# Research on the Changes in China's Image in the UK from the Perspective of Appraisal System—Based on the News Coverage of Beijing Olympics by Mainstream British Media

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*Abstract:* After Beijing became the world's first city to host both the Summer and Winter Olympics, China's response to this "public opinion battle" in the Olympics has been reflected to some extent through the reporting of major Western media. Using the theory of appraisal system, this project selected the dual Olympics coverage by two mainstream British media outlets, BBC and Reuters, and utilized Factiva news database and AntConc corpus to quantitatively analyze and summarize their narrative patterns and practical paths. It analyzes China's image and changes in the mainstream media in the UK and sets a framework for future external propaganda, leveraging the residual heat of the Olympic communication window to effectively construct a new national image of China in a new era.

*Keywords:* Appraisal System; Dual Olympics Coverage; Changes in National Image

## 1. Introduction

After successfully hosting the Summer Olympics in 2008, Beijing presented an unparalleled Winter Olympics event to the world in 2022, making it the first "Dual Olympics City" globally. Although the Olympic Games started as a sports platform, it has gradually evolved into an international forum for discourse, involving various fields such as modern politics, economics, and culture. Research analyzing the agenda network characteristics of the Western mainstream media's coverage of the Olympics has found that Western media Olympic coverage is not solely focused on sports events but often emphasizes reporting on the country hosting the Olympics and its political, economic, and social situations. Therefore, Western media Olympic coverage significantly influences China's national image presentation.

Since the successful hosting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, scholars at home and abroad have been paying attention to the impact of Olympic-related media coverage on national image building. Domestic research has mainly focused on the publicity methods used by Chinese media to shape the country's international image during the Olympics. Chen Lijiang (2016) built on three language corpora of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the London Olympics in 2012, and the Rio Olympics in 2016, and used corpus linguistics analysis tool, Keywords, to analyze the presenting characteristics and changing trends of China's national image (such as sports powerhouse image, ethnic image, athlete image, and government image) in the British media. At the same time, most studies on British media coverage of China are conducted by scholars in China. Based on their research content, such studies can be divided into three categories: the first category focuses on the China-related coverage of one or more media outlets during a certain period, such as Jiang Heping's (1998) analysis of The Times, Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, and Financial Times in "The Image of China in the British Media"; the second category focuses on a specific perspective, such as Wang Feng and Liu Xueqin's (2013) examination of the Western media environment related to the "second largest economic entity" from February 2011 to March 2013; and the third category focuses on specific cases, such as Li Pingping's (2011) analysis of how The Times' coverage of China during the Beijing Olympics in 2008 tended to be depoliticized, with political coverage reduced and economic coverage dominating.

As can be seen from the above, there is a lack of research on the comparison of British media's coverage of China at different time periods, especially the selection of two Olympic Games as time nodes. There is a lack of attention to the significant external publicity window of the Olympics. Based on the current research status, this study intends to select news reports on the Beijing

Summer Olympics and Winter Olympics from British mainstream media, and use Factiva, a news database, and AntConc, a corpus analysis tool, to analyze the positioning and perception of China's national image. At the same time, combined with the evaluation system theory, the study aims to reveal the attitude of the British media in Olympic-related coverage and explore the way in which their attitude and stance are constructed.

# 2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This article is based on Appraisal Systems theory for evaluation. Australian linguist James R. Martin established Appraisal Systems theory in the 1990s. It focuses on the attitudes, positions, and expression methods negotiated by language users in discourse (Hu Zhuanglin, 2009). Appraisal Systems theory includes three semantic systems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. These systems can explore the emotional attitude, emotional intensity, value orientation, and other aspects of discourse.

The Attitude system includes three subsystems: Affective, Judgement, and Appreciation. The Affective subsystem divides human emotions into positive or negative, and considers their expression methods, triggering mechanisms, intensity, subjectivity, and specific content. The Judgement system includes Social Esteem and Social Sanction. In short, the former is based on morality, while the latter is based on law. The Appreciation subsystem focuses on the response, the composition, and the value. (Martin & White，2005)

This article examines news discourse and explores the attitudes presented by the mainstream British media, BBC and Reuters, in their news reports on the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics respectively. It analyzes their positioning and recognition of China's national image, and compares the two reports from different perspectives to analyze the "static" situation of China's image in the UK and innovatively derive its "dynamic" changes. The aim is to provide some reference and inspiration for China's future external propaganda strategy.

