



A STUDY ON THE IMAGE OF CHINA IN THE GERMAN MEDIA

Social Science

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ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an increasing number of researches in the domestic academic community studying the image of China in the German media. This article is divided into two parts: literature review and theoretical foundation combing. The literature review section compares domestic and foreign studies on China's image in the German media coverage of China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the studies on China-related reports in the German media and in the Western media during the pandemic are based on lexical choices and discourse themes to analyse the negative images of China portrayed by the media and to explore the influence of ideology and national interests on the construction of the discourse, without exploring the role of the discourse maker's cognition, thinking and knowledge in the production and interpretation of the discourse. In terms of theoretical foundations, this article has identified the theory of stereotypes and national identity in communication studies, thus forming a theoretical system of national image research based on critical discourse analysis.

KEYWORDS

The image of China, German media, Stereotypes, National identity

In recent years there has been an increasing number of researches in the domestic academic community studying the image of China in the German media, with studies mainly from the following perspectives.

- (1) To examine the overall characteristics of all China-related coverage in a given media outlet over a period of time and to derive such results as a general picture of German media coverage of China over that period.
- (2) Select several German media and study their coverage of a particular event, exploring the commonalities between different media coverage of a particular event as well as the characteristics of German media coverage of the event and the reasons for this.
- (3) A few German media were selected to study the characteristics and evolution of their coverage of a particular aspect of China (e.g. economy, environment).

Looking at the characteristics of the German media's coverage of China from a chronological perspective, it can be concluded that as China's comprehensive national power develops, the German media is also constantly adjusting its position. The German media has gradually evolved from denial and scepticism to affirmation and self-reflection on China's success. This change in stance is also based on an adjustment in the German media's perception of the country's image in relation to China, while the deeper motivation for this self-perception adjustment is to serve the German media's presentation of national interests.

From the selection of research samples, the current domestic academic research focuses on the analysis of the German mainstream media, with "Der Spiegel", "Die Zeit", "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", "Süddeutsche Zeitung" and "Die Welt" being the more common research samples, which also provides a reference for this study to identify the research object. From a review of the existing literature, it is found that the majority of studies in the academic field are on "Der Spiegel" as a single media sample, which is also related to the writing style of Der Spiegel's China-related reports.

In terms of the content of the analysis, most of the articles analyse and summarise the overall situation of German media coverage on China, covering a wide range of topics such as politics, economics and society.

Some scholars focus on the German media's coverage of important media events, policies or personalities in China. For example, Zhou Haixia (2020) analysed the presentation of the concept of "A community with a shared future for mankind" in several German mainstream media; Li Zhi, Li Yimeng (2018) and Han Fei (2018) analysed the coverage of China's "the Belt and Road Initiative" in German media; Cai Fuyao analysed the coverage of "China Dream" in Die Welt (2019); Wang Yihong and other scholars focused on the coverage of Tibetan issues in several German media (2010).

Some scholars have analysed China-related reports on specific topics. For example, scholars Wang Jianbin and Zhou Haixia (2011) o's

"Dynamic China's Economic Image in German Media during the Economic Crisis: An Example of German Mainstream Media's China-related Coverage in Der Spiegel and Die Zeit 2009-2010" scholars Wang Zhiqiang (2009) 's "Image of Economic China from the Perspective of German Newspaper Die Zeit (2004-2009)"; "Analysis of the Characteristics of German Media Coverage of China's Economy" by Wang Yihong and Wang Qinsuo (2016) ; "Analysis of Nine German Media Reports on Chinese Enterprises' Investment in Germany" by Yao Yan (2016) etc.

Some studies have taken China's political and diplomatic coverage in the German media as their corpus, focusing on the issues and expressions of the coverage. Some scholars have also conducted targeted studies on German media reports on China's environment, such as Zhang Kai Kai (2012) 's "China's image in the German media - an example of relevant reports during the Copenhagen climate summit"; Lu Jiaojiao (2018) 's "A comparison of Chinese and German news discourse on climate change from an ecological linguistic perspective - a comparison of Chinese and German news discourse on climate change from 2009-2013"; and "An analysis of the discursive discourse of the German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's environmental coverage of China (2000-2017)" by Zhang Yin (2019).

