
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

China's Image in Sino-US Trade War Reporting from the Perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis: Comparative Study on the Report of China Daily in 2018 and 2025

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| ABSTRACT

This study explores how China Daily, China's official English-language newspaper, constructs and reconstructs China's national image across two critical phases of the Sino-US trade war—2018 and 2025. Drawing on Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), the research adopts a mixed-method approach combining quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative discourse interpretation. The two self-built corpora, each comprising 50 trade-related reports from the respective years, are analyzed in terms of transitivity, modality, reporting modes, and news sourcing. The findings reveal significant diachronic shifts in China Daily's discourse strategies. In 2018, the newspaper's coverage emphasized defensive and cooperative tones, with frequent use of low-value modality and indirect reporting to project a cautious yet resilient image. By contrast, in 2025, China Daily employed more assertive linguistic features, including increased use of high-value modals, a higher proportion of direct quotations, and a predominance of specific, identifiable news sources. These shifts signal a transformation from a passive, defensive posture to a confident, proactive representation of China as a responsible global power advocating fairness, stability, and multilateral cooperation. Theoretically, this research enriches CDA studies by providing a diachronic perspective on national image construction within domestic English-language media. Practically, it contributes to understanding how strategic discourse serves as a tool of international communication and ideological negotiation in the evolving landscape of China-US relations.

| KEYWORDS

China's Image; Sino-US Trade War; Critical Discourse Analysis

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

In today's globalized world, national image plays a critical role in international relations. It affects how a country is perceived by other governments and global publics, and can influence diplomatic relations, international trade, and cultural exchange. Media discourse is a central tool in shaping national image, as it repeatedly frames key ideas, values, and identities through its coverage of major events.

The Sino-US trade war, which began in 2018 during Donald Trump's first presidency, marked a turning point in China-US relations. After a brief period of relative stability, tensions escalated again in 2025 following Trump's re-election and the reimposition of heavy tariffs on Chinese goods. Both phases of the trade conflict received widespread international media attention and evolved from being purely economic disputes to becoming political and ideological struggles. In such a context, media reporting did not merely reflect facts—it actively contributed to constructing China's image on the global stage.

As China's official English-language newspaper, China Daily plays a key role in shaping and disseminating China's external narrative. It acts as both a channel for diplomatic messaging and a platform for international public opinion guidance. During the trade war periods in 2018 and 2025, China Daily's portrayal of China reveals how the nation sought to project certain images—such as that of a cooperative partner, a resilient economy, or a responsible global power—in response to external pressures.

This study focuses on how China Daily constructed and adjusted China's national image across the two trade war phases. By conducting a diachronic comparison of its news discourse in 2018 and 2025, the study aims to uncover shifts in linguistic choices, reporting strategies, and ideological positioning. The goal is to explore how China's national image evolved in response to changing geopolitical contexts and how these shifts reflect broader transformations in China's global communication strategy.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this research enriches the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by applying Fairclough's three-dimensional model to a diachronic case study of China Daily—China's official English-language newspaper—across two key moments in the Sino-US trade war: 2018 and 2025. While many previous studies have focused on China's image construction in either Chinese or foreign media, few have explored how the same domestic media adjusts its discursive strategies over time in response to changing geopolitical dynamics. This study thus provides a clearer understanding of how national image is not static, but evolves according to different historical contexts and ideological imperatives.

Practically, this research offers insights into how China's international image is shaped through strategic media discourse during major diplomatic and economic crises. By analyzing China Daily's news coverage during two distinct trade war phases, the study reveals how discourse strategies—including modality, transitivity, news sourcing, and reporting modes—are employed to maintain legitimacy, project authority, and construct a positive national image. These findings may assist people in better understanding the mechanisms behind international communication and in improving China's external messaging.

Ultimately, this research highlights how China Daily, as an official media outlet, plays a crucial role in narrating China's stance, defending national interests, and shaping global public opinion. The study provides a valuable case for examining how discourse is mobilized to manage international narratives and reflect shifting power relations in a changing world.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Review of Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA is a critical method to study the relationship among discourse, power and ideology by clearly analyzing the use and characteristics of language. It is considered as an interdisciplinary subject. It originates from the fields of rhetoric, pragmatics, textual linguistics, social psychology, applied linguistics, and anthropology (Meyer and Wodak, 2001). In addition, CDA is a problem-oriented discipline that studies complex socio-political phenomena in a variety of ways.

Van Dijk (1984) believed that both CDA and critical linguistics analyze discourse according to semiotic theory. Other researchers in the field can also interchangeably adopt these theories. Hodge & Kress (1979), for example, used the two terms. Xin (2000) also adopted these two terms in China. Although the two approaches have some similarities, they are fundamentally different to a certain extent.

Critical linguistics (CL) was formed in the late 1970s. Its main ideas were embodied in two books published simultaneously in 1979: *Language and Control* (Fowler et al., 1979) and *Language as Ideology* (Kress and Hodge, 1979). Fowler (1991) himself mentioned that CL began with their work. However, when discussing the formation of CL, the role of *Language as Social Semiotic* (Halliday, 1978) cannot be ignored, because SFG plays the most important role in text analysis of CL. (Wodak, 2001) The main motivation for the formation of CL is the criticism of Western mainstream linguistics and early sociolinguistics. CL mainly studies social issues, such as inequality and related racial discrimination, from the perspective of language, and attempts to explore the social meaning behind texts by analyzing the structure of language and establishing and maintaining power relations through language. Although CL tries to analyze the text from a new perspective, it also has its own shortcomings. Kress (1989) pointed out that many critical linguists were limited to textual analysis, presenting a fixed pattern between social and linguistic systems. Tian (2006) summarized four obvious defects of CL. First, it emphasized that the role of text was one-way, not dialectical. The second shortcoming was the neglect of discourse participants and analysts in text analysis. In addition, the relationship between the text and ideology was too direct, fixed and transparent. Finally, he explicitly pointed out that the ideology existing in CL was limited to grammar and vocabulary.

Due to these limitations, more and more linguists are trying to find better discourse analysis methods. It is in this state that CDA comes into being. CDA is also produced on the basis of critical analysis. Habermas (1971) defined CDA is not just about

analysis. First, it was critical because it tried to explore connections between language and other factors in social life. Second, it was critical because it was committed to progressive social change. It also had a liberating “intellectual interest”.

Fairclough (1995) gave a detailed definition of CDA. The primary purpose of CDA is to examine the implicit relationship between textual practice and broader socio-cultural structures and processes, to discover how much practices, events and texts are ideologically generated and shaped by power relations and power struggles, and to discuss how the implicit relationship between discourse and society becomes a factor guaranteeing hegemony and power.

Meyer (2001) defined CDA as the analysis of the opaque and transparent structural relations in language. In other words, the purpose of CDA is to critically study social inequality through the use of language. To sum up, it concluded that CDA studies language units and complex social phenomena.

Fairclough (1995) pointed out that the purpose of CDA is to find the indirect connection between society and discourse. This thesis uses Fairclough’s definition of CDA.

2.1.1 Literature Review of CDA Abroad

As a new research perspective, CDA can explore discourse from the linguistic level on the one hand, it also can analyze the relationship between language and society on the other hand. Although in the mid 1990s and early 21st century, many scholars debated and criticized CDA, now CDA has become one of the important academic schools. Moreover, it has a strong explanatory power and can be used in multi-field discourse research with the continuous development and improvement of CDA.

“CDA is essentially a social analysis of discourse, especially public discourse. It aims to improve readers’ sensitivity to language, make them aware of the complex relationship between language and social consciousness, and cultivate readers’ awareness of critical reading. It is mainly used to analyze news, political discourse, speech and other discourse.” In recent years, the study of CDA has entered a golden stage of development, and more and more scholars have begun to pay attention to the field of CDA. With the intersection of linguistics, sociology, philosophy, psychology and other disciplines, the research field of CDA will be further expanded and the research content will be more diversified.

Foreign studies on CDA mainly focus on the use of CDA to study a variety of texts, such as the application of CDA in the analysis of news discourse, education, policy documents, articles on network platforms, etc.

