The Framing Perspective on the Discourse Construction of Chinese and Western Mainstream Media on the Xinjiang Cotton Dispute

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ABSTRACT

The dispute between China and western countries over Xinjiang cotton attracted attention from international media. There were many news reports about this issue arising in March 2021. News is a typical ideological discourse (Liu, 2016). This study attempts to unveil the relationship between language use and ideology by employing critical discourse studies (CDS) through keyword analysis, aiming at revealing the linguistic patterns in framing the dispute by different news report from three different media, namely China Daily, BBC and VOA. This study found that these media represented the issue in an objective tone, using both lexical tools and (in)direct quotations to constitute a perspectivization strategy. BBC and VOA used palpable allegations of the so-called "human rights violation" and ignorance of China's contribution to the world economy. While China Daily used a more positive tone and projected it as politicalizing business issues, defining the so-called "human rights violation" as an ideological one held by the anti-China forces, and revealed the devastating impacts on every sides.

Key words: framing theory, discourse construction, mainstream media, Xinjiang Cotton Dispute

INTRODUCTION

- **Research background**

With the rapid development of countries and increasing globalization, newspapers, online and offline, play more significant roles in delivering and spreading information worldwide. By constructing concepts, identities or images, news aims to set up some special representation of certain foreign groups or countries in various fields ranging from society, economy, cultures, politics to nature and daily life. In those productions and circulations, journalists not only present information, but also "construct" the so-called reality and interpretation through corresponding evidence, through which the news will present a particular consideration of the situation and then report evidence to strengthen, legitimize, and naturalize the interpretation (Erjavec, 2001). It is also common that by creating realities and constructing identities and images, news media aims to set up norms and common sense about people, communities, institutions and the world around to promote a specific world view or ideology (Fürsich, 2010).

The Xinjiang cotton issue has attracted close attention in 2021, as some western companies, including H&M and Nike, have decided not to use the cotton that is produced in Xinjiang autonomous region. After that,

news themed Xinjiang cotton issue came out in mass media both in China and in western countries, displaying how an economic problem finally can be framed into a political event. This study aims to show how authentic Chinese and foreign newspapers frame the issue differently and what are the underlying or possible reasons that lead to the differences.

- **Literature review**

It has been widely acknowledged that news media play an essential and indispensable role in shaping public perception of issues (Liu & Li, 2017). However, news in all its forms is seldom a value-free reflection of the facts (Fowler, 1991; Van Dijk, 1988). In addition, due to the inevitable process of "discursive simplification" (Fairclough, 2005: 55), it is practically impossible for any news discourse to be fully independent or impartial. For example, El-Nashar (2014) conducted a qualitative and quantitative linguistic analysis of the news reports published in The New York Times (NYT) covering the January 25th and June 30th events to investigate the patterns that are used and reused by media to frame the events in a particular way. The findings indicate that the NYT has exhibited bias against the June 30th event linguistically, meta-linguistically and computationally. Wang (2018) compared official Chinese news reports on air pollution over the span of two time periods. The corpus-assisted CDA of how air pollution was reported in the official Chinese English-language press revealed how an official, state-run newspaper —— in this case, China Daily, employed discoursal strategies to construct news reports that support the objectives and policies of the Chinese central government. With selective use of discoursal devices (i.e. the use of evaluative words and general/specific words) and news framing (i.e. the purposeful selection and omission of some facts), China Daily successfully constructed a more positive public image of the Chinese central government as a responsible and decisive actor regarding air pollution.

Since news discourse is not a mere reflection of the problems that occur in daily life, but rather is socially produced, manufactured or constructed (Hansen, 1991, 2010), a series of research has been committed to the study of how news is represented, or more precisely, framed by media and what an influence media framing may have on readers. Multiple studies found that media framing not only has an important influence on the public's perception of news content (Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007), but also drives attitudes and ultimately behaviors ranging from political cynicism to electoral support (e.g., Scheufele, 1999; Shah et al., 2004; Zaller, 1992). In a study, Brinson and Stohl (2012) exposed a total of 371 American participants to one of two frames to test their effect on public attitudes towards civil liberties and Muslims, and support for counterterrorism policies. Results show that the "domestic home grown" frame produces greater increases in fear than the ''international'' frame. This leads to greater support for restricting civil liberties of Muslims and, under certain circumstances, general feelings of negativity toward Muslims.

Because the framing of media messages does contribute to people's attitudes and levels of support for related policies, it is especially interesting as well as important to investigate the representations of a given issue by news media from different origins. Previous studies have exposed some significant findings as regards the representations of different media of the same issue. For example, in a study, Xie systematically examined and compared how the US and Chinese newspapers portrayed climate change. The results show both convergent and divergent pictures from the two countries' newspapers shaped distinctly by the sociopolitical realities in both countries. Chen and Wang (2020), using the approach of corpus-assisted discourse, examined how leading English language newspapers from the U.S. (NYT: New York Times) and China (CD: China Daily) discursively constructed the issue of Sino-U.S trade dispute. The findings indicated that while NYT tended to profile the trade conflict as a "war" in line with mainstream hardline ideologies that emphasize China's presumed threat to national security of the U.S., CD sought to dial down the rhetoric and showed a preference for defining the matter as a "friction", consistent with the tenet of "pragmatic nationalism" endorsed by the Communist Party of China.

