Международные отношения

CONSTRUCTING CHINA'S IMAGE IN THE BRITISH MEDIA DURING INTERNATIONAL CRISES: A CASE STUDY OF THE TIMES NEWSPAPER SINCE FEBRUARY 2022

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Abstract
International society has noted a series of interlinked events that have implications for the construction of national representations within media discourse. This study probes how The Times represented China's image during global crises, with special focus on the period after Russia initiated its special military operation on February 24, 2022. Although this provides key context, the research also takes into account other factors, such as fluctuations in economic relations, changes in domestic leadership, and ongoing historical representations. Using content analysis coupled with statistical analysis through SPSS, the study outlines dominant narratives, themes, and underlying biases in media output. Based on social constructionism, the research highlights the importance of image, identity, and the mediatization of political affiliations. The findings add to the understanding of media representation and its consequences for China's monitoring of its international image.

Keywords: China's image; the Times; content analysis; SPSS; social constructivism; international crisis; media framing.

Introduction

In today's world of rapid globalization and interconnected nations, a country's image extends beyond its domestic affairs, becoming vital to its international position and influence (Meierding & Sigman, 2021). This image, shaped by media, greatly affects diplomatic ties, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges. During global crises, media reports are key in molding and altering national images (Hall, 2024; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Russian special military operation, initiated on February 24, 2022, marks a turning point that not only shook global geopolitics but also reshuffled the narratives circulated by Western media. In the context of the media landscape of Britain, particularly as exemplified by The Times, China has seen its representation change radically since the operation commenced.

The Times, as a leading British newspaper with a legacy of over two centuries, wields considerable influence over public opinion and policy discourse in the United Kingdom and beyond (Evans, 2009). Its coverage of international events, including the Russian special military operation, is scrutinized for its narrative choices, thematic focus, and underlying biases. The way China is represented in these reports can either reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes, influence diplomatic strategies, and shape the public's understanding of China's role on the global stage (Said, 1978).

While factors such as the evolving Sino-British economic relationship, domestic political changes (e.g., post-Brexit adjustments), and long-standing historical stereotypes contribute to the construction of China's image, this study maintains a primary focus on how the Russian special military operation has served as a key catalyst for these narrative changes. By closely examining media texts from February 2022 to January 2024, we aim to demonstrate that the operation provided a specific context in which The Times' coverage of China was reoriented. The operation, therefore, is not an isolated backdrop but a central element that shaped the discourse and influenced the portrayal of Chinese identity and policy in the British media.

This study looks at how The Times portrayed China's image during the Russian special military operation. By undertaking a content analysis of articles published between February 24, 2022 and January 1, 2024, we hope to identify the prominent themes, connotations, and tendencies that characterize this coverage. The study is led by the following research questions.

How does The Times construct China's image amidst the complexities of the Russian special military operation?

What are the key themes and narratives that emerge from the coverage of China by The Times during this period?

How do these narratives reflect or challenge existing perceptions of China's role in international crises?

What are the implications of these media portrayals for China's international reputation management and strategic communication efforts?

Its significance is marked by the fact that the research is both multifaceted and multidimensional. First, the research contributes to the academic discourse around media representation and the international implications thereof. This media analysis around the portrayal of China clarifies the mechanisms involved in soft power and public diplomacy. Second, the research has practical implications for China's foreign diplomacy by pointing out the importance of good media communication and image manipulation during times of global crises (Coban Oran, 2016). Third, this research provides the foundation for further research into the media and international politics by providing a case study that explores the media coverage and public views around the leading global powers in the wake of operation.

This paper is structured as follows. The literature review section of this study offers a comprehensive assessment of the existing scholarly debates on media representation, and in particular, the representation of China in Western media outlets such as The Times. This paper provides an in-depth review of theoretical models and empirical studies that have informed the understanding of media effects on public opinion and their resulting influence on foreign policy in times of international crises. In addition, the review compares methodological strategies used in the previous studies that have scrutinized media content, media framing effects on diplomatic relations, and national reputation management.

This chapter provides the intellectual context of the present study by identifying gaps in the existing literature that the present study aims to address, specifically regarding how China is portrayed in media discourse amid the Russian special military operation. The Methodology chapter reports the procedures for data gathering, sample selection criteria, development of the encoding scheme, and operational definitions for coding. The Results chapter provides an in-depth examination of the findings, excavating the prevailing themes, trends, and biases of The Times' reporting on China. The discussion chapter interprets these findings, examining their effects on media representation, international diplomacy, and the management of China's reputation (Krippendorff, 2018). Lastly, the key findings are summarized briefly, and suggestions are provided for future study and practical application.

Coverage of China in British media

Jiang Heping, as early as 1998 published the article "The Image of China in the British Media", which analyzed the four British newspapers, the Times, the Daily Telegraph, the Guardian and the Financial Times, from the perspective of content and reporting. The results obtained demonstrated that British media like to use one-sided opinion to generalize China hastily in a biased way: China as a country that is authoritarian, backward, corrupt, and lacks democracy (p. 80-81).

Newton and Brynin (2001, p. 267) note that British newspapers have strong political stances, attitudes, and agendas, and these publications are eager to utilize their coverage to sway the public's perceptions of significant political problems in the country.

