



Representing the ‘Other’: The Framing of China in BBC English and Urdu Online News

Azmat Khan

PhD fellow at Scripps
College of Communication, Ohio University
ak066021@ohio.edu

Dr.Syed Irfan Ashraf,

Assistant professor,
University of Peshawar
syedirfanashraf@uop.edu.pk

Dr.Faizullah Jan,

Professor,
University of Peshawar, Pakistan.
faiz.jan@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

Having established its economic power globally, China is now also asserting its soft power in the international symbolic representational realm—largely dominated by the West. This paper critically evaluates how BBC discursively constructs China in its Online English and Urdu News, and discusses its attendant social, political, and economic implications for the Chinese and Pakistani citizens in particular, and for people all over the world. We also discuss how does the West perceive China’s efforts to establish a global soft image and what role BBC plays in it. Using a combination of research tools; Framing, Authorship and Sourcing, the study analyzed 115 news stories. The analysis revealed that ‘China-Threat’ is the dominant frame in BBC’s coverage of China. Second, all stories were written by correspondents stationed outside China. Finally, BBC disproportionately cited Western news/expert sources, and also many sources/reports were unspecified (anonymous). The aim of this paper is to prompt readers to question commonly held assumptions of China propagated mostly by Western media.

KeyWords: China; BBC Online; Representation; Framing Analysis; Authorship



INTRODUCTION

Perceptions matter more than reality, and media are the biggest mediator of perceptions in today's age of mass communication. Even as early as 1922, Walter Lippmann had observed; "the mass media is the principal connection between events in the world and the images in the minds of the public" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 5). Media play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing foreign policies of states. Therefore, media representation (or the manufacturing) of sociopolitical reality has enormous practical implications for governments and people. As contemporary China is considered an emerging economic and cultural power, it also faces crisis of representation in international symbolic representational realm, predominantly dominated by the West. As Yukon also pointed out; "policymakers in Beijing often complain that the Western media tend to demonize China and that judgments are impaired by unwarranted and ideological biases" (Yukon, 2017, p. 1). Similarly, Mertens argued that the image of China suffered for a long time of misconceptions which were encouraged by Western philosophers and historians who defined China as an immobile society (Mertens, 2013). He further contended that Western philosophers and thinkers, Hegel, Foucault and Von Rancke, for instance, reproduced these concepts which became the dominant signifiers for China. According to Wong, all this mediated imagery has contributed to the creation of the widespread Sinophobia in the Western world (T. Wong, 2020). Eighty-three years ago, the renowned Hokkien Chinese writer, linguist, and philosopher Yutang Lin had protested against this tendency arguing that the West assumes the role of either a merciless critic, permitting nothing good about China, or else, as its passionate, romantic admirer (Lin, 1936). For Lin, these generalizations were "silly." He wrote:

"China has been greatly, magnificently misunderstood. Greatness is often the term we confer on what we do not understand and wish to have done with. Between being well understood, however, and being called great, China would have preferred the former" (Lin, 1936, p. 7).

The West's "defensive" mentality towards Chinese culture has often led media analysts to criticize China before taking into account its unique history and its wider spatiotemporal nuances (Mertens, 2013; Yukon, 2017). Mertens maintained, "Western culture has a tendency to create the history of the other cultures and to subordinate them to Western systems of values, beliefs and boundaries" (Mertens, 2013, p. 3). Conventional themes and epithets which define China as a rigid entity, according to Mertens, are the overarching Frames that dictate Western media's coverage.



Moreover, scholars are recently also researching "China threat," an emerging sociopolitical phenomenon in the discourse of the Western media (Huang & Leung, 2005). According to Huang and Leung, media is the key channel for the dissemination and popularization of "China Threat" (Huang & Leung, 2005). Therefore, this paper also investigates how "China Threat" complicates China's representation in the Western media.

News outlets are defined not only by what they report and how, *but also* by what they do not, what scholars call "non-coverage" (Mulvey, 2019). The French philosopher Sartre famously remarked: "not to choose is also a choice" (Sartre, 1946, p. 7), and a very strategic one. Therefore, non-coverage i.e., what media want to disregard or silence, is equally significant to be subjected to academic scrutiny. This paper also examines the "untold" aspects of the China Story in the Western media.

Finally, as Yukon upheld that the main issue is not to be positive or negative about China but finding a framework that would guide our understanding of that country in a better way (Yukon, 2017, p. 13). This study will be a contribution to such a scholarship which diversifies discursive avenues for Western and Chinese media where they can engage in more open and unprejudiced ways, minimizing the risk of various threats which may result from their mutual rivalries. China is becoming an increasingly important player in global affairs and also the subject of much media debate. However, very little research is conducted on how it is represented in the online news versions of those media outlets which have worldwide influence and readership (Griffiths, 2013). This paper qualitatively analyzes BBC's online English and Urdu News, looking for how it constructs the image of China.

Why BBC Online News?

Edward Said, in 1993, wrote: "whether the view that London tells the Truth is only a vestige of colonialism or not, yet it is also true that in England and abroad, the BBC has a position in public life enjoyed neither by government agencies like the Voice of America nor by the American networks, including CNN" (Said, 1993, p. ix). Even today, Said's assertion stands true because according to Alexa's Traffic-Rank system, BBC Online is the most popular English Language website in the world. Formerly known as BBCi, BBC Online consists of a large network of websites. BBC claims to be Europe's most popular content-based site being visited by 13.2 million people each day (B.B.C., 2017).

Besides BBC English, we also analyze news from BBC Urdu which is the Urdu language station of the BBC World Service, accompanied by its web news portal. The target audiences are Pakistani and Indian populations. Although



BBC operates a Hindi service as well but since spoken Urdu is mutually intelligible with standard Hindi, and because BBC is well aware of the fact that people on both sides of the border are interested in each other's films, politics, and security, therefore BBC Urdu publishes stories of mutual interest which are read by people in both countries (Gadda, 2014).

The internet has registered an enormous growth in audiences over the past years and will continue to do so. With more people gaining access to internet, media organizations are also switching from traditional to online. Therefore, Liss suggested that online provides a much richer resource for academic research (Liss, 2003). These were the reasons this paper chose BBC Online.

