

# Evidentiality in News Discourse: A Study of Western Mainstream Media

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**Abstract:** The "Xinjiang-related issues" have drawn substantial attention from the international community in recent years. Western media have persistently manipulated these "issues", exerting a notable impact on China's international reputation. This study is designed to analyze the distribution characteristics and pragmatic functions of evidentials. Its objective is to deduce the discourse features of evidentiality within the context of news reporting by Western mainstream media. Furthermore, it seeks to scrutinize the authenticity of the discourse construction employed in Western news reports pertaining to Xinjiang. This research adopts the evidential classification proposed by Hu Zhuanglin and focuses on three mainstream Western media. The research findings disclose variations in the frequency and lexicogrammatical manifestations among the seven types of evidentials. Moreover, the use of evidentiality in these news reports demonstrates three major discursive characteristics: (a) Written Reliability, (b) Subjective Speculation, and (c) Implicit Persuasion. This study enriches the research on evidentiality related to Xinjiang and provides potential references for future research in this field.

**Keywords:** Evidentiality; Evidential; Western Media; News Reporting

## 1. Literature Review

The conceptualization of evidentiality as a linguistic category traces its academic lineage to American anthropologist Franz Boas (1947), who first operationalized the term "evidential" in his posthumously published work *Kwakiutl Grammar*<sup>[1]</sup>. This foundational text catalyzed scholarly interest in evidentials as discrete grammatical phenomena. A significant milestone occurred in 1981 with the Berkeley International Conference on Evidentiality, culminating in the seminal 1986 volume *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology*<sup>[2]</sup>. This collective endeavor formally established evidentiality as an autonomous research domain within linguistic inquiry. Theoretical development progressed through competing conceptual frameworks. Chafe (1986) proposed a comprehensive model encompassing both information source and epistemic certainty, articulating four analytical dimensions: (a) source of knowledge, (b) mode of knowledge acquisition, (c) reliability assessment, and (d) knowledge verification processes<sup>[3]</sup>. Contrastingly, Willet (1988) advocated a narrower operational definition centering on information provenance, positing a binary typology of direct versus indirect evidentials<sup>[8]</sup>. Contemporary scholarship abroad demonstrates methodological diversification, integrating evidentiality studies with cognitive linguistics, rhetorical analysis, second language acquisition research, and discourse studies<sup>[4]</sup>. The methodological repertoire has expanded beyond functional linguistic analysis to incorporate corpus linguistics, contrastive studies, and empirical experimentation, yielding substantial findings in cross-linguistic patterns<sup>[5]</sup>.

In Sinophone academia, systematic investigation commenced with Hu Zhuanglin's (1994a) pioneering work that extended Chafe's framework. Hu classifies evidentials into seven categories: (culture-) belief, (sense-) induction, (language-) hearsay, (hypothesis-) deduction, reliability, verbal resources, and expectancy (see Figure 1)<sup>[6]</sup>. Subsequent scholars like Fang (2006) reconceptualized evidentiality as metapragmatic strategies for cognitive encoding<sup>[7]</sup>, arguing that evidential markers serve dual functions: facilitating communicative intentionality while simultaneously indexing speakers' epistemic stances. Current research trajectories exhibit three salient characteristics: (1) progression from descriptive taxonomies to functional analyses, (2) cross-register comparative investigations, and (3) interdisciplinary synthesis with cognitive and pragmatic theories.

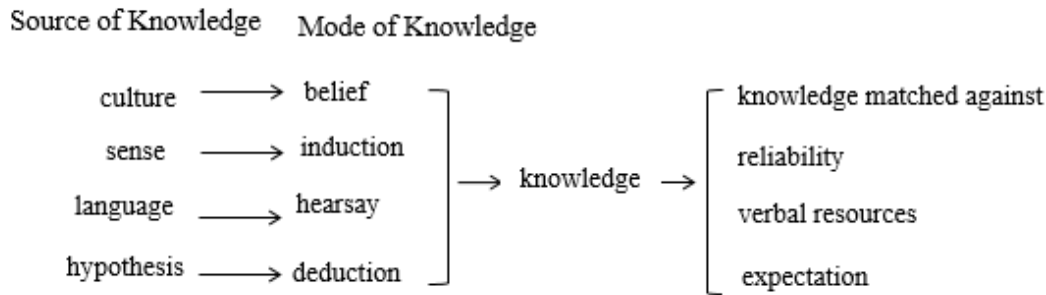


Figure 1 Hu Zhuanglin's classification of evidentiality (1994a)

