



A Critical Discourse Analysis of Traditional Chinese Medicine Reports in US Media in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract— As a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has a history of more than four thousand years. Examining overseas news coverage of TCM can contribute to a better understanding of its international representation and communication. Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model, this study conducts a critical discourse analysis of traditional Chinese medicine coverage in mainstream American media from 2020 to 2022. At the textual level, the high-frequency words show that the focus of the reports is mostly on the effectiveness of TCM. US media use a large number of low-value modal words to convey their attitude towards TCM, which is conducive to building a relatively objective media image, but the selection of relevant components shows its questioning attitude towards traditional Chinese medicine. At the level of discourse practice, the analysis of news sources shows that most of the news sources are specific. However, US media rely more heavily on American scholars, experts, and institutions than on Chinese scholars. In the social practice dimension, the study primarily examines the American social context, revealing various societal factors that influence the mainstream US media's attitude toward TCM. The findings of this study provide meaningful implications for the global dissemination of Chinese traditional culture and the international communication of traditional Chinese medicine.

Keywords— Corpus, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Critical Discourse Analysis, Three-Dimensional Mode, US media



I. INTRODUCTION

As a representative embodiment of China's fine traditional culture, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a time-honored and effective system of medical knowledge and practice that has been passed down for thousands of years. Guided by an understanding of the laws and fundamental order of heaven, earth, and the universe, TCM places human beings within the broader framework of nature in order to examine and address issues of health and disease. As the birthplace of TCM, China has long endeavored to introduce its scientific and cultural traditions to the world. Meanwhile, some countries regard TCM as a form of complementary and alternative medicine, and a number of them have incorporated it into their public health systems. Over the past several decades, TCM has attracted increasing attention worldwide.

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 once again brought TCM into the global spotlight. During this exceptional period, foreign media coverage of TCM played an important role in its international communication. As influential actors in shaping global public opinion, Western mainstream media affect the international community's perceptions, evaluations, and even policy choices concerning TCM through their news reports. For a long time, Western mainstream society has harbored cultural divide, scientific skepticism, and even ideological bias toward TCM. Therefore, by analyzing overseas media reports, this study can provide a better understanding of the discourse systems constructed by foreign media around TCM. An exploration of these discourse systems may offer useful insights and contribute

to the development of more targeted strategies and recommendations for the global communication of TCM.

II. PREVIOUS STUDIES OF TCM-RELATED NEWS REPORTS

A review of the relevant literature shows that scholarly interest in news reports on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has increased in recent years. These studies can be broadly classified into the following three categories.

The first category concerns analyses of Western media coverage of TCM and corresponding communication strategies. Ye Qing and Wu Qing (2015) analyzed the discourse of TCM-related reports in US news media, revealing how American society and the general public understood TCM. Their study found that the safety of Chinese herbal medicine remained a major focus of public concern in the United States.

The second category consists of comparative studies of Chinese and Western media coverage of TCM. Ye et al. (2017) collected reports on cupping therapy published by mainstream English-language media in China and the United States during the Rio Olympic Games and compared the evaluative strategies and orientations adopted in the two countries' coverage of TCM. Zhou Ajian (2017) examined TCM-related reports published between 2005 and 2014 by the English-language edition of People's Daily Online and the British newspaper The Guardian, exploring similarities and differences in reporting focuses and in the semantic prosody of major topics.

The third category focuses on the construction of the media image of TCM. Wang Yue (2022) employed corpus-assisted discourse analysis to investigate the media image of TCM in China Daily's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that the newspaper constructed TCM as a "weapon" by emphasizing its therapeutic efficacy and as a "comrade-in-arms" through discourse concerning its role in overseas pandemic prevention and control. Ge Houwei and Tian Yonglin (2022) built a specialized corpus of English-language TCM reports from China Daily and examined how Chinese official media constructed the image of TCM in the fight against COVID-19.

Overall, research on TCM-related news reports is relatively extensive. However, most previous studies have been conducted from the perspective of journalism and communication, while corpus-based discourse analyses of TCM coverage remain comparatively limited. In addition, relatively few studies have examined how Western media

construct the media image of TCM in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the present study adopts a corpus-assisted approach to conduct a critical discourse analysis of TCM-related news reports in mainstream US media during the pandemic. It attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the linguistic features of these news reports in terms of lexical choice and modality?
2. How to interpret these news reports from the perspective of intertextuality, namely, news sources?
3. What are the social factors that affect the generation of these news reports?

