| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Construction of National Image from the Perspective of Attitude Resources: A Discourse Analysis

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| ABSTRACT

Using the Attitude resources framework from Appraisal Theory, this study qualitatively and quantitatively analyzes the distribution characteristics of attitude resources in the climate change news discourse of China Daily. By employing Python programs to collect data and establish a small-scale corpus, the study reveals the discourse strategies adopted by China's external propaganda media in constructing a national image. The findings suggest that, in terms of affect, China has successfully constructed its image as a responsible major power; in terms of judgement, China is endowed with moral traits of fairness, rationality, and cooperation for mutual benefit; and aesthetically, China is portrayed as a leader in global climate governance.

| KEYWORDS

Attitude resources, National image, Chinese media, Appraisal theory.

1. Introduction

National image is a crucial aspect of a country's soft power, as it influences internal national cohesion and citizens' sense of belonging while externally determining the depth and breadth of international exchanges and cooperation (Chen, 2018). Recent years have seen China implement a series of strategies and actions to address climate change, contributing to global governance. However, within the predominantly Western-dominated international discourse, China is often misrepresented or distorted as the "largest carbon emitter" or an "irresponsible major power." For instance, an analysis of 218 climate change reports by The New York Times over a decade reveals a predominantly negative portrayal of China's environmental image (Guo, 2012). Similarly, research on air pollution narratives in China and India on Google News found a biased assessment of China's pollution impact (Xu et al., 2015).

The construction of a national image is a complex, multidimensional process that encompasses both international perception and domestic self-identification. Over-reliance on foreign media for this image, without sufficient domestic media self-portrayal, may lead to misinterpretations of China's efforts in global climate governance. Thus, this study aims to examine the self-portrayal and discourse representation in China Daily's climate change news reports, providing references for constructing China's national image.

2. Literature Review

Appraisal System, first articulated by Martin (2000) and further developed by Martin and White (2005), operates within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics to examine how language constructs evaluations and stances.

The development and application of appraisal theory in past research have mainly unfolded along two complementary trajectories. On one hand, efforts have been made to refine and perfect the theory, including an in-depth exploration of concepts such as

covert appraisal (Zhu, 2009), the evaluative function of material processes (Wang, 2004), subsystems of the appraisal system (Zhang, 2010), and frameworks for analyzing evaluative strategies (Sun & Zhang, 2018). These efforts aim to scrutinize and revise the existing models of appraisal theory, thereby expanding its explanatory power and scope of application. On the other hand, there has been a focus on applying appraisal theory to practical discourse analysis. This application spans a range of areas, including comparative analyses of political document translations, current news, thematic speeches, and literary works in both Chinese and English. These studies also aim to uncover ideological biases in news reporting and significant speeches, as well as how language is used to convey specific discursive meanings to different audiences. The empirical findings from these studies not only demonstrate the effectiveness of appraisal theory as a reliable theoretical method in discourse analysis but also validate its feasibility for investigating news and political discourse.

Research on national image construction has shown a cross-disciplinary trend involving fields such as international relations, communication strategies, and social psychology. Although these studies have, to some extent, expanded the theoretical boundaries of national image research, most continue to rely on traditional analytical frameworks, such as public diplomacy theory, crisis communication strategy theory, and agenda-setting theory. However, the complexity and systematic nature of national image construction necessitates the collaborative support of cross-disciplinary theories and methodologies. In this context, the field of linguistics has also sought to explore new analytical perspectives, such as discourse analysis (Wang & Xin, 2019), transitivity system theory (Han & Chen, 2018), and translation studies (Wu, 2019), to deepen the understanding of national image construction.

Nevertheless, existing research has yet to fully explore the relationship between appraisal theory and national image construction, and there is a lack of attention to the covert evaluative meanings in discourse. News discourse, as an ideologically filtered and balanced presentation (Zhang & Yang, 2015), often contains rich attitude resources. By deeply analyzing the attitude resources in climate change discourse, it is possible to reveal the inherent attitudes and emotions within the text, thereby exploring the construction of the national image in climate change news discourse.

3. Theoretical Foundation

The proposal of Appraisal Theory provides a significant supplement to Systemic Functional Linguistics in enriching the semantic dimension of interpersonal meaning (Wu & Zhao, 2022). This theory focuses on the systematic analysis of the evaluative lexicon, revealing the explicit or implicit attitudes, opinions, and stances expressed by the evaluative subject in the discourse by exploring the semantic features of these lexicons. Its core framework comprises three closely interconnected subsystems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation.