For such background, many scholars have conducted researches on the British media's portrayal of China.

Seib and Powers (2010) looked at the coverage provided by Deutsche Welle, CNN International, and BBC World Service. They discovered that the BBC tended to be biased when describing China's human and political rights record. Although China is covered by the media, it is consistently portrayed as a threat to "international" stability and order (Seib & Powers, 2010, p. 11). They emphasized that the media does not portray China as a supportive actor on the international scene in half of the stories they cover.

In the meanwhile, Sparks' (2010) study gives a narrower focus, by discussing how British presses reported China in 2008. He argues that it was a common belief that because of the 'legacy of the Cold War and Western anti-communism' ideology in Western society, British newspapers' coverage of China was 'a systematically, and maliciously, distorted account of Chinese realities.

The Times, a broadsheet with a conservative slant, mostly covered commerce, business, and economics in China (Wang, 2021). The Times demonstrated a broad interest in China's economic development and circumstances as a whole, in addition to depicting China as a nation with whom the UK is doing trade deals in the wake of the Brexit decision. Wang also mentioned, for some other mainstream newspaper, like The Sun, The Daily Mirror and The Guardian, they saw China's economic might as robust, steady, and encouraging, and, more significantly, as a country that will be open to trade with the UK following Brexit, but also gave China such a doubtful and critical views.

Other reports and surveys proved negative portrayal of China. For instance, the 2020 Sinophone Borderlands survey revealed overall negative public perceptions of China in the UK: 62% reported "negative" or "very negative" sentiment, and 68% said that their "general view" of China had worsened over the last three years.

Before the Russian special military operation, the general tendency of British media portrayal of China can be defined in the following way:

Some left-wing media tend to criticize China, especially on issues such as human rights and democracy (Wang, 2021). They may report on issues such as the Chinese government's repressive behavior, controversial policies and its treatment of ethnic minorities. These media may pay more attention to China's internal issues and continue to report on China's human rights situation.

Some authoritative and conservative media pay more attention to China's economy, technology and international status (Wang, 2021). They may report on China's economic growth, investment activity and trade relations with China. These media may pay more attention to China's international influence and geopolitics.

In addition, some mainstream media, may adopt a neutral stance and attempt to comprehensively report on all aspects of China, including politics, economy, culture, etc. (Sparks, 2010). They may provide more comprehensive and objective information to meet the needs of different readers.

However, no matter in the past or now, the media in Britain, under the regulation of their ideologies and interest groups, have always expressed their political tendencies and positions openly or covertly, implicitly or explicitly (James Curran & Jean Seaton, 2003, p.174). That is why it seems crucial to find out whether the media's stance has changed due to the Special military operation or if this crisis has not influenced the main tendencies in coverage. From Krippendorff (2018) understanding these shifts can provide valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and the general public about the evolution of international perceptions and media strategies.

Methodology

Our study on the portrayal of China in The Times newspaper, grounded in social constructivism and relies predominantly on content analysis as the research method.

Social constructivism, as defined by Berger and Luckmann (2016), posits that reality is socially constructed through interaction and shared meanings, a framework that can be applied to analyze how newspaper texts reflect and shape societal perceptions. From Peci et al (2009), media representations are not mere reflections of objective reality but are constructed through discursive practices. Therefore, there are image, identity and mediatization of politics as the key concepts guiding this analysis, first is the collective representation and symbolic attributes assigned to China through media discourse. Second is the self-representation of China within international communication, shaped by both historical narratives and contemporary events. And the third is the process by which political phenomena, including Russian Special military operation, are reframed by the media, thereby influencing public perception.

Content analysis is the method that provides a variety of tools to the study of media content (Berelson, B., 2000). The content analysis is not limited to identifying the message components, but also enables to understand the communicator's intention and receiver's interpretation of the message.

While acknowledging that factors beyond the operation (e.g., economic relations and historical biases) contribute to China's portrayal, the analysis explicitly focuses on how the Russian special military operation has redefined the narrative strategies used by The Times. The subsequent coding and content analysis specifically trace shifts in themes and sentiment that correlate with the operation period.

Sampling

This study's data was sourced from Factiva, a premier global news database, which provided a comprehensive collection of articles from The Times, a leading British newspaper. The selection of articles for content analysis was guided by the following criteria.

The articles were selected from two distinct periods to capture the evolving narrative of China's image during the Russian Special military operation. The first period spanned from February 24, 2022, to December 31, 2022, and the second period from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023.

The articles were filtered to include those that contained the terms "China" or "Chinese" in either the title or the content, ensuring that the selected articles were directly relevant to the study's focus on China's image. The articles also included a variety of types to capture a broad spectrum of media representation, such as news reports, opinion pieces, and editorials.

After applying these criteria, a total of 993 articles were identified as valid samples for the study. The articles were categorized into different themes already in the Factiva, which enables us to reorganize them into 4 general categories: Politics, Economics, Culture and Society, which can provide a structured approach to the content analysis.