## 2.2 Research Tools

This paper takes the perspective of Appraisal Theory and analyzes and compares the attitudes and positions of the mainstream British media through the discourse of news reports on the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, in order to explore the changes in the image of China in the mainstream British media.

Using literature review and comparative research methods, on the one hand, Factiva News Database is used as the source of information retrieval, and AntConc corpus analysis tool is used for corpus analysis, combining Appraisal Theory with sports news discourse to study national image through sports news reporting. On the other hand, taking the double Olympics in China as two time nodes, the changes in the image of China in the mainstream British media are analyzed and studied.

## 2.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This article uses Factiva News database to select 1543 pieces of BBC News language data and 572 pieces of Reuters language data on the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and selects 317 pieces of BBC News language data and 1128 pieces of Reuters News language data on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

After manually screening and verifying the corpus, 467 BBC materials and 126 Reuters materials related to the 2008 Beijing Olympics were analyzed from the perspectives of five aspects. For the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, 72 BBC materials and 268 Reuters materials were collected, and then further manually screened and compared from the Double Olympics perspective, assisted by AntConc corpus analysis tool. Finally, 171 BBC materials and 246 Reuters materials met the screening criteria. The corpus analysis was conducted under the guidance of systematic theoretical evaluation, and the positive, negative, and neutral reporting tonalities of the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Table1) and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Table2) were obtained.

Table 1 The proportion of tone in various attitude reports of 2008

| Attitude | Proportion（%） |
|----------|----------------|
| Positive | 65.9 |
| Negative | 14.9 |
| Neutral | 19.2 |

Table 2 The proportion of tone in various attitude reports for 2022

| Attitude | Proportion（%） |
|---|---|
| Positive | 56.9 |
| Negative | 31.3 |
| Neutral | 11.8 |

Using the AntConc corpus tool for data statistics, the main keywords were counted from five perspectives: economic image, cultural image, government image, technological image, and personal image. This resulted in the image issues of the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Table3) and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Table4).

Table 3 Image issues for 2008

| Perspectives | Main keywords |
|---|---|
| Economic image | market, profit, venues, company, stadium, economic, sales, advertising, gymnasium |
| Cultural image | spirit, ceremony, peace, culture, freedom, civilization, community, director, food |
| Government image | news, security, committee, government, report, success, media, hosting, preparations |
| Technology image | development, satellite, technology, operation, programmer, network, internet, scientific |
| Character image | athletes, volunteers, president, torch, police, safety, protection, rights, health |

Table 4 Image issues for 2022

| Perspectives | Main keywords |
|---|---|
| Economic image | pandemic, speed, health, high, bank, development, steel, market, output, currency, payments |
| Cultural image | opening ceremony, digital, programme, spirit, community, cultural, cooperation |
| Government image | covid, news media, monitoring, committee, city, officials, prevention measures |
| Technology image | venues, bach, app, green, power, efforts, facilities, stadium, energy, technology |
| Character image | athletes, team, president, gold medal, government, organisers, people, participants, Gu Eileen |

The primary issue in using the evaluation system theory to analyze specific language data is to analyze its stance and attitude. By searching for high-frequency words in the AntConc corpus, we can determine some keywords that clearly reflect the attitude, and quickly locate the focus of their attitude through the word clusters formed before and after the word, so as to better analyze the national image through the attitude (Table5, Table6).

Table 5 Obvious attitude words and the clusters for 2008

| Positive | Clusters |
|---|---|
| success | complete success, success China, great success, big success, full success, real success |
| great | great efforts, great success, great importance, great achievements, great opportunity |
| support | support Beijing, firm support, security support, great support, vigorous support |
| good | good job, good treatment, good manners, good luck, good opportunity, good competitive |
| efforts | efforts, great efforts, joint efforts, concerted efforts |
| cooperation | strengthen cooperation, beneficial cooperation, bilateral cooperation, boosting cooperation |
| spirit | cultural spirit, Chinese spirit, fighting spirit |
| Negative | Clusters |
| boycott | boycott Olympics, boycott Beijing, potential boycott, worldwide boycott |
| criticism | criticism human, constructive criticism, sparking criticism, western criticism |
| risk | risk evaluations, risk factors, political risk various risk |

