

Construction of China's National Image in the Fight against the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Post-Epidemic Era from the Perspective of Transitivity

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ABSTRACT

In the Post Covid-19 Era, taking the advantage of shaping a true, active, and the positive national image is of strategic significance for China to transform the fake national image constructed by other countries, and also for its development in the future. Based on the corpus of a white paper *Fighting Covid-19: China in Action*, the paper is intended to focus on the transitivity system to examine how China constructs a positive national image in the fight against the pandemic. The findings show that China has constructed four kinds of national images in the fight, including; the persistent image of solidarity and bravery; the responsible image of duty-shouldering and challenge-facing; the humanism image of respecting human lives and rights; the diplomatic image of dedication and commitment. By virtue of self-constructing national image, it is conducive to telling Chinese stories, spreading Chinese image, and sharing Chinese experience in the battle of fighting the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

As one of the constituent elements of a country's soft power, national image is the basis of the nation's strength (Wang, 1993). Boulding (1959), an American economist, first proposed the concept of "national image". He considers that the image of a nation is a combination of the nation's perception of itself and the cognitive evaluations from international communities. Thus, the whole national image is constructed by "self-perception" and "others-evaluation". Specifically, the former refers to the positioning and presentation of a country's own behavior in the international community, while the latter refers to "the comprehensive evaluation and impression of a country in the minds of people from other countries" (Liu, 1999, p. 25).

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China's international image has been constantly misinterpreted by other countries. Therefore, the consideration of how to actively build a true and positive international image through "self-construction" and disseminate China's anti-epidemic story has become a major challenge facing China. In the fight against the pandemic, China has not only achieved significant strategic results but also delivered a series of public safety products to share China's experience in fighting the pandemic with other countries. Among them, the top-level product is the white paper *Fighting Covid-19: China in Action*. This white paper made records of the great course and experience of the Chinese people in the fight, which is conducive to increasing the positive dissemination of China's anti-epidemic image and to telling Chinese anti-epidemic stories.

2. Theoretical background

Language is performed by three main metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function (Halliday, 2004). Ideational function refers to the expression of people's experience of the outside world and their perception of the inner world through language, which is realized by transitivity (Thompson, 1996). Interpersonal function emphasizes the interaction between speakers and expresses speakers' attitude, stance and reveals the relationship between them, which is realized by mood and modality. Textual function deals with the cohesion and organization of sentences in texts, which is realized by theme and rhyme (Thompson, 1996).

The ideational function includes experiential function and logical function (Thompson, 1996). In systemic-functional linguistics, the experiential function is realized by transitivity through the choices of process, participant, and circumstance. "Transitivity is a series of choices through which the speaker, the participant in the process, and the circumstantial components associated with the process construct the speaker's experience of the process of the outside world, as well as the process experience of the inner world as he perceives." (Halliday, 1973, p.134). As an important meaning system for people to express their experience about the world, the transitivity system consists of three basic components: participant, process, and circumstance. The process is the core of clauses, including material processes, mental processes, relational processes, behavioral processes, verbal processes, and existential processes. Material processes involve physical actions, including actor, goal, and sometimes circumstance. Mental processes focus on participants' senses, expressing their emotions, perceptions, reactions, and cognitions. Relational processes refer to the relationship set up between two concepts, which has two types: attributive relational processes and identifying relational processes. Behavioral processes are descriptions of people's physiological and psychological behaviors. Verbal processes involve verbs of "saying". Existential processes include the existents and existence (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2014). The six processes bear a close relationship with each other. The former three processes predominate in a transitivity system in which behavioral processes are intermediate between material processes and mental processes, verbal processes between mental processes and relational processes while existential processes between relational processes and material processes.

As a symbolic resource, language's functions lie in different meaning expression by the choices of systems (Halliday, 2004). In a transitivity system, each process, composed of different participants, processes, and circumstantial components, has different meanings and functions. Therefore, by analyzing the choice of different processes in the discourse, we can find the political, socio-cultural, and ideological issues hidden in the discourse (Fairclough, 1995). What's more, the transitivity system is often used to study the construction of national image through different choices of processes to reflect the role of participants in the process, thus acting as a linguistic strategy to build a national image.

