

Media Narratives of Xi'an's Urban Image: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Mainstream Media Reports from China, Britain, and America

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Abstract: This study examines the evolution of Xi'an's urban image through a systematic analysis of mainstream media reports from both domestic and international sources since the 21st century, employing corpus analysis, LDA Model, and sentiment analysis. The findings reveal that domestic media have actively constructed a “fusion of tradition and modernity” narrative through a composite agenda model, shifting the discourse on Xi'an from historical and cultural themes to scientific and technological innovation. However, influenced by an Orientalist framework, British and American media have persistently simplified Xi'an as a “historic capital,” often juxtaposing it with Beijing and Shanghai, thereby undermining its modern attributes. Furthermore, the stigmatization of Xi'an in Western media has hindered public understanding of the city. Additionally, the Brand China strategy employed by Chinese external propaganda media has inadvertently reinforced self-Orientalization in symbolic representation. Consequently, future efforts should focus on developing a “Deep Xi'an” communication paradigm through the “composite encoding” of cultural symbols and multi-level agenda integration, offering strategic insights for Chinese cities to transcend Orientalist narratives.

Keywords: Urban Image Construction; News Reporting; Xi'an; Corpus Analysis; Belt and Road Initiative

1. Introduction

American political scientist Nye introduced the concept of “soft power,” which he defined as an attractive force that integrates culture and ideology, as well as a force derived from

institutional and normative frameworks (1990). In the context of deepening globalization, the construction of urban image has transcended geographical boundaries, evolving into a pivotal arena for the competition of national cultural soft power. As a crucial medium of international communication, news reporting profoundly shapes global audiences' cognitive maps of cities through agenda-setting. In this process, cities endowed with both historical depth and strategic significance often become focal points of cross-cultural communication—serving as “microcosmic windows” of national images and as frontiers for breaking stereotypes and reconstructing multidimensional narratives.

Xi'an, as the largest city in northwest China and a key node of the Belt and Road Initiative, serves not only as an emblematic vehicle for the international community to understand China's historical and cultural heritage but also as a practical window for the nation's open-door strategy. However, this dual identity of “tradition and modernity” manifests markedly differently in domestic and international media reports: domestic media tend to focus on the innovative narrative of “fusion of past and present,” while mainstream British and American media remain inclined to emphasize its historical symbols. Such narrative divergence may not only perpetuate a static perception of Xi'an among international audiences but also reflects the broader challenges Chinese cities face in constructing their global image—how to transcend the “Otherness” label and establish a genuine, diverse, and dynamic international identity.

Against this backdrop, this study examines reports on Xi'an by mainstream Chinese, British, and American media since the 21st century, employing corpus analysis to systematically deconstruct the evolution and

mechanisms of its image construction. It aims to address three core questions: How do domestic and international media shape Xi'an's image through divergent narratives? What are the underlying factors driving these changes? And how can future strategies optimize the city's image for international "breakthrough"?

The significance of this study lies in its theoretical contribution of integrating journalism and communication studies with cultural semiotics to construct an analytical model for urban image from a cross-cultural perspective. Practically, it provides strategic insights for Xi'an's international communication, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the city among global audiences.

2. Theoretical Analysis: Agenda-Setting Theory

Traditional agenda-setting theory posits that the emphasis placed on specific issues by mass media can significantly transfer to the public agenda (Li & Lian, 2024). Agenda-setting operates at two levels: object agenda-setting and attribute agenda-setting. Object agenda-setting refers to the significant impact of issues emphasized by the media on the public agenda, while attribute agenda-setting pertains to how the attributes or characteristics of issues presented by the media influence audience perceptions and opinions. The research scope of agenda-setting theory extends beyond the interaction between media and the public to encompass the influence among different media outlets (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012).