Fowler (1991) considered “news as a product of the social and political world in his book *Language in the news*, and examined the important role of language in mediating reality from the perspective of CL”.

Fairclough (1995) revealed “the true political significance of the Labour Party by studying its use of rhetoric in a series of political discourses and texts”. Later, with the development of the theory, Fairclough (2006) analyzed “the globalization narrative from the perspective of social construction and believed that it had a constructive impact on the real process of globalization”.

van Dijk (1984) is also committed to the study of media discourse. He believes that “news discourse is also an ideological discourse”. “On the one hand, it expresses the producer’s sociopolitical attitude. On the other hand, it is an economic product that follows economic supply and demand”. Therefore, it affects the public’s social cognition and shapes people’s cognitive structure.

Hansson (2015) selected the discourse examples of the British government’s public speeches, and discussed how the administrative agencies can better reduce public complaints through discourse strategies, which has strong practical significance. At the same time, it provided a new entry point of political discourse for CDA.

Wodak and Boukala (2015) examined the identity of EU countries and the revival of nationalism from the perspective of discourse history. By studying the discourse on relevant issues, such as immigration and economic disputes, it explored the relationship between discourse construction and national identity, and revealed the influence of economic crisis, multiculturalism and other factors. The EU as a political and economic unity is bound to be affected and will face enormous challenges.

Coker (2019) explored how Turkish journalists and newspapers have constructed dissuasive practices in their newspapers in response to the influx of Syrian migrants. Through a CDA of news reports, the study identified various discourse structures used to otherize Syrian immigrants, that is, to assume that Syrian immigrants are fundamentally different from Turks.

Jenny (2019) conducted a survey of the web pages of higher education institutions aimed at prospective students. This study was used to clarify the different views of students at home and abroad on internationalization in university marketing. Multimodal CDA is used to study discourse strategies of web pages through detailed analysis of linguistic features and images.

This study explored how discourse frames the concept of internationalization or sideline, and showed that in this case, the dominant discourse of internationalization is narrow and exclusive.

Abdulmajid (2019) explored the ideological perspectives of media discourse in the Middle East by investigating the political influence of leading media companies in the region. CDA has been applied to the news reports published by the famous media Giant Al-Jazeera in the Middle East and the Arab Arab media.

To sum up, in recent years, foreign scholars have paid more attention to the applied research of CDA, mainly involving the fields of politics, economy and education, which further promotes the development of discourse practice.

2.1.2 Literature Review of CDA at Home

Domestic scholars have also made some achievements in the theoretical and practical research of CDA. Chen (1995) first proposed the concept of CDA in his book *Studies in Critical Linguistics*. He believed that "contextual analysis is the application of linguistic methods to the analysis of implicit ideology in public discourse".

Xin (1996) made a CDA of two news reports, aiming to explain how ideology affects the use of language and how the power class controlling media uses language as a tool to spread and strengthen ideology. In another book, *A Critical Analysis of Textual Intertextuality* (2000), he proposed that news reports should make diachronic and synchronic comparisons to reveal underlying ideologies.

Dai and Chen (2004) mainly studied the theories and analytical methods of CDA. They explained why Halliday's SFG is used in CDA and pointed out the similarities and differences between them. Through a comparative analysis of two news reports, they studied the influence of ideology on the process of news writing and demonstrated the unique advantages of CDA in analyzing public discourse.

From the perspective of sociolinguistics and based on the Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model, Tang (2015) regarded reality shows as a discourse event and cultural phenomenon in contemporary Chinese society. From three aspects of discourse: discourse practice, social practice and cultural practice, it analyzed the discourse reproduction and reshaping of reality shows, the reality shows in production and consumption, and their competition for the right of discourse, so as to focus on the construction of the media right of discourse of reality shows in the era of national entertainment, and finally introduced the new discourse form of reality TV shows into the research category of CDA.

Li (2016) discussed "the language types of new media discourse, the characteristics of online public opinion discourse, and the enlightenment of public opinion analysis on discourse analysis". He believed that "discourse analysis based on functional linguistics can provide linguistic description and interpretation for media discourse research, and communication analysis methods such as public opinion analysis also provide certain enlightenment for discourse analysis".

Wang and Zhang (2018) combined Framing Theory and CDA to provide a new path for discourse research in the "post-truth" era — critical architecture analysis. Through structural analysis, the mechanism of discourse generation and understanding is revealed, while through CDA, power manipulation and false truth exist in the "post-truth" era. Through the architecture theory, we change the previous false reasoning to real reasoning, and look at social problems more objectively and openly.

Wu and Chen (2018) brought to us the "twin" sister of CDA — Critical Genre Analysis at a suitable opportunity.

Hu and Li (2018) used corpus technology to study the metaphor discourses in the shareholder letters of Tencent and Amazon from 2004 to 2015. By exploring the usage characteristics of meta-discourses and the rhetorical functions realized, it reflected the different ways in which the two companies respond to their respective demands, so as to achieve their respective demands and maintain their corporate image.

Wang (2019) combined corpus with CDA and pointed out in his article that "CDA assisted by corpus is a research method combining quantitative and qualitative methods, which is suitable for discourse analysis such as media discourse and political discourse, exploring discourse events such as government, identity, conflict and feminism, and revealing discourse construction."

Tian (2019) summarized the 40-year history of CDA. It is found that the development history of CDA in the past 40 years is full of confrontation, change and accident. The study found that "the current CDA itself is not a pure expression of some scholars' academic opinions, nor is it an academic writing activity operating in the reasoning system, but 'an anonymous, historical and spatio-temporal' discourse practice."

In the same year, he synthesized the current research history and development of CDA, "combined with the observation and understanding of the development of critical discourse research in recent years, summed up three new trends in the field of critical discourse research: the innovation of critical perspective, the expansion of theoretical vision and the update of research methods." It provides a new direction for the development of CDA.

In conclusion, earlier domestic studies mainly focused on a literature review of CDA and a comprehensive introduction of relevant theories, disciplines and methods. At present, researchers have gradually begun to conduct in-depth theoretical and empirical exploration of CDA. Some researchers began to apply CDA to different discourse analysis, such as news reports and political discourse.

2.2 Previous Studies on News Discourse from CDA at Home and Abroad

The combination of CDA and news discourse was first applied and developed abroad, and its main representative figures include Roger Fowler, etc. The development of CDA in China was relatively late compared with that in foreign countries. It was not until the 1990s that Chinese scholar Chen (1995) introduced CL into China for the first time. Since then, CDA has become known to more domestic scholars and made great efforts for the development of domestic discourse analysis.

2.2.1 Previous Studies on News Discourse from CDA Abroad

Roger Fowler is one of the leading figures in the CDA. The concept of CL was also first proposed in his book *Language and Control* (1979). As the main theoretical and methodological source of CL, Halliday's SFG provides an effective means for CDA. Fowler et al. analyzed the ideological significance behind the linguistic features and social and historical background of discourse, aiming to clarify the relationship among discourse, power and ideology. Due to the combination of linguistics and social reality,

Fowler laid a solid foundation for CDA. In his book *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the News*, he successfully proved that the structure of language played an important role in the construction of newspaper ideas, and that language was not a neutral medium, but a social construction that intervened in reality. The study of CL must broaden the perspective of social and historical context. Ideology is hidden behind any form of language.

Van Dijk is a representative of social cognitive methods in CDA. His early research focused on textual grammar, etc. Since the 1980s, his perspective on research has tended to be more critical and focused on news and ideology. Van Dijk elaborated on the importance of cognitive research in the critical analysis of discourse, communication, and interaction. The discursive - cognitive - society triangle framework proposed by van Dijk focuses on the psychological activities of language users, especially their psychological creation and understanding of discourse, participation in verbal communication, integration of knowledge systems, ideologies and beliefs of other groups. In addition, van Dijk is also committed to the study of news discourse in CDA. In terms of "news as discourse", he believed that news should be studied as a kind of public discourse. From the perspective of social cognition of news participants, how journalists produce news and how readers understand news. The study emphasized that it is important to analyze the explicit structure of news reports. The social practice and ideology of news are clearly related to the structure of news, and the structure of news is closely related to the macro social context of news media.