The Attitude resources, being the core of Appraisal Theory, can be further divided into three subsystems: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation (Wang, 2001). The Affect system captures the emotional responses of language users to behaviors, entities, and phenomena. This includes both real emotions, such as safety versus insecurity and satisfaction versus dissatisfaction, as well as unreal emotions, like fear and desire. The Affect system directly expresses personal emotional reactions, revealing how language users convey their internal emotional states and attitudes toward external matters through language. The Judgment system involves the moral evaluation of others' behavior based on established moral standards or social conventions, reflecting the role of language in expressing value judgments and ethical stances. The Judgment system can be further divided into two aspects: one is social evaluation that does not involve legal aspects, including evaluations of individual morality, behavior, and character; the other is social sanction, which has legal significance and involves the evaluation of legal norms and legal responsibilities of individual behaviors. Through these different dimensions, the Judgment system demonstrates the normative and ethical functions of language in social interaction. Appreciation reflects the language users' positive and negative evaluations of entities, which can be subdivided into Reaction, Composition, and Valuation (Martin, 2005). This shows an in-depth analysis of the characteristics and implications of entities and the evaluation of their values.

As a crucial linguistic resource for expressing evaluative meanings, Attitude resources carry the subjective attitudes and emotional reactions of language users towards people or things. The use of Attitude resources in discourse analysis has multifaceted functions, not only expressing the speaker's or author's personal emotions and values but also playing a role in constructing consensus, negotiating stances, and shaping social reality in the realm of social interaction. Through systematic analysis of Attitude resources, researchers can delve into the ideological tendencies, cultural values, and social relationships within the discourse. Additionally, this analysis helps reveal the power relations and manipulation mechanisms in language, which influence individuals' cognition and behavior in social interactions.

4. Methodology
4.1 Research Questions
This study employs a corpus-based discourse analysis method, using the Attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory as the analytical framework. The research addresses the following questions:

(1) How are Attitude resources distributed in China Daily's climate change news discourse?
(2) What national ecological image does this discourse project?

4.2 Research Procedures
Firstly, the research begins with the pivotal moment of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2017, which first incorporated the ecological civilization concept of "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" into its report. The data collection period is set from October 1, 2017, to December 31, 2023. The year 2023 is chosen as the closest full year to the end of the data collection period. This time range is selected to comprehensively cover how China has showcased its achievements in ecological civilization and shaped its national image through diverse approaches—such as policy advocacy, diplomatic interactions, and media dissemination—in the realm of international climate governance after the concept was proposed.

Secondly, Python web scraping software was employed to write a specific program that focused on the keyword "climate change," extracting news articles related to climate change from China Daily as the research corpus. The scraped data was subjected to data cleaning and manual verification, with 458 news articles selected based on their relevance and redundancy to the topic, creating a Chinese climate change news corpus with a total capacity of 408,842 tokens.

Finally, the UAM Corpus Tool 3.3 was used for corpus creation, querying, and statistical analysis. The study involved identifying and classifying attitude resources. The annotation process was as follows: the research team, consisting of two English language researchers with experience in coding attitude resources under appraisal theory, conducted a thorough reading of each climate change news discourse. They searched for evidence of attitude resources and performed annotation. After an initial reading, the researchers categorized the discussed features according to the nature of the attitude resources used. For sections containing multiple attitude resources where consensus on single annotations could not be reached, dual annotation was applied using the UAM tool, achieving an inter-coder agreement percentage of 87%. The coders then discussed specific discrepancies to reach a consensus and made corresponding adjustments to the annotations.

5. Results and Discussion
5.1 The Overall Distribution of Attitudinal Resources
The corpus contained 4,372 instances of Attitude resources: 236 instances of Affect (5.40%), 1767 of Judgement (40.41%), and 2369 of Appreciation (54.19%). The predominant use of Appreciation resources reflects China Daily's emphasis on highlighting China's proactive and effective measures in addressing climate change.

Table 1. The Overall Distribution of Attitudinal Resources

Types	Number	Percentage
Affect	236	5.40%
Judgement	1767	40.41%
Appreciation	2369	54.19%
Total	4372	100%

The observed distribution can be attributed to several factors. On the one hand, the prominence of appreciation resources reflects China Daily's role as a major state-controlled foreign media outlet, which tends to emphasize the Chinese government's proactive measures and effective strategies in addressing climate change. On the other hand, the relatively high frequency of judgment resources may be associated with the Chinese media's inclination to maintain an objective and impartial stance when reporting on climate change issues. Additionally, the limited use of affective resources helps to avoid potential emotional biases. However, this does not imply that the media lacks emotional engagement with the issue of climate change. Given the complexity of climate change, excessive emotional expression might lead to distortion or misinterpretation of information. Thus, media outlets may prefer to present information in a rational manner to encourage readers to engage in a thoughtful and in-depth understanding of such complex issues.