## 2. Methodology and Data Collection

This study selects news reports from three media outlets—BBC, The New York Times, and USA Today—ranked among the top ten in online traffic data by Press Gazette (2023), based on their journalistic rigor and relevance to the research objectives<sup>[8]</sup>. Employing keywords such as "Human rights," "Xinjiang," "Uyghur," "Uigur," "Uyghurs," and "Uigurs," 100 news reports published from January 1st, 2012, to December 31st, 2023, were randomly retrieved from the Lexis Nexis database and serve as the corpus for this study. Adopting Hu's broad definition of evidentiality and his seven-category classification of evidentials, this research systematically analyzes the distribution of evidentials in Western mainstream media coverage related to Xinjiang. The semantic boundaries of evidentiality established in this framework guided the identification of evidentials within the corpus<sup>[9]</sup>. The AntConc 4.2.4 software facilitated keyword extraction and frequency counting, supplemented by manual verification, to identify the distribution patterns and functional characteristics of evidentiality in the sample texts<sup>[10]</sup>.

## 3. Distribution and Characteristics of Evidentiality

The corpus comprises 84,122 word types and 9,576,804 word tokens. Across the 100 news articles, evidentials occur 3,176 times, yielding a frequency of approximately 38 instances per thousand words. As illustrated in Figure 2, the distribution of the seven evidential categories exhibits significant disparities: hearsay evidentials dominate in frequency, while belief evidentials occur least frequently. Building on this quantitative overview, the following sections analyze each evidential type in descending order of prevalence, elucidating their textual manifestations and pragmatic implications.

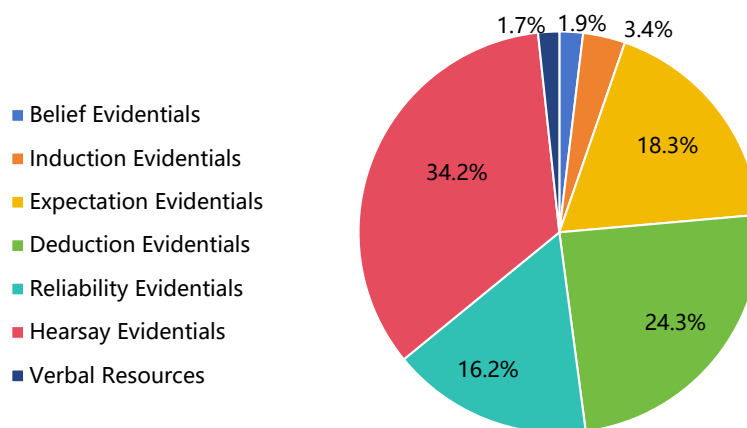


Figure 2: The overall distribution of the seven major evidentials in the corpus.

### 3.1 Hearsay Evidentials

Hearsay evidentials, which indicate that the information comes from "second-hand" or even

"third-hand" sources, account for the highest proportion among all types of evidentials (34.2%)<sup>[11]</sup>. Given journalists' frequent inability to acquire firsthand experience of reported events, news discourse systematically incorporates non-primary perspectives. As Sun (2023) believes, intertextual references to prior texts legitimize epistemic claims by anchoring new propositions to established authorities<sup>[12]</sup>. This strategic deployment fosters both discursive legitimacy and institutional authority.

The lexical repertoire of hearsay evidentials, ordered by frequency, includes: "said/say, tell/told, according to, report, claim, announce, urge, add, offer, allege, declare, suggest, argue, describe, note, allege believe, quote". Among these, "said" and "say" dominate<sup>[13]</sup>, collectively accounting for over 50% of all hearsay evidentials. The subjects of these verbs, ranked by occurrence, comprise four principal categories: (a) Western Xinjiang researchers, (b) third-party institutions, (c) Chinese government spokespersons from China, and (d) Xinjiang-based organizations/individuals.

Functionally, hearsay evidentials perform a dual role: First, they create epistemic distance between journalists and content claims, constructing an illusion of objectivity through attribution to authoritative voices; Second, mitigating institutional accountability for factual accuracy through discursive delegation of responsibility<sup>[14]</sup>.