Charts 1 and 2 below provide a basic statistical overview of the selected articles, categorized by themes, subthemes and frequency.
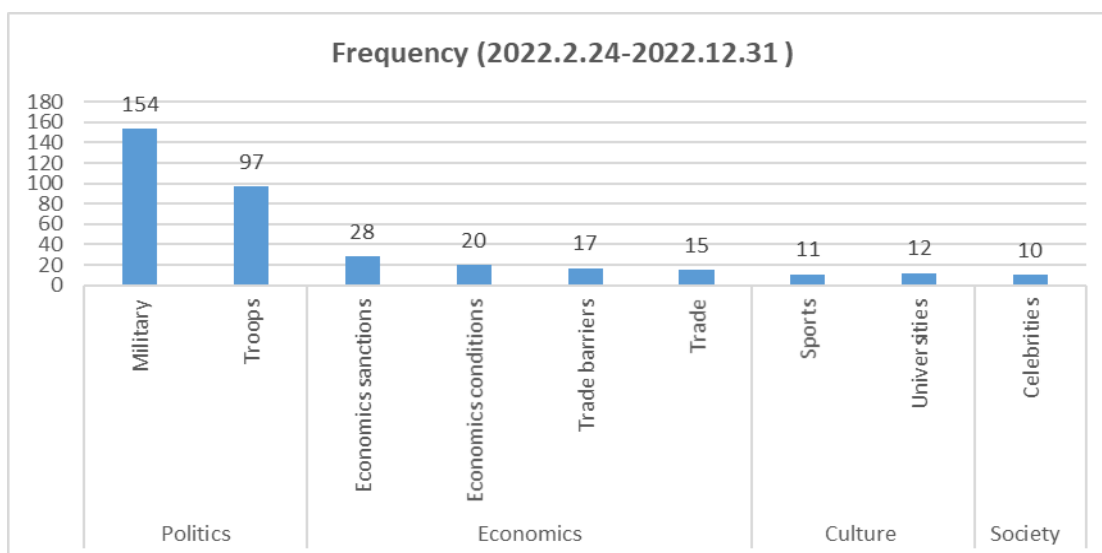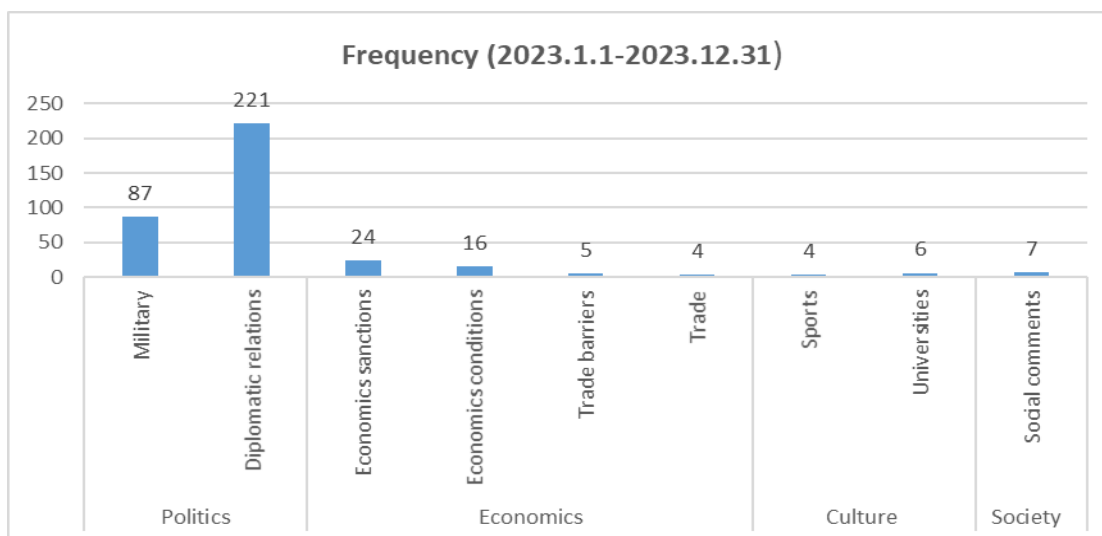

Fig. 1. Frequency of themes in 2022

Fig. 2. Frequency of themes in 2023

This categorization allows for a basic analysis of how different themes and subthemes are represented in relation to China's image. The frequency of categories provides insights into the depth and breadth of coverage, with shorter articles typically offering less detailed perspectives compared to longer, more in-depth reports

The selection process and the statistical overview ensure that the sample is representative of The Times' coverage of China during the specified periods, offering a robust foundation for the content analysis that follows.

In this study, each article was used as an analysis unit.

Code category

Constructing the encoding frame

This paper aims to study media content. Therefore, the division of "categories" in content analysis should be comprehensive, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and equal. This study assigns values to variables 1 to 5 for "date", "theme", "article length", "proportion involved", and "tendency" in turn. It is worth noting that this study assigns values to variables 1 to 8 for the specific descriptions of political positive words, political negative words, economic positive words, economic negative words, cultural positive words, cultural negative words, social positive words, and social negative words in turn in order to further explore the fuller image of China in the British media. Among them, due to the small number of cultural negative words and social words, the assignment is relatively adjusted.

