

Framing China's National Image in Global Media: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Amid intensifying global debates about China's role on the world stage, scholarly interest in how media construct China's national image has grown significantly. This article presents a systematic review of scholarly English-language research on the media construction of China's national image over the past decade, with a particular emphasis on framing strategies, theoretical developments, and broader research trends. Drawing on a PRISMA-based review framework, the study systematically identified and screened relevant literature published between January 2014 and March 2025, ultimately including 22 peer-reviewed journal articles for full-text analysis. The findings show that media representations of China are closely shaped by major geopolitical developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Belt and Road Initiative, and evolving China–US relations, which influence both framing strategies and narrative emphasis. Rather than merely reflecting events, media coverage often reinforces underlying ideological positions through selective representation. Additionally, there has been a clear shift in research paradigms from traditional perspectives such as soft power and public diplomacy towards more critical approaches, including framing theory and critical discourse analysis. However, existing research remains largely focused on Western mainstream media, with limited engagement with cross-national differences and transnational media contexts, constraining a more comprehensive understanding of how competing narratives shape global perceptions of China. While the literature has advanced knowledge of media representations, notable gaps persist in theoretical pluralism, methodological diversity, and the analysis of communicative outcomes. The article therefore calls for more comparative and context-sensitive approaches in future research on global media communication.

Keywords: *China's national image, framing theory, media studies, media communication, systematic literature review.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalised world, national image plays a vital role in shaping a country's soft power, influencing diplomatic relations, trade interactions, and international public opinion (Raj, 2024; Charles, 2023). For China, an emerging global power, the way it is portrayed in international media is not only central to how it is perceived externally, but also crucial to the construction of its discursive power in global communication (Müller et al., 2024; Flew, 2016). In recent years, amid evolving China–US relations, the global spread of COVID-19, the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, and a broader reconfiguration of geopolitical structures, international attention towards China has grown significantly. As a result, the representation of China's national image in global media discourse has become increasingly complex and multifaceted (Wang, 2023; Liu et al., 2021).

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The ways in which different countries and regions report on China are shaped by their own political stances, cultural contexts, and ideological orientations, often resulting in stark divergences and biases (Beattie et al., 2022). In Western mainstream media, frames such as the "China threat," "systemic differences," and "lack of transparency" tend to dominate. Conversely, media in developing countries or on certain transnational platforms may place greater emphasis on China's development model, its potential for cooperation, and its role in global governance (Lin et al., 2024; Wu, 2023). This diversity in media representation reflects the power dynamics of the global news ecology and contributes to contested interpretations of China's national image. Thus, investigating how "global media narrate China" is both a significant academic endeavour within the field of communication studies and of substantial real-world relevance.

Among the many theoretical approaches in communication research, framing theory has emerged as a central tool for understanding how the media construct reality and guide public interpretation (Güran & Özarıslan, 2022). Through processes of selection, emphasis, and omission, the media shape particular "frames" that influence audience perceptions of events, groups, and even nations (Iacob, 2022). As one of the most influential theories in media and communication studies, framing theory is particularly well-suited to research on national image, as it reveals how nations are encoded, represented, and ideologically constructed across different contexts (Walter et al., 2022). In the case of China, for instance, international media may frame it through a lens of "economic rise," highlighting opportunity, or alternatively through narratives of "threat" or "authoritarianism," underscoring systemic tensions with Western models (Rashid et al., 2023). These varied framing strategies shape public perceptions of China and reflect broader struggles over discursive power in the global media landscape.

Despite a growing body of empirical studies employing framing theory to analyse China's national image in international media, the existing literature remains somewhat fragmented. Research often varies in focus, with some studies centred on specific national media systems (e.g., mainstream media in the US or UK), while others examine particular events or crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hong Kong protests, "wolf warrior diplomacy," or the Belt and Road Initiative (Pan & Ituassu, 2024; Yang & Van Gorp, 2023; Sullivan & Wang, 2023; Chung et al., 2021). This fragmentation, however, limits a coherent understanding of global media discourse, as it obscures how differing political contexts shape contrasting narratives and influence international perceptions of China. More importantly, it constrains deeper insight into the mechanisms through which media framing reflects and reinforces broader power relations in the global communication landscape.

A review of the field reveals three notable limitations. First, current research is predominantly Western-centric, with limited engagement with Global South perspectives or non-Western media systems (Jin, 2021). Second, many studies focus on crisis or event-driven coverage, overlooking the slow, cumulative construction of national image in routine reporting (Liang & Lu, 2023). Third, audience perspectives remain underexplored, particularly in relation to how diverse publics receive, interpret, and negotiate mediated portrayals of China across cultural contexts (Kimaiyo, 2024). While these limitations highlight important blind spots in the literature, they also point to the need for a more integrative understanding of how China's national image is constructed, framed, and interpreted across the global media landscape. In particular, the current body of work is marked by both theoretical and empirical fragmentation. Scholars often work in isolated case studies, employ differing theoretical vocabularies, and arrive at conclusions that are difficult to synthesise across contexts.

Building on these limitations, a more systematic and comparative perspective is needed to better understand how media framing of China is discussed in relation to broader geopolitical contexts. To navigate this complexity, this study proposes a three-pronged approach to systematically review the existing literature. First, it examines how research in this field has evolved over time and what theoretical approaches have guided its development. Second, it identifies the dominant media frames employed to construct China's image, with attention to their thematic patterns and geopolitical distributions. Third, it assesses how the literature evaluates the nature and direction of China's portrayal in international media. Together, these three dimensions offer a comprehensive framework for mapping the field, highlighting both its achievements and its limitations. Accordingly, this review is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the temporal and theoretical characteristics of recent media research on China's national image?

