Journal of Literature and Art Studies, October 2026, Vol. 16, No. 10, 818-827
doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2026.10.004

China's National Image as Portrayed in Thai Rath News Reports: A Content Analysis of 2022 China-Related Coverage

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This study employs content analysis to systematically examine how Thai media construct China's national image, drawing on an investigation of China-related reports published by the Thai Rath News Network (Thailand's leading online news outlet) in 2022. Ten keywords related to China's image were selected, 539 articles were manually collected, and 320 valid samples were retained after screening. The analysis was conducted along four dimensions: reporting frequency, news type, reporting tendency, and the counterpart countries of China's international issues. The findings show that Thai Rath published 330 China-related articles in 2022, averaging approximately 27 articles per month. Political and diplomatic coverage dominated (53.9%), followed by economic, trade, and technological news (27.6%). Reporting tendencies were primarily objective narration (57.2%), with negative reporting accounting for 26.8% and positive or friendly reporting only 16.0%. The study indicates that Thai media present China's image relatively positively and objectively in the political, economic, cultural, and military domains; however, critical stances emerge on sensitive issues such as Taiwan and human rights, and perceptions of the "national image" of Chinese people have been negatively affected by incidents such as the Du Hao case. This research provides empirical evidence for understanding Thai media's framing of China-related reporting and offers a reference for China's international communication strategies toward Thailand.

Keywords: Thai media, Thai Rath, China's national image, China-related reporting, content analysis

Introduction

As China increasingly occupies a central position on the world stage, the construction of its international image has become an urgent task, necessitated by the gap between China's international status and its perceived image. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposes accelerating the construction of China's discourse and narrative systems, telling China's stories well, disseminating China's voice effectively, and presenting a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China. It also calls for strengthening

Acknowledgements: This research received funding: The 2025 Yunnan Provincial Education Science Planning Project, "Research on the Influence of Chinese Social Media on Southeast Asian International Students in China From the Perspective of Cultural Identity" (Project No. BD25031).

AI assistance statement: The authors utilized the DeepSeek-AI/DeepSeek-V4 Pro model for language enhancement purposes during manuscript revision. All ideas, analyses, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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international communication capacity building, comprehensively enhancing international communication effectiveness, and forming international discourse power commensurate with China's comprehensive national strength and international status. Sino-U.S. strategic competition has intensified over the past decade. Thailand, as the only country that has not established a "2+2" dialogue mechanism involving foreign and defense ministers with the United States, exhibits hedging behavior in this competition, which grants it greater autonomy to align with China. Thailand and China have maintained diplomatic relations for more than 40 years and have established a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. According to the "Five Connectivity Index" report on Belt and Road countries released by Peking University's Belt and Road Data Analysis Platform, Thailand belongs to the category of "cooperation-smooth countries".

Media, as tools for guiding public opinion, exert significant influence on politics, the economy, and culture, and their reporting also reflects one country's attitude toward another. International news reporting and dissemination are characterized by politicized reporting stances, diversified communication channels, and diverse audiences. Since the pandemic, people-to-people exchanges between China and Thailand have contracted sharply, reducing the opportunities for China to shape a favorable international image through direct communication with the Thai public; China's projection of its international image to the Thai public has been largely confined to online media reports. According to the 2022 Asia-Pacific Media Profile released by PR Newswire, the Thai Rath News Network, as the mainstream Thai media website with the highest click-through and view rates, is an effective channel through which mainstream Thai media introduce Chinese politics, economy, culture, daily life, and technology to local Thai audiences, guide public opinion between the two countries, and project China's international image. This study analyzes reports published by the Thai Rath News Network from January to December 2022. Ten keywords highly relevant to China's image were selected—"China", "Chinese people", "Chinese politics", "Chinese economy", "Chinese culture", "Chinese society", "Chinese military", "Xi Jinping", "APEC meeting", and "20th National Congress"—and were converted into their official Thai renderings. News materials were collected manually from the Thai Rath website. The initial sample comprised 539 articles, and, after manual screening, 320 valid news items remained.