5.1.1 Analysis of Emotional Resources

Table 2: Distribution of Emotional Resources

Type of emotional resources	Number	Percentage (%)
happiness/unhappiness	44	18.72
security/insecurity	77	32.77
satisfaction/dissatisfaction	72	30.64
inclination/disinclination	43	17.87
Total	236	100

Discourse participants use affective resources to express the emotional impact of events or phenomena on them and to evaluate these phenomena from an emotional perspective. As shown in Table 2, affective resources are predominantly reflected in two dimensions: satisfaction and security, accounting for 32.77% and 30.64%, respectively. These resources are primarily represented by terms such as "meet the standards," "appreciate," "guarantee," "convinced," "ensure," and "believes." The use of affective resources by the media effectively conveys China's proactive and positive engagement in global climate governance. It communicates the Chinese government's firm commitment to achieving emission reduction targets and climate action plans, thereby enhancing public confidence in China's climate governance efforts.

5.1.2 Analysis of Judgment Resources

Table 3: Distribution of Judgment Resources

Type of Judgment Resources		Number	Percentage (%)
Social evaluative resources	Normality	49	2.81
	Capacity	247	14.15
	Tenacity	232	13.29
	Veracity	85	4.87
Social regulatory resources	Propriety	1133	64.89
	Total	1746	100

Judgment resources focus on the speaker's evaluation of actions or events based on social norms and value systems. In climate change news discourse, the frequency of social constraint resources is higher than that of social esteem resources, accounting for 69.76% of the judgment resources. Among these, appropriateness resources appear 1,133 times, making up 64.89%. The use of appropriateness resources not only reflects the media's attention to the suitability of the reported content but also indicates the media's strategy in shaping public perception and social behavior. Particularly, terms such as "share," "cooperation," and "engage," which fall under the category of appropriateness-related social constraint resources, reveal how the media employs evaluative language to express expectations for collective action and social responsibility. Given that climate change is a pressing global challenge with its complexity and urgency requiring prompt and effective international action, the use of social constraint resources helps establish a common framework for action and reinforces the moral and ethical dimensions of global climate efforts.

5.1.3 Analysis of Appreciation Resources

Table 4: Distribution of Appreciation Resources

Type of appreciation resources	Number	Percentage (%)
Reaction	103	4.31
Composition	76	3.18
Value	2212	92.51
Total	2391	100

Appreciation resources reveal the value orientation and ideological tendencies within a text or discourse through aesthetic evaluation, value judgments, and positive assessments. They provide insights into the emotional attitudes and value endorsements of language users. Table 4 illustrates the distribution of appreciation resources in Chinese climate change news discourse. Notably, the use of value-related terms is particularly prevalent, accounting for a dominant 92.51% of the total. This high frequency indicates that value-related vocabulary plays a crucial role in conveying positive evaluations and value concepts within the discourse. Terms such as "fair and rational," "a community with a shared future for mankind," and "win-win" highlight the significant function of these resources in reflecting the Chinese government's policy philosophy on climate change governance. Moreover, the extensive use of such terms not only mirrors China's policy principles but also underscores the cooperative spirit and shared developmental values that China advocates in the realm of global climate governance.

5.2 Constructing National Image in Chinese Climate Change News Reporting
5.2.1 Affective Resources: Constructing the Image of a "Responsible Major Power"
(1) *China can play a constructive or even a leading role in world climate governance.*
The phrases "constructive" and "leading" in this sentence reflect the international community's satisfaction with China's positive efforts in global climate governance. "Constructive" indicates that China is seen as making constructive contributions, while "leading" suggests that China is expected to play a leading role. These expressions highlight the recognition and confidence in China's capability and status in this field.

(2)   China has pledged to cut its emissions per unit of GDP by 60 to 65 percent by 2030 from its 2005 level, according to the Paris pact.
This statement mentions China's commitment to emission reduction targets under the Paris Agreement. The term "pledged" conveys China's determination and commitment to addressing climate change, further emphasizing its proactive stance. By specifying concrete targets and timelines, this expression also enhances the international community's confidence and sense of security regarding China's commitment to fulfilling its promises.

In summary, the use of affective resources not only reflects the Chinese government's proactive actions and firm commitments in addressing climate change challenges but also establishes an image of China as a "responsible major power" in the international community. It underscores China's sense of international responsibility in global climate governance.