Significance of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine BBC's discursive strategies and Framing techniques which it employs for constructing China socially and politically. The paper also challenges some conventional and normally unsuspecting trends in Western media about China. Moreover, this paper is an attempt to understand media's role in the distribution of power, and critically discuss new dimensions and processes of political communication. Finally, we hope that such a project would provide guidance for academics, for journalists who strive to create fairer and more balanced news, and for the many citizens and activists who see themselves as victims of partisan media coverage.

Since this paper also focusses on BBC Urdu, therefore, it will be of significance to policy makers in Beijing and Islamabad to reckon with BBC's coverage and its attendant ramifications for their mutual interests, relations, and their respective citizens. Pakistan is a key participant in China's Road and Belt Initiative (BRI) through its flagship project China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Research Questions

This paper investigates the following questions.

1. How does BBC Online (English and Urdu) News Frame China?
2. Authorship: Who writes stories about China?
3. Sourcing: Which sources/experts are quoted, and in what proportion?
4. POV: Does BBC give due space to all victims/actors in the conflict stories?



China's Image in International Media: A Literature Review

Numerous scholars have examined the image of China in international Print and Electronic media. Xu and You argued that China's rise has shocked the world and has become a focus of attention (Xu & You, 2012). However, they claimed that Western media's portrayal is stereotypical and limited to certain fixed Eurocentric Frames. Similarly, Griffiths asserted that only a limited number of conventional frames such as environment, economic miracle, or continued human rights abuses constitute the China Story (Griffiths, 2013). Mazrui also posited, "the Western media inform about the rest of the world but also inform the rest of the world about the rest of the world" (Mazrui, 1996). Mazrui showed that Western media lump the coverage of China in five biased categories: "the exotic, the urban, the elite, the perennial male and the negativist" (Mazrui, 1996, p. 9). Moreover, Richter and Gebauer found that conflict, threat, damage and violence-oriented understanding, as well as a generally monolithic depiction of China are the main themes reflected in Western media portrayal (Richter & Gebauer, 2011).

In the same way, Yu found that American media outlets, particularly *The New York Times (NYT)*, "have a Cold-War mindset and their coverage is disproportionately negative and unable to acknowledge China's achievements" (Yu, 2018, p. 15). Yu cited *NYT's* China senior correspondent Edward Wong wrote that on the international stage, China is mainly perceived to be using its economic and military strength to occupy faraway lands, while domestically, it uses coercive ways to control its population (E. Wong, 2018, p. 1). Yu contended that this was the theme the American media routinely embrace for reporting China. Calling China an imperial power, however, Yu claimed, is perhaps the biggest oxymoron to Chinese people. He disagreed with this arguing that Chinese people have suffered enormous humiliations at the hands of imperialist power, and now anti-imperialist convictions are an integral part of both Chinese social fabric and foreign policy (Yu, 2018, p. 9).

Next, Seib and Powers examined the Coverage of BBC World Service, CNN International, and Deutsche Welle and found that BBC is fairly one-sided when detailing China's record on human and political rights (Seib & Powers, 2010). Western media, though, give coverage to China but have always painted it as a bad influence on the 'international' order and stability (Seib & Powers, 2010, p. 11). They stressed that in half of their coverage,



Western media do not project China as a helping player on global stage. Likewise, Peng carried out a longitudinal analysis (1992-2001) of Los Angeles Times and the NYT and found that both papers exhibited a profoundly hostile bias toward China (Peng, 2004).

Moreover, fake news is a major challenge of today's post truth world. According to Yu, China is also suffering from fake news blitz of Western media (Yu, 2018). Yu pointed out that when President Trump accused **NYT** and **Washington Post** of being fake news, the **People's Daily** agreed, publishing an op-ed which contended that Western media's reporting on China has always been slanted and have underreported its achievement in poverty reduction and science (Yu, 2018, p. 16).

China: A Rival or Exotic Other

The concept of Other/Otherization has also been extensively studied by media scholars. Mertens argued that Western culture creates lesser Others out of non-Western cultures which the media then reinforce and distribute in the society (Mertens, 2013). Similarly, Edward Said stated that the East is subjected to misunderstandings and distorted accounts because of the ethnocentric powerful position of the West (Said, 1978). "The material and literary power of the West has produced the East and the truth of the East" (Said, 1978, p. 55). Sardar also noted that the representations of the East "were deliberately concocted as instruments to contain and manage these cultures and civilizations" (Sardar, 1999, p. 4). Mertens highlighted that the East is always viewed as the Other in contradiction to Western society and system of values (Mertens, 2013). Hence, German sinologist Wolfgang Franke observed; "nineteenth-century European scholarship treated every manifestation of Chinese civilization by standards derived from Western developments, but assumed to be absolute" (Franke, 1967, p. 146). Mertens further stated that China's representation is still subjected to ethnocentricity and biases which do not give space to contextualization and understanding of its diversities (Mertens, 2013). Similarly, Richter and Gebauer argued that the national image of China created by Western books and the media to date has fluctuated between two poles: "a threatening adversary to our white social order or an exotic dreamland" (Richter & Gebauer, 2011, p. 36).



Cliches are powerful discursive devices of normalizing otherization. Richter and Gebauer reasoned that the oversimplified and shallow clichés marked by a Eurocentric perspective most often inform Western media’s coverage (Richter & Gebauer, 2011). They posited that it is Western expectations of China which determine dominant frames in which China is packaged and to which the Western journalistic response is one of advocacy/activism. They further added, “These centuries’ old prejudices tend to set the tone of the discussion, even though seemingly positive images of China as an ‘attractive growth market’ and ‘interesting manufacturing location’ also occur, especially in business reporting” (Richter & Gebauer, 2011, p. 38).