In the construction of Xi'an's urban image, media from China, Britain, and America have shaped public understanding of the city's core characteristics through the dual mechanisms of object and attribute agenda-setting. Chinese media, represented by *China Daily*, have positioned "cultural heritage" and "educational and scientific resources" as central themes, with related reports accounting for 30.45% from 2015 to 2024, successfully crafting a composite label of "a modern ancient capital." The international diffusion of local agendas is also evident—outlets such as *The New York Times* and the BBC have frequently highlighted "historical and cultural heritage" and "aerospace development" in their reports

on Xi'an, corroborating the cross-border influence of domestic media agendas.

At the level of attribute agenda-setting, Chinese media have deepened the dimensions of Xi'an's urban image through semantic framing. The historical and cultural discourse has been imbued with sacred labels such as "the starting point of the Silk Road," reinforcing the city's status as a cradle of civilization. To address the perception gap regarding modernity, attributes such as "modern education" and "scientific innovation" have been employed to reconstruct the city's image, aiming to reconcile the cognitive tension between tradition and modernity. However, the attenuation of attribute framing in international communication warrants caution: Western media often adopt decontextualized expressions such as "historical and cultural heritage" for the same topics, resulting in the failure of the "fusion of past and present" attribute promoted by local media to effectively reach international audiences. This underscores the constraining effect of cultural discount on communication efficacy. Furthermore, mainstream Western media, leveraging structural issue-filtering mechanisms, systematically dilute the integrity of Chinese agendas. This study reveals that domestic media's insufficient coverage intensity on secondary issues such as "digital economy" and "free trade zone cooperation" has, in effect, allowed foreign media to construct adversarial frameworks like portraying the "China-Europe Railway" as "China's implicit control over the Eurasian resource corridor." Such distortions in attribute agenda-setting deconstruct the legitimacy of Xi'an's development, exposing the structural imbalance between "active supply" and "risk defense" in current agenda-setting practices.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample Selection

This study focuses on analyzing English-language media reports on Xi'an from both domestic and international sources, utilizing the *China Daily* webpage database and the Lexis database as primary data sources. As one of the world's leading English databases, Lexis provides extensive media resources and diverse variable attributes, making it a key source for Western newspaper

research. An automated data collection program, developed using Python's *requests* and *BeautifulSoup* libraries, was employed to extract raw news texts. The search was conducted using the keyword "Xi'an," with the time range set from January 1, 2000, to July 31, 2024. Text data was batch-retrieved through the LexisNexis API interface. To ensure data integrity and accuracy, duplicate entries and invalid data in image format were removed based on the unique Lexis document ID. Ultimately, a total of 4,546 raw news texts were collected, including key information such as titles, newspaper names, years, dates, publication locations, publication countries, authors, and full texts.

3.2 Data Cleaning and Processing

To ensure the accuracy of the research data, duplicate reports were eliminated based on news ID and title similarity (Jaccard coefficient > 0.9). Non-relevant texts such as image-based news, flight information, and weather forecasts were also excluded. Additionally, to address potential ambiguity arising from the keyword "Xi'an" being a common personal name, the research team introduced "Xi" as a filtering keyword, effectively removing samples related to individuals. Furthermore, during the preliminary review of the sample reports, it was observed that some texts merely contained

flight information. To enhance the relevance of the dataset, such samples were identified and excluded through keyword searches. Ultimately, the study obtained 3,403 valid reports from Chinese English-language media and 1,143 valid reports from foreign English-language media.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

3.3.1 LDA Model Construction

Study employs the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) Model, a widely used method in the field of topic modeling, to uncover latent themes within large-scale text corpora. As an unsupervised learning algorithm, LDA assigns a predefined number of topics (K) without relying on manual labeling, thereby avoiding cognitive biases inherent in human classification during content analysis. This method is particularly suitable for processing lengthy texts such as newspaper articles.

The research team utilized Python's *NLTK* and *Gensim* libraries for tokenization, stop word removal, and lemmatization to construct the corpus. Based on this, the optimal number of topics (K=5-6) was determined through perplexity testing. High-frequency topic keywords such as "Tourism" were identified, and topic categories were manually defined in conjunction with the content of the reports to minimize overclassification.

