

A Comparative Study on the Construction of China's National Identity in Reports on Chinese Automobile

Qianxi Li^{1,a}, Ying Lin^{2,b,*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

²School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

^alqx742659460@163.com, ^blinyngwhut@163.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, China's auto industry has become increasingly influential around the world. Given that science and technology news constructs social and political reality, this study investigates the construction of China's national identity shaped by news reports on Chinese automobile in *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. Two corpora of news on Chinese automobile in 2023 from the two media have been analyzed under the guidance of pragmatic identity theory. The results show that the two media both have generally constructed China's increasingly powerful identity, but *New York Times* mainly construct China's image as aggressive, invading and destructive when *China Daily* mainly portray China as responsible great power which is environmental-friendly, innovative and open.

Keywords: National identity; Pragmatic identity; Chinese Automobile; Comparative analysis; Corpus study

1. Introduction

With Chinese automobiles sent to all over the world, China has become the world's largest exporter of automobiles. In 2023, China's automobile exports will exceed 5 million, and the world is ushering in an era of Chinese automobiles. In addition to China's mainstream media *China Daily*, America's mainstream media *The New York Times* also has many reports on Chinese automobile. China's automobile industry as an industry benchmark represents the image of China's export trade. Therefore, studying the news about Chinese automobile is of great significance to understanding our country's national image.

In recent years, there has been a discursive turn in the study of national image^[8,11]. The national image from the perspective of constructivism advocates the construction of a "dialogic image of China", which will help to place the construction path of the national image in a pluralistic, open and interactive context^[9]. Chen Xinren (2022) pointed out that "image is one of the dimensions of pragmatic identity, and image construction itself is also one of the dimensions of identity work"^[4]. Therefore, It is significant to apply pragmatic identity theory to the study of national identity. This study mainly follows the fourth path of pragmatic identity, which means that the pragmatic identity selected and constructed by communicators is regarded as an explanatory resource^[7], to explain the reasons for the formation of specific discourse characteristics.

Today's identity studies reflect not only constructivist tendencies, but also disciplinary convergence^[5]. Most of the existing research on pragmatic identity is mainly qualitative research, and quantitative research is lacking^[10]. In this view, this paper will adopt a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to compare China's identity constructed by the two countries and reveals their discourse strategies and pragmatic motivations.

2. Study Design

In this paper, 20 news about Chinese automobile in 2023 are respectively selected from *China Daily* and *The New York Times* to form two corpora. Among them, Chinese news corpus includes a total of 2,338 types and 11,488 tokens, American news corpus a total of 2,286 types and 10,744tokens, which means the corpus size of the two is comparable.

This paper uses AntConc 4.2.0 to process data. Firstly, through high-frequency words, main concerns

consumers and emitters of greenhouse gases which is known to the world with China's identity as a global leader in green development which is unknown to most people in the world, which highlights China's identity as the latter. By using the comparative "more.....than.....", (2) compares China with other countries to stress China's incomparable contribution on green development. It can be seen that China vigorously generates renewable energy such as wind energy and solar energy, develops new energy vehicles, and uses clean energy such as electricity and hydrogen as the power source of automobiles. The core concept of new energy vehicles is environmental protection and energy saving by improving energy efficiency, reducing energy consumption and environmental pollution so as to realize the sustainable development of the automobile industry. This is the concrete practice of China's adherence to the concept of green development.

Table 3: Collocations of "Year".

	Collocate	Rank	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood	Effect
1	percent	1	41	35	6	1	95.362	2.866
2	units	2	33	19	14	1	95.243	3.310
3	year	4	40	20	20	1	73.929	2.472
4	sales	7	21	7	14	1	39.856	2.527
5	november	8	14	12	2	1	38.478	3.218
6	million	9	19	9	10	1	35.736	2.514
7	totaled	10	8	5	3	1	34.176	4.336
8	increase	12	8	4	4	1	28.705	3.851
9	representing	13	4	4	0	1	18.960	4.658
10	record	15	6	4	2	1	18.158	3.436
11	soar	16	4	4	0	1	15.574	4.073

