

A Study on the News Construction of the Xinjiang Cotton Incident by Ten Western Mainstream Media Outlets, Including *The New York Times* and the BBC

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Abstract

This study focuses on the news construction of ethnic policies in China's Xinjiang region by mainstream Western media, which generally exhibits a negative tendency and includes some demonizing reports. These reports present stereotyped impressions and strong biases, erroneously linking Xinjiang's ethnic policies with so-called "human rights issues". They even sensationalize individual cases and obscure issues to deliberately frame them as "matters of global security". Such coverage distorts China's image and places Xinjiang within a misleading framework. Through a typical case study, the Xinjiang cotton incident, this research aims to reveal the news construction strategies employed by Western mainstream media regarding Xinjiang and to explore the practical approaches for constructing China's international discourse power in this context. The findings reveal that Western media employ "double standards" in their news construction to smear the nature of ethnic policies in Xinjiang and the region's cotton production conditions. They project their own framework of "racial discrimination" onto issues concerning Xinjiang's ethnic minorities, aligning with the U.S.-led Western governments' "encirclement" of Xinjiang cotton, thereby fostering misconceptions among overseas audiences and fueling negative public opinion. In response to accusations from Western mainstream media, China needs to optimize its response strategies and enhance its international discourse power. This can be achieved by increasing the sources of discourse output, strengthening logical coherence, reducing moral judgments, and incorporating more micro-narratives to counter false reporting on the Xinjiang cotton incident, while striving to build more credible international news reporting.

Keywords

Xinjiang cotton incident, western media, news construction, international discourse power

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and international public opinion. Mainstream media, with its authoritative and influential characteristics, further amplifies its communicative power. Driven by ideological differences and competitive dynamics, media-driven public opinion warfare has become a significant means of projecting national influence. Since the 21st century, certain Western mainstream media outlets have made unwarranted criticisms of China's policies aimed at promoting the development of ethnic minority regions. For instance, to facilitate successful poverty alleviation in ethnic minority autonomous regions, China implemented labor transfer policies. However, *The Washington Post* described these efforts as "politically motivated, primarily aimed at depriving Uyghurs of their unique culture

and identity”, thereby distorting the original intent of these policies and undermining the credibility and authenticity of their reporting.

In October 2021, the HandM Group issued a statement on its official website, announcing it would “no longer use Xinjiang cotton” based on allegations of so-called “forced labor” in Xinjiang. Concurrently, numerous Western mainstream media outlets, in coordination with governments and organizations like the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), repeatedly hyped claims of “forced labor” in Xinjiang’s cotton and tomato industries, accusing them of “violating labor rights.” This led to pressure on international brands to boycott Xinjiang cotton, serving certain economic or political objectives. The resulting negative international public opinion about Xinjiang adversely affected the image of Xinjiang and its cotton product brands. Given the wide-ranging impact and representativeness of this incident, it has been selected as a case study for analysis.

Western media coverage of the Xinjiang cotton incident often disregards authoritative information released by the Chinese government, leading to selective reporting that causes Western audiences to misunderstand the true situation in Xinjiang. This study also examines Chinese media coverage to explore more reasonable approaches to “breaking through” the negative narratives of Western mainstream media, fostering cross-cultural communication and understanding, and enhancing the international community’s objective perception of events in China.

This research focuses on Western mainstream media’s coverage of the Xinjiang cotton incident to uncover the characteristics and impacts of their news construction. Western media have securitized China’s ethnic policies in Xinjiang, framing them as human rights violations and constructing these policies as global security threats. Through an analysis of their reporting, this study aims to examine the news construction strategies employed by Western media in the Xinjiang cotton incident, their impact on public opinion, and the dual objectives of understanding the current state of Xinjiang’s ethnic issues from the perspective of Western mainstream media and proposing practical approaches to safeguarding China’s international discourse power.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, Western media coverage of the Xinjiang cotton industry has garnered significant academic attention. Studies have pointed out that some international media frequently employ specific terminology and selective narrative strategies, raising various issues surrounding the Xinjiang cotton industry. Media outlets such as *The New York Times* and BBC often use emotionally charged vocabulary and specific visual materials to construct a particular narrative framework (Luo and Zhao, 2021).

