| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

A Critical Discourse Analysis of American News Reports on the Opening Ceremony of Beijing Winter Olympics

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| **ABSTRACT**

The opening ceremony of Beijing Winter Olympic Games in 2022 has been extensively covered in international news reports. Although these news reports seem impartial and objective, they carry underlying ideologies that can influence public opinions and judgments. This paper examined the discursive representation of China in American news reports on the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model as the theoretical basis. News stories from American media were collected and analysed in terms of headline, collocation, and quotation pattern. The research found that American news reports present mixed and multifaceted views toward the host country. They showed appreciation for the host country's success in delivering a spectacular opening ceremony, but they tended to frame China negatively, portraying it as an intimidating power and a geopolitical threat. This study can improve our understanding of the discursive practice of news reports and enhance critical awareness in interpreting news texts.

| **KEYWORDS**

Critical discourse analysis, news report, opening ceremony, Olympic Games

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

1. Introduction

The Winter Olympic Games are an important international sporting celebration that takes place every four years. On February 4, 2022, the Winter Olympic Games opened at the National Stadium in Beijing. Athletes from all over the world gathered to celebrate the opening of the Games. The opening ceremony is not only a sports event but also a major cultural activity that highlights human diversity, inclusiveness, and international cooperation. It is an important part of the Olympic Games that marks the beginning of the international sports competition and celebrates cultural heritage and global unity. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ceremony has become a symbol of resilience and hope for people in China and elsewhere in the world. With effective COVID countermeasures, China ensured the Games were delivered on schedule in a successful and safe way (Chong & de Kloet, 2024). After many people came to China to witness these achievements, China's global image significantly improved after the Games. However, there are still many misperceptions of China regarding COVID-19 prevention and control, environmental concerns, and the "China Threat Theory" among Western countries such as the US. In recent years, the tension between China and the US has continued to increase, especially over a number of economic, political, and defense issues. According to a report by the Pew Research Center (2024), 81% of Americans view China unfavorably, 42% see China as an enemy, and two-thirds of Americans think China is having a significant negative impact on the American economy. Most people maintain that top priority should be given to limiting China's power in American foreign policy (Pew Research Center, 2024). Such negative public perception might be largely attributed to the image of China portrayed by American media. Media exposure plays a major role in shaping public opinions (Baum & Potter, 2008; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). As most Americans have never been to China, the media has become an important channel for them to understand this country (Huang, Cook & Xie, 2021). Although media are supposed to provide a neutral and objective coverage of international events, they sometimes take the opportunity to shape public opinions towards a direction in

line with their ideologies or interests. As American media has a powerful influence on public opinions worldwide, their representation of China can be a major source of information for people all over the world to understand and perceive this country. This study examines how American media covered the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games using a critical discourse analysis approach and explores the discursive representation of China in American media.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Previous studies on media discourses related to Olympic Games
Discourse is an instance of discursive practice and social practice (Fairclough, 1992). It is also an essential tool for media to cover major international events such as the Olympic Games. Plenty of studies have been conducted to explore media discourses related to the Olympic Games. Early studies provided descriptive accounts of the Games by documenting the types of stories, themes, and tone of news coverage, using various analytical approaches to identify the nature and frequency of specific topics. For instance, Billings and Angelini (2007) analyzed NBC's Coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics to identify the types and degrees of ethnic bias, gender bias, and nationalism embedded in the news coverage. Recently, research into media discourse related to the Olympic Games has evolved from descriptive studies to more detailed critical analyses to provide deeper insights into how media coverage shapes social values and perceptions. Many studies used the critical discourse analysis approach to understand the underlying ideologies and power structures reflected in media narratives. For example, Cui (2024) has examined how People's Daily Online constructed China's national image during the Beijing Winter Olympics using a discourse-historical approach (DHA). Zhang and Wu (2022) investigated the representation of China in the news coverage of the Beijing Winter Olympics by Russian media. Besides, many studies adopted a comparative approach to explore differences in media coverage between different countries and focused on how social and cultural contexts may influence media narratives. By comparing the media coverage of the Olympic Games in different countries, these studies examined how the media shapes the public image of the host nation and promotes national ideology. Yang (2015) examined the news coverage of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing by the British media and the Chinese media using a corpus-based CDA approach. Hayashi et al. (2016) compared the news coverage of the opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games in 2012 from 10 channels in five countries and examined how news coverage of the same international event was shaped by differences in locations, political systems, and television systems.