Table 1. Principles for Encoding the Issue Context Corpus

Category	Encoding Rules
History, Culture, and Archaeological Discoveries	Reports involving historical heritage, cultural inheritance, archaeological discoveries, and related activities in Xi'an, such as the Terracotta Army and the ancient city walls.
Economy and Trade	Reports on Xi'an's economic development, trade cooperation, investment environment, business activities, and economic policies.
International Education Cooperation and Academic Exchange	Reports on education cooperation programs, academic exchange activities, university partnerships, and study-abroad initiatives between Xi'an and international entities.
Urban Ecology and Sustainable Development	Reports covering urban greening, environmental protection, sustainable development planning, ecological construction projects, and resource utilization in Xi'an.
International Politics and Diplomatic Dynamics	Reports involving international political events, diplomatic activities, international relations, and cooperation with Xi'an as the context.
Technology and Innovation Industries	Reports on Xi'an's technological innovation achievements, emerging technology industries, development of technology parks, innovation and entrepreneurship activities, and technology policies.

3.3.2 Quantitative and Visual Construction of Weiciyun

This study imports relevant data into the micro word cloud database, generating keyword cloud images by year and by media using the WordCloud library, providing an intuitive

representation of the evolution of media reporting focus. The TF-IDF algorithm is employed to extract core vocabulary across different stages, revealing changes in semantic weight. For instance, the word frequency table of *China Daily* from 2000 to 2009 indicates

that the TF-IDF value of "university" rose from 0.004082 in 2000-2004 to 0.007397 in subsequent years, signifying an increased prominence of education-related content within the news samples during this period. Additionally, the study utilizes sentiment analysis tools within the micro word cloud framework to quantitatively and visually compare the emotional tones of domestic and international media coverage on the same issue.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Word Frequency Analysis

To enhance the accuracy and validity of text mining, the study established a custom dictionary and a stop-word list, refining the segmentation results using Weiciyun. By calculating the TF-IDF scores of terms, the study derived word frequency tables for domestic and international media coverage from 2000 to 2024. This facilitated a deeper analysis of the shifts in news focus.

From a holistic perspective, the terms "China"

and "city" consistently rank as high-frequency words throughout the period from 2000 to 2024, indicating Xi'an's administrative affiliation and geographical location. Over time, the perspectives in reports from Chinese, British and American media became more nuanced. The emergence of "university" in British and American reports in 2005-2009 highlights their focus on Xi'an's educational endeavors. Meanwhile, the appearance of "company" and "Samsung" in China Daily reflected Xi'an's efforts to attract foreign investment and promote economic development.

Comparative analysis revealed that, in contrast to the conventional reporting frameworks often employed by Western mainstream media, China Daily demonstrates a more multidimensional perspective in its news narratives. Its reporting matrix not only encompasses a broader thematic spectrum but also achieves a three-dimensional construction of the information ecosystem through a balanced distribution of topics.

Table 2. Top 20 Word Frequency in British and American Media Reporting from 2000 to 2024.

Year	Keyword									
2000-2004	xian	China	city	have	province	Chinese	visit	Shaanxi	capital	Beijing
	say	northwest	control	shanghai	satellite	student	people	Japanese	Centre	president
2005-2009	xian	China	have	city	say	Beijing	visit	Chinese	shanghai	capital
	province	Shaanxi	university	people	first	northwest	take	central	Nanjing	party
2010-2014	xian	China	have	city	say	Chinese	province	year	Beijing	Japan
	visit	Shaanxi	university	Japanese	high	world	capital	people	make	Shang-hai
2015-2019	xian	China	have	city	Chinese	take	say	warrior	Shaanxi	Beijing
	province	capital	train	studio	report	people	company	shanghai	make	world
2020-2024	xian	China	city	say	Chinese	report	central	company	flight	Asia
	case	president	summit	Beijing	visit	train	shanghai	Kyrgyzstan	outbreak	covid-19

Table 3. Top 20 Word Frequency in China Daily Reporting from 2000 to 2024.

