

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE WAR OF WORDS: A DISCOURSE STUDY OF THE US-CHINA TRADE WAR

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ABSTRACT

The US-China trade war is not only an economic and political contest, but also a struggle for discourse power. Integrating multidisciplinary perspectives from discourse, communication and international relations, this study reveals the multidimensional characteristics and strategic implications of the US-China trade war discourse. Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of discourse theory, this study employs a systematic literature review methodology to select 89 high-quality Chinese and international academic articles from 2018 to 2024. It constructs an integrated analytical framework of "micro-text — meso-communication — macro-order." The findings reveal that the US-China trade war discourse highlights the contest for discourse power amidst the reconstruction of the international order, primarily manifested as follows: (1) China constructs institutional legitimacy by relying on rule-based consensus and multilateral narratives, while the US reinforces ideological opposition through confrontational and threatening discourse; (2) The rise of the digital communication ecosystem has reshaped the landscape of discourse power, leading to diversified communicators, emotionalized content production, and opinion polarization; (3) Both China and the US compete for the power to formulate global governance rules through national image shaping, the dissemination of values, and historical narratives. Facing a new round of the trade war, China needs to construct a multi-agent collaborative discourse system, strengthen narratives of emotional affinity and social media platform strategies, and deepen its discourse alliance with countries of the Global South to enhance its discursive influence in the reconstruction of the international economic order.

1. INTRODUCTION

The US-China trade war has evolved from a mere trade friction into a strategic contest aimed at reshaping the global order. In 2018, the Trump administration, citing "trade imbalances" and "intellectual property protection," officially launched a trade war against China, imposing high tariffs on Chinese goods and placing Chinese tech companies like Huawei on the "Entity List," restricting their access to American technology and components. This series of actions marked a shift in US-China relations from long-term economic cooperation toward strategic competition and even confrontation. In April 2025, the Trump administration's "Liberation Day" policy further raised tariffs on Chinese goods to their highest level in nearly a century, initiating a new round of the US-China trade war and further accelerating the restructuring of the global trade landscape. The complexity of this trade war lies not only in the economic and political struggles but also in its evolution into a fierce competition over the construction of international influence and the ownership of discourse power (Hopewell, 2021).

Discourse studies on the US-China trade war often approach the topic from the perspectives of linguistics, communication studies, and international relations, conducting research through textual, semiotic, communication, survey, and experimental methods, yielding a wealth of academic results. A bibliometric analysis of English-language literature on the US-China trade war in the Web of Science shows that communication studies has become a core research cluster, forming a tight knowledge network around keywords such as public opinion, news media, and critical discourse analysis (Figure 1). However, related research is scattered across different disciplinary fields and is often event-driven, resulting in fragmented theoretical perspectives and findings. There is an urgent need to integrate existing research outcomes through an interdisciplinary review.

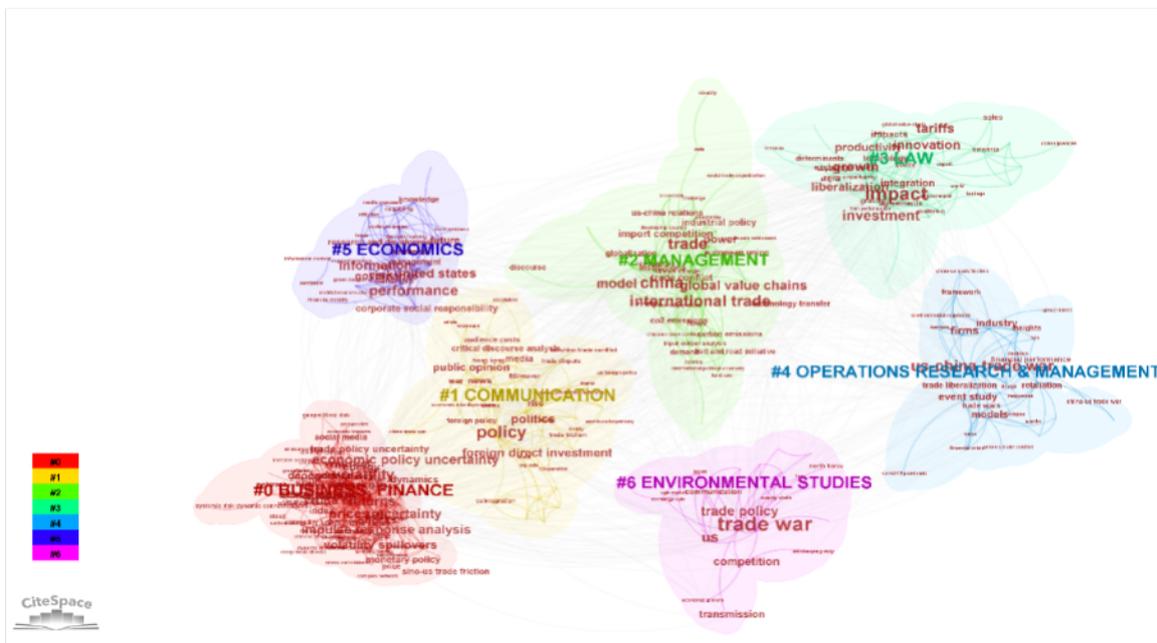


Figure 1: Disciplinary Cluster Map of English Literature on the US-China Trade War

This study, framed by Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of discourse, systematically reviews 89 high-quality Chinese and English studies (2018-2024) to construct an

analytical model of "micro-text — meso-communication — macro-order." This model integrates multidisciplinary perspectives from linguistics, communication studies, and international relations to reveal how discourse, within the context of trade conflict, achieves a constructive transformation from textual features to the international order (Fairclough, 2013). Through this systematic literature analysis, the study aims to answer three core questions: (1) What textual and symbolic features does the US-China trade war discourse exhibit? (2) How do the production and dissemination mechanisms of US and Chinese media discourse influence public perception and attitudes toward the trade war? (3) How does the trade war discourse participate in constructing or reshaping the international economic and political landscape? The findings of this research provide strategic insights for responding to the new round of the trade war and are significant for understanding the strategic role of discourse in 21st-century great power competition.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of discourse has become one of the foundational theories of critical discourse analysis due to its systematic nature, operability, and interdisciplinary integration capabilities. The theory involves the dialectical interaction of micro-level linguistic features, meso-level discursive practices, and macro-level social practices, forming three nested theoretical frameworks for discourse analysis (see Figure 2).