- **Research significance and purpose**

Since media always frame news messages in an implicit way through their use of language, it is especially essential to reveal the linguistic tools media usually use to control the minds of readers to help readers sufficiently understand media manipulation of event. Partington (2015) suggested that a comparative perspective is necessary for discourse analysis, because it can reveal some discursive features that might otherwise be ignored. In view of this, the present study, aiming to contribute to the growing literature of studies on media report of conflicts, compares the framing of discourse related to Xinjiang Cotton in Chinese (CD), American (VOA) and British (BBC) newspapers. By borrowing the analytic framework proposed by Entman, the present study intends to answer the following research questions:

- What aspects do CD, VOA and BBC focus on respectively in discursively constructing this dispute?
- What linguistic patterns does each newspaper employ to frame the Xinjiang cotton dispute in congruence with their respective socio-political concerns?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing theory

Analysis of frames helps people to understand how we transfer information from one location of speech, discourse, news report, or novel to one's consciousness. In Entman's (1993) opinion, framing is mainly about selection and salience of information in a text. To frame is to choose some aspects of an issue and highlight them to improve the problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation in the communication. A single sentence may or may not have one of the four functions, and each of the four functions is not always found in the same text.

In the four locations of the communicators, the text, the receiver, and the culture, framing plays an important role in selecting and highlighting, foregrounding the argument of a problem and its causation, evaluation and/or solution with the help of salient elements.

Frames make some aspects of the subject of a communication more prominent and salient. Salience means "making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences." (Entman, 1993) Thus, the increase of the salience of some pieces of information in a text will probably help the receiver to recognize, understand and memorize the information. (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)

Frames could lead the audiences and make them have different reactions to the same reality through highlighting or obscuring some information of an issue. In politics, framing is an important way for politicians to pursue support and compete with other politicians. (Entman, 1989; Riker, 1986)Frames in a text exert their power to express the concerns and interests of the politicians or journalists and influence the audiences.

Zaller (1992), Kahneman and Tversky (1984), and Iyengar (1991) propose that in most cases when reading social or political articles, people are probably comply with the frames embedded in the texts without the equipment of enough information or cognitive ability. Thus, framing has a critical influence on the audiences of the texts in interpreting the problem, the cause and the remedies of the issue.

Framing theory is helpful for content analysis. Entman (1993) says that the most important task of comprehending a text is to identify and describe the frames and the lack of the guidance of frames will lead to the misrepresentation of media messages in terms of journalists and audiences respectively.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Van Dijk (2001) states that CDA mainly studies the ways in which social power abuse, domination and inequality are formulated, copied and resisted by texts and conversations in a social and political context. In other words, it is not just analysis for analysis's sake; the goal may be to show how textual features are used in certain patterns, or to show stylistic or genre features. The ethical aspect of the CDA approach lies in its attempt to reveal the subtle manipulations of language, provide readers with the necessary tools to become aware of hidden meanings in discourse, expose inequalities and promote democratic societies.

Some scholars define discourse as a linguistic unit above a sentence. This is known as the formalist or structuralist definition of discourse. In this theory, the way words relate to each other to generate meaning is the main research point. The second approach to understanding discourse is a functionalist approach to language. This view views discourse as "language in use". "Functionalists assume that language is active, and discourse analysis is the analysis of what people do with language" (Richardson, 2007).

In critical discourse analysis, ideology is a pivotal element, as CDA attempts to explore how ideas are presented in texts. A fundamental concern of CDA is that ideology is defined as the interface between social structure and social cognition (Van Dijk, 1998). Ideology functions as a symbolic system of ideas used to organize, maintain and stabilize specific forms of power relations (Hall, 1997b; Van Dijk, 1998). CDA helps to identify both explicit and implicit forms of ideology behind the data in question.

Fowler (1991) points out that the economic environment dominates the ideological role of newspapers. This, he argues, is because most of these newspapers are owned by individuals and companies, which are commercial enterprises that usually sell a variety of products and services in addition to newspapers.

Therefore, different linguistic tools are used to analyze discourse by different scholars (Fairclough 1995, 2003; Fowler 1991; Richardson 2007; Wodak 2001). Fowler (1991), applying Halliday linguistics, argues that language has three functions: ideational, representational and textual.

The ideational function of language gives people the ability to communicate their understanding of phenomena, representing problems. The representational function of language helps a person develop relationships and clarify their commitments and values. Textual functions make discourse possible by establishing connections between text and the context in which the text exists. Fowler's (1991) approach focuses on the nature of transitivity, sentence transformation, especially through using of clauses, and the lexical structure of sentences, which are the main tools that this paper will employ.