Moreover, scholars have also identified one dominant habit of Western media; the exoticization of China. Foucault argued that the East constitutes for the West a vast reservoir of utopias (Foucault, 1972). Building on Foucault, Longxi inferred that for the West, China as a land in the Far East becomes traditionally the image of the ultimate exotic heaven (Longxi, 1988). Both Said and Longxi emphasized that it may have been made up to represent a Western fantasy of the Other. “Indeed, what can be a better sign of the Other than a fictionalized space of China. What can furnish the West with a better reservoir for its dreams, fantasies, and utopias” (Longxi, 1988, p. 21). Exoticization, however, circumvents a multivocal understanding of Chinese people as human beings with sufferings, sorrows and happiness, or weaknesses and strengths.

‘China Threat Theory’

Ever since China emerged as a global economic counterpart of the West, scholarship about the ‘China Threat Theory’ has been in vogue. Yang and Liu examined the emergence of ‘China Threat Theory’ and how it has impacted China-West relations (Yang & Liu, 2012). The media, Huang and Leung argued, are the principal channel for ‘China threat’ popularization and dissemination (Huang & Leung, 2005). They empirically examined the coverage of five major US newspapers over a period of 15 year (1992-2006) and found that the theory’s emergence paralleled China’s sharp economic ascent in 1990s. “The perceptions of China as a military/strategic threat replaced [earlier] political/ideological concerns in 1995, and the military focus has dominated media coverage ever since” (Huang & Leung, 2005, p. 22). It can be inferred from these studies that ‘China Threat’ is directly related to the economic progress of China: the more it asserts its economic muscles globally, the more Western media depict it as a threat to the West’s financial monopoly.



Western Media’s reaction to China’s soft power building efforts

Scholar Joseph Nye’s concept of Soft Power is commonly summoned in foreign policy discussions surrounding China (Zhao, 2018). The term, Nye explained, refers to “the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion” (Nye, 2018). China is a rising global power and over the past decades, has intensified its efforts at soft power to gain international influence and back up its economic interests (Zhao, 2018). Zhao remarked that China is well aware of the West’s, particularly America’s, longstanding global cultural hegemony, assisted by historically Washington-led international establishments such as WB and IMF. Zhao noted that President Xi Jinping’s major policy focus has been on levelling the global field of soft power struggle. Xi recently asserted; “We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power” (Zhao, 2018, p. 2).

But China’s Soft Power is perceived as Sharp Power by the West!

Sharp power, Nye defined, “is a more government-led and aggressive approach to cultural promotion than soft power” (Nye, 2018, p. 3). Nye’s article *China’s Soft and Sharp Power* theorized that Power sometimes depends on whose army or economy wins, but it can also depend on whose story wins (Nye, 2018). Zhao claimed that today, when China tries to project the positive aspects of its cultural values (Soft Power) globally, the international media, specifically commentators in America, label it as Sharp Power offensive. For example, an article in the Economist *What to do about China’s Sharp Power* termed China’s global soft influence as perilous to America (The Economist, 2017). This tendency is reflected in Nye’s article. “A strong narrative is a source of power of anti-Chinese hysteria and as the rising superpower, China has an appetite to shape the rules of global engagement—rules created largely by America and Western Europe and routinely invoked by them to justify their own actions” (Nye, 2018).

Clash of values or clash of Soft Powers?

As China is trying hard to swiftly boost its international cultural influence, It is becoming increasingly challenging for China to remain true to its own



socio-political ideals but also not offend people and leaders of other countries on issue which are sensitive to them in terms of political correctness (Zhao, 2018, p. 23). At the same time, this also provides the Western media with an excuse to criticize and sometimes ridicule China. However, Zhao argued that these controversies are often sparked by the countries panicked by the global rise of China.

Furthermore, since multipolarity is being promoted as a global norm, scholars argue that the Western media should not deploy liberal values as sole yardstick to evaluate China or other countries. “It is dangerous and somewhat irresponsible to analyze a Chinese cultural products through a purely American lens”, wrote Anthony Tao, managing editor of the digital media company Supchina (Tao, 2018). Although according to Zhao, the collision of values from both sides of the equation seems unavoidable due to China’s global efforts at increasing its international influence, however, this seems more a clash of Soft Power efforts at winning the hearts and minds of people around the world, historically perceived by the West to be its sole province (Zhao, 2018, p. 24).

This literature review shows that much research exists on how Western media construct the image of China, but the Online news of many global media moguls have not been touched. This paper tries to fill some of this research gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a Qualitative-cum-Quantitative Content Analysis, guided by Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Content Analysis, Mazrui argued, “provides an important layer of analysis in that it helps to note what stories, stakeholders and Frames are included and excluded and to what effect” (Mazrui, 1996, p. 77). However, besides Framing, we also use three other analytical categories; Authorship, Sourcing and POV (Actors/Victims’ voices)—explained on the next page.

Framing Theory

Scholars consider Framing as a sub-theory of Agenda Setting.(Pan & Kosicki, 1997) Agenda-setting is a social theory which describes the ability of the news media to influence public opinion by placing more importance on specific topics of the



public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This theory follows that if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the audience will come to regard the issue as more important than other.

Erving Goffman first developed the concept of Framing. According to him, “in social theory, framing is a schema of interpretation, a collection of anecdotes, stereotypes, and conceptual filters that individuals rely on to understand and respond to events” (Goffman, 1974, p. 5). However, it was Robert Mathew Entman who incorporated the concept of Framing into Media Studies and enthusiastically worked to develop it as a theoretical field of its own (Alger, 1989). According to Entman, Framing involves selection and salience which influence our thinking and guide how we process information. “The concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 2). He further stated that the power of Framing lies in selecting and emphasizing some aspects of reality while omitting others.

Framing and bias are two inseparable phenomena. Entman defined bias as “consistent patterns in the framing of mediated communication that promote the influence of one side in conflicts over the other” (Entman, 1993, p. 3). He further stated that “to reveal media content biases, we must show patterns of slant that regularly prime audiences, consciously or unconsciously, to support the interests of particular holders or seekers of political power” (Entman, 1993, pp. 3–4). Drawing on this, Schattschneider reasoned, “Media mobilize bias in the political system by helping some actors regularly prevail over others” (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 3). So, this paper also looks into the bias that is embedded in media framing.