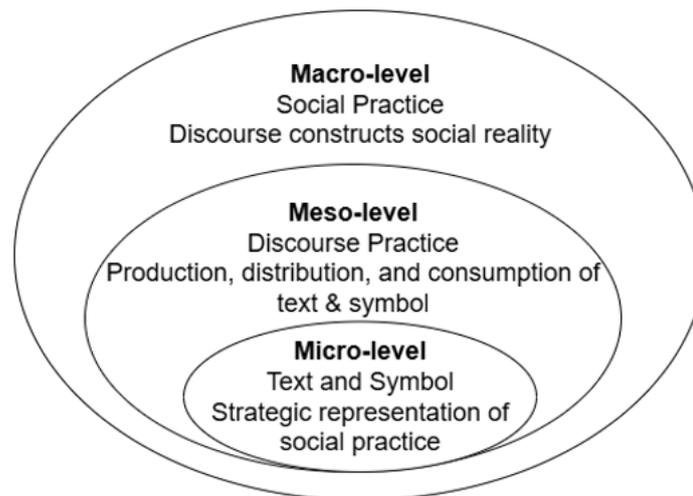


Figure 2: Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Discourse Analysis Framework

At micro-level, texts and symbols are strategic representations of social practice. The choice of any linguistic symbol implies the ideological position of the power holder and reflects the constraints of the social structure. This dimension is closely related to critical discourse analysis, framing analysis, and cognitive metaphor theory in linguistics and media studies. The power struggle between China and the US over the international economic order is reflected in the features at the micro-textual and symbolic levels. For instance, Chinese media primarily adopt a "responsibility attribution" frame, while American media prefer an "economic consequences" frame (Tian & Xie, 2020). Similarly, the "war" metaphor in US media frame a zero-sum game and the threat of Chinese hegemony, whereas the "journey" metaphor in Chinese media de-escalates confrontational narratives and emphasizes strategic rationality (Zhang & Feng, 2021).

At meso-level, discursive practice is the key intermediary connecting micro-level texts with macro-level social structures, encompassing the production, dissemination, and reception of discourse. This dimension is closely related to agenda-setting, network communication, and media effects research in communication studies. Agenda-setting research examines how media influence public attention by prioritizing certain issues, such as the US media's continuous reinforcement of the "China threat" agenda (Wang & Liu, 2021). Network communication research focuses on the production and circulation characteristics of discourse in the digital environment, such as Huawei using social media to influence the public and gain discourse power (Arman, 2022). Media effects research investigates the mechanisms by which media content influences audience cognition and attitude formation. For example, media frame selection directly affects public attitude formation: a peace frame can enhance American public favorability toward China, while a war frame strengthens identification with the US (Ha et al., 2022).

At macro-level, the focus is on social practice, i.e., how discourse constructs social reality. Language is not merely a reflection of social reality but an agentive force that can change it (van Dijk, 2015). This dimension is closely linked to theories in international relations, political economy, and sociology, with primary research methods including national image analysis, ideological critique, and historical discourse analysis. National image analysis explores the discursive construction of national identity, such as the transformation of China's national image in its media from an "equal and mutually beneficial partner" to a "principled defender" (Wang & Ge, 2020). Ideological critique analyzes how discourse reflects and constructs value system conflicts. For example, Hopewell (2021) reveals how the US uses the "free market vs. state capitalism" binary to conceal its own trade protectionist contradictions. Historical discourse analysis examines the role of historical intertextuality in shaping discourse, such as Zhang's (2021) analysis of how the US legitimizes its protectionist economic policies by discursively constructing a "barbaric China". These studies demonstrate that trade war discourse has transcended the representation of economic disputes to become a strategic tool for shaping a new order of global economic governance, producing substantial socio-political effects from domestic public opinion mobilization to the reconfiguration of international alliances.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model connects micro-linguistics, meso-communication, and macro-social structures, providing a panoramic analytical tool for integrating multidisciplinary perspectives in the study of trade war discourse. For example, the US government's sanctions against Huawei fully illustrate the three-dimensional discursive interaction mechanism: the US first used labeling language like "espionage threat" to construct a "security frame," then amplified security risks through coordinated agenda-setting by Western media and think tanks, and ultimately constructed policy legitimacy through discourse to exclude Huawei from the 5G market (Wang & Miao, 2018). The interactive relationship between the three dimensions of the theory reflects the dialectical relationship between language, communication, and social power (Fairclough, 2013), providing the theoretical foundation for this study's "micro-text — meso-communication — macro-order" analytical framework.

3. METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review is a research method that uses explicit procedures to collect research findings to address a specific question. Its advantages lie in its systematic and transparent

methodology, replicability, and capacity for interdisciplinary integration (Tranfield et al., 2003). By detailing literature screening criteria, coding procedures, and analytical steps, systematic reviews make the research process verifiable and replicable by other scholars (Linnenluecke et al., 2020), thereby enhancing the objectivity and credibility of the research. In the field of discourse studies, a systematic literature review can effectively integrate research findings on a social phenomenon that are scattered across different disciplines (Burgers et al., 2019), overcoming the issues of disciplinary dispersion and theoretical fragmentation in existing research on trade war discourse.