RQ2: What types of frames are commonly employed by global media in reporting China's national image?

RQ3: How do existing studies evaluate the tendencies in China's portrayal within international media coverage?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Time Frame

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review approach, aiming to comprehensively identify, synthesise, and critically evaluate academic research from the past decade or so on the representation of China's national image through media framing in global contexts. Guided by clearly defined research questions, systematic literature reviews involve standardised procedures for data collection and selection, thereby enabling a structured and transparent consolidation of existing findings to reveal key themes, theoretical approaches, research trends, and knowledge gaps in the field.

To ensure both transparency and methodological rigour, this review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which includes three stages: identification, screening, and included. This approach also demonstrates the applicability of PRISMA beyond its original use in medical research, highlighting its value for systematically analysing communication studies. The selected time frame spans from 2014 to March 2025, reflecting the period during which scholarly interest in China's international image has intensified, particularly in light of developments such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the global COVID-19 crisis, and the ongoing strategic competition between China and the United States. This time window captures the evolving narratives surrounding China's rise on the global stage.

Databases and Keyword Strategy

To ensure the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the literature collected, searches were conducted within two major academic databases: Web of Science and Scopus. These databases offer extensive coverage of core journals across international communication, journalism studies, and political communication, and are widely regarded as authoritative and robust sources of scholarly material (Pranckutė, 2021). Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 1 January 2014 and 31 March 2025.

The keyword strategy was carefully designed around the core themes of the study: China's national image, framing theory, and global media. All searches were conducted using consistent keyword combinations across databases. Key search terms included: "China" AND ("national image" OR "country image" OR "image of China") AND "media"; "China" AND ("framing" OR "framing theory" OR "media framing") AND "news"; "China" AND ("representation" OR "portrayal") AND ("news coverage" OR "media discourse" OR "news reporting").

In preliminary testing, the combination "China" AND ("representation" OR "portrayal") AND ("international media" OR "foreign press" OR "Western media") was also explored. However, this yielded a very limited number of results, many of which were not relevant to the research focus. As a result, this particular combination was excluded from the final search strategy. The selected keywords were thus carefully designed to balance breadth and relevance, ensuring coverage of the key dimensions relevant to the research topic while maintaining search precision. Certain limitations should be acknowledged. Restricting the review to English-language publications may introduce a bias towards Western scholarship, while reliance on only two databases may limit the diversity of perspectives captured in the dataset. Nevertheless, these methodological choices were made to balance comprehensiveness with manageability and to maintain a clear and reproducible search strategy.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the scientific rigour and consistency of the selection process, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to the literature search. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) the study must focus on the communication or construction of China's national image; (2) the analysis must be based on foreign or international media sources, including news outlets and international journals; (3) framing theory or its derivative theoretical frameworks must be used as the primary analytical approach; and (4) the publication must be written in English, published in a peer-reviewed journal, and fall within the period from 2014 to March 2025.

Following an initial screening phase, the remaining studies underwent a full-text review based on the pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were excluded for the following reasons: (1) not published in English; (2) not peer-reviewed, such as book reviews, editorials, or conference abstracts; (3) purely theoretical or conceptual discussions lacking empirical data and analysis; and (4) full text not accessible. This rigorous filtering ensured that the final body of literature included in the review met high standards of academic quality, readability, and research relevance.

Literature Screening Process

To guarantee the systematic nature and traceability of the literature screening process, this review followed the PRISMA guidelines (Parums, 2021). Initially, a total of 1,491 records were identified through keyword searches conducted in both Web of Science and Scopus using a standardised search strategy. After removing duplicates using Zotero reference management software, 1,083 valid records remained. The titles and abstracts of these articles were then screened to eliminate those not clearly related to the research topic, such as studies not focused on China, those unrelated to national image or media reporting, or those not applying framing theory. This process excluded 940 articles, leaving 143 for full-text review.

During the full-text evaluation stage, further exclusions were applied based on the pre-set inclusion criteria. First, conference papers and book chapters were excluded, resulting in 102 journal articles. Next, two articles were removed as they had been formally retracted, leaving 100. A further 23 articles were excluded for falling outside the designated time range (1 January 2014 to 31 March 2025), resulting in 77 articles. Finally, a detailed review based on language, research focus, and thematic relevance to this study narrowed the selection to 22 articles for systematic analysis.

This multi-stage screening process ensured that the final selection of literature was scientifically robust, methodologically sound, and replicable, while reflecting the predefined inclusion criteria and search boundaries of the study. The entire selection process followed the PRISMA framework, ensuring transparency and traceability. The detailed flow of the screening process is illustrated in the accompanying figure.