Table 6 Obvious attitude words and the clusters for 2022

| Positive | Clusters |
|---|---|
| support | strong support, active support, offering support, support China, support operations, firm support |
| great | great confidence, great victory, great efforts, great importance, great food, great opportunity |
| high | high speed, high alert, high profile, high definition, high level, high quality |
| positive | positive aspects, positive cases, positive contributions, increasing positive |
| strong | strong support, strong connections, strong economic, strong leadership, |
| best | best athletes, best air, best enjoy, best freestyle, best session |
| Negative | Clusters |
| boycott | diplomatic boycott, olympics boycott, political boycott |
| risk | risk Omicron, high risk, athletes risk, pollution risk |
| corruption | corruption scandals, corruption investigations, rooted corruption |

# 3. 3. Analysis of China's National Image in British Mainstream Media's News Coverage of Two Beijing Olympics

## 3.1 Economic Image

After the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China's economic image in the UK has seen a significant improvement overall. Based on the relevant reports from BBC and Reuters, many reports quote other authoritative media to directly praise China's rapid economic development, reflecting that China's strong economic strength can provide a guarantee for the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics.

In addition, after 2008, the level of economic globalization has further deepened, and China's economic strength has steadily increased over the past decade, with China occupying an increasingly important position in the international community. Therefore, the reports on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics also pay attention to China's growing economic strength. Overall, after the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, China's national image in the UK is increasingly matched with its status as a great power, mainly reflected in the impact that China can bring to the world economic structure.

## 3.2 Cultural Image

After the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China's cultural image made significant progress in the UK, attracting the attention of many media outlets with its profound cultural heritage. From the design of the emblem, souvenirs, mascot, torch, and the performance on the opening ceremony stage, every detail of the Olympics allowed Western media to see the charm of China's long-standing culture and experience its rich historical heritage.

In contrast, the coverage of China's cultural image in the related reports of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics focuses more on China's mascot Bing Dwen Dwen, Chinese food, and Chinese national spirit. The popularity of Bing Dwen Dwen reflects the world's love for Chinese culture and also shows China's progress in cultural export.

At the same time, various delicious Chinese foods also gained popularity. During the Olympics, videos of foreign athletes enjoying Chinese food went viral on the internet, and in mainstream British media reports, some foreign athletes' objective evaluations were quoted, some of whom liked Chinese and Asian-flavored dishes and thought the food tasted good. Overall, the emotional attitudes towards China's cultural coverage in the British media are both positive and negative. This is partly a natural result of cultural exchange, fusion, and collision, but also indicates that there is still much room for China to explore in building its cultural image.

## 3.3 Government Image

The UK media's coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympics had many positive affirmations of the efforts made by the Chinese government in areas such as education, climate protection, environmental protection, security, Olympic preparations, and anti-corruption work, reflecting the image of a responsible, ethical, and accountable Chinese government.

However, reports involving China's freedom of speech, food safety, and other aspects have had a more serious negative impact on the Chinese government's image. Due to China's rapid development, there are more and more voices trying to tarnish and question it. The successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics demonstrated the strength of the Chinese government to Western countries, but they still maintain a skeptical attitude. The government is inevitably linked to politics, and different political systems and ideologies in different countries make it difficult for China's government image to be entirely positive in other countries.

The UK media's coverage of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics similarly praised the efforts made by the Chinese government in environmental protection, Olympic preparations, and other areas. However, unlike 2008, the 2022 Winter Olympics faced the challenge of epidemic prevention and control. In summary, after the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the Chinese government still faces international questioning, but its image in the UK overall is positive.

