

Article

Analyzing Foreign Media Coverage of China During the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics Opening and Closing Ceremonies: A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The Olympic Games play a crucial role in shaping and promoting the host country's national image and global perceptions. Nevertheless, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how international media coverage of such events influences the perception of the host country abroad, particularly regarding major sporting events held in China. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing 50 China-related pieces of news from leading international publications covering the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics. Drawing from these selected news articles based on circulation metrics, this study employs a dual-level analytical framework from the perspectives of macro and micro discourses. The research integrates a corpus-assisted methodology with critical discourse analysis to systematically explore features of media headlines. We incorporate both keyword analysis and keyword-in-context approaches (KWIC) to reveal underlying patterns and meanings. Analysis of international media coverage during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics revealed distinct narrative patterns concerning Chinese diplomatic relations and leadership. The findings indicate that foreign media outlets devoted limited attention to the Olympic events themselves. Instead, they emphasized broader sociopolitical issues, particularly in portraying China as a country that overworks regional ethnic minorities and has human rights problems. In addition, General Secretary Xi's presidential image emerged as intrinsically linked to China's national image in international discourse. These insights offer valuable perspectives on China's diplomatic positioning and suggest implications for future approaches to national image construction through major sporting events.

Keywords: Beijing Winter Olympics; national image; critical discourse analysis; foreign media; corpus study



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1. Introduction

International sporting events—such as the Olympics and World Cup—function simultaneously as athletic competitions and complex geopolitical platforms with profound political and diplomatic implications (Jia et al., 2022). The Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Olympics serve as essential components of the events themselves, while also attracting academic attention to the Games' political, social, and cultural implications (Leheny, 2024). The Beijing Winter Olympics was held in Beijing, China, from 4 to 20 February 2022. The Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games were held

on 4 February and 20 February 2022, respectively, at the Beijing National Stadium. Both ceremonies were directed by Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, who also led the iconic 2008 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony. The 2022 performances emphasized themes of harmony, environmental sustainability, technological innovation, and China's position as a confident modern nation (Wang et al., 2024).

As a global sports mega-event, billions of eyes were on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, which was subject to comprehensive media coverage. China is a major sports power and host country, and Beijing made history as the first city to host both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. Nevertheless, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics confronts a markedly more intricate domestic and international public opinion environment compared to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Prior to the Opening Ceremony, several countries boycotted the Beijing Winter Games with forced labor claims. Therefore, foreign media paid special attention to the event. In addition, a country's national image is highly related to its cultural and sports soft power. Hence, an international consensus by all countries has been concerned with displaying the particular country's national strength and international status and creating a favorable national image to the world with the Olympic Games, the biggest global sports event (Chen, 2016). D. Li et al. (2022) noted that international media coverage of the 2022 Winter Olympics focused on three primary domains: competitive outcomes, pandemic prevention policies, and the opening and closing ceremonies. This study specifically explores the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Olympic Games from these identified topics. As a result of a global ceremonial communication event, Olympic ceremonies are highly regarded opportunities to demonstrate China's cultural confidence and embody the Olympic spirit. In this context, hosting the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Games in a smooth and multi-functional manner was undoubtedly the focus of international attention, particularly amid the combined global challenges of unprecedented changes unseen in a century and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. To this end, investigating China's national image and public perceptions toward China through foreign media's China-related coverage during these ceremonial events offers substantial research value.

News reports emerge as a social construct, increasingly becoming a research focal point in discourse analysis. From the perspective of corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS), this study aims to explore the English newspaper coverage of the Opening and Closing ceremonies of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics with a self-built corpus to conduct discourse research. This study also seeks to investigate the regularity of the targeted foreign press's news and discourse strategies from the macro and micro perspectives. The macro-level investigation covers topic analysis and the news headline discourse strategy; the micro-level examination includes the analysis of keywords (KWs) and keywords in the content (KWIC) of the news. Furthermore, the study attempts to interpret the construction of China's image by foreign media by examining the political ideology and power implications in China-related news coverage and attempts to answer the following two questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of the Chinese national image occupying the dominant position among the targeted news?
- (2) What are the implied ideology and political sentiments behind the news?

1.1. National Image and Sports Mega-Event

Kenneth Boulding is one of the scholars who first explored the concept of "national image." In his article published in 1959, he defines a country's image as the receivers' overall cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure toward the country (Boulding, 1959). He highlights that the people whose decisions shape the policies and actions of nations are not swayed by the "objective" facts of the situation but by their "image" of the situation.

Jervis (1971) explores the impact of a country's national image on its international relations and points out that national image building is an indispensable means for a country to achieve its strategic goals. Similarly, Martin and Eroglu (1993) believe that national image is a multidimensional construct, which is "the total of all descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs one has about a particular country." From a cognitive perspective, national image is the sum of all those emotional and aesthetic qualities, such as experience, beliefs, ideas, recollections, and impressions, that a person has of a place (Kotler, 1993). It is multifaceted and contains factual and emotional information associated with people's consistent perceptions and impressions of a specific country. Kleppe et al. (2002) claims that a country's image can be developed over time to contain many strong associations, which develop in stages and depend on reoccurring image-creating moments. On the whole, national image is the overall perceptions and feelings about a particular country and the overall impression, understanding, and evaluation formed based on all variables of that country by the public from home and abroad. It is subjective in nature, covering people's systematic impression of a country from different perspectives, such as culture, economy, history, and politics.

As a part of national soft power, international sports mega-events radiate culture, tourism, brand, diplomacy, and trade (Grix et al., 2015). A sports mega-event, like the Olympic Games, provides the host country with an opportunity to positively enhance or evaluate the attitudes held by the rest of the world about the country, that is, shaping and/ or reinforcing a country's brand image (Dolles & Söderman, 2008). Scholars generally believe that the Olympic Games, the largest sports mega-event, bears the unique value of national image communication (Fan, 2013). Hosting international sports events enables the host country to showcase its national image in the global media to the public, which has always been indispensable to the host country to enhance its international reputation and national image (Coakley & Dunning, 2000; Dembek & Włoch, 2014; Kobierecki & Strożek, 2017). Additionally, hosting the Olympic Games allows for countering negative stereotypes. In 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that "the Beijing Winter Olympics is an important landmark and historical event in China, and a significant opportunity to showcase the national image, promote national development, and uplift the national spirit (CPCnews, 2017)." Hosting the Olympics offers countries a universally legitimate opportunity to showcase and advertise their unique national identities and cultures to the rest of the world. The overall impact of the Games could potentially have lasting longevity on how people perceive the host nation (Heslop et al., 2010).

1.2. Media Coverage of Sporting Events

Major news events are significant to the construction of national image (Cao & Zhao, 2019). News narratives function as a critical mechanism for disseminating current events and information. National image is shaped in various ways, among which the media, in particular, can influence the public's cognitions regarding a specific country by disseminating information and guiding international public opinion (Chen, 2016). Xu (1996) claims that national images should be constructed based on global public opinion and media reports from other countries. It is impossible to achieve all-rounded and whole-process information exchanges only with direct communication among people from different states. Undoubtedly, most exchanges and communication occur through information intermediaries such as the mass media. Accordingly, media coverage is considered an imperative way to guide and change the cognitive structures of the public (Jackson, 2010).