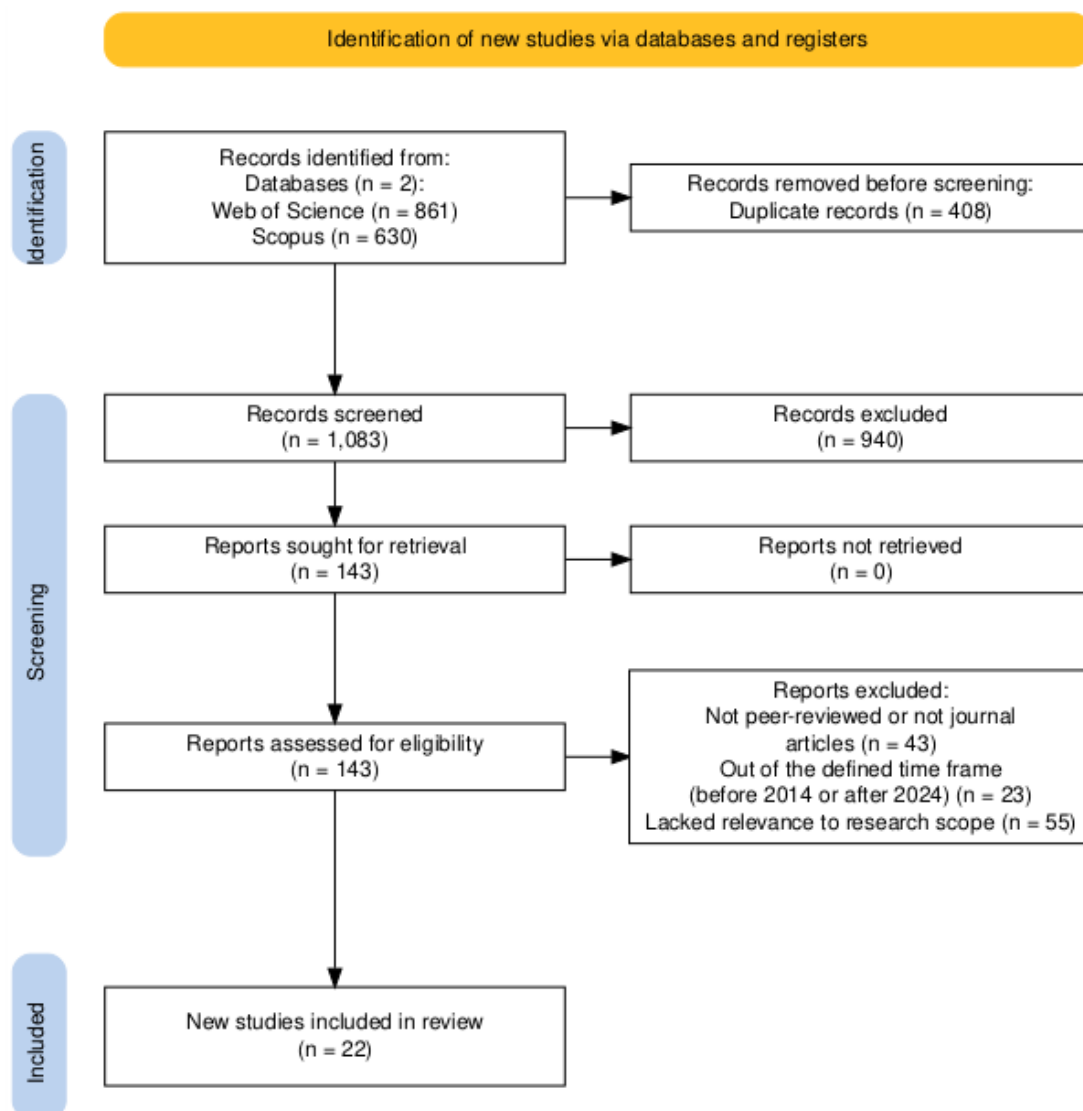


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

Data Coding

To systematically identify research trends and thematic distinctions within the selected studies, a structured coding scheme was employed to categorise each of the final included

articles. The coding variables comprised: year of publication, theoretical framework adopted, type(s) of frame(s) applied, nature of the data analysed (including media type and event type), overall evaluative stance of the study towards China's national image, and the research methodology used. Coding the year of publication enabled an overview of temporal trends in scholarly output, while examining the theoretical frameworks highlighted the dominant conceptual lenses employed in this research area. The types of frames were systematically coded to capture recurring patterns in media narratives. The nature of the data analysed captured the type of media (e.g., newspapers, television, online news) and the geographic origin of the sources (e.g., Western media, regional media), providing insights into media diversity. The evaluative stance variable recorded whether studies portrayed China's national image in a positive, negative, or neutral light. Finally, the research methodology variable distinguished between qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches, facilitating an understanding of the dominant methodological preferences across the literature. This structured coding procedure ensured a systematic and transparent thematic analysis of the selected studies.

Table 1: Articles for review

No.	Year	Theoretical Framework(s)	Framing Categories	Data Source	Overall Evaluation of China's National Image	Research Methodology
1.	2014	Media Diplomacy, Soft Power	Diplomacy, Economy, Security	Korean Newspapers / General Political Coverage	Mixed to Positive	Qualitative (Textual Analysis)
2.	2015	Social Comparison Theory, Framing	Traits, Competition, Threat	Public Opinion Survey / Sino-US Relations	Neutral to Negative	Quantitative (Survey Experiment)
3.	2015	Framing Theory, Nationalism	Suspicion, Achievement, Nationalism	News Media / 2012 Olympics	Mixed (Negative US, Positive China)	Qualitative
4.	2016	Image Theory, Framing	Threat, Culture, Technology	South Korean Media / General Bilateral Issues	Neutral	Quantitative (Content Analysis)
5.	2017	Defensive Soft Power, Image Repair Theory	Sovereignty, Human Rights, Stability	Chinese State Media / Hong Kong Protests	Positive (from Chinese perspective)	Qualitative (Discourse Analysis)
6.	2018	Public Diplomacy, Gendered Soft Power	Culture, Charm, Soft Power	State Media + Foreign Media / Diplomatic Visits	Positive	Qualitative (Visual/Textual)
7.	2021	Transitivity (Systemic Functional Linguistics), CDA	Threat, Global Power, Diplomacy	US Mainstream Media / General Coverage	Negative	Qualitative
8.	2021	Imagology, Public Diplomacy	Culture, Cooperation	Turkish Public Opinion + Chinese Media / General Image	Mixed to Positive	Mixed (Survey + Media Analysis)