Regarding the type of research, existing studies can be divided into two categories, dynamic and static analysis, according to their focus on the dynamic characteristics of the relevant coverage. Most studies focus on the ongoing changes in German media coverage related to China. However, a small number of studies involve dynamic analysis, generally using content analysis and frame analysis, using issues, word frequencies or article titles as entry points to analyse relevant reports over time, such as Wang Jianbin and Zhou Haixia (2010) 's "Dynamic Chinese economic images in the German media during the economic crisis: an example from the German mainstream media Der Spiegel and Die Zeit", and "A study on Chinese cultural stereotypes in the German media - the example of the cover of the weekly magazine Der Spiegel" by scholar Liang Shanshan (2015). These studies attempt to provide some reference to the dynamics of China-related coverage in the German media on specific topics and to provide some reference to the dynamics of China's national image.

The theoretical and methodological approaches involved in studying the German media in domestic scholarship are generally homogeneous. Most of the studies use content analysis, while others use critical discourse analysis, and the rest do not specify the methodology in the paper. This has led most scholars to focus on issues or themes in the discourse, examining the expressions and high-frequency words used in the discourse; some scholars have analysed quotations and headlines to explore the discourse strategies of the German media; a few scholars based their analysis on cross-cultural communication theory, frame theory and symbolic theory. In general, the existing studies focus on individual words and utterances in the discourse, and only a few of them analyse the discourse, which is prone to bias in the interpretation of discourse and understanding of the meaning of the discourse.

In "The Changing Image of China", Christian Hilsmann (1997) analysed six representative newspapers, including Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, from 1984 to 1996 based on their coverage of topics, sources, and tendencies. Carola Richter and Sebastian Gebauer's study (2010) "German Media Coverage of China" focuses on content analysis, supplemented by interviews with news producers, to understand China's changing image in Germany. Linny Bieber (2011) in "China Coverage in the German Media 2008" also makes a very similar study, which aims to understand the German media's discursive patterns and media mechanisms on China and thus the generation of discourse. In "China in the Media", Dimitrios Psarris (2015) builds a corpus of reports on political and economic topics in China from 1997 to 2011 in six German mainstream media and identifies three common patterns in German media coverage of China. Accordingly, the study found that the German media mainly focused on the conflicts, crises and risks facing China.

Most studies have concluded that German media coverage of China is predominantly negative. For example, in his article "Views on German media coverage of China", former Chinese Ambassador to Germany Mei Zhaorong (2008) points out that the reasons for negative coverage and negative images include national interests, ideological, cultural and value differences. In their analysis of reporting positions, scholars Ran Hua and Dai Cheng, in "The 'othering' of China's national image - an analysis of the international edition of Der Spiegel's China-related reporting", argue that German media reports on China are more neutral and less extreme. In "China in the Media", Psarris (2015) focuses on the positive side of China's development. The analysis of the reasons for these positions and the conclusions of the literature as mentioned above has inspired this thesis to explore the characteristics and reasons for the German media's coverage of China from a new research perspective.

Through literature combing, we found that, as a popular topic in recent years, domestic academics have selected different German media subjects to conduct research on "China's national image" in different contexts, and have achieved rich results and covered a wide range of contents, including discussions on the concept of national image, research on the relationship between national image and soft power, as well as responses to national image crises.

1. Research on Overseas Media Coverage of China during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the proposition of examining China's national image by studying public opinion in overseas media has become a current research hotspot. As of 31 January 2021, more than 34,000 academic articles on the CNKI.com were searched by the keywords "The COVID-19 pandemic, overseas media, China's image".