Literature Review

Research on National Image in International News Communication

Research on national image can be traced back to Harold Lasswell's studies on propaganda during World War I. Communication studies have consistently served as the core disciplinary carrier for national image research. Kenneth Boulding was the first to treat "national image" as a theoretical concept, emphasizing that actors in the international system respond to "images" rather than "objective facts" (Boulding, 1959). Current research on national image primarily focuses on three levels: national image as soft power, national image as a cross-cultural communication brand, and national image in the media (Xu & Cui, 2018). Extending from this, scholars emphasize different aspects: First, some stress national spirit and overall strength, viewing national image as the unity of content and form (Xie, 2004; Cheng, 2007; Zhang, 2015); second, some focus on evaluations by domestic and international publics, considering national image as the overall assessment of a country by its domestic and foreign audiences (Guan, 1999; Yang, 2000; Li, 2006); and third, some emphasize

the role of the media in shaping national image, viewing it as the image presented in news discourse (Xu, 1996; Li, 1999; Zhang, 2002).

Shi and Wu (2022) argue that the intelligent communication era provides opportunities and pathways for creating a new international communication landscape and reshaping national image, and that it is necessary to conduct international communication work well in this era to reshape China's national image and create a favorable international public opinion environment for China's development. Huang et al. (2021) contend that after China's hard-power construction has reached a certain and relatively high level, the construction of soft power and sports soft power becomes particularly important. The national image China presents to the world is multifaceted: Its economic, cultural, military, diplomatic, and sports images display and constitute China's overall international image from different angles. Xing and Zhao (2021) suggest that new media have divided the international discourse power of traditional media, flattening the information production structure and enabling nationwide participation in the international communication of China's national image. New media can better satisfy information consumers' needs in both form and content, thereby enhancing the external communication effect of China's national image through audience segmentation and optimization.

Overall, current research can be divided into two categories according to its research object. One category consists of studies of specific media outlets, such as The New York Times and The Washington Post in the United States; The Times and the BBC in the United Kingdom; Nhan Dan and the Vietnam News Agency in Vietnam; and the Thai-language Chinese newspapers Thai Rath and Sing Sian Yer Pao. The other category consists of studies of specific cases, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, poverty alleviation in China, and China's image during the Two Sessions. In view of this, the present project investigates China's international image as presented by Thai new media.

Research on Thai Media Reporting Concerning China

Foreign media reports serve as an important window through which domestic audiences understand another country's national conditions, a primary arena for constructing a foreign country's national image, and a site where public opinion on international issues takes shape. Cosmopolitanism holds that information disseminators should break down information barriers, care about the lives of others, and be responsible for every information receiver from different cultural groups (Jakubowicz, 2013). With regard to China-related reporting, Luo Yi observes that the China-related reports published by Sing Sian Yer Pao and World Journal focus on social and cultural news with weak political discourse power, while publishing relatively few reports on military, political, and economic topics, which to some extent creates a bias in local Chinese communities' understanding of "China's image" (Luo, 2019). Guo (2019) both summarizes the experience of and lessons from "self-shaping" in the external publicity of Chinese mainstream media such as People's Daily and Guangming Daily, and, drawing on China-related reports in foreign mainstream media such as The Times and The New York Times, summarizes the current state of the "other-shaping" of China's image, and then proposes relevant strategies. The research points out that foreign mainstream media are influenced by numerous factors when reporting on China's stories; for example, when Thai mainstream media report on President Xi Jinping's new policies, most reports are positive, but they maintain a neutral stance on certain sensitive topics. Luo (2019) notes that, in terms of content, Thai media hold a positive and favorable attitude toward China's "poverty alleviation", "Chinese Dream",

"anti-corruption", and "Belt and Road Initiative" under the leadership of General Secretary Xi Jinping, and are optimistic about China's growing international influence, but they adopt a critical attitude toward issues such as "democracy movements", "internet censorship", "human rights", and "Hong Kong Occupy Central". Tao and Mo (2019) argue that attention should be paid to publicizing the Belt and Road Initiative and to using local Thai media to voice opinions, so as to change Thai people's stereotypes of China, guide public opinion in a direction favorable to China, and safeguard China's positive international image. Kulnapa Siridissakul (2021) finds that in Thai Rath's coverage of the Thai region, international relations receive the most coverage, and China-Thailand cooperation spans politics, the military, the economy, tourism, education, the film industry, and real estate, including coverage of the friendly relations on the 40th anniversary of the establishment of China-Thailand diplomatic relations.

Current research can be divided into two parts according to its research object. One part consists of studies of the overall dimensions of China's image in the eyes of Thailand's "Chinese-language media", analyzing China-related reporting data and summarizing its general characteristics, such as "Research on China's Image in Thai Chinese-Language Media" and "Study of China-Related Reporting in the Thai Chinese Newspaper Sing Sian Yer Pao"; and studies of specific events concerning China's image in Thai "Thai-language newspapers", such as "An Ideological Analysis of China Trade News Reports in Thai-Language Newspapers" and "China's Image in the Reporting of the Mekong Incident in Thai Mainstream Newspapers". The other part consists of media studies of Thai English-language newspapers, analyzing and describing China-related reporting data and the China image presented, such as "A Study of China-Related Reporting in the Bangkok Post".