As shown in Table 3, collocations of "year" include "million", "increase", "record", "soar". The following is typical example sentences:

(1) *Great Wall Motor, China's largest SUV and pickup maker, saw its NEV sales in November soar 143 percent year-on-year to hit 31,248 units.*

(2) *Vehicle production hit a record 3.09 million units, up 29.4 percent year-on-year, and sales reached 2.97 million units, up 27.4 percent.*

In terms of sales, *China Daily* has made positive evaluations. Through verbs like "soar" and "hit", verb phrase like "hit a record" and preposition like "up", it has emphasized the high sales, the rapid growth rate, and the upward trend of automobiles in China.

Table 4: Collocations of "Development".

	Collocate	Rank	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood	Effect
1	research	1	7	7	0	1	22.594	3.616
2	sustainable	2	4	4	0	1	17.572	4.486

As shown in Table 4, collocations of "development" are "research" and "sustainable". The following is typical example sentences:

(1) *First is the strong and consistent support from the highest levels of policymakers, including significant funding for research and development in all aspects of renewable energy...*

(2) *"Through our 'integrated' innovation ecosystem, we hope to partner with local partners in the Greater China region to jointly support the sustainable development of society," Poon said.*

Through nouns like "support", adjectives "strong" "consistent" and the superlative "the highest levels", (1) describes Chinese government's solid backing of renewable energy development, which shows China's in-depth practice of green development. Through the verb "partner" and the adverb "jointly", (2) expresses the strong desire of foreign companies to cooperate with China, which not only shows China's great contribution to sustainable development, but also presents China's openness and win-win spirit.

3.1.3 Keyword

Taking *China Daily* reports as target corpus and *The New York Times* reports as reference corpus, keywords of China's reports compared with America's reports were obtained as shown in Table 5:

Table 5: keywords of China Daily reports.

	Type	Rank	Freq_Tar	Freq_Ref	Range_Tar	Range_Ref	Keyness (Likelihood)	Keyness (Effect)
1	energy	1	77	9	1	1	57.305	0.013
2	units	2	42	0	1	0	55.534	0.007
3	development	3	41	0	1	0	54.210	0.007
4	ev	4	34	0	1	0	44.944	0.006
5	nev	5	28	0	1	0	37.006	0.005
6	green	6	26	0	1	0	34.360	0.005
7	global	7	47	6	1	1	33.421	0.008
8	wind	8	24	0	1	0	31.715	0.004
9	catl	9	22	0	1	0	29.070	0.004
10	yuan	9	22	0	1	0	29.070	0.004
11	carbon	11	24	1	1	1	24.770	0.004
12	province	12	18	0	1	0	23.782	0.003
13	renewable	13	17	0	1	0	22.460	0.003
14	solar	14	22	1	1	1	22.296	0.004
15	gw	15	15	0	1	0	19.816	0.003
16	ceo	16	14	0	1	0	18.495	0.002

Keywords like “energy”, “development”, “green”, “global”, “wind”, “carbon”, “renewable”, “solar”, etc., means that *China Daily* more emphasizes the use of renewable energy, the continuous promotion of green development, and global openness and cooperation.

To sum up, in terms of words *China Daily* tends to use positive verbs and approving nouns to build China’s identity as a responsible great power; in terms of grammar *China Daily* is likely to use comparison and transition to remove people’s misunderstanding of China. The constructed national image of China has following characteristics:

Staying committed to green development. Chinese enterprises are deeply rooted in the concept of sustainable development and the practice of low-carbon production, especially new energy companies actively demonstrate a green leading role in green development.

Staying committed to innovation-driven development. China is taking green technologies to lead innovation and making green products cheaper and more accessible.