However, an actual national image is sometimes inconsistent with the national image presented in the media (Guo, 2004), which can even constitute diametrically opposed views. The reason is that the media usually depicts reality according to specific predetermined

ideological standards and values, thus operating to maintain its political power (Kim, 2014). After the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, based on empirical data from global opinion polls, even the world's largest sports mega-event had minimal impact on altering global perceptions towards China. An important reason is that China lacks the opportunity to participate in the competition for "meaning-making" that Western media won hands down (Manzenreiter, 2010).

Prior related research has been largely based on framing analysis (Chen, 2016; Feng & Hu, 2008) and mainly focuses on the study of media coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. For instance, Syed (2010) examines images of China portrayed in the American media before, during, and after the Olympics by nine widely circulated newspapers and the three largest cable news networks: Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. DeLisle (2008) uses the narratives and counter-narratives theory to examine the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and compare China's official narratives with those of foreign media. Earlier studies support the idea that Olympic ceremonies function as expressions of soft power. Arning (2013) conducts a semiotic analysis of Olympic Opening Ceremonies from Moscow 1980 to London 2012, illustrating how symbolic manipulation is used to promote ideological narratives. Lee and Yoon (2017) compare Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Olympics, showing how Opening Ceremonies can articulate divergent nation-branding strategies rooted in contrasting historical and political contexts. Lemus-Delgado (2023) extends this comparative approach to Beijing 2008 and Tokyo 2020, analyzing how national identity is staged differently across cultural settings. The recent literature has examined Olympic Opening Ceremonies as platforms for constructing national images, where aesthetics, ideology, and soft power intersect. Wang et al. (2024) explore how the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony used multimodal semiotics to project four major themes and reshape a modern China identity.

Audience reception of Olympic discourse has also received scholarly attention. Boykoff (2024) investigates how US media framed the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, identifying recurrent patterns of politicization, including critiques of human rights and diplomatic tensions. Meanwhile, Vishnevskaya et al. (2024) examine the effect of media visual primes on American public opinion regarding both the Olympics and China. Their findings indicate that media framing may influence audience perception, suggesting that symbolic representations in Olympic ceremonies can extend beyond state narratives to shape international attitudes.

The studies above showcase a close relationship between the sports events' coverage and the host country's national image, providing insights into this research since the Olympic Games link media, society, and countries.

Nevertheless, a relatively small body of literature is concerned with foreign media coverage of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics on both the Opening and Closing Ceremonies and China's national image construction. Moreover, corpus analysis is merely used in previous studies. A more substantial and complete corpus study is urgently needed to provide more objective data support. To fill this research gap, based on the previous literature, the current study aims to conduct a corpus-assisted discourse study of the image of China in foreign media reports on the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Study (CADS)

There is a growing consensus in linguistic enquiry that corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA) can cooperate profitably (Mautner, 2016). The interactive study of corpus linguistics and CDA enables researchers to find a research entry point and create

a virtuous research cycle (Baker et al., 2008), and that is Critical Linguistics (CL). CL sees itself as an “instrumental linguistics” that focuses on analyzing the relationship between the symbols people generate (e.g., words, phrases, sentences, etc.) (Fowler, 1987). CL also explores the ideological meaning behind linguistic structures by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of discourses and the socio-historical context in which they are generated, and in turn, reveals the complex relationship between language, power, and ideology (Xin, 2002). When disseminators enjoy greater cultural discourse power, they will likely influence individual and social cognition by manipulating discourse structures (Van Dijk, 2008).

Corpus technology provides sufficient examples of linguistic phenomena, and corpus analysis helps reveal language patterns. Therefore, corpus study can strengthen, refute, or correct researchers’ intuition (Partington, 2003). With corpus study, we can observe the repeated use of language, which helps us discern implicit meanings and identify and describe discourse more precisely (Hunston, 2002). To be more specific, corpus analysis software not only displays universal phenomena from a specific text but also reveals the hidden ideologies of the disseminators. Hardt-Mautner (1995) was the first scholar to advocate corpus technology for CDA. She believes that the corpus indexing function effectively breaks the boundary between quantitative and qualitative research, and corpus provides us with a solid foundation for quantitative analysis. Hardt-Mautner outlines the application of word frequency and concordance analysis in critical discourse analysis and proposes a clear stance of combining corpus linguistics with CDA. Stubbs (1997) presents a systematic and intense critique of the concept, data, and argumentation methods of CDA and puts forward a case study of discourse analysis under corpus study. Based on CDA, Partington et al. (2013) propose a corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS), which is defined as “the study of the form and function of language in communicative discourse by integrating corpus analysis.” CADS pays special attention to the mining of non-obvious meanings of the texts. The corpus analysis techniques used in CADS mainly include keyword analysis, collocation analysis, and keywords in content analysis. Based on the results, a wide range of sociocultural information and disciplinary knowledge is utilized to interpret and construct the meaning of discourse in a multidimensional manner (Jin & Wei, 2023).

The concept of ideology is defined as the set of implicit, socially shared beliefs, values, and power structures that are reproduced through language (Van Dijk, 2008). Rather than being overtly stated, ideologies often manifest indirectly through discursive patterns such as lexical choices, agenda setting, topic selection, and repetition, which help sustain dominant or contested representations in public discourse. In this analysis, ideology is primarily examined through recurrent evaluative framing, discursive strategies in headlines and keywords, and the ideological implications associated with specific topics or issues.

2.2. Research Materials

The current study used the LexisNexis news database as the search engine. Additionally, the Google News database was used as a complementary search engine to enhance the comprehensiveness of our data collection and avoid missing relevant news coverage. We created a targeted corpus with news materials by searching keywords, such as “Beijing Winter Olympics Opening,” “Beijing Winter Olympics Closing,” “2022 Olympics Opening,” “2022 Olympics Closing,” “2022 Olympics Kicked off,” and “2022 Olympics Ended.” These research keywords were chosen to ensure that irrelevant news will be detected and removed from the corpus, such as news unrelated to the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics, and also to avoid mistakenly deleting the news coverages meeting our research scope as far as possible. To capture the “first reaction of foreign media,” the real-time news report covered by the foreign press on the Opening and Closing

Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics, the monitoring period spanned 19 days from 3 to 21 February 2022. Taking the differences in time zones into account, the start and end dates were ahead of and behind by one day of the Games, respectively.

The news were selected (see Table 1 and Appendix A) based on four criteria: (1) the outlets’ global reach and reputation for international news coverage; (2) the news outlets’ representation of diverse geopolitical regions including North America, Europe, Oceania, and the Middle East; (3) the accessibility of English-language reports from the LexisNexis and the Google News database during the relevant period of the Beijing Winter Olympics; and (4) were primarily text-based reports rather than photo galleries, video clips, or live-streaming posts. Content from non-news platforms, blogs, or purely entertainment-focused news outlets was excluded to maintain analytical consistency.

Table 1. International Media Outlets by Country of Origin.