### 3.2 Deduction Evidentials

Deduction constitutes a logical reasoning process that derives conclusions from established premises. Deduction evidentials operationalize logical reasoning through hypothesis-driven conclusions, constituting the second most frequent evidential category (24.3% prevalence) in this study.

Hypothetical conjunctions such as "if", and modal verbs like "will/would", "can/could" and "may/might" are frequently employed for inferences based on assumptions, accounting for 98.2% of all deduction evidentials. Additionally, a minor proportion of words such as "maybe", "conclude", and "presumably" are also used for hypothetical speculation<sup>[15]</sup>.

The most predominant collocations of deduction evidentials involve the combination of modal verbs with "be" and "have," where the preceding text typically presents a hypothesis, followed by modal verbs expressing the possibility of making assumptions and deductive reasoning. In news reports, frequency patterns of deduction evidentials can reflect the degree to which an author's conclusions are based on assumptions, thus permitting evaluation of informational veracity and source reliability through quantitative linguistic analysis.

### 3.3 Expectation Evidentials

The expectation is a projection of future conditions, and expectation evidentials evaluate the congruence between observed realities and projected outcomes<sup>[16]</sup>. The employment of expectation evidentials is a writing strategy aimed at attracting readers' attention, further guiding the public, and persuading readers to hold the same views as the author.

Sorted by frequency, the expectation evidentials in this study include: "but, more than, even, only, while, hope, at least, of course, yet, however, instead, although". Based on the degree of consistency with expectations, the expectation evidentials can be classified into three categories:

- a) **Subverted expectations** (69.8%): "but, while, hope, yet, however, instead, although"
- b) **Met expectations** (10.9%): "only, at least, of course"
- c) **Exceeded expectations** (19.3%): "more than, even"

Notably, Western news reports on Xinjiang predominantly employ subverted expectation evidentials to establish cognitive contrast effects. This strategic framing enhances persuasive efficacy by juxtaposing anticipated versus actual outcomes from reader-centric viewpoints<sup>[17]</sup>.

### 3.4 Reliability Evidentials

Reliability evidentials refer to the journalists' assessment of the credibility of knowledge. Given the varying degrees of authenticity in information, authors require different reliability evidentials to mark the credibility of the information. News reporting excels at using reliability evidentials to imply or enhance the credibility of news discourse.

In this study, reliability evidentials are primarily embodied in modal verbs and modifying adverbs. Reliability evidentials can be divided into two categories:

**a) High-reliability markers** (87.2%): "will, can, would, must, really, should, likely, certainly, sure, especially, actually, certain"

**b) Low-reliability markers** (12.8%): "could, may, probably, might, perhaps, maybe, appear"

It is evident that Western news reports on Xinjiang frequently use evidentials that reflect a high degree of information reliability to enhance the information authority of their media.

### 3.5 Induction Evidentials

Induction evidentials emerge from "sensory-based knowledge," representing a cognitive approach derived from firsthand sensory experiences or generalizations based on such experiences. Generally, the use of induction evidentials reflects journalists' and individuals' perceptions of their sociocultural environments, thereby summarizing and expressing the information accordingly.

Wang (2011) believes that "knowledge derives from the senses is the induction of human comprehension of natural and social phenomena<sup>[18]</sup>," implying that individuals engage in reflective induction based on perception, summarizing events or information grounded in certain reality to form general knowledge.

Ordered by frequency, the terms indicating induction evidentials in this study encompass: "feel, so, show, appear, seem, see, hear, clearly." In this study, Western media frequently summarize novel information based on events and data (feel, so, show, appear, seem, clearly), accounting for 83.3%, whereas induction grounded in visual and auditory information comprises a much smaller proportion (see, hear). Induction evidentials underscore first-hand data and evidence in human cognition of the objective world, thereby demonstrating a degree of objectivity. However, from the holistic perspective of the proportion of the seven types of evidence, induction evidentials constitute merely 3.4%<sup>[19]</sup>.

### 3.6 Belief Evidentials

Adapting Chafe's framework, Hu (1994a) redefines "belief" as "the speaker's, writer's, or character's views, imaginations, or conjectures." Belief evidentials, reflecting cognitive processes of contemplation, imagination, or prediction, primarily derive people's subjective judgments, personal viewpoints, and cultural biases, thus carrying a strong subjectivity<sup>[20]</sup>.