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a text-oriented analytical approach that originated from critical linguistics in the late 1970s. It can be defined as "a shared perspective of linguistics, semiotics, or discourse analysis" (van Dijk, 1993). Through the analysis of written and spoken texts, CDA explores the discursive sources of power, inequality, and prejudice. It critically examines how such discursive structures are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political, and historical contexts. Therefore, the purpose of CDA is to critically investigate social inequalities manifested through language use. Jaffer Sheyholislami (2001) points out that "critical discourse analysis aims to uncover the relationships among discursive practices, social practices, and social structures, which may remain obscure to ordinary people." Overall, CDA is both a research approach and a methodology that seeks to explore and explain the relationships among discourse, ideology, and social structures.

3.2 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

As one of the leading scholars in critical discourse analysis, Fairclough proposed the "Discourse as Social Practice" approach, which has exerted a profound influence on subsequent studies. This approach was first introduced in the first edition of *Language and Power* (Fairclough, 1989). In this book, Fairclough divided social conditions into three levels: the social context, social institutions, and society as a whole. He further argued that discourse is a discursive event consisting of text, discursive practice, and social practice, thereby establishing the three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis (see Fig. 1).

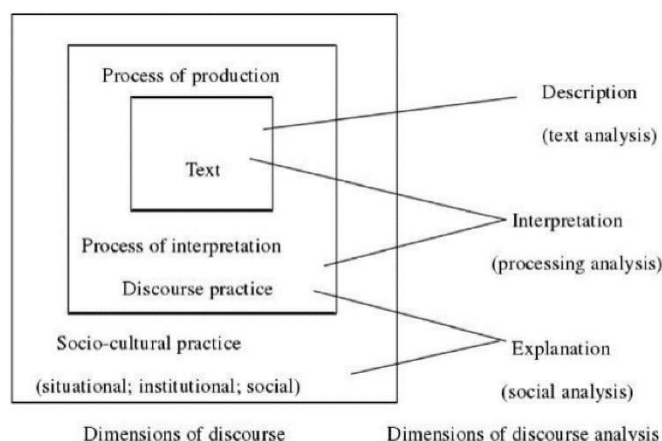


Fig. 1 The Three-Dimensional view of discourse (Fairclough, 1995)

As shown in Fig. 1, the analysis of any discursive event should focus on three analytical elements: text, referring to the product of the text production process, such as news reports; discursive practice, referring to the processes through which the discourse is produced and interpreted; and social practice, referring to the social and cultural structures within which the discursive event is produced. In other words, text is the product of discursive practice, while discursive practice is embedded within particular social practices. Accordingly, critical discourse analysis involves three dimensions: the description of the formal features of texts; the interpretation of the relationship between texts and discursive practices, in which texts are regarded as products of production processes and resources for interpretation; and the explanation of the relationship between discursive practices and social practices, focusing on the social determinants of discourse production and interpretation as well as their social effects.

IV. DATA COLLECTION AND PROCESSING

This study adopts the Dow Jones Factiva global news and business information database as the data source. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* were selected as the sources of TCM-related news reports. By searching for four keywords, namely “Chinese medicine,” “traditional Chinese medicine,” “herbal medicine,” and “alternative medicine,” and setting the time span from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2022, which covers the peak period of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent impacts, this study collected TCM-related reports published by the three English-language media outlets.

The initial search yielded 99 relevant results. Articles were retained only when TCM, acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, or related practices constituted a substantive part of the report rather than appearing merely as an incidental reference. Duplicate items, advertisements, brief mentions without analytical relevance, and reports unrelated to the research questions were excluded through manual screening. Following this procedure, a small specialized corpus of English-language TCM reports was established, comprising 20 news reports with a total word count of 12,234 words. Based on this corpus, AntConc 4.3.1, a corpus analysis software, was employed to conduct corpus-assisted analysis. Through corpus-based methods such as high-frequency word analysis, this study examines TCM-related news reports published by the three mainstream US media outlets in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and explores how the media image of TCM was constructed.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this study combines corpus retrieval with manually coded statistical data to conduct a critical discourse analysis of US media reports on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) from three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice.