Country	Press
United States (12)	The Washington Post, NBC News, USA TODAY, CNN, Associated Press, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, NPR, Radio Free Europe, Time, New York Magazine, CBS News
United Kingdom (4)	The Guardian, BBC News, The Daily Telegraph, Financial Times
Canada (1)	Global News
France (2)	FRANCE 24, EuroSport
Germany (1)	Deutsche Welle (DW)
Australia (1)	ABC News Australia
Greece (1)	Greek Reporter
Qatar (1)	Al Jazeera English

The authors manually selected and reviewed raw data, and some irrelevant news coverages were excluded from the corpus. For example, the authors removed media reports from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao and news with duplicate content or without reporting on China. Considering that one piece of news may have multiple headlines or may be published on multiple websites, all news coverages collected were checked on the official website of the news publishing press for verification. In addition, we deleted redundant information, such as the bylines, datelines, press names, photo credits, cutlines, and URLs. The news headlines, subheads, body parts, and publishing dates were retained in the corpus. According to the results and statistics, the manually built corpus collected 50 ($N = 50$) valid samples, drawn from 23 different media outlets, with a total of 41,599 tokens. Among them, 12 media outlets are based in the United States, contributing a total of 35 news reports. This distribution reflects the prominence of American media in international Olympic coverage.

2.3. Research Methods

We conducted a corpus-assisted CDA to analyze the news collected from both the macro and micro perspectives.

The macro-level investigation included news themes analysis and the headline discourse strategy; in the micro-level assessment, we used a corpus software, AntConc 4.0.9, to analyze the KWs and KWIC of the news. Parallellly, we adopted the British National Corpus (BNC) as a reference corpus, which has three unique features of a high-quality corpus: size, speed, and extensive annotation (Davies, 2005).

3. Theoretical Framework

This research incorporates agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) as a complementary theoretical framework to the corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CADS) approach. Initially developed in political communication research, agenda-setting theory

maintains that mass media significantly influence the public agenda by determining which issues receive prominence in news coverage. [McCombs \(2005\)](#) points out that the media are not only successful in directing public attention to specific topics, but also in shaping how audiences conceptualize and interpret these issues.

In the context of international media coverage of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics Opening and Closing Ceremonies, this theoretical perspective helps explain why certain themes are recurrently emphasized. This study combines CDA and agenda-setting theory to investigate how foreign media construct China's national image during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. CDA provides the methodological foundation by emphasizing linguistic patterns, evaluative strategies, and discursive structures to uncover the underlying ideological implications embedded in news texts ([Van Dijk, 2008](#)). The agenda-setting process reflects how editorial choices are shaped by geopolitical interests, and it helps explain how media shape public understanding by selecting particular issues and attributes ([McCombs & Shaw, 1972](#)). The first level of agenda-setting concerns issue salience ([Moniz & Wlezien, 2020](#))—what topics are given prominence. The second level, or attribute salience, addresses how media influence public attention and implant thoughts in people's minds regarding specific issues ([McCombs, 2005](#)). The combination of CDA and agenda-setting theory facilitates an analytical framework to explain why media select specific issues and how these selections are manifested through linguistic choices, thereby collectively influencing the construction of national image.

Simultaneously, this research integrates agenda-setting theory with CADS in a two-level analytical structure. From the macro perspective, agenda-setting theory explains why certain content is prioritized and its implications for global perceptions of China's national image: which topics are persistently emphasized, how frequently they appear, and how this emphasis may shape international perceptions of China's national image. From the micro perspective, CADS examines the structural and linguistic patterns within media discourse through keywords, N-grams, collocates, and keyword-in-context analysis to uncover how specific actors (e.g., "China," and "Xi") are discursively positioned. They both reveal how certain politically charged topics were systematically foregrounded over the artistic and cultural dimensions of sports mega-events.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Macro-Level Discussion

Different from other forms of discourse, topics of news discourse may routinely come up in headlines or subheads instead of the rest of the text ([Van Dijk, 1987](#)). Therefore, investigating news headlines and subheads helps to determine the overall sentiment of the news and preliminarily understand the topic of the news from a macro perspective.

4.1.1. China's National Image in the Headlines of Foreign Media Coverage

News headlines occupy a privileged place of pragmatics and strategy in news reports and are expected to convey key information ([M. Zhang, 2013](#)). They are always well-designed, concise, and comprehensive, able to summarize the most essential and valuable facts in news reports and play an independent role in information transmission and publicity ([Pan, 2015](#)). Technically, a valuable news headline can promptly attract the target audience's attention, enabling its readers to grasp the main ideas of the content in the shortest time. Because of the unique feature of headlines, foreign media coverage of China tends to use news headlines as a pretext to raise concerns and imply a political incline in news discourse strategies ([Lin & Xu, 2020](#)), thus influencing the spread of China's image.

As part of data analysis, we sifted through and summarized the self-built corpus and read through the full text of each piece of news to avoid one-sided interpretations. Apart

from that, we used the AFINN (Nielsen, 2011) online tool for headlines' sentiment analysis. AFINN was chosen for two reasons. First, it is specifically designed for short, discrete text units, such as headlines and tweets, making it particularly suitable for analyzing the emotionally charged yet compact linguistic structure of news headlines. Second, AFINN assigns integer sentiment scores ranging from -5 (highly negative) to $+5$ (highly positive) (Nielsen, 2011), allowing for quantitative comparisons across multiple headlines. This numeric scoring provides a way to detect general emotion tendencies in discourse.

Based on the results, we map every headline to a sentiment category—positive, negative, or neutral, with each accounting for 18%, 58%, and 24%, respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2. Foreign Media's Attitudes Toward China-Related News Headlines at the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

Sentiment	Number/ Percentage	Examples
Positive	9/18%	(1) 'One World, One Family': Beijing Winter Olympics Draws to a Close with Stunning Ceremony
		(2) What Does the Willow Twig at the Olympics Closing Ceremony Symbolize?
		(3) Olympics Closing Ceremony Reverberates Themes of 2022 Opening Ceremony
Negative	29/58%	...
		(1) A Winter Olympics that was farcical, disturbing and often exceptional
		(2) Curtain Falls on Beijing Olympics Marred by Politics and Doping Scandal
Neutral	12/24%	(3) Beijing Olympic Ratings were the Worst of Any Winter Games
		...
		(1) Winter Olympics: Closing Ceremony Marks Ends of 2022 Beijing Games
Overall	50/100%	(2) Beijing Olympics: Opening Ceremony Kicks off 2022 Winter Games
		(3) Let the Action Begin-Winter Olympics Games Officially under Way in Beijing
		...

Notably, the dominant attitude is NEGATIVE. Words selected in the headlines, such as "worst," "disturbing," and "mar," are associated with strong negative emotions. Word selection reflects the attitude of the press and its implied ideology (Gong et al., 2015). In addition, foreign media tend to include Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Winter Olympics boycott, doping scandals, and other political factors as news headlines that have little to do with the Games.

Furthermore, the number of neutral and positive headlines together accounts for approximately half of the total. Neutral headlines do not contain emotional directing; rather, they only objectively describe the event. Words and phrases without sentiment, such as "kick off," "mark," and "end," can be noticed in neutral headlines.

Although the headlines with favorable terms are less common than those with negative terms, 18% of them are relatively positive and encouraging. Affirmative words such as "stunning" and "magnificent" can be seen in the headlines to describe the grandeur of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Beijing Winter Olympics. For instance, *NBC News* explained the metaphor of the "Willow Twig" shown in the Closing Ceremony and its cultural meaning in its report entitled *What Does the Willow Twig at the Olympics Closing Ceremony Symbolize?*

From the perspective of agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the dominant proportion of negative sentiment performs a strategic function in initiating the mechanism of issue salience (Moniz & Wlezien, 2020). The first level of agenda-setting explains how media determine the salience of topics by giving greater visibility to certain issues, while the second level claims that media not only influence "what to think about," but also "how people should think about the nature of the issues" (McCombs, 2005). Specifically, by

highlighting negative words in headlines, such as “*disturbing*,” “*mar*,” and “*worst*,” and by emphasizing topics such as human rights records or calls for boycotts, the cultural, artistic, and ceremonial functions of the ceremony could be weakened.