In this study, expressions such as "I/we think, I/we know, I/we feel, I believe, I guess" are frequently used. Among them, "I/we think" accounts for 44.1%, predominantly in the forms of "I think that...", "I think it/that is", and "I think the reason...". This indicates that Western media prefer vocabulary that expresses personal viewpoints in everyday conversational use when using belief evidentials, making their opinions clearer and more direct.

Belief is a mode of knowing and belief evidentials possess a strong subjectivity, and thus are rarely employed in newspapers and are also known as "zero evidentials." In this study, belief evidentials appeared a total of 60 times, accounting for only 1.9% among the seven types of evidentials<sup>[21]</sup>. This suggests that in news reporting, readers expect fair and objective information, while belief evidentials are written in a way that expresses personal viewpoints and thus appear relatively infrequently. However, to some extent, belief evidentials can better express the ideological tendencies of news media. At the same time, the use of belief evidentials can also reflect the subtle influence of social and cultural factors on individuals and media.

### 3.7 Verbal Resource

The use of verbal resource indicates that the user's uncertainty about whether the information truly reflects the facts or intentionally conceals the truth. Due to the implicit uncertainty regarding the information, such elements appear relatively infrequently in news.

The verbal resource in this study include "kind of, sort of, around, a little, nearly," among which "kind of" and "sort of" have the highest frequency, accounting for 67.3%. Zhang and He (2006) suggest that *Relevance Theory* advocates the employment of positive information, as it can contribute to improved cognitive efficiency. Conversely, a narrative conveyed negatively lacks relevance and consequently is not worth retaining. In this study, Western media often append some untruthful

information, or even information the authors themselves cannot fully affirm after "kind of" and "sort of". For example, "kind of state violence," "kind of injustice," "sort of fatalism," etc., are used to present uncertain information more legitimately, thereby enhancing the relevance of knowledge and subsequently producing a smear effect. Overall, verbal resource constitute the lowest proportion among the seven types of evidentials, at only 1.7%<sup>[22]</sup>. This suggests that the primary purpose of news media is to convey relatively certain information to the public. However, by analyzing the distribution of verbal resource in news reports, we can discern the ideological biases of Western media and their preferences for public opinion orientation.

#### **4. Discursive characteristics of Evidentiality**

This part aims to analyze the various pragmatic functions and distributional characteristics of different evidentials, thereby deriving the features embodied in the discourse of the news reports on Xinjiang. These features include the Written Reliability of the news content, the Subjective Speculation employed by the news media, and the Implicit Persuasion exerted by news media on readers.

##### **4.1 Written Reliability**

Hearsay evidentials function as linguistic devices that specify information sources. By utilizing hearsay evidentials, people or news media indirectly express their attitudes and viewpoints by quoting the speech of a third party.

The analysis demonstrates that hearsay evidentials constitute the most prevalent category, occupying the highest frequency position among the seven evidential types. The frequent adoption of hearsay evidentials by news reporters is primarily based on the following two reasons. First, they enhance informational credibility through explicit source documentation. Second, they reinforce journalistic objectivity.

Example 1: Human rights groups believe China has detained more than 1 million Uyghur ethnic minorities in internment camps where they are subject to forced labor and other extreme repressions.

Example 2: Now, Rahile's mug shot is captured by an official's digital camera. Her name and supposed infractions are logged in a spreadsheet along with those of thousands of other people. And Rahile, too, will be sent to a camp that outside experts say is essentially a prison.

Example 3: Among other things, that site attacks Zenz's credibility and says his reports are "full of fabrications and data manipulation."

Example 4: In 2021, Zakir, the Uyghur governor, held an online forum titled "Xinjiang is a wonderful land," focused in part on refuting allegations of repression and touting the region's "achievements in economic and social development." He said there had not been any violent "terrorist" attacks in Xinjiang for more than four years,

