

# A Study on China's Image Construction in the New Straits Times' Reportage of the South China Sea Based on Appraisal Theory

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**Abstract:** This study, grounded in the evaluative framework of the appraisal theory and employing corpus analysis methodology with the aid of AntConc 4.3.1, examines the evaluative construction of China's national image in the *New Straits Times'* news discourse on the South China Sea (SCS) issue. Findings reveal that the discourse in the newspaper's coverage portrays China as both cooperative and peaceful, yet also assertive and expansionist due to territorial disputes. In the attitude resource subsystem, judgment resources are the most prevalent, significantly outnumbering both affect and appreciation resources. Collectively, the reports contain a mix of positive assessments of China's economic growth and regional cooperation, alongside negative evaluations of its hardline stance in territorial disputes.

**Keywords:** Appraisal Theory; National Image; SCS Issue; News Reporting; Attitude Resources

## 1. Introduction

On the stage of international politics, the shaping and dissemination of a nation's image constitute the key production mechanism of soft power as a symbolic power. Particularly in today's era of highly developed global media, news reporting serves not only as a tool for information dissemination but also as a vital platform for constructing national image [1]. Among numerous international issues, SCS issue has become a focal point of global attention due to its complex geopolitical context and sensitivity, simultaneously emerging as a key arena for shaping China's national image. As Malaysia's primary official English daily newspaper, *New Straits Times* represents the government's stance and reflects official views [2]. Its coverage of SCS issue holds considerable influence on a global scale. Through these reports, China's image is presented to readers in Malaysia and worldwide, thereby shaping international

perceptions and attitudes toward China. Appraisal Theory, a powerful linguistic tool for analyzing attitudes and affect [3], provides a theoretically dynamic framework in functional linguistics for this study [4]. Therefore, this research employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, utilizing corpus tools and appraisal theory to conduct macro and micro analyses of the *New Straits Times'* reporting on SCS issue, exploring the constructed national image of China and the discourse strategies employed in the reports.

## 2. Overview of Appraisal Theory

Appraisal theory, a significant development in systemic functional linguistics, was originally proposed by James Martin during the 1990s, aiming to explore interpersonal meaning in discourse from a lexical perspective, and serves as an effective theoretical framework for positive discourse analysis [5,6]. It regards language as a means of evaluation, analyzing the language in the text to distinguish the views, positions, values, and attitudes of the discourse users towards events [7]. Appraisal theory consists of three main subsystems: attitude, engagement and gradation, which complement each other [8-12]. Among them, central to appraisal theory is the attitude system, which involves three dimensions: affect resources, judgment resources, and appreciation resources. Affect resources refer to an individual's emotional experiences and responses, such as happy, satisfaction, security, etc. Judgment resources refer to the evaluations made by discourse users based on social norms and ethical morals towards certain behaviors. When studying news media language, researchers conventionally categorize judgement resources into two principal types: social esteem, concerned with normality, capacity, and tenacity; and social sanction, concerned with veracity and propriety. They have both positive words, such as praise, and negative words, such as condemnation. Appreciation resources is a

system for evaluating products and processes, involving aesthetic principles and social value standards, formed from three aspects: reaction, composition, and valuation. They also have positive and negative distinctions, such as beauty and ugliness, profound and superficial, innovative and conservative, etc. This study will use the three dimensions of the attitude subsystem as a theoretical framework to explore and analyze how various attitude resources in SCS related reports of *New Strait Times* construct China's national image.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Research Questions

This study seeks to investigate the following research questions: How is China's national image discursively constructed in *New Straits Times*' coverage of SCS? What attitude resources are employed to construct evaluative stances toward China in these reports?

#### 3.2 Research Corpus

This study selects news reports on SCS issue published in *New Straits Times* from January 1, 2013, to December 31, 2023, as its corpus (comprising 631 news articles totaling 252,807 tokens). The reports cover various aspects of SCS issue, including geopolitical dynamics, international legal disputes, regional cooperation and conflicts, as well as the policies and stances of various countries. The study will annotate key vocabulary, expressions, and attitudes in the reports to identify and categorize evaluative resources such as affect, judgment, and appreciation. These reports not only reflect the attention paid by Malaysia and the international community to this regional hotspot issue but also provide rich data for analyzing the construction of China's national image.

