



Corpus-Assisted Discourse-Historical Analysis of the Construction of China's Late Qing Image in Contemporary Western Discourse

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Abstract. This paper uses a corpus-assisted discourse-historical analysis to explore the construction of China's Late Qing image in contemporary Western discourse. The Late Qing period, marked by profound transformations and confrontations with Western powers, presents a unique case study for understanding national image construction from a Western perspective. The research aims to uncover how China's Late Qing era is perceived and contextualized within Western narratives, particularly through the lens of *China's Hidden Century*. The study combines corpus linguistics with a discourse-historical approach to analyze the depiction and contextualization of the Late Qing period. It focuses on the analysis of the macro-topic content and micro-linguistic features to dissect the portrayal of this era. By doing so, the study aims to suggest strategies for better interpreting and presenting China's historical and modern narratives globally, telling Chinese stories better to the whole world.

Keywords: Late Qing, corpus-assisted, DHA, western discourse, China's publicity

1 Introduction

The construction and perception of national images are vital in international relations and cultural exchanges. The Late Qing period in China, known for its profound transformations and interactions with Western powers, provides crucial insights into the dynamics of national image construction. Understanding how the West perceives China during this era is essential, as it influences contemporary perceptions and efforts to enhance China's image in the Western world, ultimately strengthening its global image.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the construction of China's Late Qing image in Western discourse, particularly through *China's Hidden Century*. Employing corpus-assisted discourse-historical analysis, it will examine how this image is portrayed and understood within Western narratives. The research seeks to enhance the broader discourse on national image construction, providing insights into the representation and interpretation of Chinese history and culture. It also aims to offer strategies to improve China's modern international publicity and the global interpretation of Chinese stories.

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I. A. Khan et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 2nd International Conference on Language, Innovative Education and Cultural Communication (CLEC 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 853, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-263-7_45

2 Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies on China'S National Image Construction

Academic interest in the construction of China's national image has generated a considerable body of work. This research can be broadly categorized into three distinct types. The first type is to explore the shaping of China's national image through China's mass media, including TV, books, newspapers, films, and so on. A substantial portion of such research hones in on documentaries, with works by Wang & Qiao (2016)[7] and Shen & Yin (2018)[4] being particularly notable. Furthermore, with the success of some Chinese films in recent years, many scholars like Wang & Zhang (2019)[5] analyzing films such as *The Wandering Earth* for their synthesis of venerable Chinese cultural traditions with modern demands for global cultural dialogue.

Another strand of the studies is the construction of China's national image in international promotional media. For instance, Wei & Pan (2018)[8] focus on CGTN's home page on Facebook, exploring how CGTN could build the image of China through the news reports on its Facebook homepage, alongside assessing the effectiveness of its strategic communication tactics. Besides, the studies about China's national image from international events, especially sports events, are major directions. Since Beijing hosted the Winter Olympics in 2022, scholars such as Hu (2020)[2] have seized the moment to reflect on how such global sporting occasions can amplify China's international standing. Hu's literature-based analysis affirms the contributory influence of the Winter Olympics in fostering a favorable national portrayal.

However, despite the extensive research on contemporary China's image, two significant gaps persist. First, studies are scarce on the historical image of China during the Late Qing period (gap1). The unique socio-political dynamics and cultural developments of this era, which laid the groundwork for modern China, are often overlooked. Second, while existing studies have scrutinized modern China's image construction, there is a lack of analysis that integrates historical perspectives with contemporary Western views that analyze how China's past is interpreted and repurposed in current international relations and China's publicity (gap2). These gaps underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of China's historical image as constructed and perceived by the West, which can offer a more complete picture of China's evolution in the realm of international image construction. This entails a deep dive into historical events, figures, and cultural outputs as interpreted by Western actors, to bridge the divide between past perceptions and present-day realities.

2.2 DHA

When examining the methodologies employed to analyze China's national image, a variety of approaches can be identified, demonstrating the complexity and multi-dimensionality of this field of study, such as metaphor construction (Wang & Xin, 2019)[6], frame theory (Zhao, 2018)[9] and so on. This study will adopt DHA (Discourse-Historical Approach) to analyze China's national image since it is a general research paradigm in combination with corpus linguistics.

3 Corpora and Methods

3.1 Corpora

Research data in this study were obtained separately from *China's Hidden Century* and CROWN2021. To begin, *China's Hidden Century* is the accompanying hardback catalog to the British Museum exhibition, published in 2023. It mainly depicted the history of the Late Qing period and the cultural creativity (including print, painting, textiles, etc) in China between 1796 and 1912. The originality of this book is that despite a conflicting time, the Late Qing demonstrated extraordinary resilience and marvelous creativity. Hence, this book can reflect China's image at that period from the modern Western perspective. Based on this book, a corpus of *China's Hidden Century* was built (hereafter referred to as CCHH) with 65,966 total word tokens.