Norman Fairclough is one of the key figures in the field of CDA. He is concerned with social culture and, in his book *Language and Power* (1989), proposed the Three-dimensional model of text, discourse practice and social practice. He put social issues in an important position, took discourse analysis as the core, and regarded discourse practice as the connection between discourse and society. Corresponding to the Three-dimensional model are three research steps of CDA: description, interpretation and explanation. For further study, he placed discourse in the social context and explored the role of language in social change. Fairclough's

Three-dimensional Model incorporates Halliday's theories of systemic functional linguistics and sociolinguistics to study power, discourse, and ideology in society. At the same time, Fairclough also has a keen interest in the research of news reports. He gave examples in his book *Media Discourse*, which made his CDA more perfect and expanded the study of news discourse analysis. He used the Three-dimensional Model theory to build a bridge between media and social practice, and published *Critical Discourse Analysis: A Critical Study of Language*. This research paradigm has gradually become a mature and popular analysis framework in domestic news discourse analysis.

Ruth Wodak is a famous female scholar of CDA. Her major contribution to the field of CDA lies in the theory of Discourse-Historical Approach. Discourse-Historical Approach is a problem-oriented approach, and in her book *Language, Power, and Ideology* (1989), she focused on the complex relationships in society: (1) Language and power; (2) Language and politics. Discourse-Historical Approach focuses on context, especially intertextuality, social context and historical context. Wodak's research focuses on social issues such as anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination. In *Critical Discourse Analysis Methods*, Wodak

(2001) took climate change discourse as an example and proposed an eight-step analysis methodology. Wodak focused on political news reporting and other subjects, and has conducted extensive research on racial discrimination of Romanian immigrants, construction of Austrian national identity, construction of European identity, etc., contributing to the research of Discourse-Historical Approach combined with news reporting.

In addition, there are other scholars who use corpus auxiliary means to analyze critical discourse in news texts, such as Hardt-Mautner (1995), Baker (2006), etc.

2.2.2 Previous Studies on New Discourse from CDA at Home

Chen is the first scholar to introduce CDA into China. He (1995) argued that CL uses linguistic theories, principally Halliday's SFG, to reveal the ideology or power relations implicit in discourse through the analysis of public discourse. He provided a

new analytical tool for the domestic study of language, discourse, context and ideology. He chose two newspapers about the strike of British workers, Morning Star and Daily Mail, and made a discourse analysis with CDA. He summarized how reporters use grammar, social relations and discourse structure to spread ideology to achieve the purpose of power control.

Xin (1996) analyzed two dispositions on ethnic and religious conflicts in the Independent and the International Herald Tribune. The purpose of CL is to reveal the implicit ideological meaning of language and its relationship with social structure and power through discourse analysis. Later, he (2000) proposed that in the analysis of news discourse, language structure and semantic function of expression should be combined for comparative analysis. News discourses should not only objectively and accurately report the speech activities of government agencies and leaders, but also give play to the role of the media in conveying the themes of these discourses to the public in the form of indirect discourse and popular language.

Dai and Chen (2004) focused on the theory of CDA and its common analytical methods. Through the comparative analysis of two network news discourses, this study discusses the influence of ideology in the writing process, thus revealing the unique advantages of CDA in public discourse analysis.

Qian is a leading figure in the combination of corpus and CDA. Qian (2010) took Bin Laden's discourse construction in the British Sun as an example to explore how newspapers infiltrate political and social factors such as national interests, commercial purposes and reader positioning into their discourse.

Yang and Fu (2018) took Discourse-Historical Approach as the theoretical framework, combined with the social and historical context, and used the research method of corpus to carry out a historical study on the Hillary Clinton email scandal, and found that the American mainstream media's reports on the scandal were manipulated by the government's political stance and values, revealing the ideology hidden behind it. After more than 30 years of development, CDA has made remarkable achievements.

It is also pioneering and innovative in the study of combining with news discourse, using more persuasive means such as corpus to conduct auxiliary research, and making great contributions to the construction of national image and the revelation of hidden ideology.

On the basis of reviewing the studies of news discourse by CDA at home and abroad, it can be concluded that CDA researchers believe that news discourse is a rich source of information, which can help to clarify the ideology and values hidden in the language form. Since news discourse symbolizes the latest development of major social issues, the relevance of news discourse makes the practical value of CDA quite timeliness. Therefore, it is of great significance to conduct CDA on news reports.

2.3 Previous Studies on the Linguistic Analysis of Sino-US Trade War

The Sino-American trade war, which formally began in 2018 and continued into the 2020s, has attracted increasing academic attention in both international and Chinese scholarly communities. Researchers have approached the topic from various perspectives, including economics, international politics, media studies, and discourse analysis. Among these, media discourse surrounding the trade war has become a particularly salient topic, as it reflects the ideological contest between the two nations.

Western scholars have largely focused on the political and ideological framing of China in U.S. mainstream media. For example, Schneider (2020) conducted a discourse analysis of The New York Times and found that while the paper maintained a liberal stance, it reinforced negative stereotypes of China by repeatedly associating trade tensions with security threats and

authoritarianism. Similarly, Hall (2021) explored how American political discourse surrounding the trade war framed China as a revisionist power, threatening not only economic stability but the liberal international order.

In the realm of critical discourse studies, some researchers have employed Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model to examine how power and ideology manifest in media texts. Wodak and Meyer (2016) emphasized that media discourse plays a crucial role in normalizing political decisions by embedding them within seemingly neutral reporting. Within the context of the trade war, this suggests that the framing of China in U.S. media is not merely informational but ideologically strategic.

Furthermore, Bista (2022) highlighted the role of modality and lexical choices in American news coverage, noting that high-certainty modals like "must" or "will" were often used in reference to Chinese actions, creating a tone of threat and urgency, whereas softer modal expressions were reserved for U.S. policy decisions.

Chinese researchers have actively contributed to the analysis of the trade war discourse, particularly by comparing Chinese and American media narratives. Liu (2020) examined China Daily and The New York Times using critical discourse analysis and identified that the former often employed constructive and cooperative language, whereas the latter tended to adopt a conflict-based and accusatory tone. This contrast reflects differing national positions on trade, development, and global leadership.

Wang and Chen (2019) investigated the intertextual strategies used by China Daily to emphasize multilateralism and fairness in trade, finding that Chinese media embedded official diplomatic language within journalistic narratives to construct a rational and legitimate national image. They argue that such strategies not only counter external criticism but also serve to reinforce internal cohesion.

Another noteworthy study by Zhang (2021) focused on ideological representation and found that Chinese media frequently utilized inclusive and developmentalist discourse, portraying China as a responsible global actor. In contrast, U.S. media discourse often drew upon exclusionary rhetoric that painted China as a threat.

2.4 Comments

Most scholars have carried out research on the news coverage of the Sino-US trade war from various theoretical perspectives, such as metaphor analysis, Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), appraisal theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These approaches have greatly enriched the academic understanding of how language shapes ideology in trade-related news discourse.

Among the studies focusing on China Daily and The New York Times, several researchers—including Jin Haimei (2020) and Feng Yali & Sui Guilan (2019)—have applied CDA to explore the construction of China's image during the 2018–2020 trade war period. While their findings have provided valuable insights, no studies have specifically addressed the 2025 phase of the Sino-US trade war, which marks a new and intensifying round of bilateral tensions under changing global conditions. This stage is characterized by renewed tariff confrontations, diplomatic disputes, and intensified media narratives.

So far, no existing study has comparatively examined the changes in China's image construction between the 2018 and 2025 periods of the Sino-US trade war. To address this gap, the current study conducts a diachronic comparison of China Daily's trade war coverage in 2018 and 2025. Grounded in Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model and SFG theory, the research investigates how China's national image has evolved across the two trade war phases. In particular, it examines how the newspaper's discourse shifted from a defensive and restrained portrayal in 2018 to a more confident stance in 2025, reflecting broader ideological and communicative transformations.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

This study adopts a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods to ensure a comprehensive, scientific, and objective analysis of media discourse. The integration of mixed methods is more convincing. While quantitative analysis offers statistical support and reinforces objectivity, qualitative analysis allows the researcher to explore ideological meaning and linguistic difference in depth. In this study, both methods are employed in parallel to support each other.