Therefore, in this case, the dominance of negative sentiment suggests that media affect salience through topic selection and through the use of specific tone and lexical emphasis. In turn, this negatively emotion-charged framing primes international audiences to interpret the Olympics primarily through a geopolitical or ideological lens, rather than as a global sports celebration. Therefore, different sentiment proportions in news headlines can be understood as a mechanism of agenda-setting that assigns higher communication priority to specific issues through repetitive negative evaluations, thereby influencing audience perceptions of China’s national image. The alignment between sentiment and agenda-setting mechanisms highlights how headline construction itself can serve as a subtle but powerful vehicle for shaping public discourse on national image.

4.1.2. Discourse Strategies of Headlines in Foreign Media Reports

Based on the samples collected in the corpus, all news headlines could be divided into the following typical types.

- Contrast headlines

A contrasting headline can be rather easily found in the corpus. Adversative or concessive conjunctions are the most distinguishable features of this kind. For instance, “*but*,” “*despite*,” and “*nevertheless*” are frequently used in the headlines (Yang, 2017). A contrasting meaning can sometimes be realized even without conjunctions when it contains a transitive connotation in the headlines. In addition, the foreign media tend to use a “hijacking” strategy to present discourse attacks (Lin & Xu, 2020), which, based on the self-built corpus, is mainly manifested by using “*in*” or “*with*” to lead an adverbial clause in the headlines. In this way, a negative Chinese national image is justified (see Table 3).

Table 3. The Discourse of Contrast Headlines.

No.	News Headlines	Analysis
1	Beijing’s Olympics Close, Ending Safe but Odd Global Momen	Although the 2022 Winter Olympics ended safely, some foreign press still insinuated that the Games were held contrary to global expectations.
2	With Olympics Closing Ceremony, China Celebrates a Joyless Triumph	Some press try to downplay China’s success in holding the Games by seeing it as a self-deceiving victory.
3	In a provocative choice, China picks an athlete with a Uyghur name to help light the cauldron	At a time when the United States was boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics, China chose a Uyghur athlete as the last torchbearer to light the cauldron at the Opening Ceremony. The foreign press highlighted “Uyghur” in the headline. A “hijacking” strategy is applied to present discourse attacks.

- Metaphorical headlines

Lakoff and Johnson believe that the essence of metaphor constitutes understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another and understanding abstract, unknown, and unfamiliar things with concrete, known, and familiar things through human perception (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The tenor and vehicle of a metaphor represent different conceptual domains. The source domain and target domain of a metaphor represent different conceptual domains. Some source domain features can be reflected in the target domain through mapping; thus, the target domain also owns some features of the source domain. When a discourse producer chooses one metaphor over another, it precisely

reflects the intention and ideology of the discourse producer, as every metaphor chosen always aligns with its hidden ideology (Cheng, 2021). Behind these conceptual metaphorical news headlines are different perceptions of China's national image. Here, we raise three examples (see Table 4) based on cognitive mechanisms by which abstract political meanings are metaphorically grounded in concrete physical actions from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Table 4. The Discourse of Metaphorical Headlines.

No.	News Headlines	Analysis
1	The Beijing Winter Olympics' <u>cauldron lighting</u> made a political statement	This expression reflects the metaphor ACTION IS SPEECH, whereby a ceremonial act—namely, the lighting of the Olympic cauldron—is interpreted as a communicative act that conveys ideological content. In this metaphorical mapping, the physical act of lighting the flame becomes a vehicle for delivering a “statement,” a term conventionally reserved for verbal or written expressions. By construing an Olympic moment as a political message, the language frames the global sporting event not merely as a site of athletic competition, but as a platform for soft power projection.
2	...What should have been a glorious <u>tapestry</u> of winter sport has just been a succession of scandals	The sentence reflects several conceptual metaphorical mappings that structure the media's evaluation of the event. “SPORTING EVENTS ARE TEXTILES” characterizes the event as crafted art, evoking workmanship and beauty. In contrast, another metaphorical mapping is SCANDALS ARE OBJECTS IN A LINEAR SEQUENCE. These mappings demonstrate how conceptual metaphors contribute to political meaning construction in media narratives. Media discourse thus leverages metaphor to embed political critique within metaphorical contrast, transforming the Olympics from a symbol of cooperation into political disappointment.
3	Athletes Enter Closing Ceremony to ‘Ode to Joy,’ Surrounded By <u>Zodiac Skates</u>	The use of <i>Ode to Joy</i> , a symbol of European unity and idealism, activates the metaphor UNITY IS A SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE, transforming the ceremony into a site of ideological expression that transcends sport. Meanwhile, the presence of Zodiac Skates embeds Chinese cultural imagery into the global spectacle, reflecting the metaphor NATION IS SYMBOL. Together, these metaphorical choices serve both symbolic and ideological purposes, underlying the cultural integration between China and the West.

- Evaluative headlines

The linguistic features of an evaluative headline are characterized by the extensive use of evaluative expressions such as noun phrases (Table 5, No. 1), adjectives (Table 5, No. 2), and verbs (Table 5, No. 3). By using evaluative expressions, this kind of news headline achieves a satirical effect. On the one hand, they appear to display dissatisfaction with the Beijing Winter Olympics. On the other hand, these headlines also indicate that some foreign media tend to portray China as a global competitor and even an enemy.

Table 5. The Discourse of Evaluative Headlines.

No.	News Headlines	Analysis
1	Olympics close without breaking the carefully enforced script from China—A display of sporting and technical prowess was paired with information controls and a rejection of criticism	Some foreign media portray an arrogant and concealed image of China by depicting it as a country that “refuses criticism” and describing China’s pandemic containment policies as “a carefully enforced script.”
2	The Most Controversial, Most Unwelcoming Olympics of our lifetime are now over	Two evaluative adjectives are used here, describing the Beijing Winter Olympics as “the most controversial” and “the most unwelcoming” in history. Evidently, some foreign media are adept at politicizing the Olympic events and fabricating human rights issues to discredit China’s image.
3	Curtain Falls on Beijing Olympics Marred by Politics and Doping Scandal	Mar is a verb with strong negative connotations, presenting instances of groundless criticism of the Beijing Olympic Winter Games by foreign media.

4.2. Micro-Level Discussion

4.2.1. Keywords Analysis

Keywords are items of unusual frequency in specific research corpora compared with a reference corpus of some suitable kind (Scott & Tribble, 2006). The keyness of a keyword represents the value of log-likelihood or Chi-square statistics; in other words, it indicates a keyword’s importance as a content descriptor for the appeal (M. Anthony & Gladkov, 2007). Media communication embodies certain political stances and inherent biases of the media, which can express intangible opinions by selecting facts to report. Technically, the output of viewpoints on specific news events can reflect the media’s ideology (X. Liu & Leuven, 2010). From this perspective, the study of keywords can provide an in-depth glimpse into the linguistic features of and core ideology in foreign media’s China-related coverage. In this study, we used AntConc 4.0.9 for corpus keyword retrieval. The self-built corpus was loaded into AntConc 4.0.9, and the BNC was used as a reference corpus. We then pressed the “Start” button to generate the keyword list. Since keywords in the form of content words can highlight the focal content of the news and provide a research starting point for other studies (X. Li & Hu, 2017), the authors removed those function words manually after obtaining the list of keywords from AntConc 4.0.9. Further, in cases of different expressions of the same word with the same meaning, we retained only one of them. Table 6 shows the top 40 ranked keywords in terms of likelihood.