9.	2022	Discourse-Historical Approach, Framing Theory	Threat, Responsibility, Cooperation	News Media / Health Crisis (COVID-19)	Mixed (Negative in US, Positive in China)	Mixed (Corpus + Critical Discourse Analysis)
10.	2022	Media Dependency Theory, Framing Theory	Threat, Economy	Survey Data / US-China Trade War	Neutral to Negative	Quantitative (Survey Study)
11.	2023	Critical Discourse Analysis, Framing Theory	Environment, Responsibility	The New York Times / Environmental News	Negative	Qualitative (Corpus-Based Analysis)
12.	2023	Agenda-Setting, Image Theory	Health, Management	German Media / COVID-19	Neutral	Quantitative (Statistical Content Analysis)
13.	2023	Framing Theory	Public Health, Diplomacy, Suspicion	News Media / COVID-19 Vaccine	Mixed	Qualitative (Comparative Framing Analysis)
14.	2023	Image Theory, Public Diplomacy	Science, Development	Twitter / Science and Technology Coverage	Neutral to Positive	Quantitative (Social Media Analysis)
15.	2023	Critical Discourse Analysis	Power, Global Order	The New York Times Editorials / General Political Coverage	Negative	Qualitative (Editorial Discourse Analysis)
16.	2024	Soft Power Theory, Public Diplomacy	Development, Cooperation	Chinese Media + Survey / General International Affairs	Positive	Mixed (Survey + Content Analysis)
17.	2024	Soft Power, Media Representation	Cultural Soft Power, National Pride	YouTube / Beijing 2022 Olympics	Positive	Qualitative (Visual and Content Analysis)
18.	2024	Framing Theory, Agenda-setting	Human Rights, Counterterrorism	CGTN, New China TV / Human Rights & Xinjiang Coverage	Positive (from Chinese sources)	Qualitative (Media Strategy Analysis)
19.	2024	Framing Theory, National Image	National Identity, Success	News Media / Sports Celebrity Coverage (Gu Ailing)	Positive (China), Mixed (US)	Qualitative
20.	2025	Framing Theory, Environmental Communication	Environment, Global Responsibility, Blame	Indian News Media / Environmental Issues	Mixed to Negative	Qualitative (Content Analysis)
21.	2025	Public Diplomacy, Soft Power	Cooperation, National Branding	Chinese Social Media / Public Diplomacy	Positive	Qualitative (Media Strategy Analysis)
22.	2025	Translation Studies, Discourse Analysis	Sovereignty, Economic Justice	White Papers / China-US Trade Frictions	Positive	Qualitative (Textual Analysis)

RESULTS

This chapter presents a systematic synthesis of English-language literature published between 2014 and March 2025, highlighting the overall characteristics of media studies concerning China's national image. The findings reveal notable developments in thematic focus, theoretical approaches, and media positioning within this research domain.

Temporal Distribution and Theoretical Frameworks

A review of the relevant academic literature from 2014 to March 2025 reveals a steadily increasing volume of research on China's national image in global media. This upward trend becomes particularly pronounced after 2021, a period marked by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, shifts in China's role on the global stage, and efforts to reshape its diplomatic image in the post-pandemic era (Chang, 2021). The number of studies peaked in 2023, a year that not only represented a critical juncture in China's struggle against international public opinion but also included extensive media coverage of the Beijing Winter Olympics, which became a focal point for scholarly inquiry. This growth is closely associated with the increasing politicisation of China-related media discourse, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and intensifying geopolitical tensions. These developments have collectively heightened scholarly attention to issues of framing and representation.

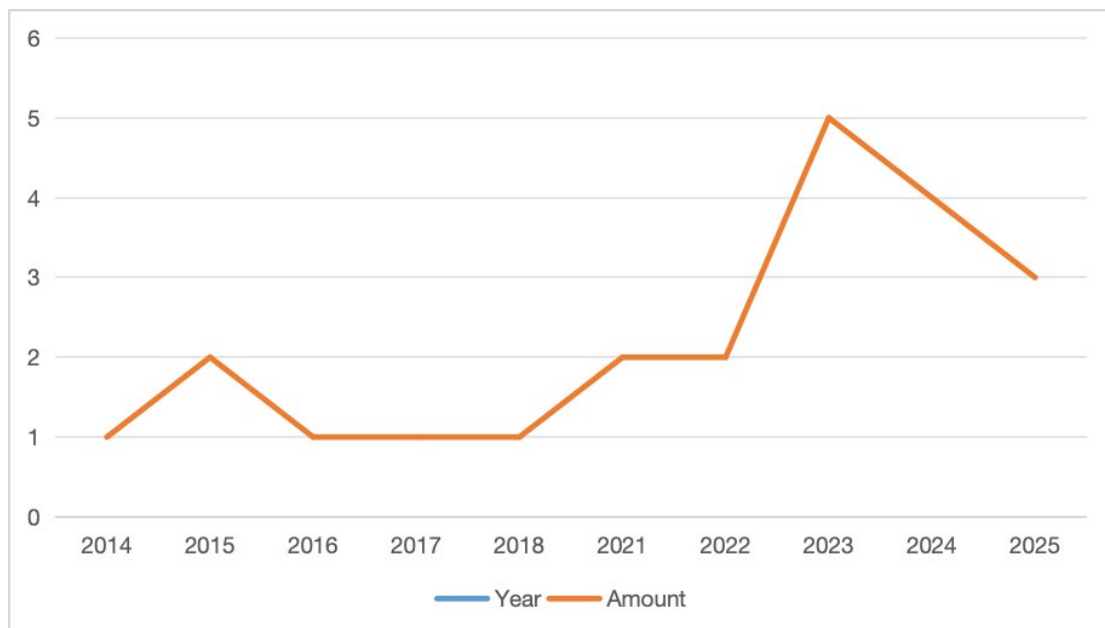


Figure 2: Annual distribution of studies (2014 – March 2025)
Source: Researcher's compilation from PRISMA-screened corpus (n=22)