Although plenty of studies have been conducted to examine media discourses concerning the Olympic Games, not much attention has been given to American media's coverage of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Given the geopolitical context and rising tensions between China and the US, American media's representation of China may be influenced by complex ideological and social-cultural factors in ways that have not yet been fully understood. Therefore, the present study examined the discursive representation of China in American news reports on the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, using a critical discourse analysis approach.

2.2 Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis
Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a critical theory approach that is used to examine language in relation to power and ideology (Fairclough, 2016). The theory closely associates language with society, emphasizing the importance of social, cultural, or political contexts in the construction of meaning (Wodak & Meyer, 2024). According to the CDA theory, text is not just an instrument to disseminate information but also a part of social practice. It can produce and reflect power relations in social structures. By analyzing ideologies embedded in texts, we can find out how discursive practices generate power and drive social changes (Fairclough, 2016). Fairclough's CDA theory has been widely applied in different social and cultural contexts to analyze discourse in various domains, including economic discourse, educational discourse, and political discourse (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). It provides a powerful instrument to explore the power dynamics hidden in language use. Since being introduced into media discourse studies, CDA has developed into a common framework for analysing news discourse.

Fairclough's (1989, 1995) model of CDA consists of three dimensions: text as the object of analysis, interaction as the process of discourse production, and social context. These three elements are interconnected and constitute the basic framework of discourse analysis. Text is the specific form of language expression in either written or verbal form. It can be regarded as the most straightforward type of discourse that delivers meaning. Interaction is the communication between individuals or groups in social and cultural settings, and it facilitates the understanding of texts by providing contexts. Social context is the background that influences discourse production. It involves power dynamics, social structure, and cultural and historical background. Each dimension requires a different type of analysis. Fairclough proposed the three stages of analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough, 2015). The description stage involves detailed linguistic analysis of texts to identify patterns, structures, and strategies that may reveal underlying power relations and social identities. This stage focuses on the description of the text using various linguistic features such as grammar, lexicon, and textual structure. The interpretation stage focuses on discursive practices, such as the production, distribution, and consumption of discourse. It intends to reveal how texts are interpreted and how text interpretation is shaped by specific sociocultural contexts. In the stage of explanation, social, economic, or cultural factors are considered to account for the ideologies and power relations embedded in the discourse. In the present study, we will draw

on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of CDA to examine the discourse representation of China in American news coverage of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games.

3. Methodology
3.1 Data collection
In this study, a text corpus was established for news reports related to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics. Twenty-three news stories were collected from American media outlets, including the Associated Press, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and others. These news reports were published between February 3, 2022, to February 5, 2022. Image and video reports were not included in the study. The selected reports covered various aspects of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics. The corpus contains a total of 19,628 English words.

3.2 Data analysis
Fairclough's three-dimensional framework was adopted to guide data analysis, which involves the three stages of description, interpretation, and explanation. At the level of text description, headlines and collocates were analysed to describe the language features of the texts. Antconc 3.5.8 was used to extract collocates from the reports. Taking "China" and "Chinese" as node words and MI (mutual information value) as the indicator of collocational strength, the top 15 collocates with a span of 10 and a MI value greater than five were extracted for analysis. MI values were calculated by examining the positions and frequencies of collocates in the text. At the level of text interpretation, we analysed the quotation pattern to explore the relationship between discourse and social practice. We also extracted and analysed some statements to further analyse China's image constructed by the media. In terms of explanation, this study explored the relationship between discourse practice and social culture and explained the social, cultural, and ideological factors influencing the construction of China's image through American news reports.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1 Description: Headline analysis
The theme and essence of a news article are typically reflected in its headline and initial paragraph (Fairclough, 2015). Headlines are particularly important as they can shape readers' expectations and perceptions of the news content, leading them toward specific interpretations (Ecker et al., 2014). We find that the headlines of the selected reports portray a mixed and complex image of China, highlighting both its success in delivering a grandeur ceremony and the controversies surrounding the event. Below are some of the headlines from the news reports.