This study follows the PRISMA guidelines for systematic literature reviews (Page et al., 2021), which provide a standardized reporting framework organized into four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. The specific process is detailed in Figure 3. This study selected Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), Peking University Core journals from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) indexed journal articles with a time frame from March 2018 (the start of the trade war) to 2024. The literature search was conducted in four steps:

Initial Search: The search term combination for Chinese literature was "中美 AND (贸易战 OR 贸易谈判 OR 贸易摩擦 OR 经贸摩擦 OR 贸易冲突 OR 经贸冲突 OR 贸易争端 OR 经贸争端 OR 贸易纠纷 OR 经贸纠纷)". The English literature search term combination was "(trade war OR trade negotiation OR trade conflict OR trade dispute OR trade friction OR trade tension) AND (China OR Chinese OR Sino) AND (America OR 'U.S.' OR American OR 'US')".

Discipline Filtering: Chinese literature was limited to the disciplines of Journalism & Communication, Foreign Languages & Literatures, and Chinese Language & Literature. English literature was limited to Communication, Language & Linguistics, and Linguistics.

Supplementary Search: To ensure comprehensiveness, a supplementary search was conducted on studies outside the communication and linguistics fields. The supplementary search terms for Chinese were "语篇 OR 话语 OR 多模态 OR 符号 OR 叙事 OR 修辞 OR 框架", while excluding articles that only contained "话语权" (discourse power) (as these often focus on institutional rights rather than linguistic representation). The English supplementary search terms were "linguistic OR discourse OR discursive OR rhetor OR narrative OR frame OR framing OR multimodal OR semiotic".

Manual Screening: After excluding purely theoretical discussions and studies not from a discourse perspective, a final set of 89 articles was included. The specific screening criteria were as follows: a) The content must include an empirical analysis of discourse related to the US-China trade war, not just theoretical discussion. b) The research focus must be on discourse representation, dissemination, or impact, excluding literature focused solely on economic policy or international relations. c) The research object must clearly focus on one of the following three aspects: linguistic or symbolic representation, communication patterns, or media effects.

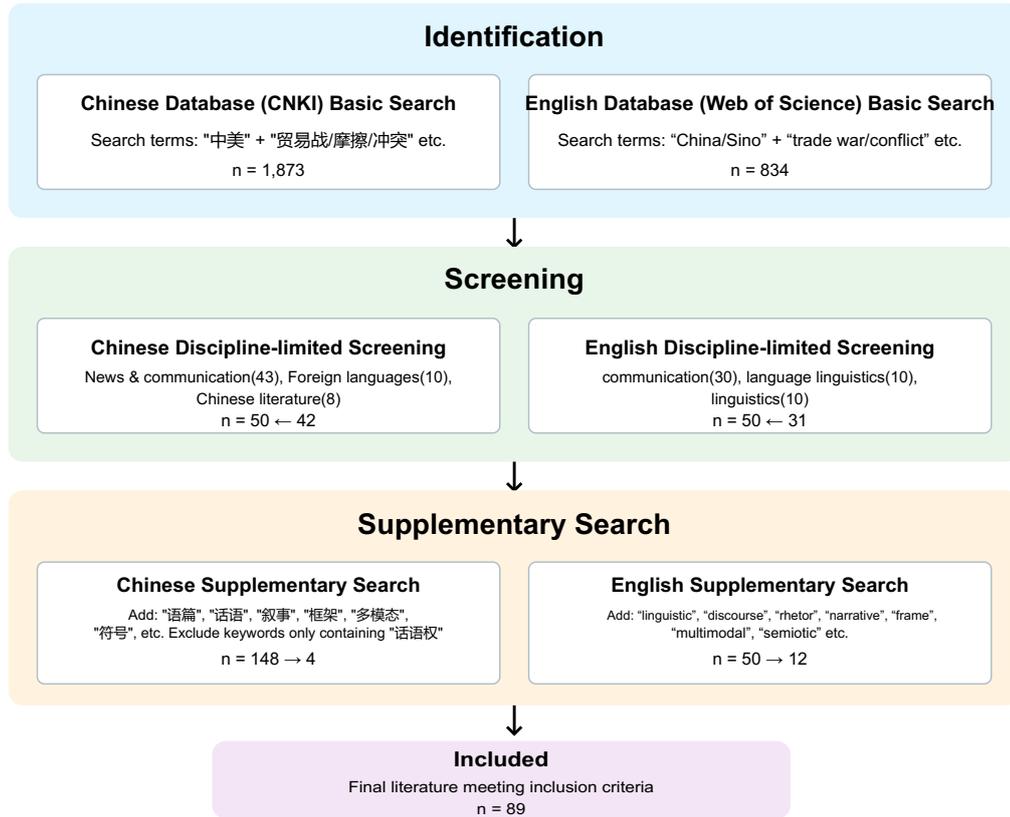


Figure 3: PRISMA Flowchart for Literature Screening on US-China Trade War Discourse Research

4. LITERATURE ANALYSIS

This study employed an open coding method to analyze the literature. As a core step in grounded theory, this method allows researchers to induce concepts and categories from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), maintaining theoretical sensitivity while capturing emerging patterns (Charmaz, 2006). Drawing on the classification experience of previous systematic literature reviews in communication and linguistics (Nervino, 2024), this study constructed a multi-dimensional coding framework, including four dimensions: country of data source, disciplinary field and theoretical perspective, research method, and data type (see Table 1).

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this review, a single article could be assigned to multiple categories, with a maximum of three labels per article. Two independent coders labeled all 89 articles, and Cohen's Kappa coefficient was used to assess inter-coder reliability. The Kappa coefficient distribution indicated that coding consistency reached "moderate" to "good" levels (see Table 2). Disagreements in coding, mainly concentrated on articles with multiple category labels, were resolved through joint review and discussion by the two researchers, with a third-party expert consulted when necessary, to finalize the category labels.