Specifically, quantitative methods were used to measure the frequency, distribution, and proportions of linguistic features such as transitivity, modality, news sources, and reporting modes in news reports. The tools AntConc 3.4.3 and UAM CorpusTool 6 were applied to search keywords, calculate frequencies, and examine concordance lines. These statistical results formed the basis for further in-depth analysis.

Qualitative analysis was employed to interpret the textual data and reveal the underlying ideology of China Daily. Guided by Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model, the study analyzed each dimension: the textual dimension (transitivity, modality), the discursive practice (source citation and reporting modes), and the social practice (media ideology and political context). In addition, Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) was used to identify and annotate the transitivity processes and modality systems.

In terms of corpus construction, this study built two corpora for China Daily. Each corpus consists of 50 representative news reports related to the Sino-US trade war, 50 articles from 2018 and 50 from 2025 respectively. All articles were manually annotated to ensure that the main content focuses on the trade war and contains discourse relevant to China's national image. The reports were selected from Lexis database and verified through the official websites.

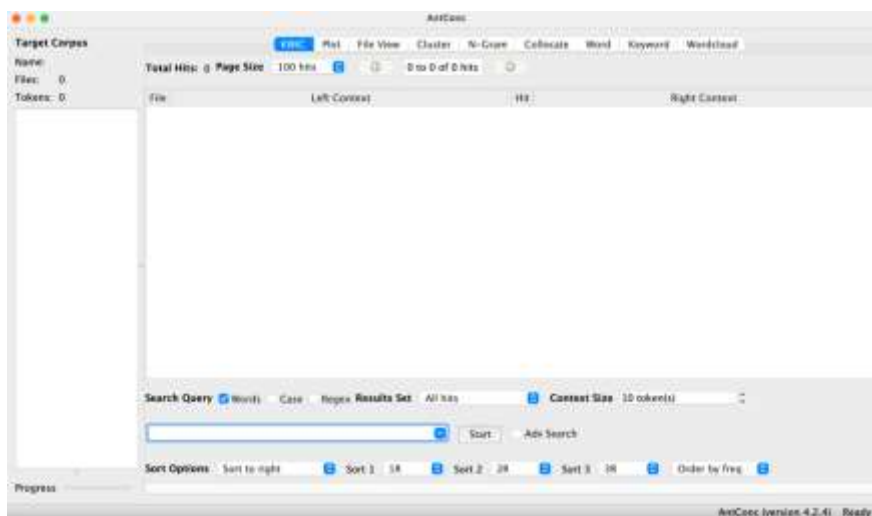
The representativeness of the data is critical to the reliability and validity of the research. China Daily, established in 1981, is the most authoritative English-language newspaper in China and an important tool for national image projection. Thus, China Daily are chosen as representative examples of domestic perspectives in shaping China's image.

By combining corpus-based quantitative data with in-depth qualitative interpretation, this study aims to reveal not only how language is used in constructing China's image, but also how such image has evolved in different time and media systems.

3.2 Research Instruments

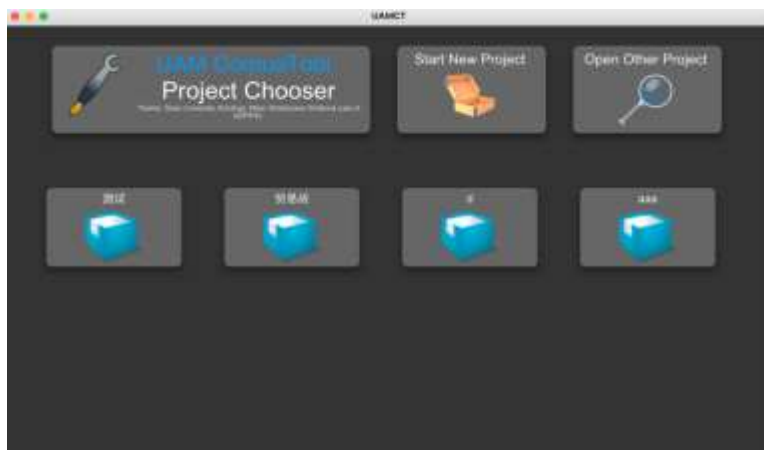
3.2.1 Antconc 4.2.4

AntConc 4.2.4 is a free and user-friendly corpus analysis software developed by Laurence Anthony from Waseda University. It includes various practical functions such as concordance search, word list generation, keyword extraction, and collocation analysis. Because of its simple interface and powerful features, it is widely used in fields like corpus linguistics, language education, and discourse analysis.



3.2.2 UAM Corpus Tool6

UAM CorpusTool 6 is a practical tool developed for annotating and analyzing linguistic features in text. It is especially useful for discourse studies, as it allows users to manually label categories such as transitivity, modality, and attitude within a clear interface. The tool supports both qualitative and quantitative research, offering visual charts and statistics to help interpret results.



3.3.1 Data Collection

The data used in this study were drawn from China Daily, China's most influential English-language newspaper and an official outlet representing China's national stance in international communication. The data collection process aimed to ensure representativeness, topical relevance, and chronological balance between the two trade war phases—2018 and 2025.

Two self-compiled corpora were constructed for comparative analysis. Each corpus consists of 50 news reports published during the peak months of the Sino-US trade war in 2018 (from March to December) and 2025 (from January to September), respectively. All reports were retrieved from the China Daily official website and the LexisNexis database using keywords such as trade war, tariff, China-US relations, Biden, Trump, and China's economy.

To ensure data validity, only hard news and analytical reports directly addressing the trade conflict and involving China's international image were included, while editorials, opinion columns, and duplicated contents were excluded. Each article was manually reviewed to confirm thematic relevance and linguistic integrity. The selected news texts collectively reflect China Daily's institutional voice during two distinct geopolitical contexts—2018 as the initial confrontation phase and 2025 as the renewed escalation period.

Altogether, the dataset includes approximately 120,000 words of text, representing a balanced and reliable corpus suitable for both quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis.

3.3.2 Data Processing

After data collection, all selected news reports were converted into plain-text format (.txt) for corpus analysis and processed using two main tools: AntConc 4.2.4 and UAM CorpusTool 6.0.

The data preprocessing stage involved several steps: Text normalization; Segmentation and labeling; Corpus verification

For quantitative analysis, AntConc was used to generate word lists, keyword frequency tables, and concordance lines for core linguistic features, focusing on process types (verbs) and modal auxiliaries. These outputs were cross-verified to identify statistically significant differences between the two corpora.

For qualitative analysis, UAM CorpusTool was employed to annotate transitivity and modality structures following Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar framework. Each clause was manually coded according to process type (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, existential) and modality value (low, median, high). Additionally, all instances of reporting mode (direct vs. indirect speech) and news source type (specific, semi-specific, unspecific) were labeled to facilitate interpretive comparison.

Finally, the coded data were exported into Excel for statistical visualization and comparative interpretation. The integration of quantitative frequency counts and qualitative CDA interpretation allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic and ideological evolution in China Daily's discourse between 2018 and 2025.

4 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Transitivity

To compare the transitivity process types, the author calculated the percentage of material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes in each corpus of China Daily. Table 1 below summarize the distribution of process types in the 2018 and 2025 texts.

Table 4.1 The Frequency and Distribution of Processes in 2018 and 2025

	2018		2025	
Process	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Material	1136	72.1%	1647	70.5%
Verbal	230	14.6%	320	13.7%
Relational	89	5.7%	176	7.5%
Mental	103	6.5%	161	6.9%
Existential	17	1.1%	33	1.4%
Behavioral	0	0%	0	0%
Total	1575	100%	2337	100%

It is evident that material processes dominate both corpora, whereas behavioral and existential processes are negligible in frequency. The corpus in 2018 has a slightly more balanced distribution among process types, while the 2025 texts rely even more heavily on material processes.

From these results, the author identifies two process types with significant shifts (greater than about 3% change) between 2018 and 2025: material processes increase by roughly 7 percentage (from 74% to 81%), and verbal processes decrease by about 4 percentage points (from ~10% to ~6%). Relational processes show a slight drop (~2.7%) just below the 3% threshold. In the following sections, we focus on material and verbal process examples from each year.