3. Analysis of Chinese national anti-epidemic image in Transitivity

The study was based on the English version of the White Paper *Fighting Covid-19: China in Action*, which has a total word count of 23,899 words, telling the story of China's fight against the pandemic during the Covid-19 outbreak period. According to the classification principles of the transitivity system, the distribution of the processes in the White Paper is as follows:

Table 1 the distribution of the processes in the White Paper

| process type | material process | relational process | mental process | verbal process | existential process | behavioral process | total |
|--------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------|
| quantity | 1230 | 113 | 97 | 93 | 7 | 0 | 1540 |
| percentage | 79.87% | 7.34% | 6.30% | 6.04% | 0.45% | 0% | 100% |

According to Table 1, the most frequently used types of processes are material process (79.87%), followed by relational process (7.34%), mental process (6.30%), and verbal process (6.04%). The less frequently used process is an existential process (0.45%). And the behavioral process does not appear in this discourse. Due to the limited length of the paper, this study attempts to focus on the more frequently used processes shown in the data, including material process, relational process, mental process, and verbal process in order to interpret the anti-epidemic image of China in the white paper.

(1) China's persistent image of solidarity and bravery
Examples:

- 1) The People's Liberation Army (PLA) dispatched over 4,000 medical personnel to Hubei to work in epidemic control.
- 2) Trade unions, Communist Youth League organizations, women's federations, and other mass organizations organized and mobilized their contacts among the general public to get involved in Covid-19 prevention and control.
- 3) Police and auxiliary police officers handled emergent, dangerous, difficult, and burdensome tasks such as guarding hospitals, transporting patients, and patrolling the streets to maintain order.

Examples 1) - 3) are material processes, which emphasize the action of the events, namely, what the participants do, highlighting the participant's role as the doer of the action. The material process consists of actors, goals, and circumstances. In example 1) - 3), the actors are various institutions and groups throughout China, namely, "the People's Liberation Army (PLA)", "Trade unions, Communist Youth League organizations, women's federations, and other mass organizations", "Police and auxiliary police officers", corresponding respectively to the action "dispatch", "organize and mobilize", and "handle". The goals of these three material processes are "over 4,000 medical personnel", "their contacts among the general public" and "emergent, dangerous, difficult, and

burdensome tasks". The circumstantial components are, in turn, "to Hubei to work in epidemic control", "get involved in Covid-19 prevention and control" and "maintain order". Therefore, in the fight against the pandemic, the various organization groups throughout the nation actively participate in the actual action for the national cause of fighting against the pandemic.

4) Community actions were taken to keep local areas in good condition and promote health education.

5) Medical workers, from the very young to the very old, showed no hesitation in confronting the epidemic.

Example 4) is a material process that lacks an obvious actor. The goal of this process is "community actions", the corresponding verb is "take", and the circumstantial component is "keep local areas in good condition and promote health education". Compared with example 1)-3), this material process also emphasizes the occurrence of the action, but the difference is that this process has adopted passive voice that the actor is hidden, which to some extent can make a dent in personal subjectivity, becoming more objective and more convincing to the reader. Example 5) is a mental process consisting of the senser and the phenomenon. The sensors of this mental process are people from veteran experts to young medical staff; the mental process involves people's dedication and commitment. The phenomenon is to fight the epidemic. Thus, it is seen that Chinese people's firm attitude of making contributions to their motherland in the battle of fighting against the pandemic.

From what has been discussed above, in the fight against the pandemic, the whole country has made united efforts and contributions to help ease the pandemic, fully shaping its persistent image of solidarity and bravery.

(2) China's responsible image of duty-shouldering and challenge-facing

Examples:

6) The Chinese government took the decisive measure to close outbound traffic from Wuhan.

7) China acted immediately to conduct etiological and epidemiological investigations and to stop the spread of the disease.....

8) China has made vigorous efforts to resume work and reopen schools.

9) The NHC sent seven inspection teams to different provincial-level health agencies to guide local epidemic prevention and control.