Authorship, Sourcing and POV

While the principal theoretical tool of this paper is Framing, however as Gaber, Seymour, and Thomas argued, “news frames have certain inadequacies as means of analysis” (Gaber et al., 2009, p. 272). These scholars posited that Frames do not tell whose perspectives get represented and whose interests are served. To overcome these limitations, this paper sought to supplement Framing Theory with three other analytical concepts, borrowed from Film Studies (Gaber et al., 2009; Tregde, 2013). First, the concept “authorship” which attempts to analyze a film by decoding the dominant voice. For this study, authorship means determining who writes a



story about whom and from where (location). Whether the correspondents contributing news and analysis (about China) are stationed in China or are in BBC's international bureaus? This is a fundamental question because correspondents must have firsthand information (physical presence) and in-depth knowledge of histories and cultures of societies if they want to report objectively. As a regular visitor of BBC Online, the authors observed that most stories about China are either nameless or written by BBC's Middle East, New York, London or New Delhi correspondents. In 2005, the BBC Board of Governors responded to the persistent complaints by Palestinian and Israeli audiences about its coverage of Hezbollah-Israel War, and appointed an independent panel to evaluate the claims. "The panel commissioned both quantitative and qualitative research, including content analyses and audience studies" (Gaber et al., 2009, p. 6). The panel's recommendations included "more historical, and other, background and context, greater attempts to avoid being 'picture-driven' and the appointment of a Middle East editor to provide an *editorial Guiding Hand*" (Gaber et al., 2009). This shows authorship is an essential research consideration.

Second, authorship also examines where are the audiences oriented towards and from whose point of view (Gaber et al., 2009, p. 9). This consideration has been labeled as "Sourcing" (a news) for this paper. Journalists have to attribute each fact and figure in their news stories to undeniable sources. Also, news and analysis quote different experts, officials, and published reports/polls. Hence, the choice of a source also affects the objectivity of news. For example, if a news story discusses environmental issues in China and it quotes five experts from the West but does not take the opinion of an equal number of Chinese experts, the story will likely be unbalanced and biased. This paper also examines how BBC sources its news reports and commentaries.

Finally, Point of View (POV) looks at shots and scenes by focusing on the ideological position of camera to see where the audiences are directed/positioned (Gaber et al., 2009). For this study, POV has been designated as 'Victims/Actors Voices. Since there is a high possibility that majority of the stories will be about conflicts between China and the West or China's domestic issues, it is important to scrutinize whether all victims/actors are given due space as is recommended by internationally recommended Conflict Reporting Manuals (Galtung & Lynch, 2010). BBC's code of practice also underscores "giving those criticized a right of reply" (Seth-Smith et al., 2016).



Time Period

Although time period is a strategic choice, but it is not an exact science. We selected six months, from July 2018 to December 2018 for this study. There were two reasons for this choice. First, as a regular reader of BBC Urdu, the authors noticed in the latter half of 2018, that BBC heavily reported stories about China to its Urdu audiences, primarily focusing on issues related to Xinjiang. Second, scholars suggest that the content analysis of most-recent news yields better critical insights as news media constantly change their policies, accommodating fresh research and criticism.

Data collection and handling

Data was collected from BBC's online archives. A total of 115 stories; 68 from English and 47 from Urdu service published during the specified time period, were collected. Each story was then closely, and multiple times, examined (manually) to discern the frames it employed, its authorship, Sourcing and POV patterns. Results were developed into Excel sheets, and illustrative graphs/tables were drawn.

The coding-set of Frames

Drawing on many studies, a coding-set consisting of the following Frames was devised according to which the data was scrutinized. However, this study also identified some new Frames.

1. **Mazrui's (1996) four Frames:** The Exotic, the Urban (Geography of news: metropolitan vs periphery), the Elite and the Perennial Male.
2. **Griffiths' (2013) five Frames:** The Economy, Politics, Foreign Affairs and National Security, Human Rights and the Environment.
3. **Ethnography of news:** Chinese domestic conflicts, trade, culture, society, education, sports, science and technology (considering each as a frame)
4. **Geopolitical Frame:** Stories focusing on China's role/influence in international politics.
5. **China Threat Frame**



DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Table 1: Total news stories

Total stories	Urdu News	English News
115	47	68

The analysis first examined the data for authorship, sourcing and POV. The reason for this is that in the news production cycle, these steps precede, and to a maximum extent also determine, the framing process. This will set the stage to understand the framing strategies of BBC in a more systematic way.

Authorship: Who writes the News?

Table 2: Authorship

Total Stories	Byline Stories	Without Byline/anonymous	Pakistani Correspondents	Western Correspondents	China Correspondents
$47u^1 + 68e = 115$	$10u + 18e = 28$	$37u + 50e = 87$	5	$5u + 18e = 23$	$0u + 0e = 0$

None of the 115 stories was written by China correspondent, although BBC has its reporters in Beijing and other cities of the country. Only 18 out of 68 English stories were byline and that too, all written by experts/bureaus in the Middle East, Japan, India, UK, or US, which may cast a doubt on the utility of the presence of BBC's reporters in China. This is also the violation

¹ The subscript 'u' denotes Urdu News while 'e' refers to English News.



of BBC's recommendations that a reporter should be based in an area to be able to report with sufficient editorial context and background (Seth-Smith et al., 2016). Similarly, only five Urdu stories had Pakistani writers despite the fact that all stories had discussed Pakistani domestic political, security and social issues. Ironically, four Urdu stories were contributed by correspondents from America while one from Israel.

Anonymous Writers

Table 2 shows that 87 stories (76%) were written anonymously. It is worth questioning why BBC's huge number of stories about China are nameless, and why local (China) correspondents are given zero importance/representation. This might be to shield its reporters from being challenged about the evidence/sources they quote (or ignore) in their news.