5.1 Text Analysis

The textual dimension focuses on the description of the formal features of texts. Considering the characteristics of the corpus, this study mainly analyzes the use and distribution of high-frequency lexical items and their collocations, as well as modal verbs.

5.1.1 Analysis of Lexical Choices

Van Dijk (1988) points out that lexical choice is “an eminent aspect of news discourse in which hidden opinions or ideologies may surface.” Therefore, lexical choices are not randomly or accidentally formed, but are determined by specific ideological positions. The ways in which journalists choose to encode and represent reality may explicitly or implicitly reflect their ideological stances and attitudes toward events and social actors. Therefore, an analysis of lexical choices can help reveal journalists' positions and underlying ideologies.

To conduct a more effective analysis, this study examines the frequencies of nouns, verbs, and adjectives occurring in the reports. AntConc 4.3.1, a corpus analysis software, was employed to identify high-frequency words and their concordance lines. To ensure the validity of the results, certain function words, such as conjunctions, prepositions, and articles, were removed from the

frequency list. Table 1 presents the twenty most frequent words appearing in the twenty news reports.

Table 1 High Frequency Words used in Corpus

Rank	Frequency	Word
1	210	be(am,is,are,was,were,been,being)
2	124	have/has/had
3	73	Chinese
4	69	say/says/said
5	65	acupuncture
6	52	medicine
7	51	treatment(s)
8	42	traditional
9	35	health
10	29	pain
11	27	China
12	25	drug(s)
13	22	patient(s)
14	21	could
15	21	national
16	19	study/studies
17	17	cronavirus
18	16	can
19	15	medical
20	15	cancer

According to Table 1, it can be seen that reports on TCM published by mainstream US media focus not only on its practical medical value but also on its applications in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The frequent use of the verb *be* and reporting verbs such as “say/says/said” helps establish a framework of factual statements and authoritative quotations, thereby enhancing the appearance of objectivity and impartiality in news discourse. Lexical items such as “pain”, “cancer”, “treatment” and “health” indicate that the information conveyed to the public mainly focuses on the intervention of TCM in specific diseases and its value for daily health maintenance.

Among the nouns, the high frequency of “acupuncture” is particularly prominent. Compared with terms referring to the broader theoretical system of TCM, it suggests that the selected newspapers tend to represent TCM through individual therapeutic techniques rather than as an integrated medical system. This fragmented representation may make TCM more intelligible to Western readers, while simultaneously reducing its theoretical and cultural complexity. The words “Chinese” and “traditional” accurately introduce the origin and historical characteristics of TCM, indicating that it is a traditional medical practice originating from China. The term “medical” serves as an intrinsic definition of TCM and highlights its essential characteristics as a medical system. In this corpus, “medical” also frequently appears in contexts related to the treatment of diseases and injuries

through TCM.

Furthermore, with the application of TCM during the pandemic and the advancement of related research, certain practical values of TCM have received increasing attention, and its application scenarios have been presented in more specific terms. Lexical items such as “coronavirus”, “study”, “drug” and “patient” indicate that US media focus not only on the role of TCM in the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 but also on its development in clinical practice and scientific research. Regarding the description of TCM’s effects, the frequent use of the modal verb “could” among high-frequency words indicates that US media tend to make cautious judgments of possibility regarding TCM’s efficacy, implying a certain tendency toward observation and inquiry.

5.1.2 Analysis of Modality

The modality system is an important linguistic resource for realizing interpersonal meaning, as it reflects speakers’ judgments concerning the truth, possibility, and necessity of propositions (Halliday, 1994). In news discourse, modal expressions not only reveal journalists’ degree of cognition regarding events but also represent the strategies adopted in the production of news discourse to regulate objectivity, authority, and uncertainty. Therefore, an analysis of modal verbs can help reveal how US media represent the scientific value and social image of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) through linguistic choices. Based on Halliday’s (1994) classification of modal values, this study conducts a statistical analysis of modal verbs in the corpus. (see Table 2).