The construction of the encoding frame is a critical step in content analysis, as it lays the foundation for systematic and reliable data interpretation. For this study, the encoding frame was developed to capture the nuances of China's image as portrayed in The Times during the Russian Special military operation. The frame consists of several categories, each with specific variables and operational definitions to ensure comprehensive and structured analysis.

In addition to tracking themes and sentiment, the coding system has social constructivist variables based on documenting how identity and mediatization are formed in the textual analysis over the course of the operation. Specifically, the analysis records textual markers symbolizing the construction of China's identity and the mediatization of political affairs during the Russian SMO. For example, descriptive labels such as "global mediator," "assertive rising power," and the like were indicated as China's projected identity. Further, recurring narrative routines—whereby diplomatic messages or policy initiatives were framed as natural components of a long-term strategic reaction to the crisis—were coded in mediatization.

Although these mediatization and identity dimensions were not independently measured through distinct numerical values in our original dataset, they were consistently considered throughout the qualitative analysis of the articles. This practice lends richness to the quantitative results by relating the described thematic frequency and sentiment shifts to the social constructivist image formation dimensions themselves directly. In so doing, the analysis echoes that the Russian special military operation was the primary driver behind the reorienting of media representations, paying homage to the fact that the other drivers (e.g., economic relations or historical stereotypes) exist but in the background.

Operational Definition
Theme

The report themes are divided into four categories: politics, economics, culture and society (the subcategories under the major categories have been classified and counted in the Factiva database.) Political reports include news about China's activities in politics and diplomacy, international relations, law and military, national security, human rights and freedom. Economic reports include news about China's domestic economic policies, international energy investment, stock market trade and other dynamics. Cultural reports include news about the media industry, education and culture, sports and health, natural environment, science and technology, medical care, tourism and meteorology. Social reports include news about social appearances, social events and social problems.

Connotation

Connotative meaning of the articles is based on the connotation of the terms used: positive, negative and neutral. The main way to distinguish the tone is to look at the context and specific meaning of words in the article. Words that praise China's policies and practices are commendatory words; words

that criticize the Chinese government or may cause obvious distortion or misunderstanding of the audience's understanding of China's image, as well as words that may cause unfavorable associations, are classified as derogatory words; other objective declarative words without any commendatory or derogatory color are classified as neutral words.

Overall tendency

The overall tendency of an article is determined by the prevalence of lexemes carrying negative, neutral, or positive connotations, which is a common approach in content analysis to assess the tone of media coverage (Neuendorf, 2017). This classification system provides a structured approach to understanding the tone of the media coverage, which is crucial for analyzing the portrayal of China's image in The Times during the Russian special military operation.

This method of classification allows for a nuanced understanding of how different articles contribute to the overall narrative and sentiment surrounding China's image in the context of international crises. By categorizing articles based on tone, this study can provide insights into the media's role in shaping public perception and inform strategic communication efforts (Hall et al., 2024).

Analytic Process

The contingency table was constructed in SPSS with themes as row variables and reporting tendencies as column variables to observe the frequency distribution between different themes and reporting tendencies. A chi-square test was conducted on the contingency table data to assess the independence between themes and reporting tendencies. The chi-square value, degrees of freedom, progressive significance (two-tailed), and Monte Carlo significance (two-tailed) were calculated.

Data extraction for the years 2022 and 2023 from the dataset included variables such as themes, frequency, and tendency. The dataset encompasses multiple topic categories (e.g., politics, economy, culture, society) and their corresponding reporting tendencies (negative, neutral, positive).

Hierarchical clustering was employed to explore the relationship between different themes and their associated article lengths. In DeCoster'guidence (2004), hierarchical clustering is a statistical method that allows us to group data points (In this case, articles on different themes) based on their characteristics, revealing the underlying structure of the data. Ward's linkage method, a type of hierarchical clustering that enables us to observe the hierarchical relationships between data points, thus understanding how different themes cluster together.

Results

Comparison of frequency in the themes

From the Fig.1 and Fig.2, we can see shifts in media coverage across various themes. In the domain of Politics, the frequency of articles related to Military sphere saw a decrease from 154 in 2022 to 87 in 2023, indicating a reduced focus on military affairs. Notably, the theme of Diplomatic relations emerged as a significant focus in 2023 with 221 articles, which was not present in 2022, suggesting a heightened emphasis on international diplomacy.

Within the Economic sphere, there was a consistent decline in the frequency of articles across most subthemes. Economic sanctions and Economic conditions both experienced a decrease, with 28 and 20 articles in 2022 dropping to 24 and 16 in 2023, respectively. Similarly, the coverage of Trade barriers and Trade communication saw a marked reduction, aligning with a broader trend of decreased economic reporting.

In the realm of Culture, the frequency of Sports articles decreased significantly from 11 in 2022 to 4 in 2023, while Universities saw a slight increase from 12 to 6 articles over the same period. This shift may reflect changes in cultural interests or priorities.

Within the Society category, the coverage of Celebrities remained relatively stable, with a modest decrease from 10 articles in 2022 to 7 in 2023. Conversely, Social comments made their first appearance in 2023 with 7 articles, indicating a new area of societal focus.