Translated Stories

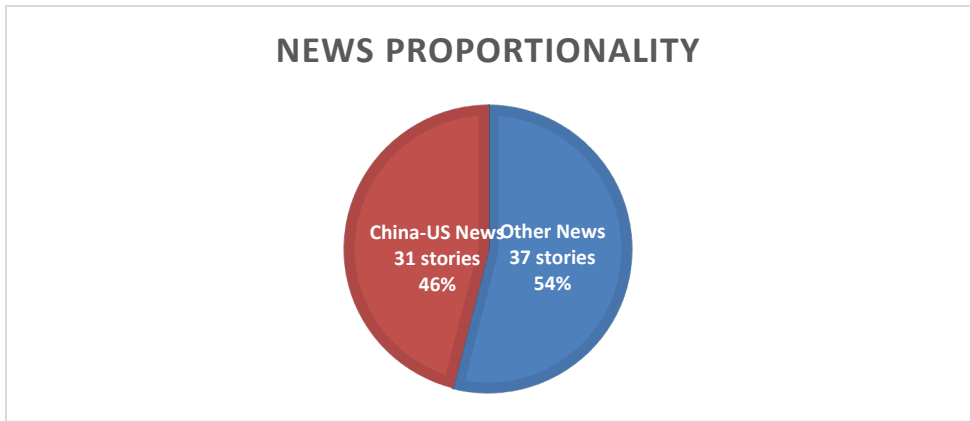
Eleven stories published on BBC's Urdu news portal were the verbatim translation of the English version (or may be vice versa, but since neither the reporters' name nor their location was given, it was impossible to verify which news was original and which translation). This should highlight a serious journalistic principle: how, for instance, a Middle Eastern correspondent can objectively write a story about Baluchistan (Pakistan's province) or whether a local reporter is qualified enough to write about an issue in the Middle East?

BBC online (English) is preoccupied with US-China News

Out of the 68 English stories, 31 (46%) alone were about China-US affairs. The following Pie Chart 1 shows the overall distribution of the news stories.



Pie Chart 1: News Proportionality



The above Chart reveals that BBC’s coverage of China is overwhelmed by the debate about the global competition between an existing superpower and an emerging one. The following Table 3 further unfolds this editorial trend.

Table 3: Sub-division of news stories about China-US affairs

Total Stories about US-China	Trade War	Hacking/Cyber Spying	Technological Competition	Security (Pacific, South China Sea)
31	18	5	4	4

Eighteen stories out of these 31 were specifically about US-China trade war of which the headlines of 16 stories contained words like “US-China Trade War” or “US-China Trade row.”

Sourcing

The following Table 4 reveals how BBC sources its news.



Table 4: Sourcing pattern of BBC

Specification of the source	The number of times it was quoted
American/European Experts, United Nations, Human Rights Watch, IMF, WHO, Oxford, Amnesty, EU etc.	$13u+40e = 53$
Chinese Sources (President Xi, Foreign Ministry, Peoples Court's Reports, Police)	$15u+26e = 41$
American/UK president/vice president, Congress members	$9u+29e = 38$
Anonymous Critics, Analysts, Observers	$3u+20e = 23$
Chinese Media (Xinhua, People's Daily, South China Morning Post)	$11u+9e = 20$
American/Western Media (AP, AFP, The Economist, Reuters etc.)	$2u+14e = 16$
BBC's international Correspondents	$=15e$
BBC's think-tanks in West/Middle East	$4u+9e = 13$
Chinese but living/working in Western Organizations/Universities	$2u+3e = 5$
Pakistani Sources (Foreign Ministry)	$=4u$
Social media users (Weibo, Zhihu 发现-知乎)	$1u+3e = 4$
Sources from other countries (Denmark etc.)	$=3e$
China Correspondents	$1u+1e = 2$



Westerners working in China	=1e
No Sources Mentioned	9u+8e = 17 stories

The table shows that 91 sources/experts (53+38) were reached from Western countries and institutions (UN, IMF and WB) compared with only 41 from China which reflects a huge gap of 50 sources. Professionally, equal number of sources must have been approached from both sides. This disparity can tilt the balance of stories in favor of the West. Similarly, 15 times the opinion/take/input of BBC's international reporters was taken as compared to only two times from China. It shows BBC's China reporters/news staff neither write news stories (Table 2) nor their expert opinions are taken. Such one-sided treatment of news may end up producing partial stories. Also, 13 times BBC quoted media think-tanks in America/Europe/Middle East. Such foreign sources/think tanks however have very little firsthand information of what is happening inside China, and mostly rely on other media which in turn rely on the former.

Moreover, from Pakistan, only four sources, all officials of Pakistan's foreign office/ministry, were quoted which shows BBC's complete reliance on elite opinion (elite bias). Most of Urdu News were about Xinjiang. However, BBC never reported the opinion of Pakistani or Chinese authorities. It only relied on vague/anonymous sources or UN reports.

Anonymous Sources

BBC frequently supported its claims with nameless sources which are camouflaged in vague phrases. Table 4 shows that 23 anonymous sources were mentioned. A list of vague phrases is given below.

Experts say, It is thought, Some say, Experts are assuming, Analysts suspect/report, Experts worry, Rights groups say, Critics say, Observer note, According to reports

The absence of clear sources not only leads to abstraction but also does not clearly tell who a 'critic' is or which 'rights organization' said something. Particularly doubtful are the 'reports' which are referenced in the news but details are not given as who published the report and when. Also, online



links of such reports or articles are not provided. Such statements become ‘fact’ if they are repeated often enough.

Stories sans-source

Seventeen stories did not quote any source. Journalists can only write a news story based on evidence/facts/figures which come from established and well reputed sources/authorities. A news story without any attribution to undeniable sources can only be counted as an opinion piece (column). So, writing stories anonymously shows BBC’s unprofessional, opinionated, and self-righteous treatment of news about China.

POV: Giving space to Victims/Actors

Table 5: Quoting Victims/Actors

Total Stories containing Conflict	Stories without mentioning any Victim	Pakistani Victims	Chinese Victims	Western Victims
33u+54e=87	26u+51e =77	3	2u+2e =4	2u+1e =3

BBC was found quite weak on giving space to the views of the victims/actors. Table 5 shows that out of the total 87 stories which primarily contained conflicts (US-China trade War, China’s involvement in South China Sea, Uyghur issue, Baloch resistance to CPEC in Baluchistan etc.), only 10 stories quoted victims/actors. Moreover, majority of the stories were about trade war. BBC reported the views of Chinese and American officials but never bothered to get the views of common man/woman or any businessperson to know how they look at these developments or what consequences they will bear. Particularly, in conflicts like Xinjiang, BBC never mentioned any local member or government official.