According to Table 6, the top nine keywords are highly correlated with the Beijing Winter Olympics. Among the top 40 keywords, 26 of them are related to the Games, for instance, “games,” “Beijing,” “Olympics,” “ceremony,” and “IOC,” indicating that the Olympics sports events still dominate the coverage, and the Beijing Winter Olympics remains a bridge to facilitate dialogs among multiple civilizations. The other 14 keywords are related to China or Russia and are rather irrelevant to the Winter Olympic Games, such as “boycott,” “Uyghur,” “Russian,” “Xinjiang,” and “human rights.”

Based on the keyword list, we implemented the N-gram function within Antconc. The “N-gram tool” can automatically identify all contiguous word patterns of a certain size, which is useful for identifying common idiomatic expressions in a corpus (L. Anthony, 2024). In this study, we used the N-gram function (N-gram size 5) in AntConc to extract and count recurring multi-word expressions from news corpora to identify potential fixed collocations and analyze discourse strategies. Therefore, the research was able to identify significant linguistic units worthy of further analysis.

Table 6. Top 40 Ranked Keywords in Terms of Likelihood.

No.	Keywords	Likelihood	Freq.	No.	Keywords	Likelihood	Freq.
1	games	823.373	386	21	sports	113.962	70
2	china	761.687	344	22	putin	111.545	49
3	beijing	743.595	326	23	international	109.481	73
4	olympics	636.653	289	24	closing	107.461	65
5	ceremony	566.755	254	25	nest	107.219	54
6	chinese	455.779	200	26	boycott	104.713	46
7	winter	401.455	195	27	world	104.512	117
8	athletes	398.735	175	28	flag	102.812	52
9	opening	359.535	179	29	country	92.321	104
10	xi	223.168	98	30	event	91.412	83
11	covid	191.268	84	31	valieva	91.051	40
12	stadium	177.133	91	32	host	88.393	50
13	bach	175.32	77	33	pandemic	84.649	41
14	gold	151.884	71	34	positive	83.428	38
15	russian	145.707	64	35	committee	82.895	39
16	ioc	134.319	59	36	diplomatic	82.421	40
17	medal	131.653	62	37	xinjiang	81.944	42
18	president	117.029	96	38	human	81.924	43
19	games	116.099	51	39	rights	80.491	44
20	uyghur	823.373	386	40	doping	77.39	46

The keyword analysis revealed that foreign media coverage of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics Opening and Closing Ceremonies emphasized topics that extended well beyond the ceremonial content itself. As seen from the keyword list, high-frequency keywords included “COVID,” “Xinjiang,” “Uyghur,” “human,” “doping,” and “boycott,” while positive terms associated with celebration or artistry—such as “performance,” “spectacle,” or “tradition,” were notably absent. These findings suggest that international media coverage of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics ceremonies reflected an agenda-setting tendency to prioritize certain controversial issues over neutral, aesthetic or celebratory content. As summarized below, the lexical distribution indicates three main areas of focus.

The keyword distribution pattern reflects a clear case of agenda-setting through keyword selection (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). On the one hand, international media foregrounded politicized and ideologically sensitive narratives. On the other hand, they tended to marginalize the cultural, artistic, and symbolic dimensions of the ceremonies. The data appear to indicate that foreign media form a relatively fixed reporting pattern, namely “sports mega-events + negative social evaluation on the national system,” when reporting China’s mega sports events.

The N-gram analysis further proved the above patterns. As shown in Table 7, several high-frequency multi-word sequences pointed directly to negative narratives: “China’s human rights record” and “diplomatic boycott of the games”. The repetition of these clusters reflects editorial preferences when conducting public discourse. Rather than foregrounding the artistic elements or symbolic themes of the ceremonies, these outlets emphasized controversial issues, thus guiding audiences toward critical or skeptical interpretations of China’s role as host (see Table 8).

Table 7. Top 10 Ranked Word Patterns in N-gram.

Type	Rank	Freq	NormFreq
the bird s nest stadium	1	17	408.703
China’s human rights record	2	11	264.455
at the bird s nest	3	9	216.372
a diplomatic boycott of the	4	8	192.331
as the bird s nest	4	8	192.331
diplomatic boycott of the games	4	8	192.331
known as the bird s	4	8	192.331
of the international olympic committee	4	8	192.331
the first city to host	4	8	192.331
countries are divided by conflict	10	7	168.289
each other even if your	10	7	168.289
embraced each other even if	10	7	168.289
even if your countries are	10	7	168.289
first city to host both	10	7	168.289
if your countries are divided	10	7	168.289
international olympic committee president thomas	10	7	168.289
olympic committee president thomas bach	10	7	168.289
other even if your countries	10	7	168.289
over china’s human rights	10	7	168.289
president of the international olympic	10	7	168.289
your countries are divided by	10	7	168.289

Table 8. Keyword-Based Agenda-Setting.

Category	Keywords	Agenda-Setting Effect/Communication Focus
Political controversy	<i>boycott, diplomatic, Xinjiang, human,</i>	The ceremonies were framed within the context of human rights concerns.
Pandemic control	<i>COVID, pandemic, restrictions</i>	China’s strict COVID-19-related measures were repeatedly emphasized as central topics.
Omission of neutral or artistic terms	(Notably absent) <i>celebration, spectacle, performance</i>	The absence of culturally descriptive or aesthetically positive terms supports the observation that symbolic and artistic elements of the ceremonies were largely downplayed or ignored.

Equally significant is the absence of positive or cultural language in both the keyword and N-gram outputs. Words typically associated with ceremonies—such as “performance,” “tradition,” “harmony,” or “spectacle”—are notably absent. Such discursive omissions are as ideologically powerful as tangible negative evaluations, since the lack of ceremonial descriptors constrains how audiences evaluate the ceremonies.

Notably, the token “Xi” ranks 10th in the keyword list. The association between the name of the head of state and the country can reflect a country’s international profile and visibility (Lin & Xu, 2020), which indicates that in the process of national image promotion, the presidential image of General Secretary Xi has received increasing focus among foreign media and has become highly relevant to China’s national image; this will be explained in detail in Section 4.2.2.

4.2.2. Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) Analysis

Concordance lines are generated when using a keyword as a hit for performing searches in AntConc 4.0.9. The concordance lines present the context in which the keywords appear and reveal the shared linguistic form of the context. Louw (2000) explained that the results of these concordance lines are characterized by semantic prosody, referring to a form of meaning established through the proximity of a consistent series of collocates. The initial function of semantic prosody is to express the attitude of its speaker or writer toward some pragmatic situation. Sinclair (2004) believed that the primary functional choice of semantic prosody is to link meaning to purpose, as the speaker or writer tends to select prosody of difficulty and adheres to a semantic preference of visibility. Therefore, by analyzing KWIC and through semantic prosody, we can gain insight into the connotation and ideology implied in foreign media’s China-related coverage on the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics. With the help of concordance lines generated by AntConc 4.0.9, the authors analyzed the language strategy and underlying attitudes conveyed in the portrayal of China’s national image in foreign media’s coverage of the Opening and Closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics.