Overall, the comparative analysis of thematic frequencies between 2022 and 2023 highlights a dynamic media landscape, with certain areas such as diplomacy and social commentary gaining traction, while traditional focuses like military affairs and economic issues experienced a decline in coverage. These trends provide valuable insights into the evolving priorities of news reporting and may be indicative of broader geopolitical and social shifts.

The relation between themes and tendency

For the tendency, as aforementioned, it was divided into positive, neutral and negative. Here we use VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner) as the source of lexemes, which is a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool that is particularly attuned to sentiments expressed in social media. It is fully open-source and follows an MIT license, making it accessible for a wide range of applications (Hutto, C., & Gilbert, E., 2014). For example, positive connotation was represented by the following lexemes: great, good, love, amazing, happy etc. Negative connotation was represented by such lexemes as horrible, terrible, bad, failure, annoying etc.

According to the list of lexemes, we can get the tendency of reports in each theme as aforementioned.

Within the topic Politics the following example demonstrates the positive tendency:

Lin has also attended events in Britain where he praised the CCP and its political goals. An October 2019 event to mark the launch of the British Fujian Association was attended by two Conservative MPs, an official from the Chinese embassy and a UFWD official from Fujian province. Lin, the president of the association, gave a speech and was reported by Chinese media to have praised the Chinese tradition of "love the country, love the hometown, dare to fight and win" and the role the overseas Chinese community could play in actively promoting "the development of the motherland and hometown".

At the same event, the deputy minister for the UFWD in Fujian province heralded the work of overseas Chinese citizens in supporting the country's goals, including reclaiming Taiwan. He said they had made "positive contributions to supporting the construction and development of the motherland, promoting the reunification of the motherland, and promoting the spirit of the Chinese nation", according to a Chinese-language news report. (The Times, 2023.04.19)

Within the topic Economics the following example demonstrates the negative tendency.

China's domination of international shipping and control of key European ports would enable it to choke global trade in the event of a conflict with the West over Taiwan, an EU research paper has warned.

The paper, which draws on Chinese government documents, found that "there is a growing politicisation and militarisation of China's civilian maritime sector" at a time of heightened geopolitical tensions.

Professor Jonathan Holslag of the Brussels VUB university and the Belgian Royal Higher Institute for Defence warned about the complexity of the current situation in Europe: "It is crucial for Europe's security and prosperity to critically evaluate this vulnerability," said he in the paper (Times, 2022.12.26).

The overall tendency has been summarized and presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1

Overall tendency of themes in 2022 and 2023

Theme	Subthemes	Frequency (2022)	Tendency (2022)	Frequency (2023)	Tendency (2023)
Politics	Military	154	Negative	87	Negative
Politics	Troops/Diplomatic relations in 2023	97	Negative	221	Neutral
Economic	Economic sanctions	28	Negative	24	Negative
Economic	Economic conditions	20	Neutral	16	Positive
Economic	Trade barriers	17	Negative	5	Negative
Economic	Trade communication	15	Positive	4	Positive
Culture	Sports	11	Neutral	4	Positive
Culture	Universities	12	Neutral	6	Positive
Society	Celebrities	10	Neutral	7	Neutral

Expected Frequency Calculation

Ensuring that the expected frequency in each cell was at least 5 to meet the basic requirements for the chi-square test, it was found that 3792 cells (97.5%) had expected counts greater than 5, with the minimum expected count being 4.05 for 2022 and 4.61 for 2023.

The results of the chi-square test, including the chi-square value, p-value, and confidence interval, were analyzed to determine if there is a statistically significant association between themes and reporting tendencies. The results obtained presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2

Chi-Square Test (Themes and Tendency) from 2022 to 2023

Chi-Square Test (Themes and Tendency) for 2022						
	Value	**Degrees of Freedom**	**Progressive Significance (Two-tailed)**	**Monte Carlo Significance (Two-tailed)**		
				Significance	**99 % Confidence Interval**	
					Lower limit	**Upper limit**
Pearson Chi-Square	10.560[a]	3	0.015	0.0150[b]	0.002	0.030
Likelihood Ratio	9.871	3	0.026	0.0220	0.001	0.004
Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test	11.239			0.0130[b]	0.000	0.000
Valid Cases	993					
a. 3792 cells (97.5 %) have expected counts greater than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.05.						
b. Based on 100,000 sampling tables, with a starting seed of 126474071.						

Chi-Square Test (Themes and Tendency) for 2023

	Value	**Degrees of Freedom**	**Progressive Significance (Two-tailed)**	**Monte Carlo Significance (Two-tailed)**		
				Significance	**99 % Confidence Interval**	
					Lower limit	**Upper limit**
Pearson Chi-Square	15.230[a]	3	0.000	.020[b]	0.001	0.004
Likelihood Ratio	12.348	3	0.006	.080[b]	0.060	0.060
Fisher-Freeman-Halton Exact Test	14.562			.040[b]	0.003	0.005
Valid Cases	993					
a. 3792 cells (97.5 %) have expected counts greater than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.61.						
b. Based on 100,000 sampling tables, with a starting seed of 1201225993.						