#### 3.3 Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research to address the research questions. For the first research question, this study utilizes AntConc 4.3.1 corpus software to extract high-frequency word lists and employs the concordance function to thoroughly examine the co-textual patterns of these lexical items, thereby revealing the constructed image of China and the discursive strategies employed in the reports. For the second research question, the study continues to

employ corpus-based statistical analysis to examine the frequency and proportion of attitude resources, obtaining distribution data of attitude resources. Through case studies, it further elucidates how the reports in the *New Straits Times* shape China's image by leveraging the three dimensions of attitude resources.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 The Image of China Constructed in the *New Straits Times*' Coverage of SCS

Through analysis of high-frequency terms in the corpus, this study finds that *the New Straits Times* has constructed a complex and multifaceted image of China—one that encompasses both cooperative and peaceful dimensions, as well as assertive and expansionist tendencies stemming from SCS territorial disputes. A detailed analysis of these constructed images is presented below.

##### 4.1.1 A resolute advocate of maritime rights and territorial claims

Keywords such as “SCS,” “China,” “claim,” “sovereignty,” “defence,” “territorial,” and “dispute” appear frequently in the reports, highlighting China's asserted maritime entitlements and territorial claims across the SCS region. *New Straits Times* repeatedly mentions China's territorial assertions and extensive sovereignty claims in the SCS, fully demonstrating its firm stance regarding the safeguarding of national maritime interests and handling territorial disputes with neighboring countries. For example: “China claims virtually all of SCS, which includes busy sea lanes and rich fishing grounds, and is believed to have large undersea deposits of oil and natural gas (2015-4-28).” Here, the words “claims” and “virtually all” fully illustrate the scope and firmness of China's sovereignty assertions regarding the SCS. In addition, the “nine-dash line” claim regarding SCS is mentioned multiple times, demonstrating China's resolute attitude in upholding its territorial sovereignty.

##### 4.1.2 An economic and military superpower on the rise

Words such as “China,” “ASEAN,” “economic,” “military,” and “superpower” appear with high frequency in the selected news discourse of the *New Straits Times*, indicating that China, as an economic and military superpower on the rise, is increasingly interacting with ASEAN countries. China's economic influence and military

modernization are manifested at both regional and global levels. For example:

①	China has become the largest trading partner for Malaysia, Vietnam as well as Japan and South Korea.	June 5, 2013
②	In the coming five years, China will import US\$10 trillion worth of goods and China's overseas investment will reach US\$500 billion.	June 5, 2013
③	China is now more emboldened as US soldiers continue to recuperate from operational fatigue.	May 17, 2014
④	China's rise comes at a time when its biggest rival, the Frugal Superpower (after Michael Mandelbaum), is limping and retreating home.	May 17, 2014

**Figure 1. Quoted News Discourse on China's Economic and Military Rise**

As shown in Figure 1, example ① demonstrates China's significant position in the regional economy as a major trading partner for multiple countries. Example ② reveals the massive scale of China's economy and the influence of its overseas investment. Example ③, through a comparison of Chinese and American military conditions, shows China's military confidence and rise. Example ④, by contrasting China's rise with the relative decline of the United States, emphasizes China's superpower status. These reports employ a balanced narrative discourse that both expresses the growth of China's regional influence and highlights its economic contributions, while simultaneously demonstrating China's military strength.