Table 1: Coding Framework and Categories for Literature Analysis

Classification Dimension	Categories
Country of Data Source	China, US, US-China Comparison, World
Data Type	Official Texts, Academic & Think Tank, News Media, Social Media, Corporate & Industry Discourse, Survey Data
Research Method	Experimental Study, Survey, Text & Symbol Analysis, Communication Study, Case Study
Disciplinary Field & Theoretical Perspective	<p>Discourse & Linguistics: Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Corpus Analysis, Rhetoric, Narrative Analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Pragmatics, etc.</p> <p>Media & Communication: Media Effects Theory, Network Communication Theory, Affect/Emotion Communication, etc.</p> <p>International Relations: Public Diplomacy & Soft Power Theory, Intercultural Communication, Political Economy, Constructivism/Identity Theory, Nationalism Theory, etc.</p>

Table 2: Cohen's Kappa Coefficients for Each Coding Dimension

Coding Dimension	p_o	p_e	Kappa Coefficient
Data Source	0.955	0.850	0.700
Disciplinary Field	0.921	0.780	0.641
Theoretical Perspective	0.899	0.750	0.596
Research Method	0.944	0.820	0.689
Data Type	0.933	0.810	0.649

Research on the US-China trade war discourse is predominantly led by Chinese scholars. In the English literature, Chinese or ethnic Chinese scholars account for 73.2% (34 articles), while foreign scholars account for only 26.8% (13 articles). In terms of research themes, Chinese scholars are more concerned with the direct impact of the discourse power contest on national interests, whereas foreign scholars tend to approach the topic from the perspective of international relations or communication theory, with a relatively limited number of studies. Figure 4 shows that Chinese research exhibits typical event-driven characteristics: a rapid response in 2018, peaking in 2019-2020, and then declining annually. In contrast, research published abroad shows a relative lag and greater continuity.

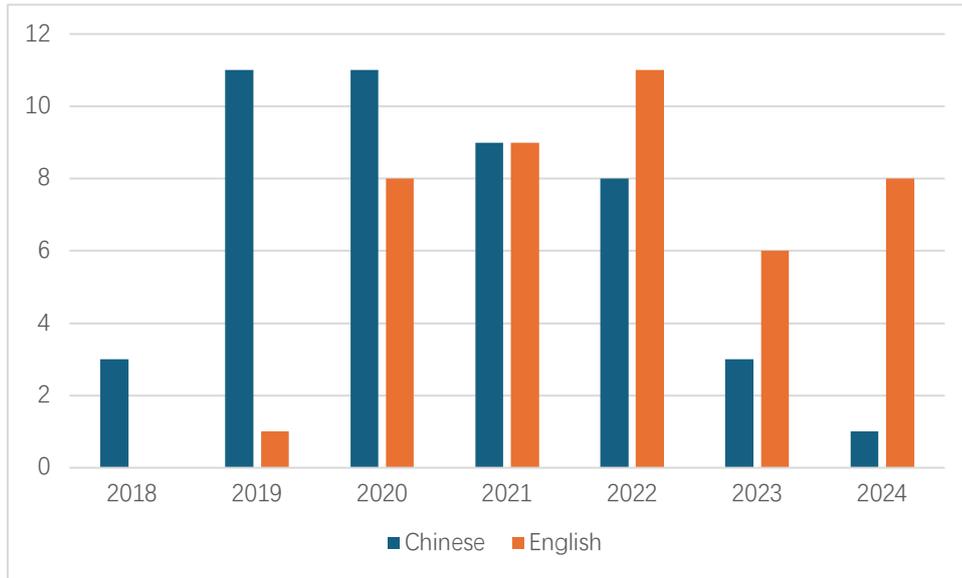


Figure 4: Temporal Distribution of Literature on US-China Trade War Discourse Research

Figure 5 indicates that linguistics/discourse studies and communication theory perspectives are prominent. Linguistics and discourse research is dominated by critical discourse analysis, combined with multi-dimensional methods like conceptual metaphor and corpus analysis to reveal the features of trade war discourse. Media and communication research focuses on network communication characteristics and media effects, while international relations research concentrates on the political and economic effects of discourse.



Figure 5: Distribution of Disciplinary and Theoretical Perspectives in US-China Trade War Discourse Research

Figure 6 shows that the research objects mainly focus on China and US-China comparisons, with relatively few studies on the US alone. The "world" perspective primarily analyzes communication characteristics on international social platforms like Twitter or YouTube. This distribution reflects the researchers' identity and positional tendencies, with the dominant Chinese scholars more often adopting local and comparative perspectives. The data types are mainly news media and social media, supplemented by official discourse and survey data. News media research primarily uses textual and symbolic analysis methods, while social media research is divided into two paths: linguistic analysis and communication characteristics. Survey research, combined with statistical analysis, is mainly used to examine the impact of trade war discourse on audience cognition and attitudes. The distribution of research objects and methods in the literature reflects interdisciplinary characteristics but also reveals a relative lack of empirical research.

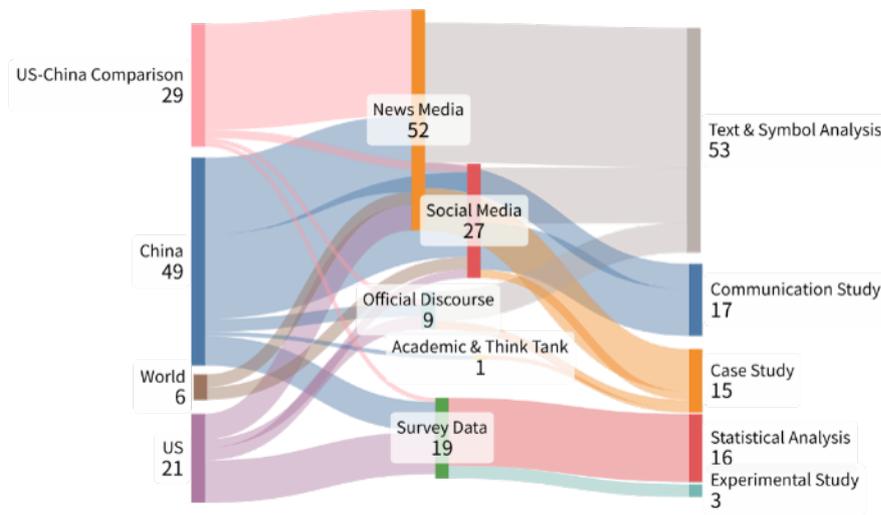


Figure 6: Sankey Diagram of Data Source-Type-Analysis Method Interaction in US-China Trade War Discourse Research

5. THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF US-CHINA TRADE WAR DISCOURSE

5.1. Micro-level Analysis of Text and Symbol

This section begins at the micro-textual level, summarizing the micro-textual and symbolic features of the US-China trade war discourse by analyzing two main dimensions: media framing and discursive strategies. The comparison of media frames examines how US and Chinese media use frame selection, thematic emphasis, and narrative structure to construct the trade war differently, revealing the political, economic, and ideological inclinations behind these choices. The analysis of discursive strategy contestation focuses on micro-linguistic features, analyzing how both sides use legitimation strategies, proximization strategies, and emotional resources to build policy legitimacy and compete for international discourse power.

Media Framing. Framing is the process by which media select, emphasize, and organize certain aspects of information, guiding the audience's understanding and evaluation of events by highlighting specific perspectives (Entman, 1993). As a core mechanism of news production,

framing not only affects what information is conveyed but also determines how that information is interpreted, thereby shaping public perception and attitudes. Media frames construct social reality through selective reporting, topic organization, and narrative structures, reflecting specific values and interests.

Comparative studies of media framing in the US-China trade war reveal deep-seated, systematic differences. Chinese media primarily employ a "responsibility attribution" frame, attributing the cause of the trade conflict to US unilateralism. In contrast, US media tend to use an "economic consequences" frame, emphasizing the negative economic impacts of the trade war (Tian & Xie, 2020). The frequency of references to international rules (such as the WTO) in Chinese reports is significantly higher than in US reports, reflecting China's strategy of seeking discursive legitimacy through international regulations. Conversely, the application of the "war" frame is significantly higher in US media than in Chinese media (Ha et al., 2020).

Furthermore, research finds that political systems and media stances systematically influence the choice of frames for reporting on the trade war. A cross-national comparison by Liu et al. (2022) found that democratic countries like the US and Ireland are more inclined to use a strategy frame, depicting the trade war as a "competitive game," while one-party-dominant systems like China and Singapore primarily use an issue frame, focusing on policy content, government statements, and solutions. Even media that strive for objectivity, such as The Wall Street Journal, have their China-related reporting influenced by US positions, stereotypes about China, and selective reporting, leading to a distorted image of China (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Liberal US media often adopt an "institutional confrontation" frame, while conservative media use an "economic war" narrative. In contrast, most of China's official media emphasize "mutual benefit and win-win" outcomes (Zhu, 2022) and primarily use a "peaceful development" frame (Cao, 2022).

Discursive Contestation. Discursive strategies are systematic linguistic means employed by language users to achieve specific communicative goals, influencing audience cognition, attitudes, and behaviors through carefully arranged language choices and structural patterns (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The discursive strategies involved in the US-China trade war discourse include van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies and Cap's proximization strategies.

Chinese discourse emphasizes building consensus and global responsibility, employing diverse and flexible discursive strategies. The Chinese government flexibly uses various legitimation strategies such as authorization (citing WTO rules), moralization (linking to global interests), and future-oriented hypotheses (constructing a vision of a shared community) (Cheng, 2021). It constructs a moral stance through assertive speech acts while maintaining diplomatic flexibility with indirect and mitigating hedges (Zhuo & You, 2022). From the perspective of proximization theory, Chinese discourse expands its deictic center to broader geopolitical spaces like the "Asia-Pacific region" and the "WTO." It employs spatial proximization strategies like "violating WTO multilateral principles" and temporal proximization strategies like "damaging the stability of the global industrial chain" to emphasize multilateral cooperation, de-emphasize bilateral conflict, and simultaneously delegitimize US actions (Yan & Zhang, 2018). Temporal proximization, such as linking future risks to current decisions, is also used (Zhuo, 2021).

US discourse strategies, on the other hand, focus on "threat" construction, moral critique,

and value opposition. The US primarily constructs discursive dominance in two ways: first, by using spatial proximization strategies like "China threatens American jobs" and value proximization strategies like "undermining international rules" to create a sense of urgency and legitimacy (Yang, 2023); second, by employing moral evaluation statements rather than factual arguments (Chen et al., 2020). The US frequently uses words like "unfair" and "technology theft" to condemn China's actions (Zhu & Ding, 2022), constructing a "victim-aggressor" narrative frame through emotional and personal resources to guide the public toward a moral evaluation of economic issues (Ye & Wang, 2019). Notably, research on US discourse strategies reveals an internal contradiction: on one hand, it emphasizes the value of free trade, while on the other, it implements protectionist policies, creating a "say one thing, do another" discursive paradox (Wang & Zhang, 2020).

The discursive strategies in the US-China trade war reveal fundamental disagreements over the construction of the international order. China emphasizes rule-oriented consensus-building, constructing institutional legitimacy through normative citations and flexible expressions. The US, however, highlights confrontational threat narratives, reinforcing ideological opposition through moral accusations and crisis sensationalism, while also presenting a value conflict between its free trade commitments and protectionist practices. This difference in strategy is essentially a symbolic contest for dominance over the international order. China seeks to maintain and strengthen stability through the multilateral system, while the US aims to reshape the power structure by reconfiguring exclusive alliances. The discursive practices of both sides have evolved into strategic tools for reshaping the structure of global governance.