5.2.2 Judgment Resources: Highlighting the Image of "Equity, Cooperation, and Win-Win"
(3) *China committed to the principles of equity, common but differentiated responsibilities, and respective capabilities and maintains that negotiations should be open, transparent, inclusive, party-driven, and consensus-based.*
In this example, the phrase "committed to the principles of equity" reflects a normative evaluation, emphasizing China's commitment to adhering to the principle of fairness. The phrase "maintains that negotiations should be...consensus-based" demonstrates an evaluative stance regarding China's perseverance in achieving consensus.

(4) *China calls on the international community to take immediate action, strengthen solidarity and cooperation, and remain committed to multilateralism.*
The phrase "remain committed to multilateralism" reflects a moral evaluation in social judgment, emphasizing the ethical standards that China believes the international community should uphold in addressing climate change.

(5) *All countries should uphold the goals, principles, and framework set in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement and implement the latter in full.*
The phrase "uphold the goals, principles, and framework" reflects a legitimacy evaluation in social sanction, stressing the legitimacy and appropriateness of adhering to international agreements and conventions. Despite global recognition of the seriousness and urgency of climate change, many countries lack political will and action, particularly developed countries, which often shirk their responsibilities. In contrast, China has shown a proactive stance in climate governance. It has implemented a series of domestic policies and measures aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing climate resilience. Internationally, China insists on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, advocating for a fair and equitable international climate governance system. These initiatives not only reflect China's contribution to global climate governance but also demonstrate its willingness and determination to work with the international community to address the challenges of climate change.

5.2.3 Appreciation Resources: Shaping the Image of a "Leader in Global Climate Governance"
(6) *China is working to build a modernized country in which humanity and nature coexist in harmony.*

The phrase "humanity and nature coexist in harmony" places humans and nature on an equal footing and uses the word "coexist" to emphasize the value of harmonious coexistence. The use of "harmony," a positive appreciation resource, reflects a high evaluation and aesthetic recognition of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

(7) *China has allocated about RMB1.2 billion for South-South climate cooperation, providing tangible and effective outcomes in the fight against climate change.*
This statement, by specifying the financial commitment (RMB1.2 billion), clarifies China's substantial contributions to South-South climate cooperation. The adjectives "tangible" and "effective" convey the material and impactful nature of China's contributions. The positive word choices in appreciation resources express a high evaluation and recognition of China's achievements in combating climate change, reinforcing China's role as an active participant and contributor in global climate action.

(8) *China's decisive and forceful actions in green transformation have been widely recognized as a significant driver for the necessary changes needed for a green future.*
The term "decisive" implies that the actions are firm and well-considered, highlighting the deliberate and positive value of these actions in promoting green transformation. "Forceful" emphasizes the strength and effectiveness of these actions, further consolidating the positive evaluation of their value. The phrase "significant driver" underscores China's key role in global green future transformation, shaping its image as a leader in global climate governance. Finally, "for the necessary changes needed for a green future" connects China's actions with the long-term goals of global climate governance, further emphasizing China's critical role and influence in driving the necessary changes for a sustainable future.

In conclusion, the strategic use of appreciation resources in news discourse effectively communicates China's active role and contributions to global climate governance, shaping an image of a nation that is actively involved, innovative, and leading change. This image-building not only enhances China's voice in international climate negotiations but also offers Chinese solutions and insights for global climate action.

6. Conclusion

This study, based on the appraisal theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics, investigates news discourse on China's climate change in *China Daily*, constructing a small corpus by compiling news text data. By exploring the distribution of attitude resources in the news discourse, the study analyzes how Chinese media actively constructs and reinforce national image through the use of different attitude resources. The findings reveal that in the affective domain, by effectively utilizing affective resources, especially in conveying satisfaction and security, China has successfully established an image as a "responsible major power." In the ethical domain, frequent use of social sanction resources endows China's national image with the moral attributes of "fairness, equity, and cooperation." In the aesthetic domain, the strategic application of appreciation resources, particularly the notable use of value-laden terms, portrays China as a "leader in global climate governance." These three resources—affective, ethical, and aesthetic—interact and intertwine, ultimately merging into a unified and harmonious national image of a "Beautiful China."

In summary, this study provides empirical insights for subsequent research on the ecological discourse analysis of China's national image. Future studies could build on this foundation to further explore and deepen related topics. Especially in the context of digital media and social networks increasingly becoming the main channels for information dissemination, examining the presentation and communication of China's national image in cyberspace and analyzing how online discourse influences the construction and public perception of national image could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms behind China's image construction. This would provide more scientific and systematic theoretical support and practical guidance for shaping China's image in a globalized context.

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