The chi-square test results for both 2022 and 2023 showed p-values less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant association between themes and reporting tendencies (DeCoster, J., & Claypool, H. M., 2004). This suggests that reporting tendencies are not randomly distributed but are influenced by the category of the theme.

The chi-square value for 2023 (15.230) was higher than for 2022 (10.560), implying a potentially stronger association between themes and reporting tendencies in 2023.

The majority of cells had expected frequencies above 5, ensuring the reliability of the chi-square test results.

Monte Carlo significance was calculated using a specific seed value, which should be included in the analytic process. The Monte Carlo simulation results further supported the findings from the chi-square test. The results were based on 100,000 samplings, with starting seeds of 126474071(for 2022) and 1201225993(for 2023), ensuring the randomness of the simulation and the reliability of the results. The setting of seed values in Monte Carlo simulations is crucial for ensuring the reproducibility and stability of the results, allowing for consistent sequences of random numbers across different time points or studies, thus making the research findings comparable. The 99% confidence intervals indicate that there is 99% confidence that the true p-values lie within the calculated ranges, further supporting the conclusion of statistical significance.

The Monte Carlo significance results were consistent with the chi-square test results, further validating the statistical significance. The Monte Carlo significance (two-tailed) for 2022 was 0.015b, and for 2023, it was 0.020b, indicating that in both cases, the association between themes and reporting tendencies was statistically significant. Combining the chi-square test and Monte Carlo simulation data, we may infer that the association between themes and reporting trends is statistically significant and consistent over two years.

In summary, the research findings reveal that there are significant disparities in reporting frequencies across a large number of themes in both 2022 and 2023, which are statistically significant. This might mean that the media uses various strategies when covering different issues or that the public has different reactions towards the coverage of various themes. These findings are important for understanding media reporting patterns and dynamics and may have implications for media practice and public policy.

The relation between themes and articles' length

The hierarchical clustering analysis of the data from 2022 and 2024 yielded the following clustering results (*Fig. 3* and *Fig. 4*):
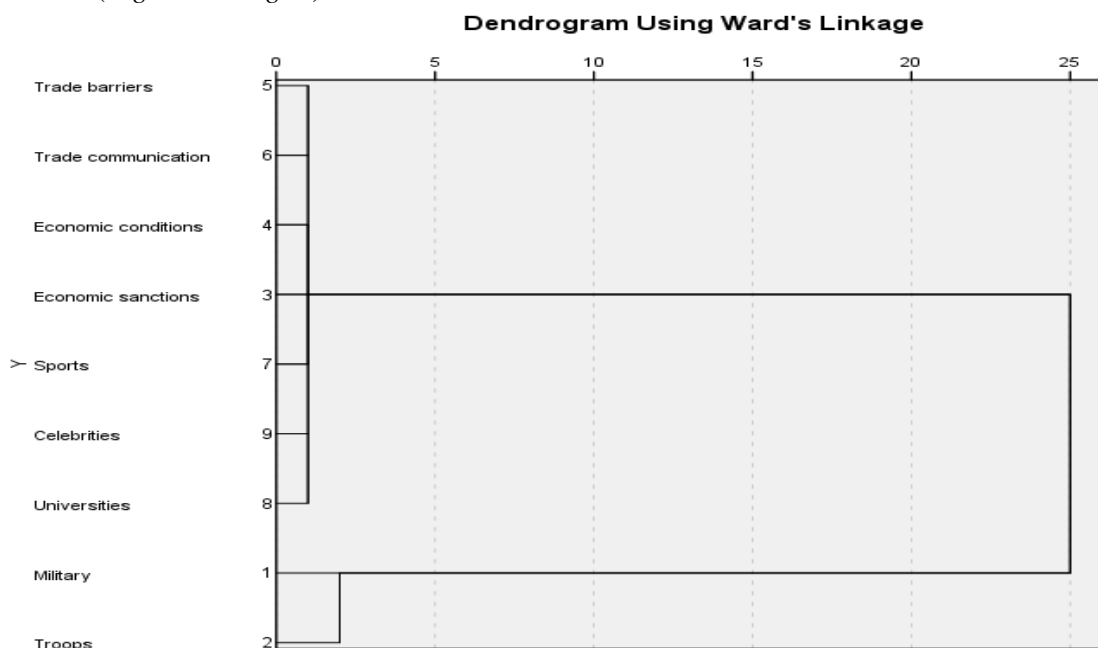