Such reporting behaviors have been analyzed within the contexts of international communication and geopolitics. Some analyses suggest that Xinjiang’s cotton industry, as a critical component of the global textile supply chain, has significant economic implications due to its scale and export growth, potentially influencing global market competition patterns. This economic backdrop is one of the factors contributing to the attention these reports receive (Wang and Liu, 2023). Additionally, Xinjiang’s geographic and economic significance in the Belt and Road Initiative has made the region a focal point in international public opinion (Tursun Abai, 2022).

At the academic level, many studies have employed textual analysis and framing methodologies to explore the content characteristics and narrative structures of international media coverage related to Xinjiang cotton. These studies have identified patterned characteristics in issue selection, source usage, and expression styles, with reporting often concentrating on specific aspects while providing limited comprehensive coverage of the actual operational mechanisms and labor conditions in the cotton industry. (Wang, 2023, Shi, 2012) Some studies have also examined linguistic strategies and narrative approaches in these reports (Bai and Lan, 2015), analyzing the underlying causes of their framing from cultural and ideological perspectives, such as the legacy of the “Yellow Peril” discourse, the intensification of the “China threat” narrative, and the resurgence of Hobbesian perspectives (He, 2015). This study builds on these insights, conducting an in-depth analysis from the perspective of news construction.

A review of existing studies reveals that numerous studies have analyzed the news framing of Western media coverage of the Xinjiang cotton incident through empirical analysis and case studies, providing rich reference material for this research. However, there are still areas with relatively limited coverage. First, most studies remain at the theoretical level of framing analysis, with few offering practical approaches or

comprehensive response strategies. There is also a scarcity of research on how to present the actual situation of the Xinjiang cotton industry through diverse channels and communication strategies to secure news discourse autonomy (Chen, 2023, Zhou, 2022). Second, many studies focus on analyzing the issue itself, summarizing problems or examining specific cases, with relatively few employing framing analysis. Consequently, there is a lack of research on constructing “counter-discourse” frameworks, which limits direct contributions to strategic innovation for Chinese mainstream media in public opinion warfare and enhancing cross-cultural communication effectiveness (Yan, 2016, Ye and Jiang, 2010).

3. Research Design

The data for this study are sourced from news reports on the Xinjiang cotton incident published by relatively authoritative and widely followed media outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, Agence France-Presse (AFP), *The Guardian*, BBC, Reuters, and *The Times*. A total of 37 valid samples were obtained for textual analysis after screening and cleaning to remove irrelevant information from the reports of these ten mainstream media outlets.

Data analysis primarily involves text compilation, followed by word frequency analysis to identify the top-ranking groups of keywords. Low-value words and nouns are excluded, and semantically similar terms are merged for extraction. These keywords then serve as entry points for conducting a framing analysis.

4. Research Results

4.1 Keywords

The analysis ultimately reveals that the sample reports frequently use words such as “forced”, “labor”, “brand”, “human rights”, “Uyghur”, “violation”, “sanction”, “ethnic”, “accusation”, “criticism”, “market”, “Muslim”, “detention”, and “government”. Across the 37 articles, “forced” (including terms like “forced labor” and “being forced”) appears a total of 312 times; “human rights” (including “labor rights” and “human rights issues”) appears 282 times; and “Uyghur” (including “Uyghur ethnic group” and “Uyghur people”) appears 259 times, ranking as the top three most frequently used terms. In one investigative report from *The New York Times*, the word “forced” appears 34 times, averaging about 1.36 occurrences per 100 words, creating a high-density narrative with emphatic undertones. The high frequency of these words reflects the framing bias in Western media’s coverage of the Xinjiang cotton incident, with an emotional tone that is predominantly negative and inflammatory. Combined with the textual content, this reveals characteristics of selective reporting and emotionalized narration, which collectively contribute to a one-sided public perception of the Xinjiang cotton incident.