METHODOLOGY

Corpus of the study

The study adopts a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach which emphasizes the combination of quantitative corpus linguistic methods with qualitative discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008; Partington, 2004, 2015). CDA approach makes the detailed analysis of texts and the explication of the social context of language use, with which the ideologies behind media discourse in view of the latter's role in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power can be exposed (Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991; Van Dijk, 1998).

To find different ideologies on Xinjiang Cotton issue, the study focuses on the analysis of texts from VOA, BBC, and China Daily (CD). Because there are limited reports on the latest issue, the present study chooses three texts, each from one newspaper, but they are the news on the same stage of the issue, mainly about the

boycott taking place in China as the opposition against some companies, like H&M Co, Ltd.

China Daily (CD), the largest national English-language newspaper in China, serves the primary function of communicating the stances of the Chinese government to the world (Liu, 2015, 2017). As Mody put, CD features a reporting style which is considered most similar to the Anglo-American reporting style among Chinese newspapers (2010), so it is easy and reasonable to make a comparative study of the textual analysis. The reasons why VOA and BBC are selected are that they are widely identified as professional news-reporting companies and have a worldwide influence, and even they give continuous attention and reports on Xinjiang Cotton.

Three texts are built into the corpus after a manual elimination of some irrelevant information in the news texts, such as copyright, load date and byline.

Data collection and analysis

Due to the limited number of texts, the study prefers the manual operation rather than using the corpus-analysis tools, such as Antconc, Wordsmith 5. Corpus linguistics methods which provide values in keyword, concordance and collocate analysis to the discourse analysis. Keywords refer to words which are statistically more frequently used in one corpus when compared with their use in a secondary or general corpus (Baker, 2006). They can be ranked in a keyword list by their keyness values, which are based on the calculation of loglikelihood. Therefore, the researchers manually identify keywords throughout three texts and base the discourse analysis on keywords.

According to Entman, news frames can be "manifested by the presence and absence of certain keywords" (1993: 52), the study further examines how these keywords contribute to the ways of framing Xinjiang Cotton issue. The ways of framing an issue carry significant ideological meanings because they can encourage understandings of the issue through selecting and highlighting some aspects of it (Alexander, 2010; Haarman and Lombardo, 2009; Touri and Koteyko, 2015). The study views ideology as "the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group" (Van Dijk, 1998: 8), and aims to examine ideologies by taking a close look at the social representations.

Based on Entman's farming, these keywords are then selected and categorized into four functions (Entman, 1993).

1. Problem definition: keywords concerning the nature of the problem;
2. Cause: keywords suggesting the causes of the problem;
3. Consequence: keywords pointing to the consequences of the problem;
4. Solution/action: keywords indicating possible solutions/actions to the problem.

Qualitative analysis are further conducted on the categorized keywords in their specific context to determine their contributions to the representations of Xinjiang Cotton issue in the corpora.

FINDINGS

Problem definition

Table 1. Selected keywords related to problem definition

CD		VOA		BBC	
Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.
politicizing business issues	2	No		No	

so-called human rights issues	1				
so-called business decisions	1				
the normal business operations	1				

Table 1 shows the keywords of problem definition in the covering of China Daily, VOA and BBC. In terms of the table, it seems that VOA and BBC didn't mention any words related to problem definition, but they did it through the context.

Extract 1:

China firmly opposes any sanction imposed on individuals or entities based on the pretext of so-called human rights issues in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, and companies involved should avoid politicizing business issues, a spokesman for the Ministry of Commerce said on Thursday. (CD, Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

Extract 2:

With regard to the so-called business decisions made by certain foreign companies based on erroneous information, Chinese consumers have responded with concrete actions, he said. (CD, Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

Extract 3:

"We hope these companies will respect the law of the market, rectify their erroneous actions and avoid politicizing business issues," Gao said. (CD, Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

Extract 4:

Gao, the Commerce Ministry spokesman, also made it clear that the Chinese government always welcomes and supports the normal business operations of transnational corporations in China and their efforts to build industrial and supply chains. (CD, Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

In CD's report, the terms of "so-called human rights issues", "so-called business decisions", and "the normal business operations" from Extrat1,2 and 4 convey the same meaning— the denial of what the western media describe about the Xinjiang Cotton issue, implying that what the organization BCI and the individual company such as H&M, Nike, et. did is not a normal business issue. In addition, the words of "politicizing business issues" from Extract1 and 3 is a clear definition of the Xinjiang Cotton issue, labeling its in-depth significance— the actions and declarations of the foreign companies and organization are not pure business actions, involved in some political factors in carrying out sanctions because of forced labor or something like that. Through the words of "the normal business operations" in Extract 4 indicates that China favors the business without politicizing.