In this study, we selected “China” and “Xi” as keywords for searching, set the left and right token span to seven, respectively, and analyzed the collocation of keywords.

The word selections of “China” and “Xi” for KWIC analysis was based on both theoretical relevance and corpus-driven justification. First, the keyword “China” is directly related to the objectives of the study. For this reason, its inclusion requires no further justification. Second, the selection of “Xi”, however, was determined through a systematic collocate-selection process. Specifically, we examined the top 10 keywords from Table 6 individually by using AntConc’s Collocate function (window span L5–R5). Most terms, such as “ceremony”, “opening”, and “closing”, which are contextually relevant to the Olympic events, however, returned largely neutral collocates (e.g., “Sunday”, “during”, “held”), offering limited value for national image construction.

In contrast, the keyword “Xi” yielded collocates that were semantically and ideologically aligned with “China”, including references to state leadership and national representation. This suggests that “Xi” functions as a symbolic extension of China’s national image in media narratives. Given this rationale, “Xi” was selected for in-depth KWIC analysis alongside “China”, as both terms allow for a more nuanced examination of how the nation and its leadership are discursively constructed in international reporting on the Olympic ceremonies.

Some of the selected results of the keyword “China” in context are shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Keyword “China” in Context.

No.	Left Content	Hit	Right Content
1	sterilising Uyghur women to suppress the population.	China’s	has consistently denied allegations of human
2	step of the way by questions about	China’s	human rights abuses, the 2022 Beijing
3	several countries staging a diplomatic boycott over	China’s	human rights record, and the
4	from media and human rights groups over	China’s	widespread human rights violations. But
5	at the pandemic’s beginning. Yet because	China	has already celebrated its victory over
6	final, ritual lighting of the Olympic flame.	China’s	economy, however, is now more
7	a zero-COVID policy that has isolated	China	inside what are nearly closed borders

The selected semantic prosody in Tables 9 and 10 indicates that the keyword “China” is frequently collocated with words or phrases such as “human rights,” “Uyghur,” “boycott,” and “COVID-19”. These two tables both reveal a consistent pattern of discursive association with political and ideological content. From the result of KWIC, “China” appears in contexts involving criticism, controversy, or negative evaluations in most concordance

lines. We can observe that even in the context of ceremonial coverage, international media tend to highlight human rights discourse and COVID-19 restrictions in Olympic-related reports. As such, most foreign media coverage on the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics involving “China” is pessimistic, with a majority of reports irrelevant to the Winter Olympics per se. Rather than framing China within cultural, artistic, or celebratory contexts, these collocations and lexical choices demonstrate that “China” is consistently positioned within broader geopolitical and ideological discourses in the reporting. This framing aligns closely with the second level of agenda-setting theory, which highlights how attribute salience shapes audience perceptions through repeated selection of content. While China is unavoidably salient in any Olympic coverage due to its host status, the critical tone embedded in its collocates suggests a deliberate prioritization of negative frames.

Table 10. “Collocate” Result of Keyword “China”.

Collocate	Freq(Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Likelihood	Effect
rights	640	30	7	23	55.834	2.503
human	590	25	5	20	42.274	2.357
ready	70	9	1	8	33.635	3.959
record	330	16	1	15	30.653	2.552
uyghurs	310	12	3	9	18.49	2.227
xi	980	23	4	19	18.487	1.505

Regarding China’s Xinjiang region, some news outlets always take habitual strategies to portray China as a country full of human rights issues and oppressing ethnic minorities (Examples 1 and 2). Indeed, foreign media, such as *The Guardian*, *Time* and *USA Today*, have become accustomed to mentioning “human rights” in China-related news to interfere with readers’ perceptions (Hu & An, 2020).

Example 1. *The fact that the US, Britain, Canada and others are staging a diplomatic boycott in protest at China’s human rights record is obviously a major factor. (China opens Winter Olympics with peace doves and a mighty provocation—The Guardian)*

Example 2. *Much of the criticism surrounding the Beijing Olympics has focused on China’s treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim-majority ethnic groups in the northwestern region of Xinjiang. China has long dismissed criticism over this issue as an internal matter. (China Knew It Couldn’t Escape Politics at the Olympics Opening Ceremony. It Didn’t Try—Time)*

In addition, foreign media have sarcastically insinuated that China’s pandemic quarantine policy was too harsh and complicated, and athletes were dissatisfied with the food, accommodation, and other living arrangements, calling this Winter Olympics the worst one and shaping a negative, rough, and oppressive government image (Example 3).

Example 3. *Some were placed in isolation for weeks after testing positive, while others complained about the bland food served in quarantine. But their criticism—including an emotional plea for help from a Belgian athlete—went wholly unreported inside China. (The Olympics was a success inside China. And that’s the audience Beijing cares about—CNN)*

However, it is worth noting that some news coverages, taking *Time* as an example, do contradict the aforementioned views in the semantic prosody of “China.” In Example 4, the report objectively covered China’s pandemic prevention measures during the Winter Olympics and affirmed China’s contribution to global pandemic prevention efforts,

showcasing the Chinese government's image as prioritizing its people and people's lives over everything else. The text conveying this stance is from *Time*, while according to the collected corpus, the other *Time*'s coverage of China is negative or neutral in tone. For instance, both covered by *Time*, the sentiment of Example 2 is significantly different from that of Example 4.

Example 4. *Although some athletes pushed back against the rigors of Beijing's approach, the Winter Games demonstrated **China's** capability to keep Omicron at bay—something no other country has done effectively. (What the World Can Learn from China's COVID-19 Rules at the Winter Olympics—Time)*

According to large-scale quantitative evidence of media impact on public opinion toward China, *The New York Times* might have a particular bias in how it covers China (Huang et al., 2021). However, in this study, *The New York Times*' attitude toward China is complicated and contradictory. On the one hand, it affirmed China's ability to host the Winter Olympics. On the other hand, it also showed its great concern about China as an emerging power in the world, stating that China is no longer taking the role of adapting to the rules of the international community, rather China is now defining the rules (Ovide, 2022) (Example 5). However, the saying "We're no longer supplicants seeking to enter the room. We are defining the rules of what happens in the room" (CISS-CF, 2022) was initially used by Professor Rana Mitter of Oxford University to comment on China's rapid control of the pandemic. The use of quotation has a rhetorical function, which can not only emphasize and attract readers' attention to the content within the quotation marks but also express the quoter's disapproval of the words or meaning within the quotation marks (Xin, 2020). In fact, in the coverage process, some particular political ideologies can be easily transferred to the readers when the media inserts an objective comment from a third party while distorting and misinterpreting the content of the original speaker. Consequently, the readers' impressions and cognitions of the target country will be affected gradually and intangibly. *The New York Times* tends to garble quotes out of context to guide its readers' perceptions of China; consequently, its readers tend to misunderstand that China is seeking a position of regional hegemony. In the long run, these misunderstandings will generate a sense of backlash against China among people worldwide. Nonetheless, in another coverage published by *The New York Times* on the same day, the original sentence by Professor Rana Mitter was expressed and explained (Times, 2022) (Example 6).