Beijing Olympics open with snowflakes and fireworks (Associated Press)

In Beijing, Olympic spectacle and global power games (New York Times)

Beijing Olympics open with a scene of calm amid the turmoil of reality (Los Angeles Times)

Emboldened China opens Olympics, with lockdown and boycotts (Associated Press)

China's Unspoken Winter Olympics Theme: 'We're Here, Get Used to It' (Wall Street Journal)

Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony kicks off under a cloud of controversy (CBS)

As shown in the list above, some headlines contain certain words with positive connotations, such as "snowflakes", "fireworks," and "spectacle", which highlight the grandeur and celebratory aspects of the opening ceremony. These elements reflect an appreciation for the spectacle of the ceremony and the host country's ability to present a visually impressive feast to the world. The positive attitude is also shown in the following example:

"Zhang Yimou's second go-round as opening ceremonies orchestrator easily made for the best showing since then, a display of grandeur that put what Tokyo mounted last year to shame." (Wall Street Journal)

A quick look at the headlines shows numerous nouns and adjectives with negative connotations, such as "lockdown", "controversy," and "turmoil". These words reflect a critical and negative attitude towards the Games by drawing public attention to the challenges, such as lockdowns due to the pandemic. For instance, labeling the Winter Olympic Games as "global power games" under a "cloud of controversy" points to the broader geopolitical tensions and competition between China and other nations. The headline *China's Unspoken Winter Olympics Theme: 'We're Here, Get Used to It'* portrays China as an authoritarian and defiant power that is resistant to external influence or criticism, which may reinforce the negative stereotype of China. Words such as "turmoil" and "controversy" from the headlines can create an impression of instability, conflict, and uncertainty in the Games. Such an impression is negative, indicating that the host country is facing unresolved troubles and chaos, which can spark doubt and concern among the public. The negatively framed headlines might guide readers to view the overall tone of the news as negative, skewing them towards the negative interpretation of the texts.

4.2 Description: Collocation analysis

The way that words are connected with each other in news reports can reveal the underlying message of the media coverage. Collocation analysis is an effective tool to identify implicit sociocultural meanings in media discourse. For example, the frequent co-occurrence of certain key words and their collocates may reflect certain social attitudes or biases. In this study, a collocation analysis of "China" and "Chinese" was conducted to detect the attitudes of American media towards China, by which we can see how the Chinese national image is constructed through specific collocations. The table below shows the top 15 collocates of the words "China" and "Chinese" with MI values (content words only).

Table 1. Top 15 collocates with MI scores

No.	Collocate	MI Score	No.	Collocate	MI Score
1	threat	7.69	9	Xi	6.22
2	rise	6.69	10	controversy	6.10
3	economic	6.69	11	party	5.95
4	unsettling	6.69	12	leader	5.88
5	propaganda	6.42	13	government	5.77
6	economy	6.36	14	abuses	5.60
7	powerful	6.27	15	say	5.59
8	authorities	6.23			

These collocates reveal several themes with different connotations. We can see that some collocates seem to have a positive connotation, such as "rise", "economic", "economy," and "powerful", suggesting that these reports recognize China's growing importance and influence, especially in the economic sphere. However, this rise is viewed with suspicion or concern, as reflected in the collocates with negative sentiments such as "threat" and "unsettling". The combination of these positive attributes and negative terms creates an image of China as a powerful but destabilizing force in the world. The word "threat" tops the list as a very strong collocate with "China" and "Chinese". This suggests that the host country is predominantly viewed as a source of risk and danger to global security or stability, which could easily cause fear, distrust, or opposition among the public.