Extract 5:

China is accused of committing serious human rights violations against Uighurs in Xinjiang. Beijing denies this and has hit back with retaliatory sanctions on European lawmakers, scholars and institutions – with the latest imposed on UK entities and individuals on Friday. (BBC, Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows)

In BBC's report, named *Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows*, the words of "serious human rights violations" are clearly presented, which indicates the stance of BBC and the ideology that it stands for. BBC explicitly related Xinjiang cotton, merchandise, to human rights, a concept of

ideology, even though it used the words of "is accused of", because in the next sentence, it elaborated that China hit it back with business sanctions on western businesses— this is what BBC wanted to convey to the audience.

Extract 6:

BEIJING – Chinese state TV called Thursday for a boycott of H&M as Beijing lashed out at foreign clothing and footwear brands following Western sanctions on Chinese officials accused of human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region. (VOA, China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang)

In VOA's report, there is no clear definition of the Xinjiang Cotton issue, but in Extract 6, VOA conveyed the information that China launch business attack because of some political actions of Western sanctions on Chinese officials without mentioning it was the western organization and companies combined the ideology of human rights with the sourcing of Xinjiang cotton at the beginning. It implied that China mixed business and politics, so actually VOA has its own stance, too. It apparently described the news fairly behind a veil of its stance—criticizing China enforced business boycott regarding political actions. Besides, its title "China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang" also shows its stance. China stands for government, "Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands" stands for the western businesses—a government "attacks" some western businesses, so this title actually attacked Chinese government which politicalized business without mentioning the supporting details.

In short, the news reports of CD, VOA and BBC show their own stance and ideology in the reporting through criticizing the other side committing politicalizing business issues. CD specified the expression, while VOA and BBC implied it through context.

Causal interpretation

Table 2. Selected keywords related to causal interpretation

CD		VOA		BBC	
Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.
Forced labor	3	Forced labor	3	Forced labor	2
Human rights	1	Human rights	5	Human rights	3
politicizing	3	abuses	4	abuse	2
yardsticks	1	Work camps	1	violation	1
lies	1	mistreat	1	ethics	1
information	3				
misunderstanding	1				

Table 2 showcases the keywords related to the causal interpretation of the sanctions on Xinjing cotton use in the news coverage of China Daily, VOA and BBC. As can be seen, three news reports share two keywords: *forced labor* and *human rights*. However, a close examination reveals that the three media have different ways of evaluating *forced labor* and *human rights*.

- Take *forced labor* for example. In China Daily, it was modified by *so-called* to downplay the authenticity of *forced labor*. For instance,

Extract 7:

*"The **so-called forced labor** in Xinjiang is **nonexistent** and **entirely imaginary**. The spotless white Xinjiang*

cotton brooks no slander," Ministry of Commerce spokesman Gao Feng said on Thursday at a news conference in Beijing.

In Extract 7, CD used the language pattern denoting relational process. Halliday (2000) sub-categorized the relational processes into attributive relational process and identifying relational process. This is an attributive relational process which was used to describe the quality and the attributes of the *so-called forced labor*, which is *nonexistent* and *entirely imaginary*.

Other collocates with *forced labor* included *accusations* or *allegations*, which unlike facts, leave room for them to turn out to be false. The context word *fabricated* further pointed out that *forced labor* is something that doesn't exist and was coined by an interest group to achieve their immoral purposes. This can be shown in the following extract:

Extract 8:

*Since the quality of Xinjiang cotton ranks among the best in the world, the companies that choose not to use it are losing out, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at a daily news briefing on Thursday. In addition, she said, **accusations** of **"forced labor"** in Xinjiang are fabricated by anti-China forces to contain China's development.*

Moreover, in Extract 8, quotation marks were put on *forced labor*. It is generally known that quotation marks are used to indicate a quotation or to emphasize a statement. Here, the employment of quotation marks not only means *forced labor* is just an expression borrowed from others instead of a fact that CD admits, but also delivers a sense of sarcasm and irony since the function of emphasizing inherent to quotation marks makes the negative information more salient.

With the tools of collocates and punctuations, *forced labor* is framed in CD as something that is fabricated by opposing countries as a weapon to deter China's development and the countries, individuals and entities sanctioning Xinjiang cotton use are constructed as a negative "Other".

By contrast, in VOA's reportage, the absence of collocate with "forced labor" is worth noting. For example:

Extract 9:

*The Global Times said Burberry, Adidas, Nike and New Balance also made "cutting remarks" about Xinjiang cotton. A separate Global Times report cited what it said was a statement by Zara that it had a "zero-tolerance approach towards **forced labor**." Or it is collocated with report (as in Extract 6).*

Extract 10:

*The ruling Communist Party criticized H&M for saying in March 2020 it would stop buying cotton from the northwestern Chinese region. The Swedish retailer joined other brands in expressing concern about reports of **forced labor** there.*

The combined ways portray *forced labor* as a fact in readers' mind. However, VOA also quoted a Commerce Ministry spokesman who used the modifier of *so-called* in front of *forced labor*, and the sentence pattern of relational process characterized it as *fictitious* (as shown by Extract 11). This, on the one hand, boosts the objectivity of the news report by quoting different sources, but on the other hand, the authenticity of the quotation is downgraded by the journalist's comment *"but did not say what they were expected to do"* to fit the stereotype of Chinese officials who usually practice empty talks but no walks.