More than two-thirds of the aforementioned high-frequency words are not neutral descriptions but are embedded within narratives under a “double standards” framework: The same corpus shows that when referring to human rights issues in the United States itself, similar terms appear significantly less frequently and are placed in historical contexts, thereby spatially confining the “forced” and “human rights” issues to China’s Xinjiang. At the same time, Western media project their own historical experiences of racial oppression onto the Xinjiang issue, forming a nested framework through the combination of “Uyghur—Muslim—oppressed”: In more than half of the sample reports, “Muslim” or “Islam” is inevitably linked within three sentences after the first mention of “Uyghur,” accompanied by negative modifiers such as “detained” or “persecuted,” creating a stereotypical narrative chain of “ethnic—religious—persecution”. This forms a quantified “racial oppression” filter on China’s Xinjiang, thereby misleading overseas audiences’ perceptions of the Xinjiang cotton incident, deepening misunderstandings between East and West, and exerting a significant impact on public opinion.

4.2 Problems

In the face of such news construction by European and American media, it is crucial to break through the aforementioned reporting frameworks and achieve the construction of China’s autonomous media discourse power. Theoretically, China needs to strengthen cross-cultural communication and enhance its international news discourse power to achieve this goal.

Practically, by collecting relevant documents from that time and some Chinese media reports, the following four problems are identified. First, the narrative perspective in news reporting has certain limitations, mostly from an official standpoint, which may inevitably be perceived as political propaganda from the perspective of overseas audiences. Additionally, the extensive macro-level narratives about the richness of industries and economic development in Xinjiang, while demonstrating rational narration and sufficient evidence, are also difficult to evoke resonance and. Second, the reports have a strong sense of moral judgment, with some exhibiting extreme condemnation, which is necessary for firmly upholding the legitimate rights and interests of Xinjiang's cotton production and even national sovereignty, but it may also alienate overseas readers and exacerbate the opposition between domestic and international public opinion. Third, the elaboration of report content is insufficient, and the logical chain needs strengthening—most reports are concise, short in length, and focus on result-oriented narratives, with few providing complete long-form accounts that present causes, consequences, and full logic. Finally, cognitive differences arising from cultural variations are an important aspect that needs improvement. Due to different cultural habits and historical origins, the values and concepts in some report contents are difficult to gain widespread acceptance from international audiences, leading to suboptimal effects in cross-cultural communication of news reports. To achieve a true enhancement of media international discourse power, it is essential to discuss methods and paths for addressing these issues.

5. Discussion

Through analyzing Western media reports, evident framing biases and nested frameworks can be observed. Western media coverage is influenced by its inherent ideologies and values, projecting these frameworks onto reports about the Xinjiang cotton issue, linking China's Xinjiang cotton incident with ethnic minority and religious issues, high-frequency words include those related to "Uyghur", "Muslim", and "Islam", among others. Combined with specific texts, a certain number of adjectives such as "oppressive" and "outrageous" can be found, implying guidance and incitement rather than objective descriptions, attempting to form a public opinion tendency that divides ethnic groups.

This is essentially an external projection of the "racial oppression" issues arising from Western mainstream media's own historical and cultural backgrounds, where they habitually view other countries and ethnic groups through this framework. However, no oppressive ethnic infringement incidents have occurred in China's Xinjiang region. Therefore, by contrasting the actual situation in Xinjiang with the media reports in the samples, it is evident that Western media's coverage of the Xinjiang cotton incident is distorted. In essence, this is a forced nested framework where Western mainstream media places China's Xinjiang region under its inherent "racial oppression" filter, representing a "double standards" framing bias.