In Examples 1 to 4, hearsay evidentials incorporate quotes from various experts and relevant personnel, such as "human rights groups," "experts," "Zenz," and "the Uyghur governor." News media often leverage the words of celebrities and authoritative institutions as a relatively effective means of conveying reliability. However, essentially, this reliability merely appears so to readers, constituting a form of "Written Reliability." Firstly, By quoting the viewpoints of authoritative individuals and institutions, news reports absolve themselves of responsibility for the reliability of their information. Moreover, some of the supposed "authoritative" sources in our corpus exhibit strong ideological biases. In Examples 1 and 2, news media quote a "belief" from a foreign organization and a commentary from an "expert," respectively, without providing further specific information or support. Besides, In Examples 3 and 4, news media quote from Chinese government websites and officials, presenting readers with "seemingly" absolutely credible information. However, there are significant differences between the meanings of the two expressions, where translators distort the intended meanings of the original authors. The terms "attack" in Example 3 and "tout" in Example 4 are politically derogatory English words that uglify China's strategies and measures against Western media's blackening from the translation level. What's more, the use of double quotation marks in Examples 3 and 4 also deepens this effect. On the one hand, they display the words of the quoted individuals; on the other hand, they carry an ironic tone and suggest the "untruthfulness" of the information. Thus, the hearsay evidentials, which constitute the highest proportion of Western news reports on Xinjiang, mislead readers and the public who lack understanding of Xinjiang by quoting unreliable or ideologically biased "authoritative"

individuals and media, as well as biased "translations" and "interpretations" from domestic celebrities and institutions. This achieves a blackening effect, but in essence, it is merely a form of "Written Reliability", not content credibility.

Example 5: Sure, human rights and alleged genocide certainly came up as part of these Games.

The proportion of reliability evidentials is 16.2%, with high-reliability evidentials accounting for 87.2%. This indicates that Western mainstream media tend to enhance their information authority by utilizing evidentials that reflect a high degree of reliability in their Xinjiang-related reporting. In Example 5, the word "certainly" is employed to express the Western media's degree of certainty regarding "human rights" and "genocide," thereby influencing readers' judgments. Additionally, in this study, high-reliability evidentials are frequently employed to strengthen credibility and show a sign of "reliability."

Furthermore, the proportion of induction evidentials is 3.4%, representing a relatively marginal part within the seven types of evidentials. Induction evidentials emphasize knowledge derived from sense experience and conclusions drawn by journalists through personal experience or field research, reflecting a certain degree of objectivity. However, this disproportionate distribution undermines the authenticity of Western mainstream media's Xinjiang narratives and suggests the media reports on Xinjiang are not reliable but rather a form of "Written Reliability."

#### 4.2 Subjective Speculation

The deduction is a cognitive process that involves a leap from intuition to hypothesis. In other words, deduction is a process of obtaining relevant conclusions by deducing hypotheses. However, in most cases, the correctness of these hypotheses has not been conclusively verified<sup>[23]</sup>.

The expression of beliefs primarily includes journalists' thoughts, imaginations, or predictions, which mainly originate from their subjective judgments, personal viewpoints, and cultural biases, thus carrying a strong subjectivity. In this study, belief evidentials appear 60 times, often co-occurring with deduction evidentials. They are mostly embodied in making deductions based on one's own beliefs and biases under the hypotheses.

Example 6: "If the Uighurs did it, I believe they did it out of desperation because there is no channel for the Uighur people to seek redress for any kind of injustice they had suffered under Chinese rule,"

Example 7: But, he added, "In a system like the PRC's, it would be very difficult to imagine that a systemic effort to suppress, to detain, to conduct a campaign of genocide and crimes against humanity, would not have ... the approval of the highest levels of the PRC government."

Example 8: The files include more than 5,000 photos of what appear to be Uyghur people taken at police facilities - essentially mug shots. Therefore, Zenz concluded that thousands of people were detained when the photos were taken in 2018. Others may have been photographed as part of the China's surveillance campaign, including an effort to collect biometric data from residents in Xinjiang<sup>[24]</sup>.

In Example 6, the derived conclusion employs both deduction evidentials and belief evidentials, stemming from the hypotheses in the if-clauses and the personal belief, which is a form of subjective speculation that is predicated upon assumptions. In Example 7, based on the assumptions and misrepresentations of the so-called "suppress, detain, genocide," the deduced conclusion "would not have the approval" is essentially a derivation based on false knowledge and biases, reflecting subjective speculation and smear. In Example 8, the news media employs reliability evidentials and deduction evidentials to formulate a conclusion based on conjectures using "appear to be" and "may." The use of "appear" as a low-credibility evidential indicates that the author's conclusion itself lacks persuasiveness. However, the news media continues to speculate and summarize based on this conclusion<sup>[25]</sup>, demonstrating a highly subjective nature of their speculation. Zuliya Simayi (2021) mentioned that the lie of "forced labor" by Zenz was primarily obtained through misused data, distortion of information, fabrication of cases, and interpreting out of context<sup>[26]</sup>. Even though the news reports in this study were randomly selected, a significant portion of them cites Zenz's conclusions, which, on the one hand, supports the previous conclusion of "Written Reliability" by referencing the viewpoints of "celebrities and scholars" with strong ideological biases. On the other hand, these Western news media make further deductions based on these distorted data and information taken out of context, highlighting their subjective speculation.