10) China has also published 15 technical manuals on epidemic prevention and control for key population groups, locations, and organizations, 6 work plans on psychological counseling for people affected by Covid-19, and 50 specific technical guidelines.

11) China has released information on Covid-19 in a timely, open, and transparent manner as required by law.

Examples 6)-11) are material processes, focusing on what China had done when facing the pandemic. The actor of these six material processes is the Chinese government. Examples 6)-8) emphasize the rapid actions and brave confront China had done in the fight against the pandemic. In these three processes, the verbs "took", "acted" and "had made" have a similar meaning of action, corresponding respectively to the goals of "the decisive measure", "etiological and epidemiological investigations" and "vigorous efforts". The circumstantial components are to close outbound traffic from Wuhan, to stop the spread of the disease, and to resume work and reopen schools. The three actions showed that China, in the face of the pandemic, does not shirk or hold back, but takes rapid actions to face the dilemma. Example 9)-11) are also material processes that focus on how China took action in the fight. In epidemic prevention and control, the nation sent seven investigation teams to different provincial health centers to guide the local work of prevention and control. With regard to information dissemination, the nation issued timely and transparent information related to the pandemic and provided professional help for the masses.

12) He (Xi Jinping) called for resolute efforts to win the battle to contain the virus with "confidence and solidarity, a science-based approach and targeted measures".

13) He (Xi Jinping) called for stronger policies to unleash the full potential and maintain the strong momentum of China's development.....

14) China should be more resolute in furthering reform and improving its governing systems.....

Example 12)-13) are verbal processes that involve what Xi Jinping had said in the fight against the pandemic. The sayer of these two processes is Xi Jinping and the verbs are the same: call for. The verbiage is about the resolute efforts for fighting against the pandemic and the better policies for realizing national economic and social development. Example 14) is a relational process, which is an attributive relational process in which China is the carrier and the attribute is "more resolute". That is, China is determined in enhancing revolution and improve its governance management so as to respond to the unforeseeable risks and challenges.

From what has been discussed above, China has shouldered the responsibilities for fighting against the pandemic without hesitation and shirking, facing the difficulties bravely without fear. Therefore, the above analysis of processes has constructed China's responsible image of duty-shouldering and challenge-facing.

(3) China's humanism image of respecting human lives and rights

15) On April 4, the Chinese traditional Tomb-sweeping Day, China paid tribute to all those who had given their lives in the fight against Covid-19, and those who had died of the disease.

16) All Covid-19 patients, confirmed or suspected, received subsidies from state finance for any medical bills not covered by basic medical insurance, serious disease insurance, or the medical assistance fund.

Examples 15) - 16) are regarded as a material process that emphasizes what China did during the anti-epidemic period to respect life and safeguard human rights. In Example 15), the action is China, the action process is to pay tribute, the goal is to all those who had given their lives in the fight against Covid-19, and those who had died of the disease. It can be seen that during the anti-epidemic period, China paid tribute to those who died of disease or sacrificed in the fight, and showed its respect for them by paying tribute to them on the Chinese traditional Tomb-sweeping Day. Example 16) focuses on what China had done for those infected patients. The actor is the patients; the action is "receive", the goal is subsidies from state finance, highlighting China's respect for life and showing its promotion of humanity.

17) When the novel coronavirus struck, China decided that it would protect the lives and health of its people even at the cost of a short-term economic downturn and even a temporary shutdown.

18) Guarding against inbound infections should be the top priority for the country both now and in the foreseeable future

Example 17) is a mental process. The mental process focuses on the participants' feelings and attitudes. In example 17), the senser is China; the verb is "decide", and the phenomenon is to protect the lives and health of its people even at the cost of a short-term economic downturn and even a temporary shutdown. It can be seen that in the fight against the pandemic, China has always put the lives of the masses first and also try to control the epidemic and save people's lives even at the cost of economic development. Example 18) is a relational process that has the function of reflecting the relationship between things in systemic-functional grammar. In detail, the carrier is the prevention and control of infection of immigrants and the attribute is the top priority for the country both now and in the foreseeable future.