Additionally, the study selects the CROWN2021 as a reference corpus. CROWN2021 is a balanced Brown family American English corpus comprising one million words with texts published in 2021. CROWN2021 serves as an updated language resource for contemporary American written English. Therefore, it can be the reference corpus due to its generality.

3.2 Corpus-Assisted Discourse-Historical Analysis Framework

The corpus-assisted method was combined with the DHA to enable a multi-level analysis of the construction of China's Late Qing image from a Western perspective. Compared to other discourse analysis methods, DHA places more emphasis on the historical context, revealing the image of China during the Late Qing period from the perspectives of social politics, history, and culture of a specific period. Moreover, DHA advocates analyzing discourse from three dimensions: "macro-topic content, meso-discourse strategies, and micro-linguistic resources", and lists types of discourse strategies and linguistic resources, providing a comprehensive analytical path for the study of identity construction in discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016)[3]. Limited by space, this study only analyzes the first and third levels.

Therefore, this study, based on the existing theoretical framework of DHA, analyzes the discourse in *China's Hidden Century* from these three dimensions, proposing a corpus-assisted discourse-historical analysis framework for the construction of the image of China during the Late Qing period in contemporary Western discourse. The analytical framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.

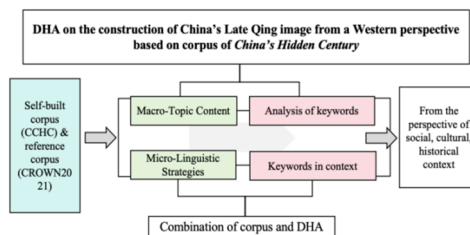


Fig. 1. Analytical Framework

In analyzing the construction of China's Late Qing image in contemporary Western discourse, this study uses the corpus tool AntConc4.2.4(Anthony, L, 2023)[1] to identify and summarize prominent keywords at the macro level. At the micro level, it analyzes these keywords within their contexts to observe the linguistic resources and discourse strategies used.

Therefore, by self-building the CCHH corpus and employing a corpus-assisted discourse-historical framework, this study attempts to investigate the image of China during the Late Qing period. Specifically, the following questions guide this study. 1) Through the analysis of the macro-topic content and micro-linguistic features, what kind of Late Qing image is constructed from a Western perspective? 2) What are the reasons for this Western perception of the image? What implications does it have for China's current efforts in international publicity?

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of the Macro-Topic Content

From a macro-topic content perspective, this section analyzes keywords from CCHC to examine the image of China during the Late Qing period within contemporary Western discourse. Keywords were generated using AntConc4.2.4 and compared with CROWN2021 in likelihood order.

The analysis involves selecting the top 50 keywords and categorizing them into several thematic groups. They are divided into time and region, events, figures and social groups, cultural and military aspects. By organizing the keywords in this manner, this study forms thematic groups that give a clearer view of how the Late Qing period is characterized and understood in modern Western narratives.

In terms of time and region, the keywords set the temporal and spatial stage for the narrative. "Qing" is the most distinct keyword, with a frequency of 486 in the targeted corpus and a frequency of 0 in the reference corpus, denoting the special historical period in Chinese history. References to "century", "dynasty", and specific time markers ("th", "late") place the Late Qing within a historical timeframe, suggesting a period of transition and change. The geographical keywords ("China", "Shanghai", "Guangzhou", and "Beijing") indicate the main settings of the narrative, highlighting those regions that were significant cultural, political, and economic centers during the Late Qing period. The inclusion of "Japan", "British", "western", and "foreign" speaks to the international dimension of the period, reflecting on the global influence and interactions that played a significant role in shaping events and indicating the comparison between Late Qing and other foreign countries.

In discussing conflicts, the keyword "war" highlights significant events that shaped the Late Qing, such as the Taiping Civil War, the Opium Wars, the Boxer War, and the Sino-Japanese War. These terms suggest that the Late Qing is often depicted as a period of conflict in Western narratives. These wars, representing both internal strife and external pressures, played key roles in the Late Qing struggles to maintain sovereignty and its transformation into a modern nation-state. They mark critical moments where

traditional Chinese structures faced modernity and imperialism, significantly impacting China's national development and identity.

In exploring figures and social groups, keywords like "Cixi", "emperor", and "Qianlong" highlight influential historical figures of the Late Qing, while "Manchu" and "Han" denote major ethnic groups, with Manchus ruling and Hans as the majority. Keywords such as "merchants", "elite", and "women" reflect attention to diverse social strata and roles within the complex societal structure and power dynamics of the era.