Table 2 Modal verbs in the Corpus

Value of modal verbs	modal word	Number	Percentage
Low	can	16	21.3%
	could	21	28%
	may	8	10.7%
	might	4	5.3%
	Total	49	65.3%
Median	should	5	6.7%
	will	5	6.7%
	would	9	12%
	Total	19	25.3%
High	must	1	1.3%
	need	1	1.3%
	have to	1	1.3%
	had to	4	5.3%
	Total	7	9.3%
Total		75	100%

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently used modal verbs in the 20 news reports belong to low-value modal

verbs, accounting for more than half of all modal expressions. Median-value modal verbs rank second, while high-value modal verbs occur with the lowest frequency. This distribution indicates that when reporting on TCM-related issues, US media tend to avoid absolute assertions and instead employ modal expressions associated with possibility and speculation. On the one hand, such linguistic choices are consistent with the emphasis on evidentiality and cautiousness in medical news reporting. On the other hand, they weaken the certainty of claims regarding the efficacy of TCM to some extent, presenting it more as a medical practice that requires further investigation and validation.

Example 1:

People who have chronic tension headaches might be able to reduce the frequency of those headaches by as much as 50 percent with acupuncture, according to research published in the journal *Neurology*. (*The Washington Post*, 22-07-05)

Example 2:

Last year, the W.H.O. offered an endorsement of traditional Chinese medicine, including it in its influential medical compendium. The move was roundly criticized by animal rights activists, who argued that it could contribute to a surge in illegal trafficking of wildlife whose parts are used in Chinese remedies. (*The New York Times*, 20-04-09)

Example 3:

The lead author, Dr. Wei Wang, a professor of neurology at Tongji Medical College in Wuhan, China, said that acupuncture, done carefully and correctly, could be an effective first-line treatment for migraines. (*The New York Times*, 20-04-07)

In Example 1, the expression “might be able to” does not directly deny the therapeutic effects of acupuncture; rather, it presents the research findings by reducing the degree of certainty of the proposition. Since medical research is subject to limitations related to sample size, individual differences, and experimental conditions, the use of possibility modal expressions conforms to the norms of scientific news reporting. Meanwhile, the use of “might” indicates that the efficacy of acupuncture is not represented as a universally applicable medical fact, but rather as an effect supported only within the scope of a specific study.

Example 2 mentions that animal rights activists argued that the inclusion of TCM in the World Health Organization's medical compendium “could” contribute to a surge in illegal wildlife trafficking. Here, “could” is used

to express the prediction of future risks made by animal protection groups rather than to describe an event that has already occurred. Through expressions such as “could contribute”, the report presents concerns from different social groups regarding TCM-related practices while avoiding directly attributing responsibility for such risks to TCM itself. This demonstrates how news discourse employs modality to distinguish reported viewpoints and established facts.

In Example 3, the modal verb “could” reflects the rigor and cautiousness of the neurologist's stance. Based on professional knowledge, the expert acknowledges the potential value of acupuncture while avoiding an absolute conclusion due to factors such as individual differences and variations in treatment conditions. This formulation not only maintains the authority of the expert but also conforms to the objective understanding of therapeutic effects in the medical field, thereby enhancing the credibility of the discourse.

B. Median-value Modal Verbs

Median-value modal verbs primarily include will, would, and should. They convey a higher degree of certainty than low-value modals, yet still retain certain conditional constraints. In the corpus, these median-value modals are predominantly employed to describe outcomes that may emerge under specific conditions, reflecting the reports' limited recognition of TCM's therapeutic efficacy.

Example 4:

“If incidents like Shuanghuanglian happen again and again, it will lose the public trust, cause more panic, and go against the authorities' advice to avoid crowd gathering,” Mr. Chen wrote. (*The New York Times*, 20-02-09)

Example 5:

Chinese medicine, they said, would mitigate some of these adverse reactions. (*The New York Times*, 20-02-09)

In Example 4, the modal verb “will” is used to express a conditional prediction, with its degree of certainty being established on the hypothetical premise introduced by “If incidents like Shuanghuanglian happen again and again,” rather than representing an unconditional assertion of future events by the journalist. This expression links the recurrence of Shuanghuanglian-related incidents with consequences such as declining public trust, increasing social panic, and violations of epidemic prevention recommendations. It therefore highlights the potential public health risks and social impacts caused by such incidents. The modal verb “will” conveys a high

degree of certainty, presenting these negative consequences as relatively inevitable outcomes under specific conditions. In this way, it strengthens the warning issued by critics against misleading publicity and irrational purchasing behaviors.