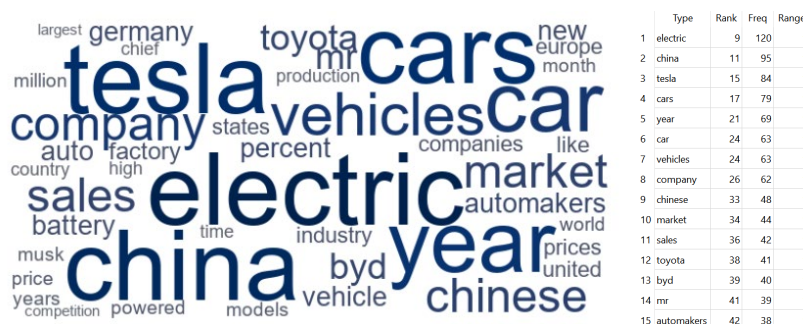
Staying committed to openness in development. Chinese enterprises continue to enter international market and deepen international cooperation.

3.2 China's National Identity Constructed by The New York Times

3.2.1 Wordlist

The wordcloud and high-frequency words are shown as Table 6:

Table 6: Wordcloud and high-frequency words of The New York Times reports.



The New York Times also pays great attention to China's new energy vehicle. In addition to introducing its sales and markets, more striking is that it compares them with its own brand Tesla and Japan brand Toyota.

3.2.2 Collocate

Taking high-frequency words “China/Chinese”, “Tesla”, “Toyota” as examples, their collocations are searched as follows:

Table 7: Collocations of “China/Chinese”.

	Collocate	Rank	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood	Effect
1	association	2	7	3	4	1	16.672	2.909

As shown in Table 7, the collocation word of China/Chinese is “association”. The following is the sentence in context:

Cui Dongshu, secretary general of the China Passenger Car Association, said the price war “will definitely continue” because of the importance of producing E.V.s in large quantities.

By citing words from authority, *The New York Times* wants to increase the authenticity of the information. By “price war”, it aims to attribute the success of Chinese automobile in overseas markets to low price and huge quantity. Making no mention of quality, it implicitly devalues the quality of Chinese automobile. Overall, it spreads the belief that China deliberately lowers sales price to expand its market.

Table 8: Collocations of “Tesla”.

	Collocate	Rank	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood	Effect
1	sales	1	13	2	11	1	16.685	1.985

As shown in Table 8, the collocation word of Tesla is “sales”. The following is the sentence in context:

(1) Tesla sales in China, the world’s largest car market and a crucial element of the company’s fortunes, slumped at the end of 2022 as domestic manufacturers like BYD gained ground with lower-priced electric vehicles, according to data published Thursday.

(2) In China, the automaker BYD has surpassed Tesla in electric vehicle sales, challenging the notion that Tesla is poised to dominate the auto industry.

(1) depicts Tesla as “largest” and “crucial” while BYD as “lower-priced” to form a comparison, which explicitly upgrades Tesla while implicitly degrades BYD. Meanwhile, it links the two with the verb “slump” to ascribe rapid decrease of Tesla sales to low price of BYD. It builds an intense competition between the two and stresses low price again, which implies that China is ratcheting up the competition with some “unsavory” tricks, like price war. (2) also compares Tesla and BYD by verbs “surpass” and “challenge” and creates a reversal with the adjective “poised”, suggesting that American media sees China as a strong competitor and sends out a warning call for the American auto industry.

Table 9: Collocations of “Toyota”.

	Collocate	Rank	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood	Effect
1	method	1	3	1	2	1	21.269	6.297
2	today	2	3	1	2	1	14.133	4.712

As shown in Table 9, the collocation words of Toyota are “method” and “today”. The following is the typical example:

Toyota’s manufacturing methods became synonymous with manufacturing efficiency, and many factories adopted what became known as the “Toyota way” or “Toyota method”. Today, Toyota is the one learning from rivals. The company is adopting techniques from Tesla. In China, it has teamed up with BYD in the hope of absorbing its electric motor and battery technology.

The American media adopted the method of “ascend slightly prior to declining intensively” in the description of the Japanese brand Toyota- first affirming its previous reputation as a leader, as shown in “Toyota method”, but then indicating its declining position now, as shown in “Toyota is the one learning from rivals”. It also mentioned that Toyota is absorbing technology from BYD. In this way, it shows the huge pressure brought by China to other countries in the industry.