Year	Keyword									
2000-2004	xian	China	Province	Shaanxi	capital	have	northwest	say	city	Beijing
	local	ancient	shanghai	Chinese	Centre	university	government	take	people	make
2005-2009	xian	China	have	province	Shaanxi	say	city	university	capital	Beijing
	northwest	shanghai	year	Chinese	dynasty	visit	ancient	local	Chengdu	Nanjing
2010-2014	xian	province	China	Shaanxi	have	say	company	city	capital	shanghai
	Beijing	Chinese	visit	university	hospital	Samsung	center	yuan	make	group
2015-2019	xian	China	have	province	Shaanxi	city	university	say	development	international
	year	capital	zone	road	Jiaotong	technology	ancient	country	world	trade
2020-2024	xian	province	Shaanxi	China	city	northwest	capital	say	university	international
	high	develop	central	Chinese	provide	country	center	people	Asia	area

4.2 Comparative Analysis of Sentiment in Chinese, British, and American News Reporting

Overall, neutral sentiment has consistently held a significant proportion in news reporting across all three countries. British and American media exhibit a higher proportion of

negative sentiment, while Chinese media shows a higher proportion of positive sentiment. This indicates a prevalence of negative language in British and American reporting, whereas Chinese media tends to focus on positive and objective descriptions. As China has increased its emphasis on international publicity and proposed the Belt

and Road Initiative, the portrayal of Xi'an in British and American media become more nuanced. Thus, the negative sentiment in British and American media initially rose and then declined. From 2005 to 2014, it increased from 15.04% to 18.94% and then dropped to 8.46%. Moreover, *China Daily's* neutral report rose from 38.62% to 59.62% in 25 years, while positive reporting experienced a sudden surge during 2005-2014 before stabilizing at 34.85%.

This shift reflects *China Daily's* strategic adjustment in international communication: transitioning from an initial focus on positive propaganda to a more balanced and objective reporting style. It not only enhances the media's international credibility but also provides global readers with a more comprehensive and authentic perspective on China.

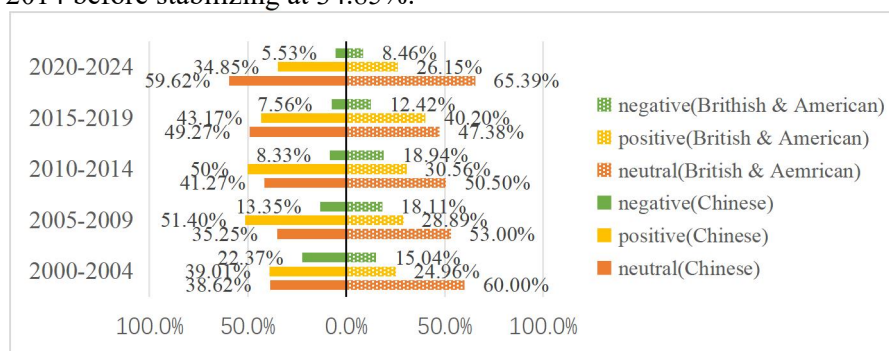


Figure 1. Emotional Changes in News Reports from China, Britain, and America in 2000-2024.

4.3 Comparative Analysis of LDA Model Themes

By applying the LDA model to extract themes from Chinese, British, and American news reports from 2000 to 2024, the c-TF-IDF scores of keywords for each theme are visualized in bar charts. This reveals distinct thematic focuses in the reporting of Chinese,

British, and American media across five time periods. A comparative analysis of these themes provides valuable insights into the construction of Xi'an's city image from different perspectives.

4.3.1 LDA Theme Comparison of Chinese, British, and American News Reporting (2000-2014)

Table 4. Comparative Scores of LDA Theme Keywords in Chinese, British, and American News Reporting (2000-2014).