Frames

The following Table 6 shows different Frames BBC deploys while reporting China.



Table 6: Frames

Frame (s)	The number of times it was used
International/national Politics Frame	$36u+40e = 76$
China Threat Frame (fear of Emerging Super Power)	$33u+43e = 76$
Economy/Trade War Frame	$24u+21e = 45$
Human Rights/ political/religious freedom Frame	$5u+15e = 20$
Elite Corruption Frame	$4u+14e = 18$
Exotic Frame	$9u+8e = 17$
Dispute Frame (Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan)	$6u+10e = 16$
Science/Technology Frame	$4u+9e = 13$
National Security Frame	$3u+10e = 13$
Fake Products Frame (DNA/Gene editing)	$2u+10e = 12$
Censorship Frame	$1u+8e = 9$
Culture Frame	$0u+6e = 6$
Foreign Affairs Frame	$2u+3e = 5$
Environmental Frame	$2u+3e = 5$
CPEC Frame	$3u$
Sports Frame	$0+0 = 00$
Urban Frame	No story was written about rural areas
Perennial Male Frame	Only two stories were about women. But women were



	portrayed as victims and not in any leadership role.
--	--

For how such Framing can impact China’s image and what political, social, and cultural implications it can have, please see the Discussion section.

Our analysis also found some other news practices/Frames which are unpacked in the following paragraphs.

Question Frame: BBC’s tricky Headlines

One dominant discursive device which BBC uses is that it frames the headlines in question form, as if casting doubts on an issue. The headlines of 31 stories (12u+19e) contained question mark at the end. For instance;

“Is China burdening Africa with debt?” (English, Nov 5, 2018)

“Is Pak-China Bus Service reliable?” (Urdu, Nov 21, 2018)

“How the world is grappling with China's rising power?” (English, Oct 26, 2018)

“Why is China constructing a ‘fake’ moon?” (Urdu, Oct 20, 2018)

The noted contradiction however was that in none of the stories, BBC has tried to professionally pursue the question. Question casts aspersion on an issue, though ideally a professional way of examining a topic, however, also requires to be answered in an impartial way. One way of fulfilling this obligation is to seek the viewpoint of all those whose role/integrity has been questioned. However, as evident from the Table 4, BBC either quoted one sided sources (mostly Western) or ignored to mention any source at all, and instead, wrote the story offering its own analysis/assumptions/expectations. The *question-headlines* may be an effective way to sub-consciously reinforce the already prejudiced views of readers about China because headline has major impact on a readers, and particularly, when the contents of the story circumvent the answer to the question raised in the headline.

Sweeping Generalizations

“It is not uncommon for Chinese consumers to boycott popular brands” (December 12, 2018). Statements like this one are given without



substantiating them with evidence. It shows the stereotypical depiction of a whole country and its people as a homogenous herd, and overlooks the diversity in individuals' initiatives/choices.

Dangerous Associations

In a news story about a blast in a factory in Zhangjiakou city, BBC, immediately after giving the details of dead and injured, wrote; "Zhangjiakou is set to hold some ski and snowboard events when China hosts the 2022 Winter Olympics." (Nov 28, 2018)

Here, BBC tries to link the factory blast with the upcoming Olympics which certainly tarnishes the image of the city, and will frighten the athletes and organizers who will participate in it. Ironically, BBC did not give any details that how far was the factory from the Olympics stadium. Also, it didn't ask authorities whether the blast will have any bearing on the games or what kind of safety arrangements have been made for the Olympics.

What is ignored (non-coverage)?

It is easy to notice and appreciate/criticize the obvious, but it is more intriguing to discern what has been omitted-out. Besides what BBC reported, this study also sought to bring to light what it ignored, deliberately or otherwise. Because both choosing and unchoosing (a story or its particular aspects) are editorial choices with equal implications. Therefore, it is equally earnest to examine why certain aspects of a reality are ignored. In the following paragraphs, we explain what different important features of Chinese society and state are absent in BBC's narrative of China.

Culture Overlooked

China has one of the oldest civilizations and rich diversity in customs and rituals across different provinces. But BBC paints its picture crammed with conflicts and trade rivalries. This image portrays China not an interesting country full of culture and life, but a mechanical entity bent on rivaling America. Soft stories about China and the dreams and courage of its people are missing. Despite the fact that China has numerous big and small events of seasonal rituals and celebrations, BBC only mentioned six of them. For instance "Thousands make ice fog to mark winter solstice in China" (Dec



24, 2018). This reveals the reduction of culture to politics, a common theme to look at a country and its people through a narrow ideological lens.

Contribution of China to Science and Technology unheeded

China is efficiently contributing in the areas of AI, IT, space exploration and genetic engineering. But BBC either flatly ignores such stories or when it reports, they are dubbed as dangerous to world peace, or as in competition to the US. Consider the following stories.

“Why is China building a ‘fake’ moon?” (Urdu, Oct 24, 2018)

“China baby gene editing claim 'dubious’”, (BBC Nov 26, 2018)

“China's Tencent Music jumps on US launch” (BBC Oct 11, 2018)

Smearing China’s Overseas Investment (BRI)

BBC specifically casts doubts on China’s engagement in trade and bilateral relations in Africa and other continents. It calls such efforts as Debt Diplomacy and China’s bid to control foreign lands. The following Headlines may testify;

“Is China burdening Africa with debt?” (Nov 5, 2018)

“How the world is grappling with China's rising power?” (Oct 26, 2018)

This reflects BBC’s one sidedness as it never takes the opinion of Chinese officials or the views of the governments and people of those African or other countries where China is investing. Instead, it relies on the opinions of ‘experts’ from IMF and other Western monetary institutions which are mostly controlled by America.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we offer a critical examining of the findings. We argue that China is more than the sum of international conflict/politics. But its framing in BBC online tells a different story. BBC used International Politics Frame and Trade War Frame 76 and 45 times respectively. It shows the coverage is overwhelmed with war (trade, cyber etc.) and neglects other diverse aspects of societies from both sides of the equation. Since culture, social customs, sports, art, music and religious/spiritual issues concern majority of the populace, coverage of these themes can broaden peoples’ imagination



about each other. If BBC and other media organizations focus more on non-military and pacifist dimensions of people's lives (i.e., cultures, aesthetics, Art, festivals), this is likely to lead to the minimization of political tensions. Instead of further widening the cultural fault lines, media that paint a humane image of countries, what can be called the "demilitarization of representation, and humanization of coverage", can help people of different civilizations to come closer and celebrate diversities.