In terms of theoretical orientation, earlier studies primarily drew upon conventional frameworks from communication and international relations, such as Soft Power Theory, National Image Theory, and Public Diplomacy (Li & Xia, 2021; Wang, 2018; Loh, 2017; Xu-Yulan & 오창학, 2016; Lee, 2014). These works largely emphasised how states manage their self-image through media strategies, focusing on national actors' communication efforts in the context of international politics.

In recent years, research has increasingly adopted more critical and structurally oriented theoretical tools to gain deeper insights into the role of media in shaping national images. Framing Theory has emerged as a dominant approach, with scholars examining the

topics, vocabulary, context, and implicit stances adopted by media when reporting on China (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Alpermann & Malzer, 2024; Ju et al., 2023; Yang & Wang, 2023; Willnat et al., 2022; Lou, 2022). Additionally, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Agenda-Setting Theory have also been widely applied to expose the ideological underpinnings and discursive power dynamics present in Western portrayals of China (Alpermann & Malzer, 2024; Jingjing & Xiaoyan, 2023; Tang, 2021).

Figure 3. illustrates the frequency of six commonly used theoretical frameworks identified in representative studies from 2014 to March 2025. This figure is based on the researcher's coding of 22 systematically selected journal articles, drawing from PRISMA-screened literature published between 2014 and March 2025. To maintain clarity and readability, the figure includes only those frameworks that appeared frequently and are considered representative: Framing Theory, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Image Theory, Discourse Analysis (CDA), and Agenda-Setting. Other frameworks, such as Imagology, Media Dependency Theory, and Translation Studies, were excluded from the visual representation due to their relatively low or scattered frequency. However, their contributions are discussed in the accompanying text. This theoretical evolution not only reflects a deepening analytical sophistication within the field but also marks a shift in scholarly focus from how states promote their own image, to how media actively construct and selectively re-present the image of China. While earlier frameworks largely emphasised state-centric communication and image management, more recent approaches enable a closer examination of media as active agents in constructing national images. These approaches further suggest that framing practices are increasingly shaped by political contexts and ideological positioning, particularly in relation to pandemic discourse and broader geopolitical tensions.

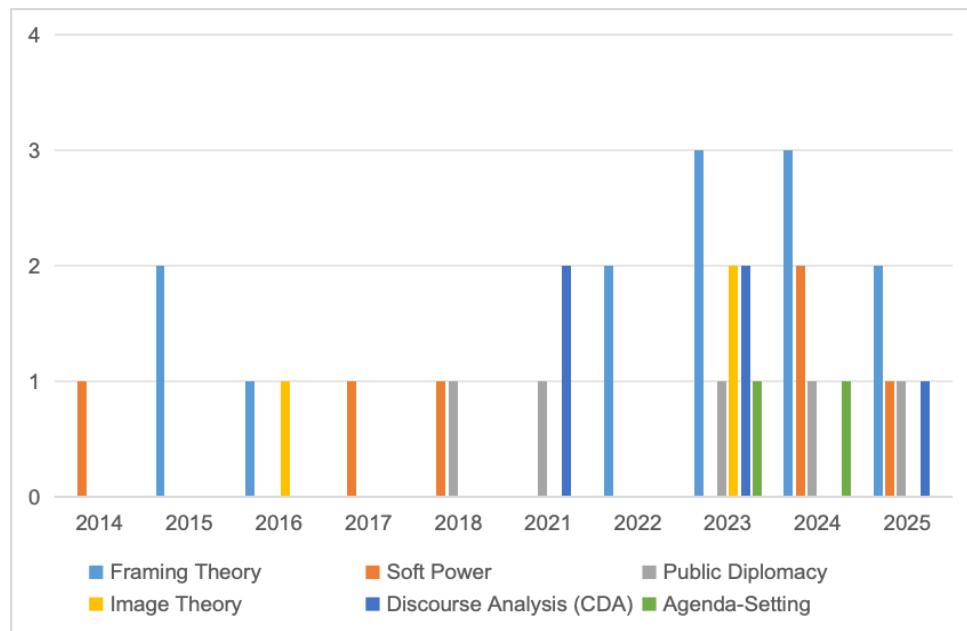


Figure 3: Theoretical perspective diagram

Media Framing of China's National Image

A synthesis of content analysis studies from various regions reveals that global media employ a wide range of framing strategies when reporting on China. Among these, several dominant frame types have been identified:

Threat Frame: This is most commonly found in Western mainstream media, particularly in coverage related to China's economic rise, military modernisation, technological expansion (such as 5G and artificial intelligence), and the broader context of US-China rivalry. Within this frame, China is often portrayed as a "challenger" to Western norms or as a "systemic rival." By emphasising alterity and perceived risks, this framing contributes to a negative and tension-laden image of China on the world stage (Willnat et al., 2022; Lou, 2022; Tang, 2021; Xu-Yulan & 오창학, 2016; Pan, 2016).