In summary, relatively little research currently exists on how Thai new media present China's international image, and scholars' studies of Thai media are mainly concentrated on Thai-language traditional media and English- and Chinese-language new media, lacking research on the international image presented by Thai-language new media websites.

Research Methodology

This study employs content analysis to systematically examine the China-related reports of the Thai Rath News Network from January to December 2022. The specific research methods are as follows.

Sample Selection

Ten keywords related to China's image were selected: "China", "Chinese people", "Chinese politics", "Chinese economy", "Chinese culture", "Chinese society", "Chinese military", "Xi Jinping", "APEC meeting", and "20th National Congress". These keywords were converted into their official Thai renderings, and news materials were collected manually from the Thai Rath website. The initial sample comprised 539 articles; after manual screening that excluded irrelevant, duplicate, or incomplete reports, 320 valid news items remained.

Analytical Dimensions

1. News reporting frequency: Analysis of the monthly number of reports and their trends.

2. News type classification: Categorization of reports into six major types—political diplomacy, economic, trade and technology, sports and culture, healthcare, social events, and military security.

3. International relationship counterpart-country analysis: Statistics on reports involving China's relations with other countries.

4. Reporting tendency analysis: Classification of reporting tendencies into three categories—positive and friendly, objective narration, and negative.

Coding and Reliability Testing

Two researchers coded independently. After training on the classification standards, 10% of the samples were randomly selected for a reliability test. Inter-coder reliability exceeded 0.85, indicating a high degree of consistency in the classification standards.

Research Findings

Analysis of News Reporting Frequency

Table 1
Frequency of China-Related News Reports in Thai Rath (Unit: Articles)

Month	Number of articles
January	12
February	10
March	19
April	10
May	27
June	17
July	12
August	28
September	26
October	51
November	66
December	52
Total	330

As shown in Table 1, Thai Rath reports China-related news with a relatively high frequency. Overall in 2022, Thai Rath published approximately 27 China-related articles per month. This is first because, according to Chinese historical records, Sino-Thai exchanges began during the Han Dynasty, and the two countries formally established diplomatic relations on July 1, 1975—48 years ago. China and Thailand are not only politically friendly and economically close but also maintain relatively close military ties; for example, Thailand conducts joint air force training with China and purchases submarines from China. The frequency peaks of Thai Rath's China-related reporting are clearly related to the occurrence of major domestic events in China. In November 2022, China-related reporting exceeded that of every other month of the year, because the 29th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting was held in Bangkok, Thailand, that month, with Chinese leader President Xi Jinping in attendance; Thai Rath provided detailed coverage from the reasons for China's confirmation of attendance to the content of China-Thailand consultations. In December 2022, Thai Rath's China-related reporting reached a second peak, because China's pandemic policy underwent significant changes and the Thai overseas Chinese businessman "Du Hao" was accused of money laundering by the Thailand Supreme Prosecutor's Office, which exposed corruption and misconduct in Thai government departments. October 2022 marked the third peak of

Thai Rath's China-related reporting, because the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China convened the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

Analysis of News Types and Reporting Tendencies

In shaping and constructing China's national image, Thai Rath inevitably selects specific issues to sketch a "political map" of China and to construct public perceptions of China. Through reading and studying all texts, this study divides Thai Rath's China-related reports into two major categories: the specific issues reported and the counterpart countries of China's "international issues". Among these, "political diplomacy", "economic trade and technology", "sports and culture", "social events", and "healthcare" constitute the five most basic and important components of a country's image.