2000-2014 British and American Media LDA Model Keyword Scores									
History (23.17%)		Belt and Road (12.37%)		Government Administration (24.17%)		Aerospace Technology (15.57%)		Urban Identity (22.22%)	
Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score
warrior	0.025	road	0.022	company	0.017	satellite	0.04	China	0.092
terracotta	0.017	silk	0.018	government	0.015	control	0.032	capital	0.052
museum	0.011	ancient	0.011	report	0.012	center	0.028	province	0.051
tomb	0.011	century	0.0088	church	0.0097	monitoring	0.016	Shaanxi	0.042
emperor	0.01	cultural	0.0068	hospital	0.0085	project	0.013	northwest	0.029
site	0.0099	call	0.0068	bank	0.0082	orbit	0.0099	Beijing	0.027

2000-2014 <i>China Daily</i> LDA Model Keyword Scores											
History and culture (21.5%)		Education (11.69%)		Administrative Division (17.68%)		Economy (12.36%)		Urban Connections (18.5%)		Government Administration (18.28%)	
Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score
terracotta	0.028	university	0.042	China	0.13	company	0.021	Beijing	0.063	director	0.023
warrior	0.024	student	0.035	Province	0.12	yuan	0.016	shanghai	0.056	improve	0.013
visit	0.012	school	0.017	Shaanxi	0.11	Develop-ment	0.013	city	0.047	work	0.011
relic	0.011	graduate	0.012	North-west	0.99	Invest-ment	0.011	Chengdu	0.035	Govern-ment	0.0088
horse	0.0096	college	0.11	capital	0.059	tech	0.011	Guang-zhou	0.031	local	0.0086
emperor	0.0084	Educa-tion	0.11	east	0.0086	industry	0.01	Shenyang	0.023	bureau	0.0074

As shown in Table 4, in 2000-2014, the topics in British and American media were government administration, history, urban identity, aerospace and aerospace technology. Among these, the government administration ranked first, reflecting the Xi'an Municipal Government's efforts in managing various social undertakings. Keyword "company" encompassed the government's endeavors to attract investments and promote economic development, such as the collaboration between the Xi'an High and New Technology Development Zone and the Huaxia Construction Company. The history topic prominently featured world-famous landmarks like the Terracotta Warriors and the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor, highlighting Xi'an's core status as a historical and cultural city.

During the same period, topics covered by *China Daily* included history and culture, urban connections, government administration, administrative divisions, and education. The history and culture (21.5%) encompassed topics such as the Terracotta Warriors and the Qin Dynasty. Compared to the symbolic representation in British and American media, *China Daily* digs deeper to their history and their popularity as tourist destinations. Urban connections and government administration followed closely at 18.5% and 18.28%, respectively. During this period, Xi'an was often mentioned alongside cities like Beijing and Shanghai as one of China's top-tier cities, as exemplified by statements such as, "The survey by the Horizon Group was conducted in November in seven cities of Beijing, Shanghai ... and Xi'an." The government

administration focused more on specific policies and measures, such as regulations aimed at improving the living conditions of foreigners.

By comparison, British and American media exhibited a more purpose-driven approach, focusing on China's growing comprehensive national strength. For instance, the aerospace technology (15.57%) frequently mentioned the Xi'an Satellite Monitoring and Control Centre. With the Belt and Road Initiative proposed in late 2013, significant attention from British and American media had been garnered, with coverage not only tracing its historical origins but also emphasizing its long-term development and impact. *China Daily*'s coverage was more comprehensive and objective, addressing areas such as education and economic development. For example, it reported on Xi'an Jiaotong University's establishment of a special class for gifted young students: "...Xi'an Jiaotong University has recruited students under the age of 15 for its Juniors' Class..." as well as foreign investment: "The US company is one of the first foreign companies that invested in Xi'an." Such differences indicate that Western media tend to simplify Xi'an's image as a historical and cultural city while remaining cautious about its future development. In contrast, Chinese media provide more holistic and multidimensional reporting, more accurately reflecting the complexity and diversity of Xi'an's coexistence of historical heritage and modern development.

