Framing China’s Corruption: A Content Analysis of Coverage on New York Times from 2006 to 2015

YUAN LE and GAO-JIE TIAN

ABSTRACT

The study tries to map the coverage of China’s corruption on New York Times in the past ten years (2006-2015), aiming to explore how did western media portray China by varied framing strategies. It is found that NYT paid increasing attention to the issue of China’s corruption and the valence of news reports tended to be less negative since the 18th Party Congress in 2012. However, the results also indicate no substantial difference varied by time in the application of framing strategies. Ideological and social/economic frames are still the two main attributive ways contributing to negative coverage of corruption issue. The findings suggest the dynamic and stubborn nature of media bias.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

China’s Image and Coverage of Western Media

Generally speaking, China’s national image is always associated with the foreign media coverage, particularly the mainstream western media. But what and how the media shape a state image is not only restricted by the strength of media self, but is also dominated by interest relationship and ideology [1]. As to China’s media image, lots of previous studies indicate the negative portrait and obviously ideological bias of western media. As Qiao pointed out, American media is “reporting China for the U.S.”, and their reports exist politicization and domestication [2]. However, with the rise of China’s economy and status in the international society, there are some emerging evidences suggesting somewhat improvements of China’s negative image. Zhang’s study argued that the New York Times breakthroughs stereotypes to some extent [3]. We assumed that the ideological bias of western media is more sensitive to the political issues, such as official corruptions and anti-corruption campaign. Therefore, the study is intent to answer the question that:

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RQ1: How did mainstream western media report China’s corruption issue in the past ten years?

Framing China’s Corruption: Theories and Related Studies

The construction of national image is always associated with the framing strategies of media coverage. Goffman defined frame as a cognitive structure that people use to understand and explain the social life experience. It enables people to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” events or information \cite{4}. Giltlin put forward a more clear definition—frame is a criterion used to select, emphasize and express about what exists, what happens and what the significance is \cite{5}. In terms of routine journalistic practice, previous studies had confirmed that ideology, social system, professional concept, news norms, work routine, organization criterion and journalist’s personal ideology etc will to what extent influence the formation of news frame \cite{6}\cite{7}.

The study presumes that political issues in China are more sensitive to the portrait of western media, such as China’s corruption or anti-corruption campaign, but few systematic studies have been done. A related research of Spanish media coverage of 18th party congress found that corruption issue is repeatedly mentioned, emphasized and is used to distract audience’s attention \cite{8}. Another research has found that the coverage of reform, anti-corruption and leadership transition by western media occupy the top three issues in shaping the perception of Chinese leader’s image \cite{9}. Therefore, it is worthy of examining the changing trend of western media coverage and the potential factors may influence the frame adoption. We continue to propose the following question:

RQ2: How did the application of framing strategies and attitudes of western media coverage are associated with the time variation marked by China’s anti-corruption campaign?

METHOD

The study selects *New York Times*, one of the typical mainstream western media, as research objective. We adopt content analysis as instrument and the sampling frame is the news coverage relating to China’s corruption from January 1st 2006 to December 31th 2015.

The key variables include the coverage amount, news frame and valence toward China. The valence is categorized as positive, negative and neutral according to Mousa’s classification criterion \cite{10}, and the categories of news frame are operationalized as Table I:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News frame</th>
<th>Operational definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>executive</td>
<td>Relate to Disciplines, regulations and execution of anticorruption, as well as the investigation, trial and sentence to corrupt officials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological</td>
<td>Relate to China’s political democracy, political system, free speech, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan</td>
<td>Relate to clan conflicts inside the CPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial</td>
<td>Relate to judicial problems of trial on anticorruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Economic</td>
<td>Relate to Social conflicts triggered by corruption, or the impact of corruption/anticorruption on Chinese economic development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DATA ANALYSIS

Increasing Attention to China’s Corruption

The statistical data display an increase of NYT coverage amount of China’s corruption in the past ten years, and reach the peak in the year of 2013 (see Fig.1). The word count of articles also show the same trend (see Fig.2). The results suggest the more attention has been paid by western media on the issue of corruption, in particular after 2012 when the anti-corruption campaign proposed in the 18th Party Congress.