Table 2
Specific Issues in China-Related Reporting

News type	Number of articles	Percentage
Political diplomacy	178	53.9%
Economic trade and technology	91	27.6%
Sports and culture	19	5.8%
Healthcare	14	4.2%
Social events	15	4.5%
Military security	13	4.0%

Table 3
Counterpart Countries of China's "International Issues"

Counterpart country	Number of articles	Percentage
China-United States	53	50.4%
China-Thailand	19	18.0%
China-Laos	6	5.7%
China-Sri Lanka	5	4.8%
China-Russia	4	3.8%
China-Japan	3	2.9%
China-Canada	3	2.9%
China-Saudi Arabia	2	1.9%
China-Singapore	2	1.9%
China-United States, Russia	2	1.9%
China-Pakistan	1	0.9%
China-India	1	0.9%
China-Indonesia	1	0.9%
China-Solomon Islands	1	0.9%
China-Iran	1	0.9%
China-United Kingdom	1	0.9%
Total	105	100%

Table 4
Reporting Tendencies Concerning China

Reporting tendency	Number of articles	Percentage
Positive and friendly	53	16.0%
Objective narration	189	57.2%
Negative	78	26.8%
Total	330	100%

As shown in Table 2, during 2022 Thai Rath's China-related reporting focused predominantly on political and diplomatic news, with 178 articles accounting for 53.9% of the total sample.

Presentation of China's Image Across Issue Areas

Political and diplomatic image. In the political and diplomatic domain, Thai Rath presents the new image of China associated with the 20th National Congress and China's image as a responsible major country conducting diplomacy. Among the 178 political news reports concerning China, positive reports accounted for 19.1%, neutral reports for 80.3%, and negative reports for 6.3%. In terms of political and diplomatic coverage, Thai Rath mainly focuses on the personal experiences and governance philosophies of Chinese leaders over the years, as well as China's positions and influence in the "Silk Road", the "Belt and Road Initiative", the "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank", and the "APEC meetings", and it expresses appreciation of and a desire to learn from China's "anti-corruption" and "rural poverty alleviation" measures. However, on issues such as the "gender ratio of the Standing Committee members of the Communist Party of China", the "Taiwan issue", and "pandemic lockdown policies", it adopts a critical attitude toward China. In reporting on the counterpart countries of China's international issues, coverage concentrates mainly on China-Thailand, China-United States, and China-Russia relations. Coverage of China and the United States centers on the Taiwan issue and chip technology; in such reporting, Thai Rath does not take sides but presents the statements and practices of both China and the United States in an objective and neutral manner. The reason for this phenomenon is that Thailand's choice between China and the United States is ambiguously neutral: it considers economic and technological advantages to lie in the hands of the United States, while displaying an eager attitude toward China's market. In addition, while it carries "bias" toward China's historical concession issues and pandemic policies, it also expresses considerable appreciation for China's traditional cultural classics.

Economic, trade, and technological image. In the economic, trade, and technological domain, Thai Rath presents China's positive economic image as a major diplomatic power alongside the negative "gray asset" image of the overseas Chinese businessman Du Hao. Among the 91 economic reports, positive reports accounted for 17.6%, neutral reports for 17.6%, and negative reports for 64.8%. In terms of content, coverage focuses mainly on China's economic strategies at the 20th National Congress and the APEC meetings, the impact of China's pandemic policies on Thailand's economy, and the investigation of the overseas Chinese businessman Du Hao's gray assets. Reports on the Du Hao economic case occupied a substantial portion; the reason for this phenomenon is that the case was designated a special case by Thailand's Ministry of Justice, involving not only drug-related allegations, the seizure of assets, and the investigation of Immigration Bureau visas, and later the replacement of the person in charge of the case, but also implicating the Thai Prosecutor's Office, the Department of Special Investigation, the anti-corruption commission, and the Anti-Money Laundering Office, thereby exposing corruption and misconduct in Thai government departments—described as "buying power with money".

Sports and cultural image. In the sports and cultural domain, Thai Rath presents China's image as a sports power and the study of traditional Chinese classics. Among the 19 sports and cultural reports, positive reports accounted for 78.9%, neutral reports for 21.1%, and there were no negative reports. Sports coverage focuses mainly on the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics, while cultural coverage focuses mainly on the succession of Chinese historical dynasties and introductions to the deeds of characters in Romance of the Three Kingdoms,

such as Zhu Yi, Sun Quan, Liu Bei, and Cao Cao. The reason for this phenomenon is that Thailand is a country with a high degree of cultural inclusiveness and tends to show respect and understanding toward different Chinese cultural phenomena. In addition, according to a survey report by the National Institute of Development Administration of Thailand, Thailand had a population of approximately 16 million people of Chinese descent in 2023, accounting for 24.58% of Thailand's total population. The wave of Chinese-language learning that this brings will inevitably increase the Thai public's interest in learning Chinese and traditional Chinese culture. The Thai translation of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, as the first traditional Chinese cultural work encountered by the Thai public, was translated in 1802 under the supervision of Bunlong—who was proficient in both Chinese and Thai—at the behest of King Rama I.