The collocate "propaganda" implies that the opening ceremony was strategically used by the Chinese organizer to influence public perception, project a desired image of China, and secure global support. This word carries a negative connotation, as propaganda can involve the use of misinformation to manipulate public opinions. It implies that the opening ceremony might present a carefully planned image of the host nation to serve its national interests, and the messages China has delivered through the ceremony could be one-sided and misleading. This will lead the public to perceive the ceremony with distrust and skepticism and question the motives behind the display. A review of the collocates above shows that many of them are related to Chinese leadership and government, such as "authorities", "party", "xi," and "government", which indicates that the decision and statements made by Chinese authorities received considerable attention from the media. This emphasis on the government and authorities might also suggest that the ceremony was used as a tool of propaganda to expand the nation's soft power, and the government may try to shape public perceptions to serve political purposes through the ceremony.

4.3 Interpretation: Analysis of quotation pattern

In this section, we analyse the source and mode of quotation in the news discourse to illustrate how the Games were represented through the selective use of voices. There are altogether 78 quotes from the reports. Among them, 28 quotes come from China, which accounts for 35.8% of the total number of quotes, significantly lower than the proportion of quotes from America. This shows that Chinese voices are underrepresented in these reports compared with voices from other countries. As the organizer of the Games, China was not given ample voice and sufficient visibility in these reports. This imbalance in quotation sources reflects a bias that prioritizes external perspectives over China's own views. Given that most of the quotes from external sources are negative, the intention might be to shape the global perception of China by highlighting criticisms or concerns raised by America or other countries.

Most of the quotes come from elite members or authorities in the US, such as US officials, government agencies, and professors in universities. These individuals or groups are usually considered influential or knowledgeable, so their statements can provide

the news stories more credibility and legitimacy. It is worth noticing that most of the quotes from American authorities in the new reports carry negative connotations. By quoting from these authorities, American media intended to frame negative narratives about China and lead the public to endorse the negative image of China. For example, in the VOA news story, the quotation sources are the US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the FBI, as shown in the examples below.

> *"Matters have gotten worse in China. The Olympics shouldn't be held there, but we can't hold that against the athletes," said Pelosi. "They have to go. They have to compete. They have to be excellent. But they have to be careful, because the Chinese government — when they say you have to honor the Olympic spirit, it's ridiculous because the Chinese government does not honor the Olympic spirit."*

> *The FBI said earlier this week that China's hacking operations are "more brazen'' than ever before.*

Nelson Pelosi was quoted as warning that the organizer does not abide by the Olympic spirit and that American athletes should be cautious. This portrayal frames China as a risky and dangerous place. Such an image was reinforced by the second quote, "*The FBI said earlier this week that China's hacking operations are 'more brazen' than ever before*", which expressed cybersecurity concern. The only quote from China in this news report is from the "officials," who were quoted to report the number of COVID cases in the bubble. These sources, Chinese or American, have jointly portrayed the host country as a potentially dangerous place where athletes can get hurt either by the restrictive measures or the coronavirus.

Apart from the authoritative figures, the reports also quote from ordinary people such as residents or athletes to show a wider range of perspectives and voices. This helps to balance different voices, making the reports more comprehensive and diverse. Below is a quote from an ordinary Chinese resident:

> *"I think the effect of the fireworks is going to be much better than it in 2008," Zhang said. "I actually wanted to go to the venue to watch it. ... But because of the epidemic, there may be no chance." (Associated Press)*

The quote is from a Chinese collector of Olympic memorabilia. He expressed a strong desire to go to the stadium to see the ceremony in person but showed regret for not being able to do so. The quote conveys a sense of disappointment towards the situation, and it reflects the residents being victimized by the pandemic or COVID restrictions.