Cooperation Frame: This frame typically appears in media coverage of China's engagement in global affairs, such as its involvement in pandemic response, climate change efforts, and participation in United Nations activities. It depicts China as an active contributor to global governance. For instance, China's roles in the Global Vaccine Initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative are often framed by certain media outlets as efforts to promote stability and global cooperation (Song & Shu, 2025; Kimaiyo, 2024; Lou, 2022; Li & Xia, 2021).

Culture Frame: This frame is used to highlight China's cultural diplomacy, traditional values, and participation in international cultural events. Typical examples include media coverage of the Spring Festival Gala, Confucius Institutes, the export of Chinese film and television, and the preservation of cultural heritage. This framing is more commonly adopted by media in developing countries and across the Asian region (Li & Xia, 2021; Wang, 2018; Xu-Yulan & 오창학, 2016).

Sovereignty and Security Frame: This frame frequently emerges in reports related to sensitive regions such as Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Western media often focus on what they describe as China's "repressive" policies, whereas Chinese domestic media tend to justify these actions through a sovereignty discourse that emphasises the legitimacy of "preserving national unity and stability" (Zhao & Wang, 2025; Alpermann & Malzer, 2024; Loh, 2017; Lee, 2014).

The distribution of these dominant frames is summarised in Figure 4 below. Researcher's coding based on 22 selected peer-reviewed articles.

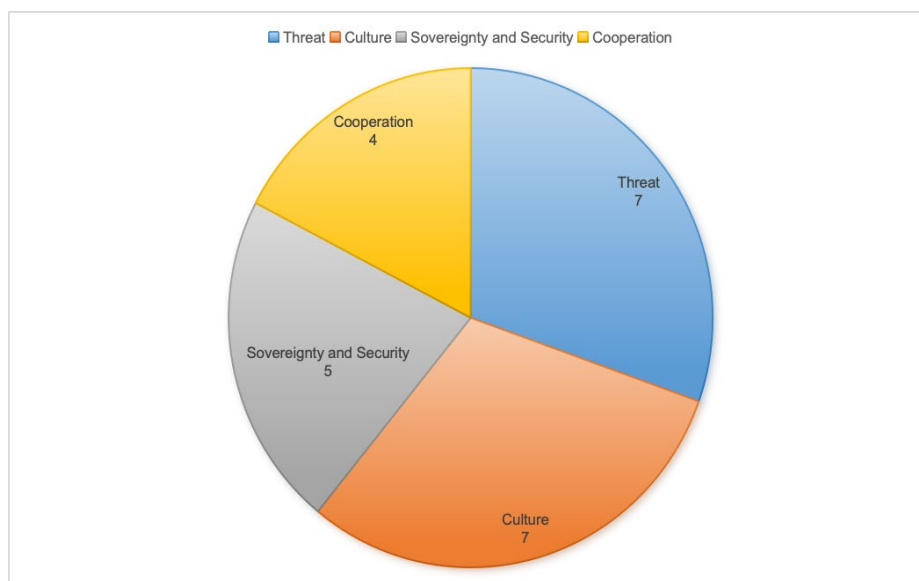


Figure 4: Distribution of dominant frame types

It is worth noting that the same event is often framed differently across distinct media systems. For instance, in the case of the Beijing Winter Olympics, some media adopted a cooperation or cultural frame, emphasising the Games as a platform for showcasing China's image and cultural soft power. In contrast, others applied a security or threat frame, focusing on controversies surrounding human rights issues. This divergence also reflects, to some extent, the fragmented nature of the global discursive environment (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Lopez-Mugica et al., 2024).

These framing categories are not mutually exclusive in practice. In many cases, multiple frames co-occur within a single media report, reflecting overlapping interpretive logics and context-dependent narrative strategies. This suggests that framing is better understood as a fluid and dynamic process rather than a set of rigid and discrete categories.

Tendencies in the Evaluation of National Image

Studies on China's national image have revealed that media evaluations tend to be complex and multilayered. Overall, existing research generally categorises media attitudes towards China as positive, neutral, or negative. However, this classification is not static, as it evolves over time and varies according to context.

Positive Evaluations: These are primarily found in reports on China's economic development, technological innovation, and international cooperation. Topics such as China's high-speed rail network, Huawei's technological breakthroughs, the space programme, and the country's provision of pandemic-related aid frequently highlight a "modernised" image of China and its "sense of global responsibility" (Zhao & Wang, 2025; Song & Shu, 2025; Lopez-Mugica et al., 2024; Kimaiyo, 2024; Li & Xia, 2021; Wang, 2018). Such narratives are especially prevalent in media outlets based in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, reflecting a generally more favourable image of China among Global South nations.

Negative Evaluations: These tend to focus on China's political system, freedom of expression, and issues concerning ethnic minorities. Western media, particularly in Europe and North America, often adopt a critical and sceptical tone when reporting on topics such as human rights, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. Outlets such as The New York Times and The Guardian frequently employ terms like "repression," "authoritarianism," and "lack of transparency" in constructing a negative portrayal of China, thereby demonstrating a strong ideological bias (Dai & Hassan, 2023; Yang & Wang, 2023; Willnat et al., 2022; Lou, 2022; Tang, 2021).

Neutral Evaluations: Some studies have noted that a number of media outlets adopt a factual reporting style, particularly when covering China's foreign policy or international economic engagement. For example, international news agencies such as Reuters and Agence France-Presse strive for neutrality in their news dispatches by avoiding overt editorialising. Nevertheless, implicit biases may occasionally be observed in headlines or lead paragraphs (Yang et al., 2023; Jingjing & Xiaoyan, 2023; Xu-Yulan & 오창학, 2016; Pan, 2016). Even ostensibly positive portrayals may reflect underlying strategic or geopolitical motivations, indicating that evaluative tone alone does not necessarily correspond to the absence of bias.