5.2. Meso-level Analysis of Discursive Practice

In the US-China trade war, the dissemination of discourse has become a key arena for power struggles, demonstrating how power holders influence public perception through media to achieve political and economic goals. This section, based on the meso-level of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, focuses on the production, dissemination, and reception processes of discursive practice. It systematically examines the communication mechanisms and effects of the trade war discourse from four dimensions: media communication characteristics, the evolution of agenda-setting power, media framing effects, and the phenomenon of social media polarization. Through this four-dimensional analysis, this section aims to reveal the new features, new actors, and new effects of trade war discourse dissemination in the digital age, clarifying how communicative practice acts as a crucial intermediary between micro-level texts and macro-level social structures to reconfigure the landscape of discourse power in international trade conflicts.

Media Communication Characteristics. The flow of information about the trade war exhibits clear power distribution characteristics. The US dominates international discourse power through the 联动 of mainstream media and anti-China channels, forming "offensive nodes" in Twitter discussion networks. China, in contrast, occupies a "defensive hub" position and faces the challenge of social media algorithms amplifying controversial content (Xiang et al., 2019).

Chinese media adopt differentiated communication strategies. Domestic social media focuses on constructing nationalist narratives, while international platforms shift toward spatio-temporal proximization discourse adapted to low-context cultures (Huang & Wang, 2021).

Although this strategic adjustment enhances the cultural adaptability of the content, its one-way communication model leads to insufficient interactive engagement from Western audiences (Nakamura, 2022), reflecting China's dual objectives of consolidating domestic consensus and seeking external understanding. CGTN has attempted to establish new paths for interactive public diplomacy through platforms for debating sensitive issues and "anchor diplomacy" dialogues across the Pacific (Luo et al., 2019). These innovations indicate that China is moving from a reactive stance to proactively setting the agenda (Long & Li, 2019), and from a singular persuasive model to a pluralistic dialogue model (Shi & Dai, 2019).

Evolution of Agenda-Setting Power. Agenda-setting theory posits that the media cannot determine "how to think" but can determine "what to think about," guiding public attention and social discussion by selectively reporting and emphasizing specific issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the context of the US-China trade war, agenda-setting power shows the following trends: First, the public is gradually gaining agenda-setting power through social media. Media control over public attention peaks during the initial outbreak of an event and then significantly weakens. The lifecycle of issues generated by the public has become significantly longer than that of traditional media issues (Chu & Fang, 2019). Second, the role of media is shifting from agenda-setting to emotion-setting. Mainstream media can significantly influence public emotional tendencies through effective emotional guidance. For example, People's Daily, through patriotic emotional guidance, caused a sharp decline in the proportion of negative public opinion, demonstrating the key role of emotional guidance in shaping public opinion (Gao & Wu, 2019). Third, corporations have become important agenda-setting actors. Research has found that Huawei can directly influence Chinese media to follow its agenda, which in turn influences the public agenda (Arman, 2022), indicating that in a globalized context, multinational corporations can bypass traditional media to directly influence public perception. Fourth, social media helps political leaders directly influence the public. Donald Trump used social media platforms like Twitter to construct policy legitimacy through crisis narratives and emotional mobilization (Wang & Zhang, 2020).

Verification of Media Framing Effects. Research on framing effects verifies how media systematically influence audience cognition and behavior through discursive frames. Empirical studies show that the process of media influence on the public is moderated by audience characteristics and socio-cultural contexts. In China, Lu and Ma (2020) found that the effect of a pro-China frame can last for about two months, while a pro-US frame can even have a counter-effect on certain populations. Hou (2022) showed that a pro-China frame increases attitude dimension scores, while a competition frame enhances cognitive rationality. In the US, Ha et al. (2022) confirmed that a peace frame can increase American public favorability toward China, while a war frame enhances identification with the US. At the same time, framing effects show significant differences among different groups: young people with lower levels of education are most sensitive to media frames, while intellectual elites exhibit a "cognitive immunity effect" (Ma & Lu, 2020). High nationalists tend to underestimate the influence of news on themselves, which in turn reduces their tendency to boycott American products (Lo et al., 2022).

Social Media Polarization. Social media, through its unique information distribution mechanisms and interactive models, promotes the polarization of opinions and emotions while amplifying group identity. Research shows that the algorithmic recommendation mechanisms of

social platforms reinforce information cocoons, leading to more polarized views among frequent users (Lu et al., 2020). Younger groups are more susceptible to emotionally driven content (Zhao & Dou, 2022), forming a "social media emotional polarization cycle", which can translate into actual behaviors like consumer nationalism (Lu et al., 2022).

Emotional expression is dominant on social media, with a high proportion of negative emotions on both Twitter and Weibo (Xu & Qian, 2022). The tariff issue triggers the strongest emotional fluctuations, while topics related to people's livelihoods stimulate both rational thinking and emotional responses (Wang et al., 2020). There are clear differences between Chinese and US platforms: Weibo users focus on national dignity and technological independence (Ma & Song, 2022), while Twitter users focus on economic and supply chain issues. Collective identity constructed through discourses of "sovereignty" and "autonomy" enhances group cohesion but also limits the exchange of different viewpoints, causing emotion-driven interaction to gradually replace rational discussion and changing the traditional form of the public discussion space.

The communication characteristics and effects of the US-China trade war demonstrate the diversified evolution of discursive practice as a medium of power. Research indicates that the agenda-setting and framing effects of traditional media remain influential, but the digital environment has spurred three major transformations: First, communication agents have expanded from media institutions to diverse actors like political leaders and multinational corporations. Second, communication content has broadened from cognitive agendas to emotional mobilization and identity construction. Third, the influence mechanism has shifted from the one-way transmission of traditional media to algorithm-led targeted distribution and interactive feedback on social media. Social media, in particular, has reshaped the public's cognitive framework and attitude formation paths regarding the trade war through opinion polarization, information cocoons, and affective communication. These changes reveal that discursive practice has shifted from being monopolized by traditional media to being dispersed among multiple actors, from cognitive to emotional, and from indirect to direct, profoundly altering the communication ecosystem in international trade conflicts.