In terms of research subjects, studies of overseas media during the pandemic period were generally in English-language media. Furthermore, the countries studied were mainly in the "Five Eyes Alliance" countries, including the US, UK, Canada and Australia. This is related to the "Five Eyes" coalition's constant blame-shifting and false attacks against China during the pandemic.

Professor Gao Jinping (2020) from Peking University has conducted a content and thematic analysis of five German mainstream media reports on the COVID-19 pandemic in China in the first half of 2020 as part of a particular project on the COVID-19 pandemic: "Analysis of public opinion on The COVID-19 pandemic in foreign media and transformation of China's foreign propaganda strategy". The analysis of the topic was conducted in the first half of 2020.

In terms of the duration of the sample, the majority of the literature is currently limited to a period of one to a few months, with the longest detection period being 1 July 2020, i.e. at a certain point in the event, such as the "early days of the pandemic". Such research lacks the ability to monitor public opinion over a more extended period, which makes the sample and the findings lack objectivity and comprehensiveness.

In terms of the corpus selection, most of the current studies focus on the analysis of a single, independent, highly influential or controversial story. A systematic analysis of all China-related texts per unit period has not been carried out.

The relevant studies up to now show that, on the one hand, how

overseas public opinion constructs China's national image in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic has become the focus of attention and research in the domestic academic community; on the other hand, the lack of research time and research samples has led to the overall appearance of the current relevant studies showing a lack of systematicity, rigour and scientificity.

2. Evaluation of existing studies

Evaluation of existing research The current research contains an account of the predominantly negative coverage of China-related coverage in the German media and the reasons for this, the use of long-term corpus and dynamic research methods, and thematic classification of China-related coverage. However, most studies of China-related coverage in the German and Western media during the pandemic have analysed the negative images of China portrayed by the media based on lexical choices and discursive themes, exploring the influence of ideology and national interests on the construction of the discourse, without exploring the role of the discourse makers perceptions, thinking and knowledge in the production and interpretation of discourse.

The main features of these studies are the following:

- (1) Diversified research objects. In terms of media selection, single media, multiple media and media comparison are all covered; the starting point of research covers national interests, international image, national relations, diplomatic strategy and news communication, with a diversified and flexible perspective.
- (2) Most of the current studies on the German media have explored the image of China, and most of them focus on the interpretation of individual images (economic, political, ecological, etc.), while there are fewer global interpretations of the country's image.
- (3) There are more case studies. Even in the case of multi-country or regional studies, this is a feature of the studies. For example, "The Belt and Road Initiative" and "Economic Development" have been the hotspots for studying German media coverage of China in recent years. Where all China-related coverage in a given period is studied, the time frame is usually short, usually within a year or less.
- (4) Theoretical research is relatively dominant in domestic studies of German media coverage of China, and the theories involved include discourse theory and social construction theory. The application of other theories is relatively limited.
- (5) There are also limitations in research methods. For example, most of the studies on the German media adopt the paradigm of cultural criticism, and few empirical studies are using the theory of journalistic framework; most of the studies are focused on undergraduate or postgraduate theses, generally lacking innovation and breakthroughs, and the depth of research needs to be promoted, and they have not yet formed a system.
- (6) The data samples of previous studies are relatively old in time and need to be supplemented with more recent corpus and data. Finally, the research questions and media are unevenly distributed. Studies have mainly concentrated on hot events and important media, resulting in a certain degree of wasted research resources.

Because of this, future research could attempt to analyse the German mainstream media's coverage of China from several perspectives, including cognition, thinking, knowledge and public opinion tendencies, with the aim of more objectively grasping the discursive construction of the German media's image of China during the pandemic period and facilitating our understanding of the views and positions of the German media and society on China.