4.1.1 Material Processes

(1) Example2018: If the US (actor) continues to engage in protectionism (goal), China (actor) is fully capable of defending its interests (goal).

Analysis: In this example, the material processes highlight clear agents: the US as actor of a negative action ("engage in protectionism") and China as actor of a counter-action ("defending its interests"). This use of material clauses frames the US as pursuing an unjust policy, while portraying China as capable of active self-defense. The construction conveys China's stance that it will not passively tolerate economic aggression; instead, China can take action to safeguard its interests. Such words reinforces an ideology of resistance to bullying – signaling that China has the resolve to counter US protectionism.

(2) Example2018: It is time for the US (actor) to stop adopting hegemonic measures to intimidate others (goal) in global trade.

Analysis: This sentence uses material process wording ("adopting hegemonic measures to intimidate others") to cast the US as the country of improper actions. The construction "It is time for..." carries an evaluative, imperative tone, implying that the speaker (from the Chinese side) claims moral authority in urging the US to cease these actions. By labeling the US's trade behavior as "hegemonic measures," the clause assigns a negative role to the US and reflects China's ideological critique of US

trade policy. It underscores China's stance that such coercive actions violate the norms of fair global trade, insisting that the US stop its intimidation tactics.

(3) Example2018: Such behavior (actor) can only damage the business ties (goal) between the two countries and force China to import more from other, more complementary partners.

Analysis: In this example, the material processes "damage the business ties" and "force China to import more..." describe concrete effects of an unspecified "behavior" (implicitly, US actions). The sentence is implicit – "such behavior" refers to US trade moves. The clauses highlight the consequences of US material actions: not only harming the U.S.–China trade relationship but also compelling China to seek imports from alternative partners. Here China is cast as the affected party (being forced to adjust imports), yet the wording also implies that China can find other suppliers. The sentence carries an ideological message: American aggression will backfire, as China can and will deepen trade with others, thereby diminishing US leverage and interests.:

(4) Example2025: Washington's (actor) heavy-handed approach to contain China's rise (goal) will only heighten tensions between the two major economies.

This sentence uses material processes ("to contain China's rise" and "heighten tensions") to make a clear statement. The actor is the United States (personified as "Washington"), which is portrayed as actively taking a heavy-handed approach—an aggressive material action aimed at limiting China's growth. The resultant material process "heighten tensions" describes the consequence of that action. The phrasing "will only..." signals the speaker's evaluation that the approach is counterproductive. This construction reflects China's stance that the US's hardline containment policy will merely worsen bilateral tensions and is not a constructive solution. The underlying ideology is a critique of the US strategy toward China, implying that confrontation undermines stability and that China's rise should not be met with such coercive containment.

(5) Example2025: In the past, China and the US (actor) pulled the world economy(goal) out of the quagmire of the financial crisis together and jointly pushed to reach the Paris Agreement.

This sentence contains two linked material processes: "pulled...out of the quagmire" and "pushed to reach the Agreement." Here, China and the US together are actors of these actions— jointly rescuing the world economy and jointly achieving a climate accord. The description highlights the effectiveness of Sino-US cooperation: the two nations took collective action to resolve global challenges. By recounting these positive cooperative material processes, the sentence emphasizes a stance that collaboration between China and the US is beneficial and necessary. The underlying ideology praises China and the US for assuming their responsibilities as great powers to produce win-win outcomes. In the context of trade conflict, this example serves as a pointed contrast to confrontation, implying that rivalry is not inevitable and that the two countries can, through shared material actions, benefit the world.

(6) Example2025: China and the US (actor), as major powers, should shoulder their responsibilities, refrain from mutual attrition, and avoid coercing other countries into taking sides.

This sentence enumerates three material processes: "shoulder responsibilities," "refrain from mutual attrition," and "avoid coercing other countries to take sides." Actors of all these actions are "China and the US." The tone is prescriptive, outlining what both nations should do (or not do). "Shoulder responsibilities" is a positive material action, showing proactive moral actors to the two powers; whereas "refrain from attrition" and "avoid coercion" demand the cessation of potential negative actions (implicitly referencing behaviors in a trade war, such as undermining each other or pressuring allies to choose sides). By deploying these material clauses, the sentence articulates China's expectation for US–China relations: both sides should take concrete actions to uphold global stability and not fall into zero-sum rivalry.

In comparing the 2018 and 2025 discourses, we see a notable shift in transitivity patterns that corresponds to changes in how the US–China trade conflict is narratively constructed. Material processes are prevalent in both corpora, but their proportion grows in 2025, indicating an even stronger focus on describing concrete actions and events. In 2018, material actions often frame the US as the aggressor (e.g. imposing tariffs, engaging in protectionism) and China as a capable defender (e.g. retaliating, defending its interests). By 2025, material processes not only continue to depict ongoing conflicts, but also increasingly highlight collaborative or normative actions (e.g. shouldering responsibilities, avoiding coercion) and past successful cooperation. This suggests that the 2025 narrative, while acknowledging sustained conflict (through material descriptions of US policy and China's responses), places greater emphasis on what actions should be taken to manage great-power relations and on the idea of mutual duties. The actor in 2025's material clauses is often more evenly distributed or dual (China and the US acting together in global contexts) compared to 2018's frequent portrayal of unilateral US moves and Chinese counter-moves. This reflects a discursive shift towards describing a broader, more global context in 2025, embedding the trade war in themes of world economy and responsibility.

4.2 Modality

The author categorized all modal verbs in the 2018 and 2025 trade war corpora into low, medium, and high modality values (following Halliday’s framework). The table below shows the frequency counts and percentage share of each modality category in the two datasets:

Table 4.2 Distribution of Modal Verbs in Selected Samples

Value	2018		2025	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Low	30	41%	28	31%
Median	40	55%	53	58%
High	3	4%	10	11%
Total	73	100%	91	100%

From 2018 to 2025, low-value modality usage decreased (from 41% to 31% of all modals), while high-value modality usage more than doubled in relative terms (from 4% to 11%). Medium-value modality remained high in both years (around 55–58%), increasing slightly in 2025. This suggests a shift toward stronger, more certain language over time. In 2018, writers relied more on low modals (e.g. can, might) to express possibility or ability, often hedging assertions or indicating willingness. By 2025, there is a greater use of high modals (e.g. must, need to), indicating more forceful expressions of obligation or certainty. These shifts likely reflect a change in stance and ideological framing: early trade war discourse was cautious and defensive, whereas later discourse adopts a more assertive, imperative tone. The sections below examine the low and high modality usages in detail, with example sentences from each corpus and a bilingual analysis of their discourse function and ideological implications.

4.2.1 Low Modality Usage

(7) Example2018: “We clearly do not want a trade war ... but if the US sticks to protectionism, we **can** cope with it,” he warned

Here “can cope with it” is a low-modality expression of capability. The modal “can” indicate a potential ability to handle the situation, projecting confidence but in a non-confrontational way. Discursively, this functions to reassure the domestic audience that China is able to withstand pressure without outright threatening retaliation. Ideologically, the use of a low-value modal implies preparedness without aggression, aligning with a defensive but resolute posture. The speaker underscores that China doesn’t want conflict but can manage if forced, reflecting an ideology of measured resistance rather than provocation.

(8) Example2018: “If the two sides don’t overreact and keep negotiating, they **can** exorcise the specter of a trade war.”

The modal “can” here denotes possibility/ability, suggesting that avoiding a trade war is achievable through caution and dialogue. The phrase “exorcise the specter of a trade war” uses metaphor, and “can” makes the statement conditional and somewhat optimistic. The discourse function is to emphasize a reachable positive outcome (no trade war) if proper actions are taken. This low modality hedges the statement – it does not guarantee the outcome, reflecting uncertainty in 2018 about how events will unfold. Ideologically, it frames the trade war as avoidable and encourages cooperation. The use of a low-value modal aligns with a hope for rational resolution, projecting a belief in diplomacy over inevitability of conflict.