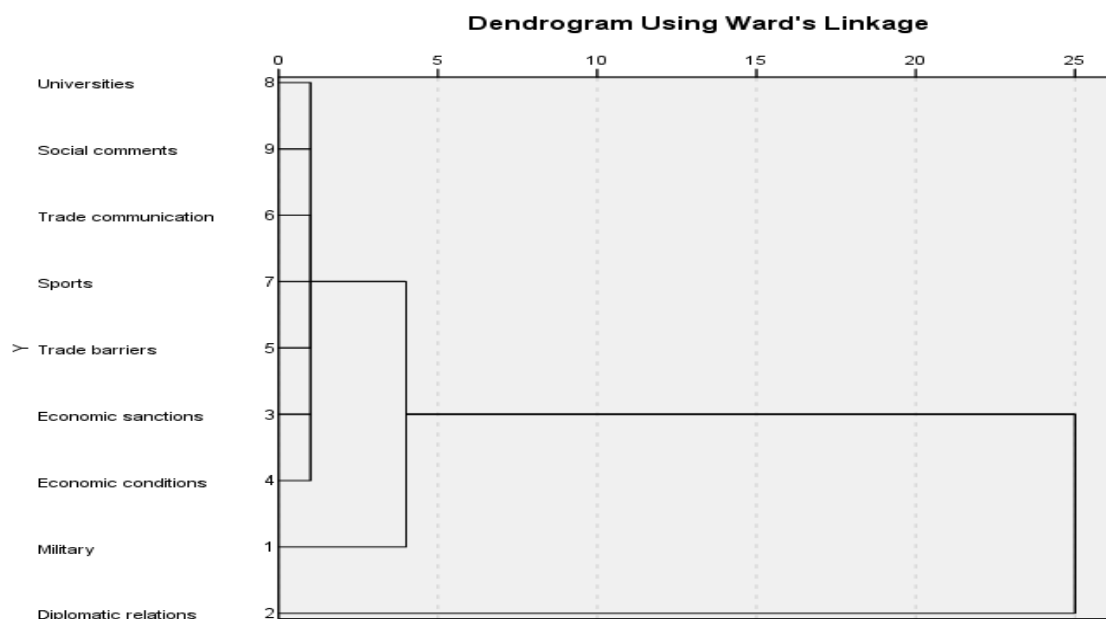**Fig. 3. Dendrogram using Ward's linkage of 2022**

Fig. 4. Dendrogram using Ward's linkage of 2023

According to the clustering study, in 2022, The Times' coverage of China during the Russia special military operation was mostly focused on political and military issues. There was a lot of long-form journalism, with numerous stories over 1000 words. This in-depth coverage was critical for understanding the intricate dynamics of China's political and military posture. The length of these studies reflected the strong worldwide interest in comprehending China's role in the operation. Economic topics such as sanctions and trade barriers were also handled, but to a lesser extent than political and military issues. Cultural and social issues got little attention, indicating that they were not the primary focus of the operation's early stages.

The focus altered as we moved toward 2023. Political themes persisted, but there was a dramatic decline in military coverage. This trend may indicate a shift in international attention away from actual military actions and toward diplomatic and political efforts to resolve the operation. Economic coverage, particularly of sanctions and trade restrictions, has expanded dramatically. This highlights the growing concern over the long-term economic impacts of the Special military operation and China's influential role in these areas. The nature of the articles also shifted towards shorter pieces, under 500 words, signaling a need for more immediate and frequent updates as the operation continued. Cultural and social topics saw a slight increase in coverage, possibly due to the prolonged nature of the special military operation leading to greater consideration of its broader societal impacts.

Comparing these two years, we see a clear transition from detailed, long-form analysis in 2022, driven by the immediate complexities of the operation, to shorter, more frequent updates in 2023 as the operation dragged on. The shift in themes from military to political and economic topics reflects changes in the operation's dynamics and international focus. These adjustments in coverage likely respond to evolving reader interests and the changing global situation. The reduction in long-form military reports and the increase in short, real-time economic updates highlight a strategic shift in media reporting to match the ongoing developments and public interest in the Russian Special military operation and China's role in it.

Discussion

The 2-year analysis of The Times' coverage of China during the Russian special military operation revealed a complex interplay of geopolitical dynamics, historical narratives, and contemporary diplomatic relations. It exposes a notable reorientation of The Times' narrative on China in the years following Russia's Special military operation. Though additional elements like historical depictions and economic policies are existed, the main change in themes and sentiment clearly relates with the conflict era. According to the statistics, media framing becomes more intense and more drastically rearranges national images amid geopolitical crises. This confirms that the Russian Special military operation played a decisive role in shaping British media's portrayal of China, evidencing a strategic use of conflict narratives to underscore specific political and diplomatic dimensions.

But the portrayal of China's image was not uniformly positive or negative, indicating a multifaceted media representation. This finding contrasts with popular perceptions that might suggest a straightforward increase in negative portrayal of China with international crises, for example, in the COVID period, China being stigmatized (Balakina, 2023). It also diverges from research that has reported increased incidence of negative reporting during periods of high tension or conflict: the media hardly gave any hope for the best, broadcasting intensely and negatively (Starosta et al., 2020). Instead, our study indicates a more nuanced media landscape where the Times has balanced critical perspectives with acknowledgments of China's diplomatic efforts and its role in global communications.

We recognize that this analysis may not fully account for potential biases in media reporting or the impact of exogenous events such as changes in conflict or policy coverage. These variables could be confounding and impact how we interpret our results. Even though we feel that these constraints had not impacted the overall result of the study significantly, future studies might be aided by having greater controls or following a longitudinal approach to examine media representation over a period of time. Future studies might also study the impact of social media and the role of individual journalists in portraying China's image.

This research has significant implications for media representation scholarship, particularly its capacity to influence public opinion and guide strategic communication campaigns. The Times' nuanced coverage of China illustrates the efficacy of media framing as a tool for guiding global discourse and influencing policy formulation.