While the positive–neutral–negative typology provides a useful analytical heuristic, the findings also indicate that media evaluations are often more ambivalent and context-dependent than this tripartite classification suggests. In practice, representations of China may combine elements of multiple evaluative stances, and neutrality itself can be strategically constructed and shaped by institutional, political, and cultural considerations.

This highlights the limitations of rigid categorical distinctions and suggests that evaluative framing should be understood as fluid and contingent rather than strictly bounded.

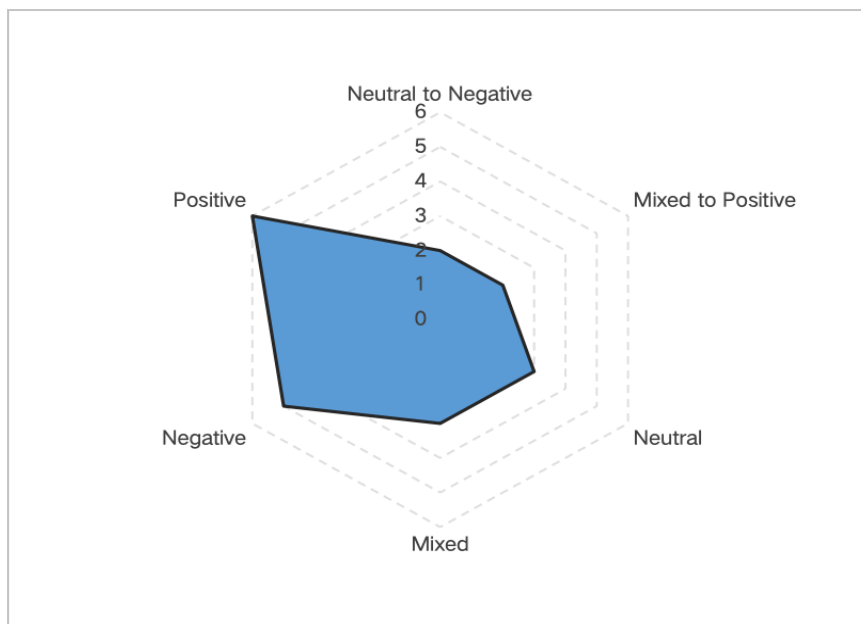


Figure 5: Tendency of media coverage
Source: Researcher's synthesis of findings from the selected literature

It should also be noted that some studies have highlighted the tensions surrounding China's image across different public spheres. These include narrative conflicts between overseas Chinese-language media and mainstream Western outlets, as well as the decentralised reshaping of China's image on social media platforms (Song & Shu, 2025; Alpermann & Malzer, 2024; Lopez-Mugica et al., 2024). Such phenomena indicate that national image has long extended beyond official narratives, becoming instead the product of competing discourses. In summary, China's national image as presented in global media is far from unidimensional. Rather, it is shaped by a combination of factors including the international political order, the ideological positions of media institutions, and the backgrounds of target audiences. As a result, it manifests in increasingly diverse and complex forms.

DISCUSSION

This study presents a systematic review of the pathways through which China's national image has been represented in communication research. It aims to critically reflect on prevailing trends and limitations in the existing literature, focusing on research topics, theoretical paradigms, methodological choices, and the global discursive environment. The findings indicate that in recent years, China's national image has emerged as a sustained area of interest within the field of communication studies. However, this body of research also reveals a range of concerns, including a high concentration of topics, theoretical convergence, methodological uniformity, and limited contextual understanding.

To begin with, in terms of topic distribution, existing English-language scholarship predominantly centres on major events and critical junctures, such as the Beijing Olympics, the Belt and Road Initiative, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Hong Kong protests (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Lopez-Mugica et al., 2024; Kimaiyo, 2024; Lou, 2022; Loh, 2017). While this

"event-driven" approach is helpful in capturing fluctuations in national image during periods of heightened public attention, it also has notable limitations. Many studies overlook the long-term construction of national image in routine communicative contexts, paying insufficient attention to the continuity and stability of narratives in "normalised" communication. Furthermore, the audience reception dimension remains underdeveloped, especially concerning how audiences from developing or non-Western countries receive, interpret, and reproduce China's image.

Secondly, at the level of theory and methodology, framing theory has become the dominant analytical tool in a large number of studies (Van Hulst et al., 2025). While this theoretical model offers a clear framework for analysing how the media constructs national images, its widespread use has also revealed a tendency towards instrumentalism. In many cases, framing analysis is limited to categorising positive and negative attitudes or counting keyword frequencies, with little exploration of frame production mechanisms or audience feedback processes (Jingjing & Xiaoyan, 2023; Yang & Wang, 2023; Willnat et al., 2022; Xu-Yulan & 오창학, 2016; Lee, 2014). In addition, other important theoretical perspectives in communication studies, such as cultural studies, identity politics, postcolonial theory, and intercultural communication, remain underutilised in this area. This imbalance in the use of theoretical frameworks may reflect broader asymmetries in global knowledge production, where dominant academic paradigms, often rooted in Western theoretical traditions, shape the selection of research topics and analytical frameworks. As a result, alternative perspectives, particularly those grounded in non-Western or critical traditions, remain comparatively marginalised.