4.1.3 An active promoter of international cooperation

High-frequency terms such as "Belt and Road Initiative," "cooperation/cooperative," "ASEAN," "integration," and "FTA" in the *New Straits Times'* coverage fully demonstrate China's active role in promoting international cooperation and its international and regional influence. For example:

It can be seen from Figure 2, example ① demonstrates China's strategic patience and leadership in breaking down barriers and deepening economic integration through pragmatic actions, even in a complex geopolitical environment. This posture of promoting regional development through connectivity and institutional cooperation conveys the image of a responsible, open, and

actively cooperative major country committed to advancing international collaboration. Example ② shows China's support for ASEAN's centrality in regional cooperation, reflecting China's rejection of dominance or exclusive influence in favor of achieving shared interests through inclusive mechanisms. This fully embodies China's philosophy of "promoting security through dialogue and stability through cooperation" in regional affairs, as well as its image as an active proponent of cooperative security. Example ③ expresses illustrates China's vision of working with other countries toward a better planet, reflecting its long-term commitment to global well-being. Such forward-looking, multilateral engagement positions China as an "active promoter of international cooperation"—inclusive and responsible. Example ④ demonstrates the active role China plays in international cooperation. In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China has strengthened relations with countries along the routes through infrastructure construction and economic cooperation, expanded China's international influence, and serves as a typical case of actively promoting international cooperation.

①	China is committed to promoting further regional economic integration through upgrading China Asean free trade agreement (FTA) and facilitating China-Japan-Korea FTA as well as regional comprehensive economic partnership and regional connectivity.	June 5, 2013
②	China will continue to be a proponent of cooperative security, and support Asean community building and Asean centrality in regional cooperation.	June 5, 2013
③	China is ready to work with all other countries to make our planet a better place to live.	April 2, 2015
④	China has also set up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to provide additional funding for infrastructure projects in the Asia-Pacific region with a paid-up capital of USD100 billion.	April 21, 2015

**Figure 2. Quoted News Discourse on China's International Cooperation**

4.1.4 A key player in geopolitical competition  
High-frequency terms such as "US," "China," "ASEAN," and "Malaysia" highlight the geopolitical competition between China and the US, as well as between China and ASEAN. As a key player, China's role on the global political stage is becoming increasingly significant, with

its actions and policies exerting profound impacts on regional security, economy, and politics. For example:

①	China happens to be the biggest and most important trading partner for most of the countries of Asean today.	February 18, 2013
②	Whether we realize it or not, today and in the near future the success of Asean's economies will depend on whether we can work out a feasible and stable economic partnership with the great giant of Asia. But in terms of our common security, Asean states remain beholden to the West, and the US, in particular.	February 18, 2013

**Figure 3. Quoted News Discourse on China's Geopolitical Role**

As shown in Figure 3, example ① emphasizes China-ASEAN economic interdependence, indicating China's pivotal role in the regional economy. Example ②, however, reveals that despite close economic relations with China, ASEAN countries remain dependent on Western countries, particularly the US, in terms of security and politics—demonstrating the competitive influence of China and the US in the region.

#### 4.1.5 A defender of international law and historical facts

In the coverage, high-frequency terms such as “UNCLOS”, “CoC”, “law,” and “historical facts” are closely related to China's efforts in safeguarding its historical rights and international legal status. For example:

①	China's position was clarified by Xu Hong, director-general of the Foreign Ministry's department of treaty and law. According to Xu, “China's sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea have formed and evolved over a long course of history. They are solidly grounded in history and law”.	January 1, 2015
②	China takes the position that the “international law applicable to maritime delimitation includes both the Convention (UNCLOS) and general international law.”	January 1, 2015
③	China's Foreign Ministry said the country would not accept any ruling from the court, accusing the Philippines of “political provocation under the cloak of law”.	November 12, 2015

**Figure 4. Quoted News Discourse on China's Legal and Historical Position**

As shown in Figure 4, example ① constructs China's image as a responsible guardian of order that respects history and upholds international rule of law, by emphasizing the dual foundations of its SCS claims in “long-standing historical facts” and “solid international legal grounds.”

Example ② reinforces its image as a rigorous and comprehensive defender of international law and historical facts through its dual-track legal stance that simultaneously upholds the authority of UNCLOS while incorporating general international law, thereby demonstrating both respect for modern treaty-based order and recognition of customary practices and historic rights. Example ③, meanwhile, demonstrates China's firm stance in defending its historical rights and international legal status.