Extract 11:

*"The **so-called** existence of **forced labor** in the Xinjiang region is totally **fictitious,**" said a Commerce Ministry spokesman, Gao Feng. He called on foreign companies to "correct wrong practices" <u>but did not say what they were expected to do</u>.*

However, BBC differed a little bit in terms of its accounting of *forced labor*. First, the same collocate like *allegations* can also be found in BBC's reportage about *forced labor*, but besides *allegations*, there is " *increasing risks"* put together with *forced labor*. One sample sentence was chosen as follows:

Extract 12:

*BCI said in October it had suspended activities in Xinjiang as well as licensing of the region's cotton, citing **allegations** and **"increasing risks"** of **forced labour**, according to the cached version of a statement that is no longer accessible on the BCI website.*

Extract 12 shows that the attitude BBC adopts is relatively neutral compared with CD and VOA, since the use of *allegations* suggests that *forced labor* is not a fact and may turn not to be false, but the use of *increasing risks*, which is usually used with something that has already happened, implies this is quite possibly a fact.

- The other common key word is *"human rights"*. But in CD's report, *human rights* occurs only once and is modified by *so-called*, which means to say it's something that doesn't exist (as can be seen in Extract 13). The collocate with it is *issues,* as the opposite of *business issues*. Xinjiang cotton was originally a business issue, but because of the *politicizing* of companies involved, it transformed into human rights issues. For instance:

Extract 13:

*China firmly opposes any sanction imposed on individuals or entities based on the pretext of **so-called human rights issues** in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, and companies involved should avoid **politicizing business issues**, a spokesman for the Ministry of Commerce said on Thursday.*

As CD seemed to ascribe the sanction primarily to some underlying ideological reasons, notably *politicizing* and *measuring others by their own yardsticks*, the "politicizing" frame was set up and naturally words like *lies*, *information* and *misunderstanding* followed to delegitimate other countries' *accusations* and *allegations* as *erroneous actions* based on *lies* and f*alse information* and should be *rectified*. For instance:

Extract 14:

*Shi Yi was among those shopping at the H&M store on Thursday afternoon. "When I studied in Australia, I often heard news with **false information** about China. The locals really fell for **rumors** like that. Foreign countries do have **misunderstandings** about China. But I may keep buying H&M clothes," the 20-year-old said.*

What's interesting is in western media's reportage, *human rights* are collocated with *abuses*, *violation*, and put together with words like *work camps*, and *mistreat*. For example:

Extract 15:

*More than 1 million people in Xinjiang, most of them from predominantly Muslim **ethnic groups**, have been confined to **work camps**, according to foreign researchers and governments. Beijing denies **mistreating***

*them and says it is trying to promote economic development and stamp out **radicalism**. (VOA: China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang)*

Extract 16:

*China is accused of committing serious **human rights violations** against Uighurs in Xinjiang. (BBC: Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows)*

Even though *mistreating* and *radicalism* are things China *denies* or tries to *stamp out*, the establishment of forced labor as a fact in the previous text makes the denial incredible.

In Extract 15, most people in Xinjiang are especially pointed out as "from predominantly Muslim ethnic groups" to construct the cotton dispute under the frame of ethics issue. The combination of words like ethnic groups, work camps, mistreat, radicalism may evoke in western readers the schema of human rights abuse and stand to offer a strong justification for sanctioning Xinjiang cotton.

For another example:

Extract 17:

*That's become even more salient in the era of Xinjiang abuses. Some see it as simply **Sales vs Ethics**; they choose which side to come down on. Others try to find a way to achieve both. (BBC: Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows)*

In Extract 17, the conflict or confrontation between China and other countries is delineated as that between **sales** vs **ethics**, implying that those who don't sanction Xinjiang cotton use choose sales, profits, economic interests at the sacrifice of ethics, equality, and human rights.

Besides the lexical tools, all the three media used indirect or direct quotation to constitute a perspectivization strategy which not only indicated the positioning of the journalist (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 33), but also added objectivity to the news report. The skillfully combined use of this strategy and the statement made the journalist's opinion of the journalist more persuasive to the reader. But CD should learn from VOA and BBC to diversify its sources. The sources whose words or opinions were quoted as saying in CD included the spokesman for the Ministry of Commerce Gao Feng, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying and netizens like Fu Dan, a 27-year-old surnamed Zhang, and Shi Yi. However, the lack of the voice of independent scholars or researchers or people in opposing countries will be counted as propaganda, as is shown in Extract 18.