(9) Example2018: “China and the US might witness ‘more trade friction than ever’ this year, though a trade war would not explode.”

The modal “might” indicate low certainty. By saying the two countries “might witness” increased friction, the writer hedges the prediction – acknowledging the possibility of serious friction but stopping short of declaring it will definitely happen. This tentative tone reflects caution in 2018, as officials and experts were unsure of the trajectory of tensions. The clause “a trade war would not explode” further uses a modal (would, medium modality) to predict the war will likely be avoided, reinforcing a hopeful stance. The discourse function of “might” here is to introduce a warning without causing panic – preparing readers for

trouble ahead but maintaining that full-out war is not inevitable. Ideologically, this balanced use of modality projects a controlled narrative: it recognizes risks (trade frictions) yet asserts confidence that disaster can be averted. It reflects an attempt to manage public perception by neither downplaying challenges nor exaggerating threats.

(10) Example2025: “Against this backdrop, major-country competition should not be the underlying logic of the times; only solidarity and cooperation **can** help humanity overcome current difficulties.”

The clause “only solidarity and cooperation can help humanity overcome current difficulties” uses “can” to express a firm ability/possibility. The structure “only X can do Y” is a strong assertion that X is the sole way to achieve Y. Here, “can” carries a somewhat higher force than a typical low modality, because it’s bolstered by “only” – implying no alternative. The discourse function is persuasive: it elevates cooperation as indispensable, implicitly dismissing unilateral or competitive approaches as ineffective. Ideologically, this aligns with the Chinese narrative of a “community with a shared future for mankind.” It reflects a worldview that global challenges are solvable only through collective action, framing China’s stance as cooperative and globally responsible. The use of “can” (rather than must here) is possibility to make the statement sound reasoned rather than overtly imperative.

(11) Example2025: “China–US cooperation **may** not solve all problems, but few problems **can** be solved without China–US cooperation.”

This sentence first uses “may not” to concede a limitation, then a “can” in the second clause to make a pointed assertion. The phrase “few problems can be solved without China-US cooperation” employs “can” in a negative construction (few... can) to emphasize inability. The discourse function is to stress the essential role of cooperation: it implies that without collaboration, solving issues is almost impossible. The low-modality verb “can” here is part of a logical appeal – it doesn’t overtly command cooperation, but by stating a conditional reality, it strongly undercuts unilateralist ideology. Ideologically, this reflects an interdependence narrative: it forwards the idea that the US and China need each other to address global and bilateral problems. By phrasing it with “can”, the statement remains in the realm of factual-sounding observation (rather than saying “must cooperate”), thus maintaining a tone of reasoned analysis while still highlighting a subtle imperative: cooperation is virtually mandatory for success.

(12) Example2025: “No one can afford an economic war between the world’s two largest trading powers...”

“No one can afford...” uses “can” to express inability, implying that a trade/economic war would be mutually ruinous. The discourse effect of this low-modality phrasing is a strong warning presented as a statement of fact. It universalizes the impact (“no one”), highlighting that everyone is constrained by this reality. While “can” is technically a low-value modal, in this context it delivers a grave certainty: it is not phrased as “no one should afford” or “must not afford,” but as a simple truth that no party is able to bear the cost of war. This makes the statement less about moral injunction and more about pragmatic reality. Ideologically, this resonates with a stance against zero-sum conflict: it frames a trade war as unwinnable for either side. The use of “can’t afford” language reflects an appeal to rational self-interest — it implicitly urges both the US and China to avoid destructive policies because the cost is beyond anyone’s capacity. This aligns with China’s 2025 narrative that confrontation is futile and cooperation is the only viable path.

4.2.2 High Modality Usage

(13) Example2018: “International trade today **needs** rules rather than supremacy by any one nation.”

The verb “needs” (third person singular of need) functions here as a deontic modal, conveying a strong necessity. The statement asserts that rules are required in global trade, implicitly criticizing unilateral dominance. The discourse function is declarative and normative – it states a principle as a fact. The use of “needs” imparts a high modality without the direct use of “must,” which might be seen as too confrontational. It still carries ideological weight: it promotes a rules-based international order (aligned with multilateralism) and rejects hegemony. By choosing “needs” instead of a softer modal like “should have,” the author gives the line a sense of incontrovertibility—as if it’s a self-evident truth that fair rules are essential.

(14) Example2018: He said a “timely liaison at the governmental level” is needed to avoid a deteriorating “free fall” of the situation.

“...is needed to avoid...” also uses “need” in passive form (“is needed”), conveying a sense of necessity for a certain action. This construction implies “must be had” or “must happen” without directly saying “must.” The discourse function is to recommend a course of action authoritatively: a timely government liaison is portrayed as essential to prevent a free-fall in relations. The passive voice focuses on the action (“liaison”) rather than who must do it, which reduces direct imposition while still stressing urgency. Ideologically, this exemplifies how Chinese officials in 2018 pushed for dialogue: the sentence frames

communication as absolutely required to stabilize the situation. The high modality ("is needed") underlines a proactive solution (talks), reflecting an ideology that rational engagement is compulsory to manage conflict. It signals that in China's view, responsibility lies in taking necessary diplomatic steps – a subtle critique that if deterioration continues, it's because this necessary communication was lacking.

(15) Example2025: "Both China and the US must recognize that under the current circumstances, common interests... are expanding rather than shrinking."

This use of "must" is a clear directive: both nations "must recognize" a particular reality. The speaker (often a Chinese official or media voice) is effectively instructing the US (and China itself) on a perspective they are obligated to adopt. The discourse function is strongly exhortative – it leaves no room for disagreement about the stated fact (that common interests are growing). Such high modality in 2025 signals China's more confident or assertive tone in international discourse. Ideologically, "must recognize" implies that acknowledging mutual interests is not optional but a duty of great powers, aligning with a narrative that cooperation is logical and inevitable. It carries an undertone of criticism toward any US reluctance: if the US fails to recognize this, it is portrayed as neglecting an obvious responsibility. The modality "must" thus serve to project authority and moral high ground; China's stance is that it understands the global trend and the US ought to do the same. This reflects a shift by 2025 to a firmer voice that calls out what both parties are obliged to do in the interest of global stability.

(16) Example2025: The ambassador said, "The two sides need to bear in mind the mutually beneficial nature of our bilateral relationship and get more big things done..."

In this quote, "need to bear in mind" carries the weight of a strong recommendation – nearly an obligation – but is phrased a bit more diplomatically than "must." "Need to" is a high modality construction that implies it is necessary for them to remember this fact. The discourse function is advisory yet authoritative: coming from an ambassador, it sounds polite but firm, indicating that remembering the mutually beneficial nature of the relationship is essential for future cooperation. Ideologically, this reflects a cooperative stance wrapped in an imperative: it underscores interdependence (mutual benefit) as a guiding principle that leaders are obliged not to forget. By using "need to", the speaker appeals to reason (it makes sense for both to keep this in mind) while still conveying a normative stance. It implies that any action by either side should be predicated on this recognition of mutual benefit. Thus, the high modality here reinforces the idea that acknowledging interdependence is not just wise, but required for constructive Sino-US relations.

(17) Example2025: "Generally speaking, we have to know that the first principle of Sino-US economic and trade relations is related to national interest, not national security."

"We have to know..." is another way to express obligation or inevitability – similar to "we must understand." The modal phrase "have to" conveys a sense of external necessity or compulsion. In this sentence, it suggests that recognizing the true nature of the principle (that it's about interest, not security) is unavoidable if one is to discuss Sino-US trade correctly. The discourse function is didactic: it seeks to correct a narrative (perhaps countering a US framing of trade as a security issue) by stating what must be understood. By using "have to", the speaker speaks collectively ("we") and authoritatively, implying this understanding is beyond debate. Ideologically, this reflects an attempt to assert control over the discourse: China is reasserting the proper terms of the debate (economic relations should be about mutual benefit, not security threats). The high modality "have to know" underscores that this viewpoint is compulsory knowledge – it delegitimizes the opposing ideological stance that treats trade as a security matter. Thus, it reinforces China's stance that economic issues should remain economic (win-win), and it places an obligation on all parties (including the US) to adhere to that framing.