5.3. Macro-level Analysis of Social Practice

This section examines how trade war discourse participates in the construction of the international political and economic order from the level of social practice, divided into three dimensions: national image shaping, value expression, and the reconstruction of historical narratives. The contest between China and the US in the trade war is not just over trade benefits but also over the rule-making power and discursive dominance in global governance.

Discourse and National Image. The US-China trade war discourse reshapes the international political and economic order by constructing national identities and relationships. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model points out that the "self-other" binary coding of national image is not only a cognitive framework for identity but also a rhetorical weapon for policy legitimation (van Dijk, 2015). In the US-China trade war, the discursive construction of national image can consolidate national identity domestically and build the legitimacy of actions externally, becoming an agentive force that changes the reality of international relations.

Chinese discourse shows an evolution of identity at different stages of the trade war: from an "equal and mutually beneficial partner" in the initial phase to a "principled defender," while consistently emphasizing a "win-win cooperation" relationship (Wang & Ge, 2020). The national image presented by Chinese media is consistent with the official stance, primarily emphasizing China's positive identity as a "cooperator" and a "supporter of multilateralism" (Yang & Shi, 2021), forming a holistic national image. This consistent discourse has effectively promoted the international trade rules system centered on the WTO by reinforcing multilateral narratives.

In contrast, the US adopts a "barbarization" strategy to proactively construct a new order, describing China with negative identities such as an "intellectual property thief" (Shu Shang & Shen, 2021). It extensively uses "war metaphors" and "disease metaphors" to construct a confrontational image of China as a "bully" and the US as a "victim" (Wu et al., 2022). The image of China in mainstream US media has changed from an "unfair trader" to a "tough opponent" and then to a "reform competitor" (Zhou & Liu, 2024), substantially altering international economic rules and forming a "China exception" trade policy framework.

Discourse and Ideology. Trade war discourse not only reflects existing ideological differences but also constructs new ideological realities, transforming economic disputes into a fundamental competition of value systems and institutional models. The discursive constructions of both China and the US reflect different worldviews and value systems: China emphasizes win-win cooperation and multilateralism, while the US highlights national security and zero-sum competition. This ideological difference is manifested through discursive elements such as value-laden vocabulary, metaphors, and narrative frames, and it forms a multi-layered interaction in official discourse, mainstream media, and on social media platforms.

Chinese value expression highlights win-win cooperation and multilateralism at all levels. High-frequency words like "cooperation," "openness," and "win-win" in official white papers reflect China's core value orientation in the trade dispute (Cheng, 2023). Chinese official discourse emphasizes traditional Confucian values, stressing "common development," "multilateralism," and "mutual benefit" (Zhuo, 2023). Cooperative metaphors dominate official discourse (Zhuo, 2022). The "journey metaphor" in Xi Jinping's speeches emphasizes the long-term and process-oriented nature of US-China economic relations (Tan & Cienki, 2024), in stark contrast to the US media's emphasis on a loss of control (disaster metaphor) (Song, 2021). Chinese media also tend to use "developmental metaphors" like "bridge" and "ship of cooperation" to highlight the concept of mutual benefit (Cai, 2023).

US value expression exhibits clear contradictions and antagonism. The US constructs a binary opposition of "free market vs. state capitalism" (Hopewell, 2021), yet deliberately conceals its own historical tradition and current contradictions of trade protectionism. At the official level, US discourse places more emphasis on values like "national security," "fair trade," and "America First". US media often use violent metaphors like "boxing/gladiatorial combat" to portray the trade war as a fierce confrontation and a zero-sum game (Cai, 2023), and they focus more on individual leadership and domestic impacts. The personifying metonymies of "TRUMP FOR US" and "XI FOR CHINA" are frequently used in political cartoons (Zhang & Forceville, 2020).

Discourse and International Order. The US-China trade war discourse is essentially a systematic competition between two views of the international order. Research finds that both

sides shape the global economic and political landscape through the reconstruction and contestation of historical narratives and by guiding market behavior.

In the reconstruction of historical narratives, Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) reveals that historical intertextuality has become a core battlefield in the competition for international discourse power. This mechanism manifests in three main forms: First, ideological historical opposition, as Zhang (2021) finds that the US legitimizes the trade war through a "barbarization" discourse strategy toward China, continuing the tradition of a civilized-barbaric binary. Second, historical analogy and memory mobilization. Tang (2023) shows that the US uses Cold War historical analogies and negative naming like "economic aggression" to legitimize protectionism, while China connects the "century of humiliation" with the contemporary narrative of its rise. Third, the recontextualization of historical symbols. Zhan and Wei (2021), in their analysis of Bilibili, find that young users creatively cite Mao Zedong's quotes and historical symbols from the Korean War to support the government's position. Furthermore, Xiao and Pan's (2020) reflection on the "Plaza Accord narrative" provides lessons from historical experience, emphasizing the importance of internal structural reform.

Trade war discourse also directly participates in the formation of global market prices and resource allocation. For example, false information has caused abnormal fluctuations in the stock market (Zhong et al., 2024), and an increase in negative sentiment in Trump's tweets corresponded to a drop in the stock prices of related industries. At the level of public consumption behavior, expressions of support for tariffs significantly increased consumer nationalism tendencies. The discourse competition in the technology sector is even more strategic: the US politicized Huawei's 5G technology through a "digital security" narrative, effectively restricting its market access. In response, China has used the "Digital Silk Road" discourse to reshape the perception of technological sovereignty in developing countries, influencing their choice of technology standards (Zeng, 2019).