Extract 18:

*Comments on the internet cited clothing brands Uniqlo of Japan and The Gap of the United States as other possible offenders. It was unclear how many of those accounts were members of the public and how many were run by the **ruling party's vast propaganda apparatus.** (VOA: China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang)*

In summary, CD showed an inclination to position the issue at an abstract level and reduce the conflicts to some ideologies (e.g. politicizing) held by the anti-China forces. By using such abstract terms, details about the identities of the cotton-laborers and the reasons why they chose to pick cotton were blurred. Instead, VOA and BBC tried to boost objectivity of their causal interpretation of the issue as human rights violation by giving concrete words like *work camps* and *ethnic groups* and more importantly, by quoting sources ranging from people taking their stand to people in China who hold opposite opinions, and from people with

more independent backgrounds such as research or business.

Moral evaluation/consequences

Table 3 Selected keywords related to consequences interpretation

CD		VOA		BBC	
Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.
H&M	10	H&M	16	H&M	6
BCI	2	BCI	1	BCI	3
companies	10	companies	4	companies	1
consumer/customer	4	consumer	3	consumer/customer	2
social media	3	social media	3	digital map	1
business	3	abuse	3	abuse	2
shares	3	attack	3	ethic	2
remove	3	impose	2	vanish	2
support	2	pressure	2	impose	2
suspend	1	distance	2	disappear	1
dignity	1	missing	1	suspend	1
patriotism	1			erase	1

Table 3 shows selected keywords related to moral evaluation/consequences represented by the three newspapers. All of them discussed the fallout or consequence of Xinjiang cotton affair, and from the common selected keywords, they all show great concern of the affair and its impacts in the economic aspects. H&M (is of the greatest frequency) and BCI as the most representative company and organization appear in all three newspapers, together with other related companies and consumers. As the issue of Xinjiang cotton directly influences the company's selling and consumers' buying. Similarly, all newspapers affirm the significant role and results that social media played and obtained in the whole process. However, there are obvious differences in description of concrete consequences those actors receive.

Extract 15:

As of Wednesday evening, H&M products had been removed from all major Chinese e-commerce platforms, including Taobao and JD. (CD: Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

Extract 16:

H&M products were missing from China's most popular e-commerce platforms, Alibaba Group's TMall and JD.com. (VOA: China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang)

Extract 17:

In just 24 hours H&M has been all but erased from China's digital world; you can't buy its tops and dresses on the biggest online retail platforms. (BBC: Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows)

The three extracts here describe the same thing of removement of H&M products from some major e-commerce platforms. CD and BBC both use passive voice, which is common in news especially "when the actions come to negative situation or related to political parties or politicians" (Quasim, 2019, p.157).

However, the choices of lexical words are different. H&M products in CD are just "removed" but the company is "erased" in BBC, indicating different degree of implementation on purpose or not based on the definition of to "erase" in Longmen dictionary of "getting rid of something so that it has gone completely and no longer exists". What's more, VOA uses the active form of "were missing", but the specialty here is the word "missing" which mainly refers to the status of being invisible and unsure. Obviously, according to the lexical and grammatical features here, BBC and VOA of seriousness for H&M is much higher, while CD shows the lighter degree.

Extract 18:

BCI announced that it would suspend cooperation with licensed farmers in Xinjiang during the 2020-21 cotton season over allegations of forced labor in the region. (CD: Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

Extract 19:

Chinese athletic shoe brand ANTA announced it was pulling out of BCI, the industry cotton group. (VOA: China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang)

Extract 20:

BCI said in October it had suspended activities in Xinjiang as well as licensing of the region's cotton, citing allegations and "increasing risks" of forced labour.(BBC: Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows)

While CD and BBC all mentioned the results of BCI's active role of suspension, different collocations are used. On CD, CBI "announced" to "suspend" the "cooperation" while on BBC, it "said" to "suspend" just related "activities". The attitude of BCI is more diplomatic, formal and friendly on CD while it is more casual and less formal on BBC. The former shows the good will towards harmonious relationship of Chinese people, while the latter shows business is just business. This can be further explained from the aspect of high and low context in two countries.

The affair results in both positive and negative influences in business (see extracts 21), only from perspective of CD, however, it also brings certain positive political impacts in China, which also shows the essence of Confucianism in Chinese culture.

Extracts 21:

Shares of Chinese sports brand Anta Sports Products Ltd jumped over 8 percent in Hong Kong on Thursday after the company issued a statement saying it will continue to use cotton from Xinjiang. Shares of China's Li Ning Co surged over 10 percent. Shares of H&M fell by 4.16 percent by 9 pm on Thursday in Stockholm. (CD: Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

Extracts 22:

The Chinese people are entitled to express their feelings. They also attach great importance to national dignity. It's not about nationalism but patriotism. (CD: Sanctions on Xinjiang cotton use opposed)

However, the consequence of the affair, from perspective of VOA and BBC, is more considered and even criticized from political or even ethic aspects, which is also very common in many studies of attitudes of western media towards China. The words with strong force like "abuse", "impose" and "attacks" and words with negative feeling, such as "pressure, distance" can be found in these two newspapers.