The source of this double-standard bias can be attributed to the influences of different ideologies and values, as well as underlying Hobbesian logics such as the Yellow Peril theory and the China threat narrative. Western mainstream media avoid discussing or beautify their own historical and contemporary issues of racial oppression in Europe and America, yet deliberately highlight these points when reporting on the Xinjiang cotton incident, focusing on accusing other countries. Such news construction frameworks distort China's international image and guide public perceptions while also undermining the credibility of Western media.

In response to the several issues mentioned above in Chinese media reports, the following solutions are proposed respectively. First, increase the sources of discourse output. While relying on official institutions, leverage self-media to combine folk and official elements for mutual supplementation, enhancing the credibility of discourse output through multi-subject collaboration. For example, invite foreign bloggers in China to conduct live broadcasts from Xinjiang cotton fields, using first-person perspectives to dilute the "official propaganda" label. At the same time, conduct in-depth interviews and produce multilingual documentaries on Xinjiang cotton themes, narrating from the perspectives of cotton farmers, textile workers, or cotton production enterprise staff, rather than merely using simple data summaries for macro explanations. While strengthening positive publicity, a shift from "grand narratives" to "individual destinies" can be achieved.

Second, in terms of discourse patterns in reporting, under the premise of a firm stance, reduce highly condemnatory rhetoric and soften oppositional attitudes to make reports more empathetic. Reduce condemnatory titles and adopt neutral expressions instead.

Third, enhance the interpretative capacity of discourse. Previous reports were short in length and lacked persuasiveness, which can be improved by adding more data summaries and relevant material analyses to strengthen the logic of media reports. Specifically, rely on cutting-edge technologies such as satellite remote sensing and the Internet of Things, along with infrastructure development, to achieve visualization of Xinjiang cotton production, displaying the entire process of planting, cultivation, and harvesting in real time, using technical evidence to counter emotionalized narratives.

Finally, optimize reporting schemes to enhance the sense of identification with news reports under cultural differences, incorporating more cross-cultural communication content. Specifically, supplement positive statements from domestic and foreign citizens, domestic and foreign officials, and relevant organizations and their representatives as key reporting content, providing multifaceted explanations of the truth about the Xinjiang cotton incident from different angles, thereby increasing international audiences' identification with China's related news reports and laying the foundation for guiding public opinion.

In summary, this article provides ideas for Chinese media to achieve a breakthrough in the international public opinion arena, hoping to realize a "counterattack" against the projective news reporting frameworks of Western media and take a further step in constructing credible international news reporting frameworks.

6. Conclusion

This study, grounded in framing theory, analyzes 37 reports on the Xinjiang cotton incident from ten Western mainstream media outlets, including *The New York Times* and BBC. Through keyword frequency extraction, textual analysis, and framing bias analysis, it identifies the "double standards" framing bias and the nested "racial discrimination" framework in the sample reports. In response, Chinese media should employ strategies such as multi-subject collaboration, data visualization, micro-narratives, and multilingual documentaries to build a more credible international discourse framework, enabling an effective breakthrough against biased Western reporting.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, the sample is primarily drawn from ten mainstream English-language media outlets in Europe and the United States, with limited media sources and insufficient representation from non-English-speaking regions, potentially introducing regional and linguistic biases. Second, the 37 valid samples within a one-year timeframe are relatively limited, making it difficult to cover all stages of the Xinjiang cotton issue's evolution. Finally, the research tools mainly rely on word frequency statistics and manual framing coding, without incorporating big data or public opinion model analysis, and the collection of reports in other formats, such as videos and images, is insufficient. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, incorporating algorithmic assistance, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

Future research plans to deepen in two main areas. First, expand the sample scope to include multilingual European and American media as well as social media data, combining mainstream media reports with individual (self-media) responses to more comprehensively analyze the impact of mainstream media coverage on public perception and opinion regarding the Xinjiang cotton incident. Additionally, simultaneously collect narrative texts from CGTN, *China Daily*, and other outward-facing Chinese media to compare keyword and emotional differences between Chinese and foreign media, further validating research findings. This will provide actionable blueprints and templates for China to break through biased frameworks and enhance its international discourse power.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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