In Example 5, “would” does not indicate an absolute affirmation of the therapeutic effects of TCM; rather, it expresses a prediction concerning the potential role of TCM within a specific context. Through the use of “would,” the report presents an expectation based on existing viewpoints or previous experience rather than a medical conclusion that has been fully verified. It is noteworthy that this type of modal expression reflects the dual stance adopted by US media toward TCM. On the one hand, the reports acknowledge that certain TCM therapies may possess potential value as complementary treatments; on the other hand, the use of modal restrictions prevents TCM from being represented as an equivalent alternative to modern medicine.

C. High-value Modal Verbs

High-value modal verbs mainly include must, need, and have to, which express a strong sense of necessity and obligation. In this corpus, high-value modal verbs account for the smallest proportion, representing only 9.3% of all modal expressions. This may be attributed to the fact that high-value modal verbs generally convey the highest degree of possibility or the strongest sense of responsibility. To maintain the objectivity of news reporting, journalists tend to use such expressions less frequently.

Example 6:

“I think it is the correct approach,” said Cheng Yung-chi, a professor of pharmacology at Yale University School of Medicine. “The evidence is going to come and we have to give it the benefit of the doubt.” (*The New York Times*, 20-02-09)

In Example 6, “have to” does not function as a demand for the public to accept TCM; rather, it reflects an expert's judgment concerning the process of scientific evaluation. The speaker emphasizes that TCM should be given further opportunities for research and observation before sufficient evidence is established. This expression embodies a scientific discourse logic that the evaluation of medical practices should be based on empirical evidence rather than preconceived positions. Therefore, although high-value modal verbs occur relatively infrequently, their use is often associated with expert voices and serves to reinforce a sense of responsibility and rationality in scientific research discourse.

5.2 Discursive Practice Analysis

The discursive practice dimension focuses on the concrete processes through which discourse is produced, disseminated, and interpreted. Intertextuality is a key aspect examined within discursive practice, referring to the process by which one text incorporates and transforms elements from other texts. In discourse, intertextuality is commonly realized through quotations (Fairclough, 1992). In the next part, analysis on news source as well as on explicitness of news sources of US news reports on TCM will be presented.

According to Zhang Jian (1993), “News sources can be divided into three categories: specific source (SS), semi-specific source (SSS) and unidentified source (US)”. Since some parts of the news reports are unrelated to TCM, the statistical analysis in this section only includes statements and quotations directly associated with TCM. Table 3 presents detailed information regarding news sources in the selected corpus.

Table 3 Proportion of three types of news sources

Text	SS	SSS	US	Total
Sample 1	1	1		2
Sample 2	6	3		9
Sample 3	1	1		2
Sample 4	1	1		2
Sample 5		1		1
Sample 6	1		1	2
Sample 7	2			2
Sample 8	1			1
Sample 9	2			2
Sample 10	2			2
Sample 11	1			1
Sample 12	3	1	2	6
Sample 13			1	1
Sample 14			1	1
Sample 15	2	1		3
Sample 16	1			1
Sample 17		1		1
Sample 18			1	1
Sample 19		1		1
Sample 20			1	1
Total	25	11	7	43
Percentage	58.1%	25.6%	16.2%	100%

The news sources in the corpus can be broadly classified into three categories: representatives of state institutions, governmental organizations, or non-governmental organizations; experts and academics; and other individuals who were directly or indirectly involved

in the events concerned. As shown in Table 3, specific sources account for the largest proportion, semi-specific sources for the second largest, while unidentified sources account for the smallest.

5.2.1 Specific Source

Specific source refers to clearly identifiable origins of information, for which details such as the speaker's name, professional or institutional identity, and organizational affiliation are explicitly provided. A typical formulation is, for example, "US President Joseph Robinette Biden stated that...". By clearly identifying the origin of the information, specific sources enhance the apparent objectivity of news discourse. For this reason, journalists tend to employ specific sources to substantiate the factual accuracy and reliability of their reports.