3. Identity and the construction of national images

National identity is the basis of legitimacy for the modern state, guaranteeing that the state as a community maintains its unity, uniqueness and continuity. Scholars Liu Shexin and Wang Shimin (2015) define national identity as the recognition by citizens of the state to which they belong, i.e., identity qualification. This identification is an internal sense of belonging to one's own country. The process by which citizens identify themselves as belonging to a political community is also how they identify themselves. This identification is, of course, the result of a twofold combination of certain cultural traditions and political institutions. The strength, intensity and breadth of a nation's citizens' identification with their country directly determine whether or to what extent the nation will retain its integrity. National identity establishes the identity of a nation-

state and gives it great cohesion and resilience and plays a crucial role in its unity and stability. National identity consists of three fundamental dimensions: national, cultural and political identity. According to scholars Zhou Yang and Pu Duanhua (2014), the national image can be divided into "object image", "media image", "cognitive image", and "identity image". The "cognitive image" is the main component of the image. The "cognitive image" refers to the selective attention and understanding of a country's image by the receiver of the information, mainly emphasising the arrival and reception of the information". The "identity image" is the overall evaluation and acceptance of a country's image based on the cognitive image, filtered by identity and cultural mechanisms. The image of the state is a combination of object image, media image, cognitive image and identity image.

In current national image studies, the focus of national image construction is too much on the construction of media images, while the important role of values and cultural identity in the construction and communication of international images is easily overlooked. How to effectively create a coherent discourse system and how to achieve accurate communication of national image are issues that need to be studied and resolved. Internally, the construction of a national image requires the recognition of one's own culture, and externally, it requires the use of various communication channels to gain the recognition of the international community. According to scholars Zhou Yang and Pu Duanhua (2014), there are three main paradigms that influence the construction and communication of national image in the dominant inter-state identity, namely "compulsory identity", "interest identity" and "conceptual identity". The "conceptual identity". Among them, "conceptual identity" refers to the integration of the state into the international community, involving core issues such as identity, cultural identity and the establishment of legitimacy, and it is the result of the internalisation of international rules.

4. Stereotypes and the construction of media images

"Stereotypes are a central concept in the study of the national image, as well as in communication, image studies and intercultural communication. Walter Lippmann first introduced the concept of "stereotype" into sociology in 1922 in *Public Opinion*, defining stereotype as "the image that preexists in our minds", and since then, the stereotype has been associated with the image. It has become an independent theoretical field of image studies. It has since become a separate.

In cross-cultural studies, "stereotypes refer to mental categories that organise existing knowledge about and expectations of people belonging to a particular social group (e.g. nation or country)". Stereotypes about foreign cultures are collective social imaginaries of the self about the other, which once formed become embedded in the collective unconscious of the nation and subconsciously influenced the perception of foreigners by their own people. Stereotypes are historically permeable and inherited, and among the various channels through which individuals acquire stereotypes, the most important is the transmission of existing stereotypes in the process of socialisation, of which the media is a significant influence. The reason why stereotypes are so widespread and so difficult to change is that they have several positive effects. People as individuals do not have access to all information about the world in the face of its complexity and general information overload. One of the tools used to achieve this "simplification task" is the stereotype. It reduces the complexity of reality to a few primary forms that are easy to grasp globally. With the help of stereotypes, the world becomes easier to grasp; but on the other hand, this also leads to another characteristic of stereotypes, namely oversimplification. At the same time, stereotypes are unconscious comparisons and analogies between the other and the self (Kategorisierung). In the case of encounters with foreign cultures, stereotypes lead to the confirmation of the social identity of the self. Stereotypes shared by the group contribute to the group's self-identification and social cohesion. Stereotypes are, in a sense, schemata that are activated in the same way again and again. Moreover, 'activability' is, in fact, one of the fundamental characteristics of the culture.

5. CONCLUSION

This article is divided into two parts: literature review and theoretical foundation combing. The literature review section compares domestic and foreign studies on China's image in the German media coverage of China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the studies on China-

related reports in the German media during the pandemic are based on lexical choices and discourse themes to analyse the negative images of China portrayed by the media and to explore the influence of ideology and national interests on the construction of the discourse, without exploring the role of the discourse maker's cognition, thinking and knowledge in the production and interpretation of the discourse.

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