To sum up, through the material processes which describe China's efforts, mental processes which focus on China's feelings, and the relational processes which emphasize China's enthusiasm to protect people's life and health, China has built the humanism image of respecting human lives and rights.

(4) China's diplomatic image of dedication and commitment

19) Local governments, enterprises, non-governmental organizations, and individuals in China have donated materials to more than 150 countries and regions, and international organizations through various channels.

20) China has fully mobilized experts at home, medical teams on foreign aid missions, and other resources to assist foreign countries to provide treatment to these patients.

21) To build platforms for exchanges between countries, the Chinese media has designed a TV program Covid-19 Frontline and a newspaper column Fighting Covid-19 the Chinese Way, among others.

22) He shared with these leaders China's experience in coordinating the fight against the virus with its efforts to continue economic and social development.

Examples 19-22) are material processes that describe China's humanitarian assistance for other countries from the international community, including medical resources donation, medical treatment for foreign infected patients, information spread between countries, and China's anti-epidemic experience sharing, all of which fully demonstrate China's persistent practice of the idea of a community with a shared future.

23) China informed the WHO of developments and the initial progress that had been made in determining the cause of viral pneumonia.

24) He (Xi Jinping) called for prompt release of information on the epidemic and enhanced international cooperation.

25) The head of the NHC discussed epidemic prevention and control with the head of the US Department of Health and Human Services (US HHS) in a telephone call.

26) In a timely manner, China informed the WHO and other countries, including the US, of the developing situation.....

Examples 23-26) are verbal processes that are realized by "inform", "call for" and "discuss" respectively, involving what China has said in the battle of fighting against the pandemic. The verbalizations of these processes mainly include the efforts made by China in the fight, including the developments and the initial progress in determining the cause of viral pneumonia, the enhancement between international cooperation, the discussion on prevention and control measures with America as well as the timely information about the development of the pandemic.

27) China has been active in providing medical aid to other countries.

28) Helping them improve their capacity and performance in epidemic prevention and control should be a top priority in the global response.

29) He (Xi Jinping) expressed empathy for the difficulties faced by other countries.....

Examples 27-28) are relational processes that function as showing the attribute of the object. In example 27), the carrier is China and the attribute is "active", while the circumstantial component is to provide medical help for other countries, which fully displays the active actions of China in assisting other countries. In example 28), the carrier is helping other countries' enhancement in epidemic prevention and control, and the attribute is a top priority, showing that China has been committed to providing medical aid for other countries without walling itself off the risk of the pandemic, which is a symbol of its loftiness of being caring about the whole world. Example 29) is a mental process in which the senser is China and the phenomenon is the difficulties facing other countries, emphasizing China's empathy for other countries, which shows its kindheartedness.

Based on the above analysis, the white paper fully shows China's active practice of the idea of "a community of a shared future" in the fight against the epidemic, and vividly constructs China's diplomatic image of dedication and commitment.

4. Conclusion

Based on the systemic-functional linguistics, the paper analyzes the ideational meaning of the White Paper *Fighting Covid-19: China in Action*, and attempts to explain the construction of China's national image in the post-epidemic era in the perspective of transitivity system mainly from the material process, mental process, verbal process, and relational process. Findings show that the most frequently used material processes in the white paper's discourse focused on what China had done and achieved during the fight against the pandemic and used facts and actions to highlight China's positive image. The more frequently used processes are relational processes, mental processes, and verbal processes. Through the selection and use of different language strategies in the white paper, China presents a magnificent picture of the country's hard-fought and proud achievements, which is conducive to reversing the distorted national image that was constructed by others at the beginning of the epidemic.

To sum up, by adopting different grammatical strategies in the white paper, China has built the following four kinds of anti-epidemic image: "the persistent image of solidarity and bravery; the responsible image of duty-shouldering and challenge-facing; the humanism image of respecting human lives and rights; the diplomatic image of dedication and commitment." By virtue of self-constructing national image, it is advantageous to tell the Chinese story, spread Chinese image and share the Chinese experience in the battle of fighting the Covid-19 pandemic.

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