Example 1:

Laurie Garrett, a member of the World Economic Forum's global health security advisory board who covered the SARS outbreak in China, said that using traditional Chinese medicine in the new coronavirus outbreak could be risky because the approach is not rigorously backed by research. (*The New York Times*, 20-02-09)

Example 2:

The lead author, Benny Antony, a senior researcher at the University of Tasmania, acknowledged that this is a small study of short duration, and that the effect on pain was only moderate. Still, he said, "Considering the limited effectiveness of current pharmacological treatments for osteoarthritis, a modest effect may be helpful, and turmeric appears to be without side effects." (*The New York Times*, 20-09-22)

Both Example 1 and Example 2 employ specific sources. In Example 1, the journalist quotes a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Health Security Advisory Board, thereby enhancing the authority and credibility of the information. However, the lexical items "risky" and "not rigorously backed by research" reflect a skeptical attitude toward the use of traditional Chinese medicine in treating COVID-19. Example 2, by contrast, cites a senior researcher at the University of Tasmania, who states that turmeric, a material commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine, has "a modest effect" and appears to be free of side effects, thus constructing a positive image of TCM.

The two speakers therefore adopt markedly different attitudes toward TCM, a contrast that is also evident in the headlines. The title of Example 1, "Beijing's Prescription to Fight Virus: Buffalo Horn and Roots," foregrounds "buffalo horn," which may evoke negative associations with TCM's alleged reliance on wildlife-derived materials

and thereby intensify misunderstandings concerning the ethics of TCM medication. The title of Example 2, "Alternative Medicine: Turmeric to Ease Knee Arthritis," affirms the alleviating effect of turmeric on knee osteoarthritis.

It is noteworthy that, among the 25 specific sources, only seven derive from Chinese scholars or their research findings, accounting for less than one third of the total. As China is the birthplace of TCM, the views and research findings of Chinese scholars serve as a valuable reference. Nevertheless, US media tend to rely more heavily on domestic perspectives and research in constructing the image of TCM and shaping readers' perceptions, which renders the coverage less comprehensive and objective.

5.2.2 Semi-Specific Sources

Semi-specific source refers to cases in which journalists do not identify the exact source of information but provide a general indication of its origin to signal that the quotation or claim is not entirely definitive. Some semi-specific sources may construct a generalized or collective voice whose individual members cannot be verified, for example, "the US Secretary of State stated that...". In some cases, journalists may deliberately omit the specific source in order to reinforce their own position. Xin Bin (2005) refers to this practice as "reference to mythical group". From this perspective, the selection of semi-specific source carries important ideological implications.

Example 3:

NIH's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) said that acupuncture can help manage physical pain in certain cases, but that not enough evidence exists to show it can help with depression. (*The Washington Post*, 22-05-31)

Example 3 belongs to semi-specific source news. Under the "reference to mythical groups" circumstance, it is important to make certain what these sources stand for. The source cited in Example 3 is the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health of the US National Institutes of Health. The quotation creates an impression of professionalism and authority. This formulation enables the journalist to emphasize the message being conveyed, namely that the effectiveness of acupuncture remains contested. In addition, by citing the position of an official US institution, the ideological implications of the discourse are also made visible.

5.2.3 Unidentified Sources

Unidentified source refers to cases in which journalists do not provide the precise origin of the information. This may result from deliberate omission, or

from the source being regarded as unclear or unimportant, leading to vague expressions such as “some studies suggest that...”.

Example 4:

Current evidence suggests that many factors—like expectation and belief—that are unrelated to acupuncture needling may play important roles in the beneficial effects of acupuncture on pain.” (*The Washington Post*, 21-10-07)

In Example 4, the news source is not identified. The absence of explicit source makes it impossible for readers to identify or evaluate the precise origin of the evidence. Although the report refers to “current evidence”, it does not specify where this evidence comes from, thereby implying that the view is supported by authoritative knowledge or broader public opinion. Therefore, journalists can use information from unidentified sources to express their own viewpoints with relatively few constraints, thereby guiding readers toward a negative perception of the therapeutic efficacy of acupuncture.