Example 5. *Nearly 14 years after the 2008 Games, a very different China—much wealthier, more powerful, but also more feared—put on a show designed to reassure, as well as dazzle, its global audience...*

...‘We’re no longer supplicants seeking to enter the room. We are defining the rules of what happens in the room. (In Beijing, Olympic Spectacle and Global Power Games—The New York Times)

Example 6. *“It’s making part of this the message that inside China, people are safe, and people act fast when they see there’s going to be an outbreak, and that means we can hold a big event like the Olympics,” said Rana Mitter, a professor of Chinese history and politics at the University of Oxford. “There is also a much stronger message saying: ‘We’re no longer supplicants seeking to enter the room. We are defining the rules of what happens in the room.’” (For Xi Jinping, the Olympics is a moment to declare, ‘China is ready.’—The New York Times)*

Foreign media's attitude toward China remains complicated and contradictory even within the same media outlet. On the one hand, these mixed emotions stem from fear of

the rise of developing countries and the “China Threat Theory (Y. Zhang, 2022)” and, on the other hand, a lack of understanding of China.

The semantic prosody of “China” can provide enlightening insights into China’s foreign-oriented publicity work in its peaceful development. It would be worthwhile for China to explore ways to use sports mega-events to build up its international communication capacity, thereby better introducing the nation to the world in the new era and narrating its stories well to make the voice of China heard and understood objectively by the international audience.

A country’s national image and its presidential image are mutually intertwined and reinforcing, and the general public’s perception of a country is partly derived from the perception of its government leader (Fan, 2013). Presidential image, as a symbol of a country’s national image, serves as an external manifestation of the national image, which itself has strong appeals and charms in winning the support of international public opinion (J. Liu, 2017). The randomly selected semantic prosody in Table 11 indicates that General Secretary Xi, leader of China, frequently appeared in foreign media coverage.

Table 11. Keyword “Xi/Xi Jinping” in Context.

No.	Left Content	Hit	Right Content
1	Ode to Joy”, dancing and taking selfies.	Xi	spectates athletes The Chinese team drew
2	silver for China, was shown on-screen.	Xi	and his wife, Peng Liyuan, joined
3	work. The success of the Games present	Xi	with a moment of national unity
4	night’s festivities to start. Chinese President	Xi Jinping	sat next to International Olympic
5	was the first face-to-face meeting,	Xi	has had with another world leader
6	a chance.” Bach was seated next to	Xi Jinping	during the opening ceremony, with space
7	The success of the Games present	Xi	with a moment of national unity as
8	Liyuan, joined in the applause, and	Xi	was later shown looking through binoculars at

Tables 11 and 12 show that most contexts in which “Xi” or “Xi Jinping” appears are closely related to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. As shown in Tables 11 and 12, the keyword “Xi” (including “Xi Jinping”) reveals a generally descriptive and event-focused pattern in international media coverage of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics Opening and Closing Ceremonies. “Xi” is mentioned in connection with actions such as “spectates athletes,” “joined in the applause,” “sat next to Bach,” and “was later shown looking through binoculars.” Foreign media’s description of General Secretary Xi in the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Winter Olympics includes the following two aspects: 1. visual image and 2. leadership image. The visual image includes the description of General Secretary Xi’s gestures and facial expressions (Examples 7 and 8), such as watching the Closing Ceremony performance with a telescope. The leadership image consists of quotations from General Secretary Xi’s statements or citations of a third party’s comments on General Secretary Xi (Example 9); another instance is of General Secretary Xi declaring the opening of the Games (Example 8).

Table 12. “Collocate” Result of Keyword “Xi”.

Collocate	Freq (Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Likelihood	Effect
jinpings	370	38	1	37	217.935	5.446
president	960	27	21	6	85.708	3.578
mr	220	13	12	1	59.697	4.649
chinese	2000	22	18	4	33.687	2.223
leader	200	8	7	1	30.6	4.086
met	120	6	1	5	25.538	4.408

Table 12. Cont.

Collocate	Freq (Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Likelihood	Effect
china	3440	23	19	4	18.487	1.505
ready	70	4	4	0	18.069	4.6
era	30	3	1	2	16.936	5.408
introduced	10	2	0	2	13.97	6.31

Example 7. *With Xi watching through binoculars, athletes filed in beneath an image of a red Chinese knot, a good-luck charm symbolizing unity and longevity. (Olympics close without breaking the carefully enforced script from China—Washington Post)*

Example 8. *Chinese President Xi Jinping stood, removed his mask, and declared the Games open. (In a Divisive Games, an Opening Ceremony in Search of Unity—The New York Times)*

Example 9. *“The world is looking to China, and China is ready,” Xi told the International Olympic Committee on Thursday. (For Xi Jinping, the Olympics is a moment to declare, ‘China is ready.’—The New York Times)*

“Xi” tends to appear in neutral contexts related to his physical presence, ceremonial role, or interactions with foreign dignitaries. These occurrences are behavioral or observational, highlighting Xi’s public visibility at the ceremonies. From an agenda-setting perspective, repeated references to “Xi” illustrate how media can shape public perceptions toward specific actors through particular descriptive strategies (such as emphasizing attendance and announcing ceremonial openings). This aligns with “attribute salience,” wherein media discourse assigns specific images to the subjects of coverage.

As his presence is consistently noted in coverage, we can observe media emphasis on leadership symbolism. The concordance lines and collocations indicate that the national image could be personalized through its leader’s image. More specifically, Xi represents China in international public discourse. His symbolic visibility contributes to the construction of China’s national image through leadership embodiment.

In summary, foreign media’s coverage of General Secretary Xi’s presidential image has an increasingly closer association with China’s national image. Mainstream foreign media’s evaluation of President Xi’s image during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics primarily focuses on his leadership and organizational capabilities. The international press generally considers him to have successfully hosted the Olympic Games. Coverage emphasizes President Xi’s personal involvement and emphasizes the Olympics’ significance to Xi’s political standing, viewing it as validation of his leadership. Despite criticism of pandemic-related restrictions, the overall management of the event is widely regarded as a success.

5. Conclusions

Perception is everything. Ordinary people’s views of a specific country dynamically derive from their worldviews and the information they receive. On the contrary, the image of a country ultimately comes from the perception and evaluation of the people of other countries. Only if the national image that a country disseminates is well received by the people of other countries and transformed into objective recognition and positive evaluation can we consider it effective. Years of negative views about a country will hardly disappear overnight; however, hosting the Olympic Games is one of the indispensable ways where sports can shape a country’s image. Public opinion is fluid and subject to many factors, with the media being one of the most influential factors. Nevertheless, public opinion crises of large sports events are very likely to become the trigger point for various social crises

in the countries hosting large sports events, which will have a huge social impact on the hosting countries. The host country of international sports events has always been the main focus of global media coverage and public attention. Generally, all host countries fully leverage the opportunity to host international sports events, thereby shaping a positive national image and influencing public opinion from home and abroad (Fan, 2013).

This study conducted a corpus-assisted CDA, combined with agenda-setting theory, to explore China's national image construction in China-related sports coverage by foreign media on the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics at both macro and micro levels of discourse. Sports news coverage of a specific country may influence how international audiences perceive that country. At the first level of agenda-setting, the research demonstrates how international media prioritized specific topics, such as human rights records, diplomatic boycotts, and COVID-19 restrictions, while downplaying the artistic and cultural aspects of the Olympic ceremonies. At the second level of agenda-setting, headline sentiment analysis reveals a dominance of negative or critical framings (with 58% of headlines being negative), indicating editorial preferences for conflict-based narratives. Furthermore, the keyword analysis and KWIC analysis results further underscore which issues and lexical patterns the media chose to emphasize.