In summary, the macro-level research finds that through national image shaping, value dissemination, and the reconstruction of historical narratives, both China and the US are competing not only for economic benefits but also for the rule-making power in the global governance system. The discursive constructions of China and the US have substantially changed the international political and economic landscape. The "responsible major power" image and the concepts of "win-win cooperation" and "multilateralism" constructed by China have successfully mobilized support from many countries worldwide, strengthening the multilateral trade system centered on the WTO. Meanwhile, the US, through the "China threat theory" and the binary narrative of "free market vs. state capitalism," attempts to establish a "democratic alliance" and a new supply chain system based on "values." Therefore, the discursive practice of the US-China trade war has transcended a mere representational function. By constructing social reality, it has reshaped international rules, alliance structures, and policy choices, highlighting the core role of discourse in constructing a new global political and economic order.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of discourse analysis to integrate multidisciplinary perspectives, revealing the multifaceted characteristics and strategic significance of the US-China trade war discourse. At the micro-textual level, China's discourse

centers on building consensus through a rule-oriented approach, constructing multilateral legitimacy via citations of international norms, flexible diplomatic expressions, and strategies that generalize global risks. In contrast, the US discourse is characterized by confrontational and threatening narratives, relying on moralistic accusations and crisis sensationalism to reinforce ideological opposition.

At the meso-communicative level, the discourse dissemination ecosystem is undergoing a profound transformation. While the agenda-setting and framing effects of traditional media remain influential, the digital environment has precipitated a threefold shift: the diversification of communication agents to include the public, political leaders, and multinational corporations; a pivot in content from cognitive agendas to emotional mobilization; and a change in dissemination mechanisms from the one-way transmission of traditional media to algorithm-driven interaction. Notably, social media has reshaped public cognitive frameworks and attitude formation pathways concerning the trade war through mechanisms of opinion polarization, information cocoons, and affective dissemination.

The macro-level analysis reveals that discourse—through the shaping of national images, the dissemination of ideologies, and the reconstruction of historical narratives—has become a core instrument for both China and the US in their contest for discourse power over the global political and economic order. China strives to cultivate the image of a "responsible major power," advocating for "win-win cooperation" and "multilateralism" to garner support from Global South countries and solidify multilateral trading systems like the WTO. Conversely, the US employs binary narratives such as the "China threat theory" and "free markets versus state capitalism" to construct a "democratic alliance" and exclusionary supply chains based on shared ideology. By integrating diverse disciplinary perspectives, this study clearly demonstrates the interplay among language, communication, and social structures, offering a systematic analytical lens for understanding the complex operations and strategic position of discourse in great power competition.

6.1. Policy Implications

The new characteristics of trade war discourse dissemination and its power mechanisms offer the following strategic implications for China in addressing potential future trade conflicts:

First, construct a multi-agent collaborative discourse system. Given the finding that discourse dominance has shifted from traditional state actors to a plurality of agents, governments and traditional media are no longer the sole producers of discourse. China should fully leverage this trend to form a multi-layered, multi-dimensional discourse system. In particular, it is crucial to support businesses and civil society forces in participating in international discourse construction, promoting the innovative integration of trade and cultural discourses.

Second, strengthen narratives of emotional affinity and empathy. The analysis indicates that emotional mobilization has become a key factor in influencing public attitudes and opinion trends; purely rational, technical economic discourse is often ineffective in mobilizing public support. The recent "Xiaongshu refugee incident" following the TikTok ban in the US illustrates that China should make full use of micro-narratives centered on people's livelihoods. This involves constructing trade discourses with greater emotional appeal, connecting abstract

international trade rules with the everyday experiences of the public, and forming a discourse model of "telling grand narratives through small stories."

Third, prioritize social media platforms and visual communication. Research confirms that social media has become the main battlefield for international discourse competition, with its algorithmic mechanisms profoundly influencing information flow and opinion formation. Therefore, China should strengthen its discursive presence on international social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, supporting groups such as Chinese merchants and international students in telling China's story effectively. Special attention should be paid to the unique advantages of new media formats like short videos and memes in cross-cultural communication to break through the discursive blockade of traditional Western media.

Fourth, recognize that discourse alliances have become critical in the reconstruction of the international order. Both China and the US are committed to forming international alliances favorable to themselves through discourse construction. China should further reinforce the "multilateralism" discourse framework and deepen its discursive consensus with countries of the Global South. Specifically, it is essential to integrate the trade war discourse with major international cooperation agendas such as the Global Development Initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative, thereby building a more inclusive and attractive international discourse-order alliance centered on common development.

Discourse is not merely a tool for describing trade conflicts but a strategic resource for shaping the new international economic order. Through discursive innovation and strategic restructuring, China can hope to secure a more favorable discursive position in a new round of the trade war, contributing Chinese wisdom to the construction of a more equitable and inclusive international economic order.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

Research on the US-China trade war discourse has the following limitations and directions for future breakthroughs.

First, there is a lack of effective integration of research methods. Future studies could develop mixed-methods designs, such as combining quantitative corpus analysis with experimental methods, to both delineate discourse patterns and verify causal mechanisms.

Second, a significant gap exists between micro-level discourse analysis and macro-level international political economy analysis. Existing research tends to focus either on the rhetorical strategies of specific texts or on the broader landscape of international relations, lacking a mid-range theory that organically connects the two. Future research could attempt to integrate quantitative social network analysis and big data public opinion mining with critical discourse analysis. Quantitative social network analysis can reveal the structural features of trade war discourse dissemination networks, big data public opinion mining can detect emotional mobilization and thematic trends in discourse, and critical discourse analysis can help interpret the underlying ideologies and power structures.

Third, the study of discourse agents is limited. Current research predominantly focuses on official and mainstream media discourse, paying insufficient attention to the discursive practices

of non-state actors and failing to fully grasp the trend of decentralized discourse power in the social media era. Future research should move beyond a state-centric perspective to include non-state actors such as multinational corporations, industry associations, and consumer groups in the analytical framework. Particular attention should be paid to how digital platforms reconfigure traditional discourse power structures by guiding public agenda-setting, thereby forming bottom-up counter-discursive forces.

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CONFLICT STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

COOPERATION STATEMENT

All authors contributed equally to this work and approved the final manuscript.

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