5.3 Social Practice Analysis

5.3.1 Analysis of Institutional Context

At the institutional level, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal are all forms of mass media and, as such, serve as platforms through which governmental ideology may be disseminated and articulated. At the same time, “the media” in the United States also constitutes an economic enterprise. From this perspective, the institutional nature of US media requires them to safeguard their own corporate interests, particularly when news coverage concerns the interest groups with which they are associated. Therefore, although these media organizations claim independence from the government and political parties, their reporting may not be entirely objective.

As commercially operated social institutions embedded in the US political and cultural context, the three newspapers may reproduce viewpoints broadly consistent with dominant American interests and public discourse. When reporting on traditional Chinese medicine, they may evaluate and comment on TCM in accordance with American public opinion and, in some cases, with the US policy toward China prevailing at the time.

5.3.2 Analysis of Social Context

Over the past decade or more, China has experienced rapid economic growth, while the persistent US trade deficit with China has contributed to the circulation of the so-called “China threat” discourse in the United States. Together with broader geopolitical and ideological

tensions, this discourse has shaped the context in which US media report on China-related issues. In addition, within the US medical system, which is dominated by Western medicine, the growing influence of TCM may challenge the established position and influence of Western medicine. Moreover, TCM has not yet been fully incorporated into formal medical education or the mainstream healthcare system in the United States. This has contributed to insufficient confidence in, and an inadequate understanding of, its safety and effectiveness. Consequently, US media may frame and report relevant news in ways shaped by American public opinion and the prevailing US policy toward China.

The development philosophy of American medicine also influences the attitudes and focal points of news reporting regarding Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). US media often question TCM because, according to Western scientific principles, they regard its mechanisms of action as insufficiently defined and assessments of its therapeutic effects as relatively subjective. Acupuncture and the TCM practice of syndrome differentiation and treatment do not follow the conventional process of basic experimentation, clinical trials, regulatory approval, and market authorization. They are therefore often regarded as unscientific. To a certain extent, these views have influenced some US scholars and officials, as well as news coverage of TCM.

In recent years, however, US restrictions on opioid misuse have also created opportunities for the development of acupuncture and other TCM therapies. As a result, acupuncture has received considerable media attention in the United States as an alternative treatment. At the same time, with the increasing international dissemination and recognition of TCM, as well as the growing acceptance of acupuncture in American society—including its inscription on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the establishment of an independent industry code in the United States—some reports have constructed a positive image of TCM and affirmed its status.

VI. CONCLUSION

Drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, this study conducts a critical discourse analysis of TCM-related content in US news reports from the dimensions of textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. The principal findings are as follows.

At the level of textual analysis, this study finds that linguistic choices in news discourse are not arbitrary but are shaped by the media. The analysis of high-frequency words shows that most reports focus on the therapeutic

efficacy of TCM. The analysis of modal verbs further indicates that many reports employ low-value modal verbs to express a cautious attitude toward TCM, reflecting uncertainty and doubt in US media regarding its therapeutic effects and future development. At the same time, the frequent use of expressions of uncertainty reinforces, to some extent, the media image of TCM as “an alternative form of medicine requiring further verification.”

At the level of discursive practice, specific sources constitute the largest proportion of all news sources, indicating a preference for identifiable and potentially verifiable voices. However, source selection remains uneven, as the reports rely more heavily on American scholars, experts, and institutions than on Chinese scholars and research findings to construct the image of TCM and shape readers' perceptions. This imbalance suggests that source explicitness does not necessarily guarantee comprehensiveness or neutrality.

At the level of social practice, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the number of TCM-related reports in mainstream US media and heightened media attention to TCM. Nevertheless, the linguistic positions adopted in these reports are also influenced by the role of mainstream US media as social institutions that support American interests, as well as by the long-standing influence of Western medical concepts. Most TCM-related reports in mainstream US media are objective and scientific and, to a certain extent, acknowledge the value of TCM. However, TCM continues to be categorized as alternative medicine in the United States, and misunderstandings concerning its safety and effectiveness remain present in news coverage.

Therefore, the Chinese government should publish accessible science-oriented books introducing the basic principles of TCM. In particular, international communication should provide clearer explanations of the therapeutic scope, mechanisms of action, and safety standards of TCM in order to reduce misunderstandings among foreign media and the public. With the joint efforts of all relevant parties, TCM is expected to achieve broader application and development in the United States and worldwide and to make a greater contribution to global health.

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