The results demonstrate that foreign media, led by American mainstream media, have formed a relatively fixed reporting pattern, namely "sports mega-events + negative social evaluation of the national system," when reporting on China's major sports events. The study finds that while the ceremonies are nominally cultural and athletic events, media outlets frequently foreground political issues such as human rights, diplomatic boycotts, and COVID-19 restrictions. As a result, a relatively homogeneous narrative is carried out in foreign media reports on China's mega-events in sports.

In addition, General Secretary Xi Jinping's presidential image has become highly relevant to China's national image, indicating that promoting China's presidential image serves as a crucial way of shaping China's national image to the world. Together, these results suggest that the foreign press, for the most part, has complicated sentiments toward China.

To conclude, international media coverage presented a multifaceted narrative. On the one hand, foreign media commended the ceremonial grandeur of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Olympics and the operational intricacies of hosting the event. On the other hand, the foreign press simultaneously employed a critical lens, contextualizing the Games beyond the sporting spectacle.

Limitations need to be noted in the present study. First, the study does not investigate how such portrayals influence audience perceptions. The focus remains on media content rather than media reception, and therefore it cannot determine to what extent the identified discourse patterns shape international audiences' perceptions of China.

Second, the corpus is limited to coverage specifically related to the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, rather than the broader Olympic period or post-Olympic discourse. As a result, the study may not fully capture how international narratives on China evolved throughout or after the Games. Future research could address this by examining media coverage across the entire Olympic period.

Third, the self-built corpus only includes text-based reports and excludes video content, live-streaming posts, photo-based reports, and news from non-mainstream or entertainment-oriented outlets. These excluded forms of coverage may also carry analytical value or contribute to public perception, but they fall outside the current study's focus.

Building on the current findings, future research could explore in two key directions. First, researchers could adopt empirical methods such as surveys, interviews, or experiments to investigate how international audiences interpret or internalize the media narratives. Second, future studies could benefit from a broader temporal scope by

analyzing media discourse across the entire Olympic period, including both pre-Games buildup and post-Games coverage. Third, future studies could expand on this work by including a wider range of media formats, such as video commentary, social media content, or real-time live posts, to better account for multimodal discourse construction and yield a more comprehensive understanding of how China's image is framed. These would allow for a more dynamic and diachronic understanding of how international narratives evolve or transform over time when reporting major global sports events.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CADS	Corpus-assisted discourse study
CDA	Critical discourse analysis
CL	Critical Linguistics
CMT	Conceptual Metaphor Theory
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
KWIC	Keyword-in-context approaches

Appendix A

Table A1. International media outlets by country of origin and news sources.

No.	Country	Press	News Headlines
1	United States	The Washington Post	Olympics close without breaking the carefully enforced script from China
2			'One World, One Family': Beijing Winter Olympics draws to a close with stunning ceremony
3		NBC News	What Does the Willow Twig at the Olympics Closing Ceremony Symbolize?
4			Athletes Enter Closing Ceremony to 'Ode to Joy,' Surrounded By Zodiac Skates
5			Uyghur athlete delivers Olympic flame in opening ceremony after global criticism of China
6			Olympics Closing Ceremony Reverberates Themes of 2022 Opening Ceremony

Table A1. Cont.

No.	Country	Press	News Headlines
7	United States	USA TODAY	The most controversial, most unwelcoming Olympics of our lifetime are now over
8			Winter Olympics opening ceremony: Dazzling celebration opens the Beijing Games
9			Chasing Gold: Opening ceremony makes way for the first full day of competition at 2022 Beijing Games
10			Sadly, China continues its political charade at Winter Olympics 2022 opening ceremony
11			NBC coverage of Winter Olympic Games opening ceremony put spotlight on China's treatment of Uyghurs, but more must be done
12			Chasing Gold: Closing ceremony bids farewell to Beijing and its strange, unwelcoming Games
13		CNN	What we know—and don't—about director Zhang Yimou's Winter Olympics opening ceremony
14			The Olympics was a success inside China. And that's the audience Beijing cares about
15		Associated Press	Let the Games begin! Team USA arrives for the opening ceremonies at Beijing Winter Olympics but American bobsledder Elana Meyers Taylor is replaced as flagbearer by speedskater Brittany Bowe and forced to go into isolation due to COVID-19
16		The New York Times	Beijing's Olympics close, ending safe but odd global moment
17			Beijing Olympic Ratings Were the Worst of Any Winter Games
18			With Olympics Closing Ceremony, China Celebrates a Joyless Triumph
19			In Beijing, Olympic Spectacle and Global Power Games
20			In a Divisive Games, an Opening Ceremony in Search of Unity
21			In a provocative choice, China picks an athlete with a Uyghur name to help light the cauldron
22			The opening ceremony drew world leaders despite a U.S. diplomatic boycott
23		Los Angeles Times	For Xi Jinping, the Olympics is a moment to declare, 'China is ready.'
24			Xi Jinping sees Beijing Olympics as validation of his power
25			Beijing Olympics open with a scene of calm amid the turmoil of reality
26		NPR	Despite containing the coronavirus, Beijing Games could never escape other problems
27			The—at times complicated—2022 Beijing Winter Games come to a close
28			The Beijing Winter Olympics' cauldron lighting made a political statement
29			The Winter Games have begun. See photos and highlights from the opening ceremony

Table A1. Cont.

No.	Country	Press	News Headlines
30	United States	Radio Free Europe	Winter Olympics Begin In Beijing Amid Western Boycott
31		CBS News	Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony kicks off under a cloud of controversy
32		Time	What the World Can Learn from China's COVID-19 Rules at the Winter Olympics
33			China Knew It Couldn't Escape Politics at the Olympics Opening Ceremony. It Didn't Try
34		New York Magazine	That Olympics Opening Ceremony Was Trippy As Hell
35			The Olympics Are Off to an Ominous Start
36	United Kingdom	The Guardian	China opens Winter Olympics with peace doves and a mighty provocation
37			A Winter Olympics that was farcical, disturbing and often exceptional
38			Winter Olympics: 11 key moments from Beijing 2022 opening ceremony
39		The Daily Telegraph	Vladimir Putin appears to fall asleep when Ukraine enter stadium at Olympic opening ceremony
40			Goodbye and good riddance to the most miserable Olympics of all
41		BBC News	Winter Olympics: Closing ceremony marks ends of 2022 Beijing Games
42			Winter Olympics: Games officially under way after opening ceremony in Beijing
43		Financial Times	Beijing Winter Olympics underway with subdued opening ceremony
44	France	FRANCE 24	Curtain falls on Beijing Olympics marred by politics and doping scandal
45		EuroSport	MAGNIFICENT FIREWORKS END CLOSING CEREMONY FOR 2022 WINTER OLYMPICS IN BEIJING
46	Canada	Global News	Beijing Olympics: Opening ceremony kicks off 2022 Winter Games
47	Germany	Deutsche Welle (DW)	Curtain falls on Olympics, Germany finish strong
48	Australia	ABC News Australia	Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics closing ceremony: the parade of nations, the handover to Milan-Cortina, the farewell and the fireworks, as it happened
49	Greece	Greek Reporter	Greece Leads Opening Ceremony of Beijing Winter Olympic Games
50	Qatar	Al Jazeera English	Beijing Winter Olympics officially closes with stunning ceremony

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