In terms of quotation mode, the proportion of direct quotes is 67.9%, which is much higher than that of indirect quotes (32.1%). The high proportion of direct quotes in the reports indicates that they are inclined to use original wording from the sources to increase their authenticity and objectivity. However, the original words from the authors might be selectively reported or cut from their original contexts to support different arguments. Therefore, we further examined the content of these quotations to gain a better understanding. The quotations can be divided into three categories based on the sentiment of their content: positive, negative, and neutral. The distribution of the three categories is summarized in the table below.

Table 2. Classification of quotes by sentiment

Category	N	Example
Positive	20	"Tonight, the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 is opening as scheduled," said Cai Qi, president of the Beijing organizing committee, "and a long cherished dream is becoming a reality." (New York Times)
Negative	48	The goal for China is "to not just feel good about itself but to show power, prestige and dominance," said Simon Chadwick, a sports specialist at France's Emlyon Business School. (Wall Street Journal)
Neutral	10	Organizers say it reflects "the Chinese people's understanding of time". (Associated Press)

As shown in the table, there are 20 quotations with positive sentiment, accounting for 25.6% of the total. These positive quotes are mainly from Chinese officials or leaders who highlighted the aspirations and achievements of the Games, which promote a positive narrative of the event. The positive quotes from overseas are mainly from the officials of the International Olympic Committee, who showed support for the Beijing Winter Olympic Games on behalf of their organisation. The sample positive quote in Table 2 is from the president of the Beijing organizing committee. It displays a celebratory tone, emphasizing the realization of long-held aspirations of the Olympic Games. It conveys a sense of pride and fulfilment in delivering the Games in spite of the challenge of COVID-19. Such positive quotes emphasize the success and the symbolic significance of the event and thus express a favourable attitude towards the event.

It can be seen from Table 2 that 48 quotations carry negative content, which accounts for 61.5% of the total quotes. Negative quotes significantly outnumber positive ones, which shows that the news stories are framed in a predominantly negative way. These quotes express criticism, doubt, or concern, resulting in a negative sentiment in the discourse. For example, the quote from Simon Chadwick in Table 2 projects the image of China as an ambitious and dominant power that seeks to overpower other countries. This can lead to a perception of China as aggressive and overbearing, which may create a sense of threat. The image of China as an intimidating power was also reflected in many other parts of the news reports. Below are some illustrations.

> *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. (New York Times)*

> *As host of the Winter Games, which open Friday, China is now a recognized superpower less interested in global validation and a lot less likely to get it. (Wall Street Journal)*

Although some quotes seem to be neutral or positive, they are framed or interpreted negatively in specific discourse contexts. For example, the report from the New York Times includes the following quote from Thomas Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee.

> *"The mission of these Olympic Games, like any Olympic Games, is bringing the world together in peaceful competition," Bach said, "uniting humankind in all our diversity, always building bridges, never, ever erecting walls." (New York Times)*

This quote seems to be a neutral statement concerning the mission of the Games. However, it was followed by an ironic statement in the report (*"The irony, to some, will be that no Olympics has ever featured this many walls, in the 'bubble' China created to keep out the virus."*). It forms a contrast to highlight that the COVID-19 restriction was inconsistent with the mission of openness and unity in the Olympic Games. It shows disapproval and criticism towards the physical separation that was implemented to ensure health and safety. This type of statement tends to use irony or juxtaposition to criticize underlying issues and thus reveal a critical attitude towards the organization of the Games.

4.4 Explanation: Social practice analysis

The third stage of the CDA model is explanation. Fairclough (1989) regarded discourse as a social practice. In his view, discourse is not only language but also a comprehensive product of social structure, cultural value, and individual experience. To interpret discourse, we need to go beyond the literal meaning of texts and explore the complex and multi-dimensional social and cultural meanings. In this section, we will explore the power, ideology, or bias embedded in the discourse of American news reports and provide further explanations.