Is China a threat for the West?

Over the past years, a substantial volume of anti-China rhetoric has come from the US which has had a long history of Sinophobia, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) which had barred Chinese laborers (T. Wong, 2020). So, it is no wonder a great number of Western people pick up on this Sinophobia. "Today China is being seen as a challenger to US hegemony, and almost every aspect of what the Chinese government does has been criticized heavily" (T. Wong, 2020, p. 3). Our study found that 'China Threat' Frame was used 76 times. Instead of projecting China is a threat, and that too only to America, coverage of China's contribution to science, technology, and bettering life standards of its own people as well as those around the world who are benefiting from the low-cost Chinese technologies and investment under BRI in infrastructure, energy and health sectors which will create job opportunities and improve life conditions, will be more holistic and beneficial to the world. For this to happen, Western media and journalists may consider adopting a non-defensive and more inclusive approach, and giving Chinese voice a sufficient space. The founding scholar of Orientalism Edward Said had remarked, "What we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the authority which has become repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented" (Said, 1993, p. 43). If Said's advice is heeded, media can help create the much needed gray area among civilization.

The West's 'Eco-Imperialism' and China's contributions to green energies

In stories related to environmental issues, BBC quoted many Western experts and officials from UN but not a single Chinese scientist or government official. Jandt argued that since developed countries are now in a position to curtail their carbon emission and the developing nations rely mainly on higher emission to achieve the status of developed country, environment now frequently becomes an issue of contention among the



global North and South (Jandt, 2018). He used the phrase ecoimperialism to denote the inherent bias in international governance bodies that hold on to protecting developed countries but deny others to use their resources and escape the poverty trap. He wrote that leaders of the wealthy nations should not deprive people of ‘underdeveloped’ countries to make choices for their better lives. But Jandt is not optimistic because he posited that China’s emergence has threatened many in the developed world, and since fear can trigger animosity, it is turned into negative stereotypes and cliches, for instance China as the world's polluter (Jandt, 2018, p. 123).

Although, damage to our ecosystem cannot be justified on any account, however according to Jandt, since 2011, China has been a heavy investor in renewable energy and pollution control mechanisms. He further stated that Trump not only ridiculed Obama's climate policies but also pledged to reopen the coal industry, and wrote off many climate change initiatives by an executive order, yet the Chinese government announced its continued commitment to the Paris climate change agreement” (Jandt, 2018, p. 124). But BBC did not report such news, nor did it provide such context when discussing China’s ‘shares in global pollution’.

Human Rights and Censorship

BBC used Human Rights Frame/abuses 20 times but only citing anonymous activists, unspecified reports, or UN officials. It never inquired the opinion of any Chinese official. Similarly, BBC mentioned internet censorship Frame 9 times assuming the Western definition of censorship as universally valid. However, as Jandt argued that China did not think the internet was a borderless enterprise and had been championing the idea of internet sovereignty. He further wrote that China considers both physical and virtual borders at par” (Jandt, 2018, p. 144).

Hillary Clinton delivered a speech in 2010 comparing the restrictions on internet in China to that of the Berlin wall. The comments prompted the Chinese government to say that the US wanted to sustain its global hegemony by using internet, guising it as value free platform though Western values are built in, in it” (Jandt, 2018, pp. 144–145). The People's Daily, on the other hand, made a comparison between Google and the opium traders of the 19th century (Demick, 2011). According to Jandt, China sees



such demands as attacks on its sovereignty, with the US operating as a self-appointed global human rights judge (Jandt, 2018). Since the flow of information from the West to the Rest is not equal, many countries, specifically in the decolonized World, challenge the spurious logic of value-free global knowledge (internet). Instead, the romantic and ostensibly neutral word ‘globalization’ is being viewed as Westernization or Americanization because only the Western cultural and aesthetic values are being globalized through internet. This puts the global South and East on the receiving and poses existential threat to their language, culture and even civilization as a whole. This fact was realized as early as in 1960s, and to rectify the information imbalance, UNESCO put forward the New World Information and Communication Order (1970) but the effort was frustrated mainly by America. Today, most of the big data giants (Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) are operating from the US.

Conclusion

This study examined the coverage of China in BBC online English and Urdu news. We found that the converge is overwhelmed with ‘China threat,’ and US-China rivalry, at the expense of ignoring the vast socio-cultural diversity in the country’s news landscape. We also found that foreign correspondents write news about China, and a disproportionate number of expert sources is quoted from Western countries while discussing the issue of China. Finally, we found that although most of the stories reported on conflicts, BBC seldom included victims/actors in its coverage.