Frame Strategies Unchanged but Less Negative

As Table II shows, there is no significant change of frame distribution before or after the anti-corruption campaign triggered in 2012 \(\chi^2 = 7.713, \text{df}=4, \text{p}=0.103\). Although the proportion of executive frame slightly rose (from 27.53% to 46.91%) and social/economic frame fell (from 30.3% to 17.28%) after the 18th Party Congress, ideological attribution and the former two frames are always the top3 strategies to framing the corruption issue.

However, the results indicate a significant difference of coverage valence between before and after 18th party congress \(\chi^2 = 6.954, \text{df}=2, \text{P}=0.031\), which means a tendency of less negative attitude to portray China’s corruption (see Table III). The Negative attitude declined (from 65.22% to 44.44%) and both increase of neutral (from 27.54% to 39.51%) and positive coverage (from 7.25% to 16.05%).
Ideological and Social/Economic Frames Affect the Coverage Valence

By testing the association between news frame and coverage valence, we found that the application of both ideological frame and social/economic frame affect the attitudes of articles toward China (see Table IV and Table V).

The results indicate that when the ideological frame was applied, the negative attitude rose (from 40.66% to 74.57%) and the neutral stance declined (47.25% to 13.56%). This ideological frame strategy is effective to shape the negative meaning of China’s corruption issue ($\chi^2=19.578$, df=2, p<0.01).

The other social/economic frame strategy is also associated with coverage valence, and leads to the rise of negative (from 7.84% to 14.14%) attitude and fall of the neutral (from 43.43% to 15.69%) and positive (from 14.14% to 7.84%) portray. The results suggest the social/economic attribution is an important strategy to framing China’s corruption negatively.

Table IV. ASSOCIATION BETWEEN VALENCE AND IDEOLOGICAL FRAME.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame Strategy</th>
<th>Valence</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological frame is applied</td>
<td>44(74.57%)</td>
<td>8(13.56%)</td>
<td>7(11.86%)</td>
<td>59(100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological frame is not applied</td>
<td>37(40.66%)</td>
<td>43(47.25%)</td>
<td>11(12.09%)</td>
<td>91(100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

($\chi^2=19.578$, df=2, p<0.01)

Table V. ASSOCIATION BETWEEN VALENCE AND SOCIAL/ECONOMIC FRAME.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame Strategy</th>
<th>Valence</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Economic frame is applied</td>
<td>39(76.47%)</td>
<td>8(15.69%)</td>
<td>4(7.84%)</td>
<td>51(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Economic frame is not applied</td>
<td>42(42.42%)</td>
<td>43(43.43%)</td>
<td>14(14.14%)</td>
<td>99(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

($\chi^2=15.961$, df=2, p<0.01)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By mapping the overall picture of NYT coverage of China’s corruption, we draw the conclusion that the western media do have the tendency to be less negatively portrayed China, but there is no substantial change in the application of framing strategies.

The study uncovers the modification of attitudes and constant attributive strategies of NYT in framing China’s corruption. On the one hand, the importance of China in the globalized economy and international society, arose western media pay increasingly attention to the issues and events happened in China, including the issue of corruption and the anti-corruption campaign in recent years. As the evidence supported, the event of 18th Party Congress and the determination of new leadership on anticorruption do improve the China’s image in western media. On the other hand, the mechanism of framing China does not substantially change. Ideological and social/economic framing strategies are always contributed to bias of western media. As Tsang pointed out, the frame is the main source of people’s ideology or stereotype that limits subjective cognition of the world and then produces bias, although the positive meaning of frame is to assist people to think or organize information [11]. Therefore, it is stubborn for the western media to go
beyond the ideological bias, and the considerable improvement of China’s media image still takes time.

As to the issue of corruption, the effectiveness of social/economic framing strategy reminds us of the destructive nature of corruption itself. When most of the social and economic problems are easily to attribute to corruption, not only the authority is more likely to be challenged and degraded, but also some sever social problems are buried by chaos of public opinions. Western media prefer to apply this social/economic frame to coverage China’s corruption for this attribution is much easier to be connected to the higher ideological pursuits, such as institutional reform in politics. To uncover the process and mechanism of meaning production and the larger social context embedded in, a deeper discourse analysis is indispensible.

REFERENCES