Healthcare image. In the healthcare domain, Thai Rath presents objective descriptions of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in China alongside the negative impacts of the pandemic on the public. Among the 14 healthcare reports, positive reports accounted for 13.3%, neutral reports for 60.0%, and negative reports for 26.7%. Coverage continuously reported changes in China's pandemic lockdown policies and reported negatively on the policies' adverse effects, such as the "Xinjiang fire", "human rights", "freedom", and "vaccine safety". The reason for this phenomenon is that China is Thailand's largest source of tourists, and the political, economic, and social benefits brought by Chinese tourism to Thailand declined sharply with the pandemic lockdown policies; Thailand therefore pays close attention to changes in China's pandemic policies. Considerable space was also devoted to the negative impacts resulting from pandemic lockdown measures.

Social event image. In the domain of social events, Thai Rath presents China's image of celebrating the Spring Festival and of combating drugs and corruption. Among the 15 social event reports, positive reports accounted for 14.3%, neutral reports for 57.1%, and negative reports for 28.6%. Events such as the "employment rate of Chinese students", "Chinese students studying in the United States", and "the fall of corrupt Chinese officials" were narrated in negative terms.

Military security image. In the military security domain, Thai Rath presents China's image of excellent military equipment and joint China-Thailand military exercises. The "purchase of Chinese submarines" was covered in detail, from the initial equipment inspections to the mid-stage government opinions and the final contract signing. The reason for this phenomenon is that China and Thailand both belong to East Asia and have long maintained friendly exchanges; strengthening defense cooperation and armed forces interaction between the two sides is of great significance for safeguarding Lancang-Mekong cooperation and the security of the Indochina Peninsula and the ASEAN region.

Conclusion and Discussion

Thai Rath's reporting on China's national news refracts, from multiple angles, every aspect of China-Thailand relations in the fields of political diplomacy, economic trade and technology, sports and culture, healthcare, social events, and military security, reflecting how Thailand's mainstream news website shapes China's national image. Overall, because China and Thailand established diplomatic relations relatively early, engage in many cultural exchange activities, and have never experienced a major war or conflict, and because Thailand's tourism industry regards Chinese people as its most important market, the communication of China's "political image", "economic image", "cultural image", "social image", and "military image" is relatively

positive and objective. However, owing to the gray assets of the overseas Chinese businessman Du Hao in 2022 and events such as China's durian market and Chinese tourists in Phuket, Thailand shows a negative tendency in shaping the "national image" of Chinese people.

Through a content analysis of Thai Rath's 2022 China-related reporting, this study reveals the characteristics of Thailand's mainstream new media in constructing China's national image. On the one hand, Thai media report relatively objectively and positively on the political, economic, cultural, and military domains, reflecting the positive influence of the long-term friendly relations and cultural exchanges between China and Thailand. On the other hand, when it comes to sensitive issues such as the Taiwan issue and human rights and to specific negative events, the reporting tendency turns critical or negative, reflecting Thailand's hedging strategy in the China-United States competition.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in filling the research gap concerning China-related reporting by Thai-language new media and in providing empirical evidence for China's international communication strategy toward Thailand. Its practical significance lies in providing a reference for China's external communication work: Communication efforts can be increased in non-political areas such as culture and sports, while more cautious communication strategies are needed on politically sensitive issues.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

Research Limitations

1. Limited time scope: The analysis is limited to 2022 data, lacks longitudinal comparison, and cannot reflect long-term trends.

2. Single media outlet: Studying only Thai Rath limits representativeness and fails to encompass the reporting characteristics of other Thai mainstream media.

3. Limitations of keywords: The 10 keywords may omit some important reports, affecting the comprehensiveness of the sample.

4. Lack of audience research: The study analyzes only media content and does not examine Thai audiences' actual reception effects and cognitive changes.

Future Research Directions

1. Extend the time span: Analyze 5-10 years of data to observe trends in Thai media's China-related reporting.

2. Multi-media comparative studies: Compare differences in China-related reporting between Thai Rath and other Thai mainstream media (e.g., the Bangkok Post and The Nation).

3. Deepen the analytical dimensions: Incorporate qualitative methods such as discourse analysis and sentiment analysis to explore the ideological underpinnings of the reporting.

4. Supplement audience research: Understand Thai audiences' perceptions of and attitudes toward China's image through questionnaires or in-depth interviews.

5. Cross-cultural comparisons: Compare the similarities and differences in China-related reporting between Thai media and those of other ASEAN countries to explore regional variations.

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