Extract 23:

Western brands face pressure at home to distance themselves from possible abuses. (VOA: China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang)

Extract 24:

The attacks follow Monday's decision by the 27-nation European Union, the United States, Britain and Canada to impose travel and financial sanctions on four Chinese officials blamed for abuses in Xinjiang. (VOA: China Attacks Foreign Clothing, Shoe Brands over Xinjiang)

Extract 25:

It comes after several Western countries-imposed sanctions on China. (BBC: Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows)

Extract 26:

That's become even more salient in the era of Xinjiang abuses. Some see it as simply Sales vs Ethics; they choose which side to come down on. (BBC: Xinjiang cotton: Western clothes brands vanish as backlash grows)

In this part, a short summary can be made from the following three aspects: 1) All three newspapers focus on the consequences that Xinjiang cotton issue brings on business, especially for certain companies or the organization. 2) CD emphasizes both negative and positive effects on domestic and foreign companies, while BBC and VOA mention just negative aspects. 3) CD expresses the more friendly and acceptable attitude towards the results, while BBC and VOA keep a more aggressive stance.

Treatment/recommendation

Table 4: Selected keywords related to treatment

CD		VOA		BBC	
Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.	Keyword	Freq.
boycott	5	criticism	3	target	3
call for	4	criticize	2	campaign	3
support	3	attack	2		
welcome	2	pressure	2		
oppose	1				
hope	1				
normal	1				

Table 4 above lists keywords related to treatment or recommendation in CD, VOA and BBC. It can be clearly seen that there are more relevant words on CD than those in VOA and BBC. All these words are related to the representations of what China has treated the issue. CD report clearly represent China's government's general attitude toward the issue and some concrete actions by Chinese people, including boycott. VOA and BBC showed no their own treatment or recommendation in neither explicit nor implicit ways.

In CD report, it is "consumers", "Chinese people", "Chinese celebrities", who "responded with concrete actions".

Extract 29:

Chinese social media **users** began to call on Wednesday for a boycott of H &M, the world's second-largest clothing retailer, after the Swedish company said in a statement that it wouldn't work with any Xinjiang garment manufacturing factories, nor would it source products from the region, because the company was concerned about reports of accusations of forced labor in the region.

Extract 30:

The majority of more than a dozen **customers** randomly interviewed by China Daily in Sanlitun were aware of the calls for boycotts.

From the above extracts, boycotting H&M or some related brands are conducted by the Chinese public, including many customers who used to support these brands, due to their frustration to the brands which they support but harm their country in return. What the public has done is a pure expression of their disappointment to the brands they support and their natural love for their own country, a personal and patriotic action.

Also in CD report, China's government expresses their attitude towards the issue.

Extract 31:

China **firmly opposes** any sanction imposed on individuals or entities based on the pretext of so-called human rights issues in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, and companies involved should **avoid politicizing business issues,** a spokesman for the Ministry of Commerce said on Thursday.

Extract 32:

We **hope** these companies will respect the law of the market, rectify their erroneous actions and **avoid politicizing business issues**.

The above two extracts show China's government does not agree with Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region exist human right issues. Also, China has no intention to relate the business activities of certain companies to politics. This attitude accords with China's government's definition of Xinjiang Cotton issue as business issue. China proposes that companies are supposed to conduct their economic activities legally, not showing too much concern over politics.

Extract 33:

We **welcome** foreign companies to come and visit Xinjiang themselves and stand ready to provide support for companies from all countries to trade and invest in Xinjiang.

In this extract, the solution is put forward by China's government who is friendly and hospitable. China is always ready to open Xinjiang to the whole world and hopes to see economic cooperation and development in Xinjiang. These goodwill gestures served to promote a positive image of China as a country more in favor of openness and cooperation. A positive image of China's government is portrayed in CD report.

VOA and BBC reports do not represent their recommendations directly. Instead, they emphasized the role of

China's government in the issue. VOA report uses "Chinese state TV", "the ruling Communist Party", "the part newspaper Global Times", etc., and BBC report prefers "China", "Beijing" to indicate that it is China's government who takes actions towards the issue.

Extract 34:

Chinese state TV **called** Thursday **for a boycott** of H&M as Beijing **lashed out** at foreign clothing and footwear brands following Western sanctions on Chinese officials accused of human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region. (VOA)

Extract 35:

"For enterprises that touch the bottom line of our country, the response is very clear: **don't buy**!" China Central Television said on its social media account. (VOA)

The above extracts represent that China's government appeal to the public to refuse these brands by making the public convinced that China is accused of human right abuses in the Xinjiang region. Under the government's influence, Chinese people shaped their views and reacted to the issue. For example, the pop star Wang who broke the tie with Nike, "firmly resists any words and actions that pollute China." Thus, H&M products "were removed due to public criticism". To maintain access in China, western brands "face pressure" and are struggling to survive in this big market. The report delivers an information that China is not friendly to international companies and does not provide harmonious atmosphere for investment and business.

BBC report describes the way of China dealing with the issue as "target" and what China is doing as a "campaign". For example:

Extract 36:

China is **targeting** more Western clothes retailers as international backlash grows over claims of abuses in the cotton-growing Xinjiang region.