We argue that reproducing the existing representational patterns, and reducing the editorial spectrum to ideological conflicts, media further polarize a world already at the brink of splitting into rival camps. Our argument is in alliance with a few scholars quoted in this study. Zhao asserts that the growing economic and political tensions between China and the West also offers an important opportunity to both countries and its peoples to learn how to have a more open minded approach towards understanding each other’s cultures (Zhao, 2018, p. 25). Similarly, Richter and Gebauer suggest that media must consciously expand the range of topics beyond that of a conflict-laden core agenda (Richter & Gebauer, 2011). Yu also proposes that more empathy is needed between the Western media and the



Chinese public. Western media outlets should portray Chinese people as individuals with autonomy and initiative but at the same time, Chinese people should also be respectful of the obligations of media, and cultural values of the West. We also argue that if for a Western journalist, it is important to criticize Trump or Biden, she/he is equally legitimate in criticizing any other leader or government, provided they back it with unbiased evidence. Finally, as Longxi also points out, many ‘oriental’ cultures and lands have been depicted as either dreamlands or places of absolute chaos in the Western thought systems. We concur with his apt advice that this dichotomy needs to be transcended. “It is time such misconceptions were questioned and the Other was recognized as truly Other, that is, the Other in its own Otherness, which is not only non-Western but may perhaps have things in common with what the West thinks of itself—the Other that does not just serve the purpose of being a foil or contrast to the Western self” (Longxi, 1988, p. 29). We also conclude that Western media may reconsider their colonial and cold war mentality, vocabular, and tropes, deployed to depict the *other*. Readers are also encouraged to have a counter-reading of news by keeping in mind the different frames, author, and sourcing of a news story.



Reference

- Alger, D. E. (1989). *The Media and Politics*. Prentice Hall.
- B.B.C. (2017). *BBC Annual Report and Accounts 2016/17*. BBC.
<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/reports/pdf/bbc-annualreport-201617.pdf>
- Demick, B. (2011). Wary of unrest, China cracks down on dissent. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2011-apr-02-la-fg-china-crackdown-20110402-story.html>
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *Archeology of Knowledge*. Routledge.
- Franke, W. (1967). *China and the West*. Harper & Row.
- Gaber, I., Seymour, E., & Thomas, L. (2009). Is the BBC biased? The Corporation and the coverage of the 2006 Israeli–Hezbollah war. *Journalism*, 10(2), 239–259.
- Gadda, D. N. (2014). Partial Journalism’—A study of national media of India and Kashmir. *Trends in Information Management*, 13(1), 13–23.
- Galtung, J., & Lynch, J. (2010). *Reporting Conflict: New Directions in Peace Journalism*. St Lucia.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Later Reprint). Northeastern University Press.
- Griffiths, D. (2013). *The international media coverage of China: Too narrow an agenda?* Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper University of Oxford.
- Huang, Y., & Leung, C. M. (2005). Western-Led Press Coverage of Mainland China and Vietnam during the SARS Crisis: Reassessing the Concept of ‘Media Representation of the Other. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 15(3), 302–318.
- Jandt, F. E. (2018). *An introduction to intercultural communication: Identities in a global community*. Sage.
- Lin, Y. (1936). *My Country and My People*. Windmill Press.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. Harcourt.



- Liss, A. (2003). Images of China in the American Print Media: A survey from 2000 to 2002. *Journal of Contemporary China, 12*(35), 299–318.
- Longxi, Z. (1988). The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West. *Critical Inquiry, 15*(1), 108–131.
- Mazrui, A. A. (1996). *East-West dialogue*. Armonk.
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 36*(2), 176-187.
- Mertens, N. (2013). *Meeting the Other: The representations of China in the French media: Ethnocentric prejudice?* Noémie Mertens-Student number: 014215289
https://www.academia.edu/23946350/Representations_of_China_in_the_Western_media
- Mulvey, L. (2019). *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times*. Reaktion Books.
- Nye, J. S. (2018). *China's Soft and Sharp Power*. Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/chinas-soft-and-sharp-power>
- Pan, Z., & Kosicki, G. M. (1997). Priming and Media Impact on the Evaluations of the President's Performance. *Communication Research, 24*(1), 3–10.
- Peng, Z. (2004). Representation of China: An Across Time Analysis of Coverage in the New. *York Times and Los Angeles Times. Asian Journal of Communication, 14*(1), 53–67.
- Richter, C., & Gebauer, S. (2011). *The Portrayal of China in the German Media*. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.
https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/china_in_german_media.pdf
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage.
- Said, E. (1993). *Representations of the intellectual: The 1993 Reith lectures*. Pantheon Books.
- Sardar, Z. (1999). *Orientalism*. Open University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1946). *Existential humanism is humanism*. Methuen & Co.



- Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. Rinehart and Winston.
- Seib, P., & Powers, S. (2010). *The USC Center on Public Diplomacy*. https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/legacy/media/China_in_the_News_Report.pdf
- Seth-Smith, N., Mackay, J., & Hind, D. (2016). *Rethinking the BBC: Public Media in the 21st Century*. Commonwealth Publishing.
- Tao, A. (2018, February 16). China's CCTV Spring Festival Gala included a truly shameless Africa skit, featuring blackface. *SupChina*. <https://supchina.com/2018/02/16/cctv-spring-festival-gala-a-truly-shameless-africa-skit-blackface/>
- The Economist. (2017, December 14). *What to do about China's "sharp power."* <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/12/14/what-to-do-about-chinas-sharp-power>
- Tregde, D. (2013). A Case Study on Film Authorship: Exploring the Theoretical and Practical Sides in Film Production. *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 4(2), 5–15.
- Wong, E. (2018). A Chinese Empire Reborn. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/sunday-review/china-military-economic-power.html?_r=0
- Wong, T. (2020). *Sinophobia: How a virus reveals the many ways China is feared*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/world-asia-51456056>
- Xu, S., & You, P. (2012). *WESTERN IMAGES OF CHINA: Media representations of Chinese attempts to invest in Saab*. University West. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:533994/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Yang, Y. E., & Liu, X. (2012). The 'China Threat' through the Lens of US Print Media: 1992–2006. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(76), 695–711.
- Yu, I. (2018). *Rethinking the Foreign Media's China Coverage: Is it Biased? China US Focus*. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/society-culture/rethinking-the-foreign-medias-china-coverage-is-it-biased->
- Yukon, H. (2017). *Cracking the China Conundrum: Why Conventional Economic Wisdom Is Wrong*. Oxford University Press.



Pak. Journal of Media Science, Vol 3, Issue 1 (2022) Representing the Other the framing of.....

Zhao, A. (2018). Apr 6). *Examining China's Soft Power and Cultural Influence. China US Focus.* <https://www.chinausfocus.com/society-culture/examining-chinas-soft-power-and-cultural-influence>