3.2.3 Keyword

Taking *The New York Times* reports as target corpus and *China Daily* reports as reference corpus, keywords of America’s reports compared with China’s reports were obtained as shown in Table 10:

Table 10: keywords of *The New York Times* reports.

	Type	Rank	Freq_Tar	Freq_Ref	Range_Tar	Range_Ref	Keyness (Likelihood)	Keyness (Effect)
1	cars	1	79	9	1	1	68.932	0.015
2	mr	2	39	0	1	0	56.794	0.007
3	electric	3	120	40	1	1	47.726	0.022
4	tesla	4	84	24	1	1	39.625	0.015
5	toyota	5	41	4	1	1	37.982	0.008
6	prices	6	26	0	1	0	37.846	0.005
7	powered	8	23	1	1	1	26.481	0.004
8	workers	10	15	0	1	0	21.826	0.003
9	musk	11	19	1	1	1	21.029	0.004
10	japanese	12	14	0	1	0	20.371	0.003
11	car	13	63	25	1	1	19.680	0.012
12	investors	15	13	0	1	0	18.915	0.002

Compared with *China Daily*, *The New York Times* is more likely to compare Chinese brands with their old-established brands, emphasizing the pressure brought by China. And it highlights price war, arguing that the strong competitiveness of Chinese car mainly comes from their lower price.

To conclude, *The New York Times* often uses comparison, not only overt comparison between different brands or different situations of one brand, but also implicit comparison by emphasizing some aspects while hiding others. On the one hand, it admits the success of Chinese automobile. On the other hand, it portrays China as a menace to seize their market share and an aggressive invader with “price war”. American media tries to distort China in an unobtrusive way and warns American industry at the same time.

4. Conclusion

Based on the pragmatic identity theory, this study adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to compare the news reports of Chinese automobile in China and America in 2023. Through comparison, the study shows different identities of China constructed by mainstream media in the two countries, analyzes their discourse strategies, and reveals deep pragmatic motivations behind them. It is found that *China Daily* tends to use positive words to build China as a responsible great power and use self-contrast to remove people’s misunderstanding of China; *The New York Times* tries to use negative words like “price war” to build China as an invader, use comparison between brands in China and other countries, indicating China intensifies the competition, and use covert comparison to question reasons of China’s success. In general, the two media have both constructed China's increasingly powerful identity, but the American media still has some negative constructions. This study uses pragmatic identity theory to study the construction of national identity, which provides enlightenment for China to better construct its own national image, and offers new discourse evidence for the study of image construction from the perspective of pragmatic identity theory.

References

- [1] Benwell, B. & Stokoe, E. *Discourse and Identity* [M]. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006
- [2] Bucholtz, M. & K. Hall. *Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach* [J]. *Discourse Studies*, 2005, 7(4-5):584-614.
- [3] Fairclough, N. *Media Discourse* [M]. London: Edward Arnold, 1995.
- [4] Chen Xinren, Jin Yingzhe. *Image Construction: Its Connotations, Types and Discursive Practices* [J]. *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice*, 2022, (3):1-12.
- [5] Chen Xinren. *Current Research on Identity from the Pragmatic Perspective: Key Issues and Main Approaches* [J]. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 2013, (4):27-32+112.
- [6] Chen Xinren. *Pragmatic Identity: How to Do Things with Words of Identity*[M]. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2018.
- [7] Chen Linlin. *The Discursive Turn in the Study of China’s Image* [J]. *Foreign Language Research*, 2018, (3):33-37.
- [8] Jiang Keyu. *The Concept Analysis of “National Image” under the Perspective of Constructivism* [J]. *Hubei Social Sciences*, 2016, (5):27-34.
- [9] Jiang Qingsheng. *Studies of Pragmatic Identity in the Last Decade: Five Theoretical Approaches and Methodologies* [J]. *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social*

Sciences Edition), 2019, (1):57-63+169.

[10] Xia Haoran. *A Cite Space-based Review of the Discursive Turn in the Study of China's Image [J]*.
Journal of Yichun University, 2019, (11):79-85