4.3.2 Comparative Analysis of LDA Themes in Chinese and British, and American News Reports (2015-2024)

Table 5. Comparative LDA Theme Keyword Scores in Chinese and British, and American News Reports (2015-2024).

LDA Model Keyword Scores in British and American Media (2015-2024)									
B&R (32.68%)		Urban Transportation (18.46%)		Urban Development (11.54%)		Cultural Affairs (12.31%)		Public Health (20.77%)	
Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score
China	0.054	flight	0.073	company	0.049	warrior	0.0260	case	0.063
Tokayev	0.037	shanghai	0.036	construction	0.022	visit	0.0250	report	0.059
Kazakhstan	0.034	Guangzhou	0.028	steel	0.016	increase	0.0240	local	0.030
president	0.033	Beijing	0.027	implement	0.016	exhibition	0.0110	covid-19	0.029
central Asia	0.017	schedule	0.023	source	0.016	museum	0.0100	resident	0.022
relation	0.017	train	0.022	build	0.014	send	0.0085	measure	0.016
LDA Model Keyword Scores in <i>China Daily</i> (2015-2024)									
City Image (11.33%)		Public Health (21.65%)		History (15.14%)		B&R (13.6%)		Technology (15.31%)	
								Education (13.97%)	

Continued Table 5

Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score	Keyword	Score
Shaanxi	0.170	report	0.015	city	0.016	central	0.025	Develop-ment	0.025	university	0.021
province	0.160	people	0.014	cultural	0.012	Asia	0.024	yuan	0.017	service	0.016
North-west	0.120	case	0.014	ancient	0.012	country	0.022	zone	0.017	research	0.010
capital	0.020	covid-19	0.013	historical	0.008	summit	0.014	promote	0.015	Govern-ment	0.009
Chongqing	0.018	control	0.0079	tourist	0.008	exchange	0.014	technology	0.014	student	0.008
provide	0.013	official	0.0068	dynasty	0.007	hold	0.009	innovation	0.013	program	0.007

From 2015 to 2024, the thematic focus of British and American news media revolved around the Belt and Road Initiative, public health, urban transportation, cultural affairs, and urban development. Among these, the Belt and Road Initiative held the largest proportion, with emphasis on evaluations and attention from leaders of countries along the Belt and Road regarding Xi'an. Russia's Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev's visit is a typical illustration. With the outbreak of global public health events, British and American media focused on Xi'an's role in global issues, such as case reporting and government measures: "...mass testing its nearly 13 million residents...", highlighting the efforts of the Xi'an government.

In contrast, *China Daily's* topics encompassed public health, technology, history, the Belt and Road Initiative, education, and city image. In the realm of public health, emphasis was placed on institutions like the "Xi'an Center for Disease Control and Prevention" and the measures taken by them. Regarding history, Xi'an transformed its cultural heritage, such as the "Song of Eternal Sorrow", into tourist attraction (e.g., "...and one night we went to watch a Tang Dynasty show featuring impressive displays by dancers and singers"). Additionally, the development of technological innovation in Xi'an were highlighted, such as the establishment of "a 2 billion yuan special fund" by the Xi'an Economic and Technological Development Zone to invite investments in science and technology innovation.

In comparison, while the themes in British and American media between 2000 and 2014 deepened, replacing basic administrative affiliations with urban transportation and governance, there remained a tendency to portray China as an "other" in international affairs, focusing primarily on China's external image (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative) and global issues (e.g., COVID-19), while overlooking China's multidimensional internal

development. In contrast, *China Daily's* coverage was more diverse, encompassing Xi'an's economic development, education, technology, and other sectors, emphasizing the city as a blend of history and modernity.