The comparative modality analysis reveals a notable shift in China's trade war discourse from 2018 to 2025. In 2018, Chinese media favored low-value modals such as can, might, and could, reflecting a cautious, open, and defensive stance. These expressions emphasized dialogue, patience, and China's resilience under pressure. High-value modals like must were rare and often used in impersonal or conditional contexts, while mid-value modals like should appeared in soft, diplomatic tones.

By contrast, in 2025, modality usage reflects a more assertive and directive discourse. The frequency of high-value modals (must, need to, have to) increased significantly, with China using stronger language to outline responsibilities and moral imperatives for both itself and the U.S. This shift indicates a growing willingness to set the narrative and assert China's role as a guardian of global stability and mutual benefit.

Although mid-value modals like will and should remain common, their tone is firmer. The discourse no longer merely calls for cooperation—it demands it. The transition from suggestive to commanding language suggests China's rising confidence, positioning itself as a leading global power rather than a reactive participant. In essence, modality evolved from managing

uncertainty in 2018 to declaring norms and expectations in 2025, reflecting a deeper ideological shift toward leadership, stability, and international order.

4.3 Reporting Mode

China Daily overwhelmingly uses indirect speech in both 2018 and 2025 when reporting on the trade war, with a relatively small portion of content presented as direct quotes. The table below shows the frequency of direct speech (e.g. quoting someone's exact words: X said, "...") vs. indirect speech (paraphrasing without quotes: X said that ...) in the two sample corpora:

Table 4.3 Distribution of Reporting Modes in 2018 & 2025

Reporting Mode	2018		2025	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Direct speech	24	48%	35	54.7%
Indirect speech	26	52%	29	45.3%

Between 2018 and 2025, China Daily's use of reporting modes in covering the Sino-US trade war experienced a notable shift. While both years featured a lot of direct and indirect speech, corpus 2025 contained a higher overall number of speech, and, significantly, more direct quotations than indirect ones. This shift indicates a change in narrative strategy—one that places greater emphasis on explicit, attributable voices to bolster China's credibility.

In 2018, the number of indirect is almost the same of direct speech. China Daily frequently paraphrased statements by officials and experts, maintaining a controlled narrative voice. Direct quotes were used sparingly and typically highlighted strong or emotionally charged remarks. For example, one article directly quoted Zhang Yesui, spokesman for the National People's Congress:

(18) Example2018: "...it will never sit by and watch while its rights and interests are infringed upon," said Zhang Yesui...

This quote vividly conveyed China's firm position, with direct wording used to emphasize national resolve. However, such direct speech instances were limited. More commonly, commentary was paraphrased, such as in the sentence:

(19) Example2018 "China is the world's biggest victim of unfair trade rules, while the US does not abide by WTO rules, trade experts said on Sunday."

Here, indirect speech frames the claim as a shared expert consensus rather than quoting a single identifiable individual, maintaining a generalized authoritative tone.

By 2025, however, direct speech became the dominant mode of attribution, not only increasing in proportion but also in frequency. China Daily more frequently quoted identifiable figures, including both Chinese officials and foreign voices, to lend authority to its messaging. For instance, in support of China's position, the newspaper quoted Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs:

(20) Example2025: " US President Donald Trump's aggressive tariff policy is "bound to fail" ... said Jeffrey Sachs, a Columbia University professor."

This type of direct citation from respected international figures was used to reinforce China's arguments and signal global support for its stance. The move toward more direct quotation reflects greater discursive openness and rhetorical confidence. Instead of summarizing or paraphrasing as in 2018, China Daily in 2025 allowed prominent voices to speak for themselves, conveying a sense of transparency and credibility.

From 2018 to 2025, China Daily increased its overall use of news sources and, more importantly, reversed its preference for indirect speech in favor of more frequent and strategic direct quotations. This change suggests a deliberate discursive shift toward highlighting authoritative voices—especially named officials and foreign experts—to reinforce China's image as confident, credible, and globally aligned. While indirect speech still serves to present consensus, the growing reliance on direct speech reflects China Daily's effort to project China's national stance in a more open and confident manner.

4.4 News Sources

In 2025, news sources became more specific over time, relying even more on named or clearly identified sources and eliminating some vague attributions. The author categorized all source references in the corpus into three types:

Specific sources: Clearly identified individuals or entities (with personal names, official titles, or institution names). E.g., "Commerce Ministry spokesman Wang X", "Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying", "the Ministry of Commerce spokesperson", or "Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs". Pronouns referring to a known specific entity (he, she, it, the spokesperson, the ambassador, etc.) also count as specific, since their referents are identifiable in context.

Semi-specific sources: Generalized groups or categories of people, without personal names. E.g., "trade experts said...", "Chinese officials stated...", "Economists and business groups believe...". These indicate a source type but not an individual.

Unspecific sources: Vague or unnamed sources with no clear identity. E.g., "some believe...", "someone said...".

The table below compares the frequency of each source type in 2018 vs. 2025,

Table 4.4 Distribution of News Sources in 2018 & 2025				
News source	2018		2025	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Specific	25	56.8%	34	79.1%
Semi-specific	11	25%	6	14%
Unidentified	8	18.2%	3	7%
Total	44	100%	43	100%

Both years show a strong majority of sources being specific (named officials, ministries, experts, etc.), but this majority grew in 2025. In the 2018 articles, about 56.8% of attributions were to specific sources, while roughly 25% were semi-specific and a number (around 18.2%) were completely unspecific. By 2025, almost 79.1% of sources were specific. Semi-specific attributions dropped to about 14%, and unspecific attributions were 7%. In 2018, we find occasional vague references. For example, one article used an unspecific source to convey a viewpoint:

"Some say that agricultural products account for a significant portion of our exports..." (illustrative)

Here "Some say" introduces a claim without clarifying who "some" are-a clearly unspecific attribution. Another instance from 2018 is an unnamed individual referred to as "the person" in context (indicating an anonymous source). These unspecific attributions, though rare, suggest that early in the trade war coverage, the newspaper occasionally alluded to sentiments or information without pinning them to an official name-perhaps to hint at broader views or to protect identities. By 2025, China Daily will avoid such ambiguity. There were no instances of "some say" or anonymous "a person said" in the sampled articles. Every claim or statement is tied to an identified source or at least a defined group. This indicates a shift toward greater transparency (or at least the appearance of it) in sourcing, reinforcing credibility.

The use of semi-specific group references (like "experts" or "officials") also decreased. In 2018, phrases like "trade experts said..." and "senior Chinese officials said..." were used to present assessments. For example: "China does not intend to become embroiled in a trade war...and the two sides will continue communications, senior Chinese officials said on Sunday." Here no individual is named, but the plural "senior officials" implies authoritative government sources. "Trade experts say it is Washington that is ignoring WTO rules."This frames an opinion as a consensus among experts, without naming anyone in particular.

Such semi-specific attributions serve to convey a general consensus or widely-held expert opinion, buttressing China's claims with an impersonal authority. However, by 2025, China Daily relies on them less. One of the few semi-specific examples from 2025 is: "..., officials and experts said." – combining two groups to attribute a statement to a broad coalition. This still appears (indicating a joint view of government officials and think-tank experts), but it's not frequent.

Instead, 2025 coverage favors specific attributions. Almost every statement is credited to a named source or a specific institution. We see a rich array of Chinese officials, ministries, and named experts being quoted or referenced. For instance: Official spokesperson: “the MOC spokesperson (Ministry of Commerce spokesperson) said...” even if the name isn’t repeated, it is clear which China’s representative is speaking. This is a specific source because it’s an official position within a ministry. In 2018, a similar role might have been referenced more vaguely or not at all; by 2025, the spokesperson is the China’s voice.

Named experts and academics: “Zhu Feng, dean of Nanjing University’s international studies school, noted that...”, “Jeffrey Sachs said...”. Citing well-known scholars (Chinese and foreign) by name gives weight to China’s narrative. In 2018, Chinese media did quote experts, but 2025 features more high-profile names, signifying an effort to align China’s stance with respected authorities.