From the aforementioned examples, it is evident that the deduction evidentials employed in Western news reports on Xinjiang indicate their conclusions are either grounded in hypotheses or subjective beliefs and wishes. These conclusions lack concrete evidence and rely on distorted information, essentially a form of "Subjective Speculation."

### ***4.3 Implicit Persuasion***

Li (2013) believes that an individual's knowledge continually progresses and develops through comparison with their accumulated knowledge and expectations. Consequently, expectation evidentials, a crucial means for conveying information and thought, play a crucial role. In this study, expectation evidentials account for 18.3%, ranking third among the seven types of evidentials.

Example 9: "We think of genocide as physical elimination of a people - massacres, mass killings, gas chambers and so forth," he said. But China has a different historical narrative its leaders are seeking to preserve - one of harmoniously absorbing ethnic minorities into Chinese culture.

Example 10: Chinese officials did not respond to a detailed list of questions about the new revelations, which were sent by the media coalition to the foreign ministry's office in Beijing as well as to China's embassies in the U.S., France, the United Kingdom and other countries. But a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in the U.S., Liu Pengyu, said Xinjiang-related issues are "in essence about countering violent terrorism, radicalization and separatism, not about human rights or religion."

Example 11: At first, she was not detained because she was nursing her baby. But that decision was reversed two months later, when police brought her in on charges of "gathering a crowd to disrupt the social order" and "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."

Example 12: The files include more than 5,000 photos of what appear to be Uyghur people taken at police facilities - essentially mug shots.

In Examples 9 and 10, the use of "but" indicates a discrepancy between the information presented and the news media's expectations. Without expressing a contrary opinion, instead, "but" is employed as a transition to implicitly guide readers to share the same stance as the media. In Example 9, the news media combines expectation evidentials with belief evidentials to contrast their views with the anticipated outcomes for China. Example 10 points out that the official Chinese response does not align with the news media's expectations, subtly hinting at possible "hidden agendas" to readers. In Example 11, a woman is not "detained" due to her pregnancy, but the subsequent use of "but" describes her "inhuman" treatment, creating a "psychological gap" between the reader's expectations and the "reality", thereby implicitly guiding readers to align with the author's perspective. In Example 12, "more than" indicates that the information is consistent with expectations, or even exceeds them. This usage, along with expressions like "of course," which meet or surpass the media's expectations, further enhances the persuasive effect of the original conclusion based on the public's preexisting expectations.

Therefore, as news media frequently comment on whether news information aligns with public expectations, they typically use expectation evidentials to enhance the relevance between news content and readers<sup>[27]</sup>. Expectation evidentials that align with expectations would reinforce existing hypotheses, while those that contradict expectations would exclude or alter them. Both scenarios enhance the contextual effects of readers' comprehension when engaging with the news articles, implicitly guiding the direction of readers' understanding of information in a comparatively implicit manner, thus exhibiting a persuasive function. Moreover, since news media express their views indirectly, it achieves the effect of "Implicit Persuasion."

## **5. Conclusion**

Evidentiality serves as a crucial analytical tool in the discourse analysis of news reports, as the distribution and frequency of evidentials can reveal the writing intentions and public opinion orientation of news media. After examining the evidentiality in Xinjiang-related reports by three Western mainstream media outlets, this study concludes that their reporting on Xinjiang is characterized by Written Reliability, Subjective Speculation, and Implicit Persuasion.

This study contributes to enhancing the comprehension of evidentiality and types of evidentials in news discourse, addressing the research gap in evidentiality studies concerning Xinjiang-related news reports within Western media. The findings not only advance empirical research in evidentiality but

also provide grounded insights for deconstructing the discourse system of Western news reports related to Xinjiang.

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