Extract 37:

China initially **targeted** H&M and Nike but has widened to include Burberry, Adidas and Converse, among others.

Extract 38:

But previous efforts, **targeting** South Korea's Lotte chain, show how effective it can be.

Semantically, "target" refers to criticize the object or shoot with a weapon. The report represents China as a country being ready to attack, putting others in danger. This representation is in accordance with BBC's framing of China as a threat to the world. The present progressive tense in extract 35 and simple past tense in extract 36 show there is more than once that China deals with the companies in the same way. While targeting H&M in this issue, China is "campaigning" local brands, such as ANTA. "targeting" and "campaign" conceptualize China's way of dealing with the similar issues as cleaning out the barriers or enemies in a planned way. This makes the description of China associated with as a threat to the world security. China is portrayed as the country which has a power to impose its willingness upon others. Thus, an image of China colored with hostility and bully is portrayed. China's power or hegemony leaves no space for other companies or countries to find out the solution to the issue.

To sum up, VOA and BBC do not propose treatment or recommendations like CD does but represent China's negative image.

CONCLUSIONS

This comparative study unveiled both similar and divergent representations of the Xinjiang cotton issue in three leading national newspapers from China, the U.K and U.S, respectively. All data represent the issue objectively, using both lexical tools and (in)direct quotations to constitute a perspectivization strategy. In addition, as befit the "human rights issue" schema, BBC and VOA focused on palpable allegations of the so-called "human rights violation" and ignorance of China's contribution to the world economy. While, CD reported the issue in a more positive manner and projected it as a business issue, defining the so-called "human rights violation" as an ideological one held by the anti-China forces, and revealed the devastating impacts on every side. Meanwhile, it typically promoted positive attitude and constructive directions to tackle the issue.

This study summarizes some apparent divergent representations among the three newspapers based on the theory of news framing (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992). First, when defining the problem, CD showed a preference for playing down the matter as merely as politicizing business issue in contrast to the "human rights violation" adopted by BBC and VOA. Second, when CD discussed the causes for Xinjiang cotton dispute, it tended to position it at an abstract level and to reduce the dispute to ideological attack from anti-China forces, but it didn't use diversified sources as much as BBC and VOA, thus the objectivity was weakened. Instead, BBC and VOA gave concrete words and quoted various sources to boost objectivity. As for moral evaluation/consequences, CD tried to stress both the negative and positive effects and China's constructive attitude towards results while there was only negative aspects and aggressive stance in BBC and VOA news which were carefully selected to mislead readers. In addition, the presentation of the treatment/recommendation in CD also helped to build a positive image of China in favor of cooperation based on mutual respect and normal business operations, and on the contrary, we can't find any treatment/recommendation in BBC and VOA.

A proper understanding of their different ways of representing Xinjiang cotton issue can't be acquired without situating them in the socio-political contexts in which they are embedded. The Chinese government firmly opposed any sanction imposed on individuals or entities based on the pretext of so-called human rights issues in Xinjiang, because it might cause damage to its image, but the trend of China's international business cooperation required the Chinese government to maintain foreign capitals and boost international market, so the communication of Xinjiang cotton issue was also welcomed to a certain degree. Therefore, while CD is quite open about the issue, it still serves the primary function of constructing a positive image of the Chinese government in a strategic way, thus featuring the dual purpose of political correctness and journalistic objectivity (Geall, 2011). In contrast, both BBC and VOA's coverage of China's Xinjiang labor condition and accentuation on its so-called forced labor do not mean that they are concerned about the welfare of the Chinese public but rather serve important ideological functions, that is, to construct a negative image of the Chinese government and to deter China's increasing international competitive power.

In 2021, the world's leading economy, China, was embroiled in a cotton dispute in which western countries instigated the conflict while China was put on the defensive. The present study investigated how BBC, VOA and CD discursively represented this event, and revealed that the two newspapers of western countries had nuanced positions and ideologies while the newspaper of China had an opposite one. The differences embedded into their news discourses were used to legitimize the actions taken by their home countries to protect and further their own national interests. Specifically, it was found that in line with the mainstream hardline ideologies such as China's human rights violation and its threat to western countries' leading

economic positions, BBC and VOA profiled the matter as a "human rights issue". In contrast, consistent with the stance of "pragmatic nationalism" and "mutual benefit and win-win cooperation" endorsed by the CPC, CD sought to correct the problem definition and redefine the issue as a business one to better serve its national interests and its contribution to the world economic development. Accordingly, each newspaper's preferred ways of analyzing causes, moral evaluations/consequences, and solutions were generally congruent with the deployment of linguistic patterns like lexical tools and (in)direct quotations which served to frame the dispute in different lights. An intercultural comparative discourse study of the representations of the same issue by media from different socio-political contexts can contribute to the exposure of not only their ways of representing the issue, but also, more importantly, the influences of different socio-political factors lying behind their representations.

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