This research adds value to the field through its systematic investigation of a premier media institution's coverage of China at a critical global juncture. It provides a comprehensive outlook which can be utilized for enhancing academic discussion, in addition to informing practical work within media and public diplomacy. The research held emphasizes the importance of considering complexities of media representations in order to shift successfully between image management at a global level.

Conclusion

The present research aimed at analyzing the coverage of China in The Times amid the Russian Special military operation, focusing specifically on what this means for media portrayal, international diplomacy, and management of China's image. Content analysis of reports released by The Times from February 24, 2022, to January 1, 2024, offers valuable information on the storylines created around China's involvement and actions pertaining to the conflict, along with addressing the concerned research questions.

RQ1: How does The Times present China's image in the context of the Russian Special military operation?

The Times has built up a picture of China derived from an informed combination of geopolitical reality, historical accounts, and contemporary diplomatic moves. This picture has been shaped by China's impartial stance and diplomatic overtures, which have evoked responses that range from acceptance to suspicion. The reporting has vacillated between highlighting China's role as a potential mediator and criticizing its position regarding international sanctions.

RQ2: What are the primary themes and narratives emerging from The Times' coverage of China over this period?

The prevailing themes and motifs that have been recognized are China's diplomatic neutrality policy, economic cooperation between China, Russia, and Ukraine, and the implications of the special military operation on China's foreign relations. China's push for peace and diplomacy, possible role in mediating the operation, and response to foreign criticisms have been reported on by The Times. These stories highlight the complex nature of China's public image and the difficulty it encounters in maintaining its international reputation.

RQ3: How do these narratives reflect or contradict current perceptions of China's role in international crises?

These assessments offered by The Times both validate and test the prevalent views about China's status within the international order. They identify the growing relevance of China and its search for impartiality as being consistent with the entrenched maxims of Chinese foreign policy (www.gov.cn, 2023). At the same time, these assessments also interrogate this depiction by exploring China's adherence to global norms in international law, notably sanctions and interventions by the military.

RQ4: How do these media depictions affect China's international reputation management and strategic communication efforts?

The imbalance pointed out by The Times has significant implications for China's strategy in forming the views that others have or wish to have about it within the international community. Positive impacts from the nation's diplomatic efforts and economic growth may make the nation better known as a positive participant within the global community. Negative implications from China's reactions to sanctions and naval operations would negatively influence the reputation. That means China's strategic communication must go further than just creating strategic messages and include the operational practice in programs that ensure that China's global reputation effectively addresses complex global issues.

In conclusion, the study has demonstrated that The Times' portrayal of China during the Russian Special military operation is multifaceted, shaped by a range of narratives that reflect both China's strategic interests and the international community's expectations. While secondary influences such as economic relationships and long-standing stereotypes are briefly acknowledged, the analysis firmly establishes that the conflict catalyzed significant changes in the media portrayal of China. Grounded in social constructivism, the findings underscore how the concepts of image, identity, and mediatization of politics are instrumental in understanding these shifts: in The Times' coverage of China from a predominant focus on military and political themes in 2022 to increased attention on diplomatic and economic issues in 2023. The portrayal of China in 2022 was largely negative, emphasizing its strategic and military actions. However, by 2023, the coverage became more balanced, highlighting China's diplomatic efforts and economic conditions.

This shift in media focus reflects broader geopolitical dynamics and suggests that China's international image is complex and evolving (Zhang, L., 2016). The study underscores the importance of proactive media engagement and strategic communication for China to manage its international reputation effectively. By understanding these media narratives, China can better navigate its role on the global stage and influence public perception in its favor (Ni, Y., 2024). These findings contribute to the broader discourse on media representation and international relations, offering insights into how media framing can shape public perception and inform strategic communication efforts. The results underscore the importance of a nuanced understanding of media portrayals for effective image management on the global stage. Contribution to the Field:

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ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ОБРАЗА КИТАЯ В БРИТАНСКИХ СМИ В УСЛОВИЯХ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ КРИЗИСОВ: НА ПРИМЕРЕ ГАЗЕТЫ THE TIMES С ФЕВРАЛЯ 2022 г.

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Аннотация

Международное общество отмечает ряд взаимосвязанных событий, которые влияют на формирование национальных репрезентаций в медиадискурсе. Рассматривается, как газета The Times представляла образ Китая во время глобальных кризисов. Особое внимание уделяется периоду после начала Россией специальной военной операции 24 февраля 2022 г. Хотя этот период является ключевым контекстом, в исследовании учитываются и другие факторы, такие как колебания в экономических отношениях, изменения в руководстве страны и текущие исторические репрезентации. Используя контент-анализ в сочетании со статистическим анализом с помощью программы SPSS, автор исследования определяет доминирующие нарративы, темы и основные предубеждения в материалах СМИ. С позиций социального конструктивизма в исследовании подчеркивается важность имиджа, идентичности и медиатизации политических пристрастий. Полученные результаты углубляют понимание репрезентации СМИ и ее последствий для мониторинга международного имиджа Китая.

Ключевые слова: имидж Китая; The Times; эмпирический анализ; контент-анализ; SPSS; международный кризис; медиафрейминг.