In corpus 2025, foreign politicians and organizations are also cited to reinforce China’s views, which is part of image construction. For example, “Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau...commenting on Trump’s tariffs” or “The Semiconductor Industry Association (Washington-based) argued that...”. These specific attributions show China Daily presenting China’s position as being echoed or validated by international figures, thereby portraying China as reasonable and supported by global opinion...

Representative Examples of Source Attribution (2018 vs 2025):

Specific Source **(21) Example2018**: “Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the US accusations were groundless.”

Here a government voice is clearly identified, lending official weight to the statement and positively projecting China’s image as having a reasoned, official response.

Specific Source **(22) Example2025**: “Xiang Ligang, director-general of a telecom industry association, noted that China’s technological progress will not be stopped by US curbs.”

Naming Xiang with his title establishes him as a credible industry authority supporting China’s image of tech resilience. China Daily’s use of named experts in 2025 emphasizes that knowledgeable figures openly back China’s stance.

Semi-specific **(23) Example2018**: “Experts predicted that the US tariffs would backfire.”

This general reference suggests a consensus among observers, bolstering the claim without citing one person. It portrays a broad agreement (which serves to legitimize China’s viewpoint) but lacks a personal touch.

Semi-specific **(24) Example2025**: “US economists and trade groups have warned the tariff strategy is counterproductive.”

A 2025 article might say this to show even in the US there is collective dissent. It’s semi-specific (categories of people), used strategically to demonstrate that not only China thinks the tariffs are bad—a chorus of economists and industry groups (not individually named here) agree. This supports China’s image as aligned with global economic logic.

Unspecific **(25) Example2018**: “Some in the US believe China’s growth comes at their expense,” but the article then refutes this via facts and quotes from officials.

Such sentence introduces an opposing view in a vague way (“some believe”), which is then countered by China Daily using data or official statements, portraying the “some believe” argument as baseless.

By 2025, China Daily would address such claims more directly via specific sources (or by citing foreign experts to dismiss them), rather than using “some believe.”

The shift from 2018 to 2025 in news sources reflects a move toward greater specificity and authority in China Daily’s reporting. In 2018, at the outset of the trade war, there was slightly more reliance on generic name (“experts”, “some”) which served to generalize support for China’s position or to set up arguments. By 2025, China Daily’s pieces almost exclusively feature named officials, ministries, and experts, indicating a concerted effort to put credible faces and institutions to statements. This enhances the reliability of the narrative—readers see ministers, spokespersons, and professors delivering the messages, rather than unnamed voices.

To sum up, Preliminary analysis of China Daily’s reports from 2018 and 2025 reveals clear diachronic changes in reporting modes and news sourcing strategies, reflecting shifts in China’s media discourse. Notable differences in modality and transitivity reinforce the changing tone of China’s image construction. The 2018 reports often used low- and medium-value modal verbs like can, might, and should, suggesting restraint and openness to dialogue. In contrast, 2025 texts adopted more high-value modals such as must and have to, signaling assertiveness and authority. Transitivity patterns also shifted: whereas 2018 texts

depicted China more often as a Goal (receiver of actions), the 2025 texts increasingly position China as an Actor, actively shaping global trade narratives.

In addition, in 2018, indirect speech and unspecific sources dominated, projecting a cautious, unified image. By 2025, direct quotations increased significantly, along with the use of named official and international sources, indicating greater discursive confidence and global alignment.

These linguistic patterns, measurable via corpus tools like AntConc and UAM Corpus Tool, demonstrate that the topic is not only researchable but also offers rich empirical data for analysis. The two self-built corpora provide strong textual foundations to track China's discursive shift from a restrained actor to a confident stabilizing force in trade war discourse.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Major Findings

This study investigated how China Daily, as China's authoritative English-language newspaper, constructed and transformed the image of China during two distinct phases of the Sino-US trade war—2018 and 2025. Drawing on Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), the research integrated both quantitative corpus-based methods and qualitative discourse interpretation to reveal linguistic and ideological shifts in media representation.

The findings reveal three major patterns of change.

First, there is a diachronic transformation in linguistic expression. In 2018, China Daily's discourse was defensive and restrained, dominated by low-value modality (e.g., can, might) and balanced transitivity structures. China was depicted as a rational and resilient actor responding to external provocation, while the United States was portrayed through material processes associated with aggression or protectionism. By 2025, however, the tone of discourse shifted significantly toward confidence and assertiveness. High-value modals (e.g., must, need to) and normative expressions became more frequent, suggesting that China's media voice had evolved from cautious self-defense to proactive leadership in framing global cooperation and fairness.

Second, changes in reporting modes and news sourcing highlight China Daily's increasing international orientation. In 2018, indirect reporting and semi-specific sources (e.g., "experts said") dominated, reflecting a more controlled and internally consistent narrative. In contrast, the 2025 corpus shows a clear increase in direct quotations and identifiable sources, including foreign academics and international institutions. This shift reflects a deliberate move toward transparency, credibility, and dialogic engagement—signaling that China Daily sought not only to tell China's story but to situate it within a broader global conversation.

Third, the ideological construction of China's national image evolved from a reactive victim of unfair trade to a responsible global power advocating stability, multilateralism, and shared development. While the 2018 discourse emphasized sovereignty and resistance, the 2025 discourse projected confidence, maturity, and inclusiveness. This linguistic and ideological evolution mirrors China's changing geopolitical position and its maturing approach to global communication. Through strategic lexical, grammatical, and intertextual choices, China Daily redefined China's image from a nation being acted upon to a nation actively shaping international discourse.

5.2 Implications

The study offers significant implications for both theoretical research and practical communication.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings extend the scope of Critical Discourse Analysis by applying a diachronic comparative approach to a single domestic English-language outlet. By combining Fairclough's three-dimensional framework with corpus linguistics tools, the study demonstrates how media discourse evolves in response to shifting political and ideological contexts. The results also validate the usefulness of integrating quantitative frequency data (e.g., modality and transitivity distributions) with qualitative ideological interpretation, reinforcing CDA's role as a bridge between linguistic description and social critique.

From a practical perspective, this study sheds light on how linguistic strategies can serve as instruments of international communication and soft power. The analysis of China Daily shows that national image construction is not static but strategically adaptable to external challenges. By emphasizing cooperation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, China Daily's evolving discourse reflects China's efforts to shape a global narrative of harmony and rationality. These insights may inform future media diplomacy, suggesting that credibility and resonance in international communication depend on a balance between

assertiveness and inclusiveness. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of English-language media as a platform for projecting China's perspectives and engaging with international audiences in a globally intelligible discourse framework.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

While this study makes both theoretical and empirical contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged, offering directions for future research.

First, the data scope was confined to China Daily. Although this outlet is representative of China's official discourse, it cannot fully capture the diversity of Chinese or foreign media narratives. Future studies could adopt a comparative multi-media approach, analyzing other Chinese media (e.g., Global Times, CGTN) and Western outlets (e.g., The New York Times, The Washington Post) to reveal interdiscursive contrasts in image construction.

Second, the temporal coverage of this research focuses on two key years, 2018 and 2025. While this provides clear comparative insight, intermediate years were not examined. Future research could extend the corpus longitudinally or apply time-series analysis to capture gradual shifts in discursive framing across multiple trade war phases.

Third, the present study centered primarily on textual and linguistic analysis. Visual and multimodal elements, such as images, layout, and typographic design, were not included. Given that national image is increasingly communicated through multimodal channels, future research could combine CDA with multimodal discourse analysis to explore how visual and verbal modes co-construct meaning.

Finally, this study focused on the production side of discourse. Future research might address audience reception and interpretation, examining how international readers perceive and respond to China Daily's narratives. Such studies could employ surveys, interviews, or sentiment analysis to bridge the gap between media output and global perception, thus achieving a more holistic understanding of international image communication.

Summary

In summary, this research demonstrates that China Daily's discourse on the Sino-US trade war reflects both China's evolving geopolitical identity and its strategic adaptation in international communication. The linguistic transformation from defensive caution to confident leadership reveals how language serves as a vehicle of power, ideology, and diplomacy. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study not only illuminates the mechanisms of China's media representation but also provides broader insights into how nations narrate themselves in an era of global competition and cooperation.

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