The keywords "court", "painting", and "art" highlight the rich cultural heritage and artistic expressions of the Late Qing, reflecting Western fascination with its art. "Military" and "forces" point to significant military aspects of the era, indicating both internal and external conflicts. The term "treaty", often collocates with ports, underscores the role of treaty ports as key sites for international contact, commerce, and cultural exchange. These ports facilitated the entry of Western influences into China and the export of Chinese goods internationally. The keyword "trade" indicates the importance of both domestic and international commerce, including the contentious opium trade, showing the Late Qing's exposure to and influence by global economic forces.

4.2 Analysis of Micro-Linguistic Features

This study examines the micro-linguistic features of Western-related keywords such as "western", "west", "British", and "Britain" to understand their context in narratives about Western powers in China during the 19th century. It reveals that the language used in CCHC often sanitizes or neutralizes the violent and imperialistic nature of Western incursions. By framing these actions as exploration or civilizing missions, the narrative makes the aggressive expansion of empire appear more acceptable and justified to both contemporary audiences and historical accounts. Here are some examples:

Example 1: "...these objects were primarily supplied by commercial manufactories, which were themselves in decline. Their manufacture and market began to revive in the 1870s, spurred by foreign fascination and demand. The British and French discovered the beauty of Chinese cloisonne works, included among the treasures plundered from the Summer Palace which were brought back to Europe and displayed in the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris."

"Discovered the beauty" not only centers the Western experience as the moment of recognition but also erases the existing value and integration of these works within Chinese culture. It echoes Western narratives of exploration and conquest, positioning Western observers as enlightened connoisseurs and reducing Chinese agency to mere custodians of beauty awaiting Western validation. Such framing diverts attention from the imperial aggression, implicitly justifying colonial exploitation by suggesting that Western imperialism led to a global appreciation of cultural artifacts. This narrative of discovery, by implying cultural superiority, overlooks the intrinsic value these works held within their original context, independent of Western acknowledgment, and downplays the trauma Late Qing's whole society experienced.

Example 2: "Jiujiang...had a customs office, which gave Western oversight of all goods transported on the Gan, one of the main north-south river-based transport routes."

“Oversight” has a less aggressive connotation compared to terms like “domination” or “control”, which can make the Western presence seem more benign, as if it were merely a supervisory role rather than an imposition of power. Besides, “oversight” can suggest a sense of responsibility or stewardship, potentially framing the Western role as necessary for maintaining order or efficiency in trade routes. This can subtly legitimize the foreign presence and downplay the coercive aspects of this control.

5 Conclusions

Through the macro and micro analysis, the constructed image of China during the Late Qing period from a Western perspective emerges as complex and multifaceted. It portrays China as a resilient nation, navigating through significant upheavals and conflicts. However, despite the admiration, it is noticeable that CCHC downplays the aggressive colonial and hegemonic actions of the West, and the deep societal trauma these inflicted on the Late Qing society. Through the lens of Western interests and the oriental gaze, although this narrative admires China’s resilience, it justifies Western imperialism under the guise of global cultural integration.

Reasons behind the Western perception of China’s Late Qing image stem from historical interactions, contemporary insights, and evolving views on colonialism and cultural exchange. This perception is deeply influenced by the West’s dual role as observer and agent of change in China, often justifying imperialistic actions with claims of benevolence and civilization. Contemporary discussions attempt to reconcile recognition of China’s cultural richness with the harmful impacts of Western imperialism, yet often downplay the more exploitative aspects due to lingering orientalism. The narrative in CCHC navigates these complexities by celebrating China’s historical achievements while also critically reassessing Western influences. This modern interpretation arises from a combination of historical analysis and current reflections on colonial legacies, aiming to present a balanced view of China’s past that respects its cultural heritage and acknowledges the challenges of Western influence. This results in a narrative that appreciates China’s cultural contributions but sometimes fails to fully recognize their significance or completely move beyond Western perspectives.

However, the construction of modern China’s image remains challenging due to historical, ideological, and cultural differences that hinder Western recognition of China’s active and contemporary culture. Transitioning from a passive figure to an active reformer on the global stage, China aims to enhance its international communication to accurately present its multifaceted nature and bolster its cultural soft power, as highlighted in the 19th National Congress (Xi Jinping, 2017). This effort underlines the importance of effectively conveying China’s story, emphasizing its rich cultural and theoretical confidence to foster understanding and engagement internationally. Recognizing that global perceptions of China are influenced by both historical contexts and current interactions, it is crucial for China to navigate its portrayal thoughtfully, integrating lessons from its historical engagements, such as those during the Late Qing period, into its modern public diplomacy strategies.

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