## 3.4 Technology Image

Numerous reports have highlighted specific venues and technological features, such as the venue structures, energy utilization, and other aspects, with rich and specific content that is objective and accurate. This highlighted Beijing's achievements in urban infrastructure construction and technological innovation, acknowledging the advanced equipment and extensive communication network coverage of the Beijing Subway Line 5, and taking a positive attitude towards its role in relieving urban transportation pressure, improving travel efficiency and comfort for citizens in the future. Overall, China's technological image in the UK was greatly enhanced after the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

In 2022, the relevant reports also specifically focused on the technology of winter sports products, and the report stated that China's technological level had caught up with international standards. At the same time, there are still doubts about China's technological development in the face of ecological sustainability, mainly due to the pressure on water resources brought about by the need for 100% artificially made snow in water-stressed areas. In addition, in 2022, there were more negative reports on internet security. The main report was on a smartphone application used to track and share medical information related to COVID-19 during the Olympics. Overall, China's science and technology image in the UK after the Beijing Winter Olympics is still positive, with information security being a topic of concern for all of humanity, posing greater challenges for China's technology. Meanwhile, with ice and snow technology being a focus of this Olympics, China's technology requirements are also more stringent.

## 3.5 Character Image

The coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympics by the British media mainly focused on athletes, the Chinese people, overseas Chinese, and volunteers. The overall image portrayed was one of unity, friendship, and strong national pride. It is worth noting that the media reports paid particular attention to the contribution of young volunteers to the Beijing Olympics.

However, there were also reports of personnel pushing and injuring incidents during on-site ticket purchases, reflecting the need to strengthen public order and improve the quality of Chinese citizens. Overall, China's image of its people is generally positive, but there is still room for improvement.

Compared with 2008, the news reports about the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022 increased the number of interviews with foreign athletes, emphasizing the high praise given by foreign athletes to China's organizational ability in hosting the Olympics. For example, American freestyle skier Aaron Blunck praised China's hosting of the Winter Olympics as "very good", reflecting recognition of the efforts made by the Chinese government and organizers. Therefore, China's positive and convincing image of its people is more significant than before, and the related reports of the British media reflect a more substantial image of China's people compared to the past.

## 4. Future Publicity Enlightenment

In the future foreign propaganda system, the following points can be considered to leverage the residual heat of the Olympic communication window and effectively construct the image of a new era in China:

Strengthening the influence of news media: In addition to effective publicity on mainstream media such as the BBC and Reuters, China can expand the scope and channels of news coverage, such as cooperating with well-known news websites and social media platforms to convey relevant information to a wider audience. In special circumstances, if the source of the report material is restricted or hindered, the government can flexibly disclose the development of relevant activities and data to provide reportable material for

foreign media. At the same time, China needs to strengthen communication and interaction with the outside world, convey information in an open and transparent manner, and increase the understanding and awareness of China by the outside world.

Strengthening international media cooperation: China can actively engage in international media cooperation, expand its exposure in the international media, and strengthen communication and cooperation with overseas media, allowing more overseas media to report on the real situation in China and enabling more of the international community to understand China. By carrying out cross-border media cooperation and expanding the dissemination of information, the "borrowing boats to go out to sea" and "borrowing mouths to speak" in regional international communication can be fully realized. The Chinese government should not only use mainstream media, but also social media platforms to publish relevant articles or videos explaining policies, explaining the necessity and rationality of relevant policies to domestic and foreign audiences and foreign media, and demonstrating the positive impact of policy implementation.

Emphasizing the Uniqueness and Charm of Chinese Culture: China can also shape its image by emphasizing its cultural uniqueness and charm. In external propaganda, traditional and modern Chinese culture can be highlighted to showcase China's diversity and inclusiveness, attracting more people to pay attention to and understand China. Representative cultural symbols with Chinese characteristics can be promoted globally, such as Chinese painting, Peking Opera, tea culture, and other traditional customs, allowing more people to understand and identify with Chinese culture. China can also promote cultural elements with Chinese characteristics, such as traditional culture, folk culture, and traditional Chinese medicine culture, through cultural output, enabling more people in the international community to understand China's traditional culture and cultural heritage.

Emphasize the construction of national brands: China can strengthen brand construction, promote Chinese brands, and increase the international visibility and reputation of Chinese products. Brands are a powerful means of market competition, but also a competition for culture. Excellent brands have good cultural foundations. When consumers purchase products, they not only choose the product's efficacy and material, but also the product's culture. China should vigorously promote Chinese brands and Chinese manufacturing, and use the Olympic stage to promote and publicize the advantages and disadvantages of Chinese brands and manufacturing, increase consumer recognition of Chinese brand products, and build China's industrial image.

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