Methodologically, content analysis dominates English-language studies, with many relying on systematic sampling and coding frameworks to quantitatively process news texts, social media content, and user comments (Ju et al., 2023; Jingjing & Xiaoyan, 2023; Yang & Wang, 2023; Willnat et al., 2022; Xu-Yulan & 오창학, 2016; Lee, 2014). While such methods are effective in identifying distribution trends and macro-level structures in media framing, they also face several challenges. For example, many studies fail to provide clear explanations of variable selection or coding procedures, and often simplify the operationalisation of theoretical concepts, potentially weakening the explanatory power and validity of their findings. Although some works claim to incorporate qualitative analysis, they often offer only superficial interpretations of frame content, without fully uncovering the ideological structures and cultural contexts embedded in the texts (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Dai & Hassan, 2023; Ju et al., 2023; Tang, 2021; Bie & Billings, 2015). Overall, integration between qualitative and quantitative approaches remains limited, and most studies make little use of in-depth interviews, ethnography, or discourse analysis to explore the subjective perceptions and symbolic meanings of national image. This methodological tendency also reflects a preference for quantifiable and standardised forms of knowledge production, which may align with dominant academic norms but risk overlooking context-specific meanings and power relations embedded in media discourse.

Furthermore, this review pays particular attention to how China's national image is framed by media across different cultural contexts within the global communication landscape. The literature generally reflects three dominant narrative patterns: the first is a "threat frame", which portrays China as a challenge to the existing order in terms of military power, governance models, and ideology (Zhao & Wang, 2025; Dai & Hassan, 2023; Tang,

2021). The second is a "developmental miracle frame", which depicts China as a case of exceptional economic growth, often accompanied by implicit metaphors of rule-breaking or opportunism (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Yang & Wang, 2023; Pan, 2016). The third is a "strategic instrumentality frame", in which China is cast as a geopolitical actor that can be engaged with, but should be approached with caution (Alpermann & Malzer, 2024; Ju et al., 2023; Willnat et al., 2022). These frames are often rooted in the West's pre-existing understandings of power structures and discursive dominance, and tend to "other" China, resulting in frequent clashes and contestations over its image in the global media landscape.

Nevertheless, some studies have noted that China's image is presented more positively, or even idealistically, in media from certain developing countries. Particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative, China is frequently framed as a model for economic development or an institutional alternative in global governance (Kimaiyo, 2024; Li & Xia, 2021). This variation suggests that national image is not a one-way product of communication but a dynamic process of negotiation, reconstruction, and re-signification within diverse cultural contexts (Szondi, 2010; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). As such, future research should place greater emphasis on the mechanisms of recontextualisation by which audiences reinterpret media frames through their own cultural lenses, and should also theoretically address the diversity, fluidity, and multiplicity of meanings attached to national images.

Media representations of China's national image are not neutral or isolated depictions, but are shaped by intersecting ideological, political, and structural forces. These include geopolitical tensions, asymmetries in global media systems, and unequal patterns of knowledge production. As such, competing portrayals of China are better understood within a broader framework of power relations, rather than as independent or purely descriptive narratives. Future research should therefore move beyond event-driven and methodologically narrow approaches, and instead engage more deeply with the structural and cultural conditions that shape global media discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a systematic and comprehensive synthesis of English-language research on the media construction of China's national image, revealing recurring patterns that are often overlooked in isolated case studies. By adopting a PRISMA-based approach to integrate fragmented findings, it offers a structured understanding of how research in this field has evolved in terms of theoretical orientation, methodology, and framing practices.

The analysis shows that existing scholarship has increasingly focused on the role of media as active agents in shaping national image, with particular attention to framing processes and discursive strategies. At the same time, the literature continues to display a concentration of theoretical approaches and an imbalance in research methods. There is a strong reliance on a limited set of analytical frameworks, alongside the dominance of content-based approaches. These tendencies have resulted in uneven research coverage, especially in relation to audience reception, cross-cultural interpretation, and the role of non-Western media contexts.

From a broader perspective, these findings indicate that media representations of national image are shaped by ideological, political, and structural conditions. They are embedded within wider systems of power that influence how such images are constructed and circulated. As a result, media representations play a key role in shaping international perceptions, influencing diplomatic relations, and reinforcing or challenging existing power dynamics within the global media system. Understanding these representations therefore

requires attention not only to media content, but also to the structural contexts in which such narratives are produced and circulated.

These insights carry important implications for both theory and practice. At the theoretical level, this study highlights the need to adopt a more reflexive approach to the construction of national image, and to understand it as a dynamic process embedded within power structures and knowledge production, rather than simply as media representation. At the practical level, the findings emphasise the importance of viewing media discourse as an ongoing site of ideological negotiation rather than merely a channel for information transmission. Strengthening critical media literacy and promoting more reflective journalistic practices are essential for fostering more balanced and nuanced global communication.

In terms of future research, scholars can further develop this field from several perspectives. In theoretical development, there is a need to move beyond the path dependence of existing paradigms and to incorporate perspectives such as political communication and media constructivism, in order to deepen understanding of the power relations and historical structures that shape national image. At the methodological level, future research could make greater use of mixed methods or strengthen the depth of qualitative approaches, particularly by focusing on narrative structures and cultural meanings. In addition, while English-language research is useful for understanding the logic of national image construction in international discourse, future studies should extend to multilingual platforms and non-Western media contexts to support more diverse and cross-cultural approaches.

Overall, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how China's national image is constructed and contested in global media discourse. It also highlights the importance of adopting a more reflexive perspective when examining this process, with attention to the underlying power structures and knowledge dynamics. As a major global actor, the construction and interpretation of China's national image have important implications for international communication, global order, and cross-cultural understanding. In this context, future research should continue to develop more critical and constructive forms of knowledge production within a broader global perspective, in order to promote a more diverse and balanced international communication environment.

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