5. Image Dilemma: The Colonization of the Other and the Fading of Self

Michel Foucault, in *The Discourse on Power*, posited: "Discourse is the manifestation of power, and the cultural force that controls the discourse of knowledge and power can achieve its dominant cultural position (1972)." As a pivotal medium of communication in the 21st century, news reporting plays a crucial role in the realization of national power and influence.

5.1 External Constructs: From "Orientalism" to "Neo-Colonialism"

Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, argued that Western media tends to reduce non-Western cultures to a system of "otherized" symbols (2003). In the media construction of Xi'an's city image, British and American media selectively extract symbols (e.g., emphasizing the Terracotta Warriors and the Silk Road), thereby solidifying Xi'an as a "static ancient city," diminishing its modernity and overlooking its comprehensive modern development. This "cultural essentialism" has led to a paradoxical perception of Chinese cities in the Western consciousness: depoliticized yet re-Orientalized.

Furthermore, the Western perception of the East is not based on genuine interaction but rather on an "otherized" imaginary system constructed through power relations. Within this system, cities are often categorized into hierarchical symbolic networks: core cities (e.g., Beijing, Shanghai) symbolize the economic and political power of "modern China," while peripheral cities (e.g., Xi'an) are fixed as cultural specimens of "traditional China." Analysis of this study's corpus reveals that British and American media exhibit a significant "dependent narrative" in their

coverage of Xi'an, with 14.25% of reports juxtaposing Xi'an with Beijing and Shanghai (e.g., "Popular routes include Beijing to Shanghai, Xian to Chengdu, Guangzhou to Nanning, Beijing to Hohhot, and Beijing to Taiyuan."), implying that Xi'an is merely an appendix to the "China narrative" rather than an independent entity. Simultaneously, Xi'an's symbolic function is reduced to a "historical reference point"—appearing as a contrast in reports on Beijing's political decisions or Shanghai's economic achievements (e.g., "While Shanghai drives innovation, Xian preserves China's ancient soul"), while its contemporary development issues (e.g., hard-tech industries) are systematically obscured. Western media also frequently employs terms such as "gateway to..." and "cradle of..." to position Xi'an as "the entry point to Chinese history" rather than a modern city with autonomous agency. Through contextual bundling, functional narrowing, and spatial metaphors, Western media further molds Xi'an into a tool for maintaining cultural superiority and discursive hegemony. On the other hand, as China rises, British and American media's efforts to disparage China's image have not ceased. Western media reconstructs infrastructure networks as vehicles of hegemony, stigmatizing the Belt and Road Initiative as "China's neo-colonialism." In reports on the China-Europe Railway Express, the "Iron Silk Road" is systematically replaced with the concept of "The New Continental Bridge." While this term ostensibly emphasizes physical connectivity, it implicitly evokes the colonial memory of the 19th-century American Transcontinental Railroad—analagizing China's technical standards to "the Pacific Railroad Company's land seizure from indigenous peoples," thereby completing the discursive substitution of "development for aggression."

5.2 Self-Constructs: "Brand China"

Joshua Cooper Ramo, a prominent American expert on China, proposed a national image communication strategy termed "Brand China." Ramo argued that to gain the trust of other countries and address negative perceptions, China needed to craft a "light-colored" national image—a paradoxical fusion of "water" and "fire" that embodies the essence

of harmonizing contradictions. He emphasized that China should build a mild and inclusive international image by downplaying ideological elements and amplifying cultural symbols (2007).

Ramo acknowledged and praised the concept of "harmony" in traditional Chinese culture. However, his "light-colored" proposition essentially advocates for "depoliticization" to erase China's competitive edge while retaining aspects of Chinese cultural values that align with Western expectations. Despite shifts in international news flows in the new century, China remains unable to escape its "otherized" image in the eyes of Western media (Zhao, Wang, & Wang, 2025).