## 4.2 Attitude Resources Analysis of the *New Straits Times*' SCS Coverage

### 4.2.1 General characteristics of attitude resources

**Table 1. Attitude Resource Distribution in *New Straits Times*' SCS Coverage**

Frequency & Proportion of Affect Resources	Frequency & Proportion of Judgement Resources	Frequency & Proportion of Appreciation Resources	Frequency & Proportion of Attitude Resources
571(21.8%)	1350(51.5%)	699(26.7%)	2620(100%)

According to the statistical data of Table 1, among the selected news reports in this study, judgement resources account for 51.5%, appreciation resources account for 26.7%, and affect resources account for 21.8%. Therefore, in terms of structure, the frequency and proportion of judgement resources are significantly higher than those of affect resources and appreciation resources. In terms of balance, the overall distribution of attitude resources exhibits an unbalanced characteristic. The specific distribution of these three resources in the coverage will be analyzed in detail below.

### 4.2.2 Analysis of affect resources

As previously mentioned, affect refers to emotional experiences and cognitive responses arising from psychological impacts on individuals. In the corpus of this study, affect resources constitute a relatively small proportion of the overall distribution of attitude resources. Within its subsystems, negative affect resources (95.4%) far exceed positive affect resources (4.6%). Negative affect resources are primarily manifested in concerns and anxieties regarding China's policies and actions, particularly concerning territorial disputes and military activities, while positive affect resources are mainly reflected in economic cooperation. This serves to construct China's image as a resolute advocate of maritime rights and territorial claims, as well as a rising power in economic and military terms. For example:

①	China's actions had "eroded trust and confidence, and may undermine peace, security and stability in the South China Sea".	April 29, 2015
②	Building on the growing strength and volume of bilateral trade, both countries have undertaken efforts to promote bilateral foreign direct investment. The Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) in Gebeng and its twin project, the Qinzhou Industrial Park in Guanxi Province are but two of the most visible and high profile ventures.	October 2, 2013

Figure 5. Quoted News Discourse on Affect Resources

As shown in Figure 5, example ① expresses concerns and negative evaluations regarding China's land reclamation and construction activities. Through this evaluation, it can be seen that the Malaysian government harbors biases toward China's policies and actions, failing to grasp the rationale for China's SCS construction activities, which aim to safeguard territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests more effectively, while facilitating maritime search and rescue, marine scientific research, navigational safety, and other public services to meet international needs. *The New Straits Times'* coverage somewhat deviates from the truth of the matter. Example ②, conversely, expresses a positive attitude toward the joint efforts of both countries to promote bilateral direct investment on the foundation of growing bilateral trade, and mentions two specific cooperative projects that enhance the positive image of cooperation while potentially stimulating interest from other countries in such partnerships.

4.2.3 Analysis of judgement resources

Judgement resources essentially refer to evaluations and judgments made regarding people or their behaviors—whether praise or criticism, commendation or condemnation [9,13]. In the corpus selected for this study, judgement resources are the most extensively used, accounting for 51.5%, with negative judgement resources (83.9%) far exceeding positive ones (16.1%). In terms of internal structure, "social esteem" (75.76%) significantly outweighs "social sanction" (24.24%). This is because news reports generally prioritize narrating events to readers rather than adjudicating right and wrong. Regarding social esteem, the largest proportion in the *New Straits Times'* coverage is "tenacity" (55.36%), followed by "capacity" (43.65%), with

"normality" (0.99%) being minimal and negligible in its role in constructing national image. In terms of social sanction, "propriety" (79.9%) far exceeds "veracity" (20.1%), primarily because the events or statements reported have already occurred, thus requiring little emphasis on the authenticity of the content. For example:

①	China is determined to (tenacity) dominate the South China Sea as its "own internal lake".	May 17, 2014
②	China's ongoing reclamation activities in the South China Sea are a cause for environmental concern, given their potential to destroy (propriety) the little-explored pristine coral reefs of the Spratlys.	May 11, 2015
③	China can stop (capacity) the US from interfering in its dispute with the Southeast Asian nations if it stops muscling its way in the South China Sea.	July 26, 2020

Figure 6. Quoted News Discourse on Judgement Resources

According to Figure 6, in Example ① the discourse demonstrates China's strong will and actions to treat SCS as its "internal lake," determined to establish dominance in the region to keep competitors at bay. Example ② conveys serious concerns about the potential environmental damage caused by China's artificial island construction in SCS, particularly regarding the impact on the Spratly Islands' coral reefs—essentially questioning the propriety of such activities. In Example ③, the news discourse author suggests that if China changes its assertive behavior in SCS, the US would lack any plausible justification to intervene in the disputes. While this example portrays China as a key geopolitical participant, it employs strategic dependency logic within the news discourse to bundle bilateral China-Malaysia issues into Sino-US and Asia-Pacific strategic games, attempting to attract international attention to and discursive suppression of China's actions in SCS. Through analysis, all three examples above exhibit bias in the coverage, which is detrimental to the construction of China's international image.

4.2.4 Analysis of appreciation resources

Appreciation resources primarily involve evaluations of objects based on aesthetic principles and social value standards [9]. In the corpus selected for this study, positive appreciation resources (93.6%) far exceed negative ones (6.4%). Within its subsystems, the

largest proportion of appreciation resources in the *New Straits Times* is reaction (53.33%), followed by valuation (30.12%), and finally composition (16.54%). The appreciation resources in the coverage are mainly manifested in recognition of China’s economic development and contributions to regional cooperation. For example:

①	For Malaysia, it was far better to welcome (reaction) China as a full participant in Asean-led forums to “socialize” the rising power than to prematurely pursue a counter-productive policy of diplomatic isolation.	February 5, 2014
②	But we (Asean) have delivered a message to China, very clearly (composition), that we want this to be speeded up, and hopefully, they will give a positive response.	April 25, 2015
③	On the region, China wanted to further promote (valuation) regional economic integration and this included the China-Asean free trade agreement.	June 5, 2013
④	Our cooperation is aimed not only at creating broad horizon and inexhaustible business opportunities for ourselves but also at making greater contribution (valuation) to world prosperity and stability.	October 2, 2013

**Figure 7. Quoted News Discourse on Appreciation Resources**

It can be seen from Figure 7 that example ① reflects Malaysia’s tendency to adopt pragmatic and forward-looking strategies in handling relations with China, emphasizing the promotion of regional peace and stability through cooperation and dialogue rather than handling differences through diplomatic isolation. This fully demonstrates Malaysia’s flexibility in regional diplomacy and its strategic thinking. Example ② is a statement by the Malaysian Foreign Minister, expressing their clear yet cautious attitude in diplomatic communication with China. Here, it emphasizes both their unified position and their expectation to accelerate the implementation of the CoC (Code of Conduct) process, while hoping for a positive response from China. Example ③ expresses affirmation of China’s efforts in promoting regional integration. Example ④ not only expresses the commercial value of cooperation but also emphasizes the important role of cooperation in promoting global prosperity and

stability.

### 5. Conclusion

Employing a mixed-methods design that integrates corpus-assisted quantitative analysis with Appraisal Theory-based qualitative examination, this study analyzes the *New Straits Times*’ SCS coverage to investigate the image of China constructed in these reports. The attitude resources in the coverage reveal a dual perspective toward China—encompassing both positive evaluations of its economic growth and regional cooperation, and negative assessments of its assertive stance in territorial disputes. This complex image construction reflects the international community’s complicated response to China’s rise, while simultaneously providing new insights into understanding how media coverage influences national image. Furthermore, this study focuses exclusively on the attitude system to deeply analyze the discursive strategies employed in national image construction in the *New Straits Times*’ SCS coverage; it is hoped that future researchers may continue in-depth investigations from the perspectives of the engagement and graduation systems.

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