This study has found that American news reports demonstrated appreciation for the wonderful performance of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics. They presented the spectacular scene of this historic moment to the global audience through the language of media. This is mostly attributed to the highlights of the ceremony in many aspects, such as the applications of high technology, innovative design, and the integration of digital technology and cultural elements. For example, the opening ceremony amazed the audience with the world's largest three-dimensional LED stage. The ceremony was not only the opening of a sports event, but it also demonstrated China's cultural identity and modern Olympic spirit. These highlights dazzle audiences worldwide and receive wide praise from different media outlets for their spectacle.

We also find that news reports express criticism and negativity in the headlines, collocation, and quotation patterns in spite of China's success in delivering the Olympic Games. The negative and critical attitudes could be interpreted in the broader context of Sino-US relations. Since 2017, Sino-US relations have undergone many changes. At the beginning of his presidency, Trump clearly demonstrated a shift in attitudes toward China. The United States would move away from its strategy of engagement with China to a more direct and strategic competition, formally positioning China as a strategic competitor (Tellis, 2020). The decision marks the beginning of a new and more tense phase in Sino-US relations. In 2021, the Biden administration launched a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games. In recent years, the US has been decoupling from China in the high-tech industry. For instance, the US government has cut Huawei's supply chain to curb its growth in the 5G sector. As Bihan-Poudec (2020) pointed out, there is a systematic bias in American media that reflects the official position of the US government. Under the influence of this policy environment, the US government's attitude and measures towards China will inevitably be reflected in China-related reports during the Winter Olympics. American media's attitudes towards China in the news reports are generally aligned with the official position of the US government. In this sense, the negative image of China portrayed by American media reports is largely influenced by the strategic competition between China and the US, and thus, it should be regarded as a one-sided and biased representation of China. American media fail to provide their readers with objective perspectives about China. Given the negative portrayal, it is not surprising that Americans hold an unfavorable attitude towards the country.

Specifically, the present study finds that US news coverage clearly views China as a rising threat and a potential geopolitical risk. In these news reports, the discussion over China clearly focuses on the core concept of "threat". This focus portrays a particular image of China: a rising power that is rapidly moving to the centre of the global stage and has the strength to challenge the current international order. They often use various discursive strategies to highlight China's possible adverse impact on the global landscape. The "China threat" argument in American media started early in the 1990s, and media plays a major role in disseminating the 'China threat' theory among the public (Yang & Liu, 2012). As Okuda (2016) indicated, China has been framed negatively in English media as a threat to global security. The tendency to view China as a threat in American media is largely attributed to the geopolitical tension between China and the US, as well as the rise of China in many areas. In recent years, China has developed rapidly and made remarkable achievements. The growth of China's national strength and the expansion of its economy are all seen as threats to the national interests of the US and the security of the Asia-Pacific region (Broomfield, 2003). Moreover, China's rise in the international community is in direct conflict with the world order dominated by the US. China's development model and its political system have also raised concerns in the West. In spite of China's commitment to a peaceful rise, these efforts did not seem to dispel the doubts and concerns in Western countries.

5. Conclusion

This study analysed American news reports on the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games in order to identify how American media constructs China's image in their reports of major international events. A critical discourse analysis approach was used to analyse the headlines, collocation, and quotation patterns of the news reports. This study found that American news stories show appreciation for the spectacle of the opening ceremony but tend to frame China as a powerful and intimidating nation and a threat to the globe. Although China is represented in these news reports as a significant global player, it is viewed with concern and skepticism. The findings indicate that the way a country is portrayed in media discourse is deeply influenced by the political, economic, and social settings within which the media operates. The use of language is far from socially and politically neutral (Chilton & Schäffner, 2011), and media representation does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is subject to the influence of broader geopolitical settings and relationships between nations. American media's portrayal of China reflects the power dynamics and ideological struggles between China and the US. This study furthers our understanding of the underlying ideological factors and power dynamics in media representation and emphasizes the need to critically examine media narratives.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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