The construction of this "otherized" image does not solely originate from the West; China's overseas-facing media has also not broken free from the cycle of "self-Orientalism." To cater to international audiences' imagination of the "mysterious East," domestic media actively exports Xi'an's historical symbols. Quantitative research on China Daily's coverage of Xi'an reveals that historical and cultural reports account for 32.9%, while technological innovation reports make up only 20.11%. This selective presentation systematically obscures Xi'an's modernity, forming a rigid symbolic chain of "Terracotta Warriors-ancient city walls-Giant Wild Goose Pagoda." Such "museum-style" narratives essentially reduce the city to a cultural specimen, allowing Western media to further appropriate it as a "cultural other."

6. Future Prospect: Building a Comprehensive Xi'an Image through Chinese Media

6.1 Expanding Reporting Content

Barthes' semiotics of culture emphasizes that the generation of meaning in symbols depends on the interaction of cultural contexts between encoders and decoders (1967). In conducting foreign publicity, Xi'an's symbolic production must break through the singular historical dimension and reconstruct international perception through the superposition of diverse symbols and metaphoric reconfiguration. For example, widely recognized dominant symbols such as the Terracotta Warriors and the city walls can be modernized by incorporating contemporary elements—such as "3D displays

of the Terracotta Warriors” or “Xi’an City Wall Marathon”—to create modern cultural IPs. Additionally, new industrial symbols should be introduced, such as increased promotion of “semiconductors,” “aerospace,” and “sponge city” initiatives in the fields of technology and ecological preservation, thereby constructing a composite label for Xi’an. Simultaneously, Xi’an should actively engage in global issues. For instance, within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, the discourse around the China-Europe Railway Express can be elevated from a “logistics channel” to a “cross-civilization dialogue platform.” By integrating into global issue platforms and reshaping their attributes, Xi’an can achieve cross-level agenda integration, breaking through the issue filtration imposed by Western media.

6.2 Expanding the “Circle of Friends”

Under the Western-dominated international communication order, China’s cultural dissemination to Western societies should not blindly follow or cater to the preferences of elite mainstream media. These media often operate within a framework of hostile bias toward China, making it difficult for China’s voice to be effectively conveyed. Instead, China must adopt a “grassroots approach,” targeting lower-tier Western populations and local grassroots institutions as its audience. By delving into the lives of ordinary people and finding common ground, Xi’an’s image can be propagated more effectively. Furthermore, a “South-South Cooperation News Network” should be established, collaborating with media outlets in Central and Southeast Asia to form a “New Silk Road Media Alliance.” Regular multilingual reports, such as the *Xi’an-Almaty Innovation Corridor Progress Report*, can dilute the centrality of British and American media and expand the dissemination of Xi’an’s positive image. Through a step-by-step process, the perceptions of Xi’an among people in the Global South can be transformed, while the influence of “Xi’an perspectives” in news can gradually impact ordinary citizens in Western countries, prompting them to change their biases. This approach facilitates the deconstruction of post-colonialism and fosters a comprehensive understanding of Xi’an.

7. Conclusions

This study analyzes the divergent portrayals of Xi’an’s city image across Chinese, British, and American media: while agenda innovation has achieved partial breakthroughs in thematic diversity and positive sentiment, it remains constrained by the hierarchical narratives of Orientalism, the stigmatization by British and American media, and the symbolic thinness of “Brand China.” The challenges Xi’an faces in international communication are essentially a microcosm of the global cultural power structure. Moving forward, China’s foreign media must construct a composite label for Xi’an, deepen the practice of “composite agendas,” and embed Xi’an’s technological and ecological issues into global agendas, thereby diluting Western centrism through South-South media alliances.

The “breaking out of the circle” for Xi’an’s image is not merely a matter of one city but serves as a testing ground for China to overcome international discourse hegemony. Only by transcending the “traditional-modern” binary and adopting a “deep-colored” strategy that integrates civilizational heritage with global values can China reconstruct a truly multifaceted and independent city identity in cross-cultural dialogues, providing a new paradigm for the image dissemination of developing-world cities.

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