

Beyond the “China Doll”: A Systematic Literature Review on the Discursive Construction of Chinese Women in International News

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Abstract—Chinese women, as one of the world’s largest, most institutionally complex, and culturally engaged female groups, have a transnational representation that involves not only gender issues within China but also holds considerable relevance for global scholarship on gender, media power, and body politics. However, current research on the international representation, of Chinese women remains scattered and lacks systematic synthesis, making it necessary to conduct a comprehensive literature review on this subject. The review process follows eight methodological steps: identifying research questions, designing the review protocol, searching the literature, screening and evaluating studies, extracting and analyzing data, and finally synthesizing conclusions. The findings indicate that existing research on the representation of Chinese women in international news is mainly concentrated in English-speaking countries, especially the United States, with less attention paid to Europe, Africa, and South America. Comparative approaches are frequently employed in these studies. Furthermore, it is found that international news reports often link Chinese women to national narratives, mainly constructing themes such as “depersonalized and instrumentalized national female images” “modern, independent, and empowered new women” and the “heterogeneous others”. This review provides a comprehensive overview of existing scholarship, identifies gaps in the literature, and establishes a foundation for further inquiry into this topic.

Index Terms—Chinese women, media representation, news, systematic literature review

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the production and circulation of knowledge no longer depend solely on traditional authorities such as schools, governments, or religious institutions. Instead, knowledge is created, represented, and reconstructed on a broader social scale through media systems, linguistic practices, and cultural symbols (Castells, 2013; Fairclough, 2013; Berger & Luckmann, 2023). Lippmann (2017) described this condition as a “pseudo-environment”, in which people perceive the world not through direct experience but through mediated images and symbolic constructions. Similarly, Hall (1997) emphasized that reality never appears in a pure form; it is always organized and coded by discourses, classification systems, and cultural symbols.

Within this mechanism, the media occupy a pivotal role: they are not merely transmitters of knowledge but active producers of meaning. By deciding who is visible, how groups are described, and in what contexts they appear, the media continually “re-encode” social subjects (Billig, 1991; Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1980). Such processes shape public understanding, influence emotions and values (van Dijk, 2006; Silverstone, 2013), and condition perceptions of events and social groups (Happer & Philo, 2013). In the information age, the media have thus become a crucial channel through which individuals access the world. Their representations not only affect collective images and public attitudes but also carry the power to influence political agendas and policy decisions. Precisely for this reason, newspapers are often selected by linguists as key materials for discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). As van Dijk (1991) points out, analyzing newspaper reporting constitutes one of the primary tasks of media discourse research, since much of our knowledge and understanding of the world is derived from the daily reading of news.

With China's increasing involvement in the globalization process, international attention toward China continues to grow. As the largest single national female population in the world, Chinese women are also receiving more focus from international media. However, scholars have pointed out that international media, particularly Western media, often perpetuate stereotypes when reporting on Chinese women, and this biased perspective has caused some distress for Chinese women living abroad (Martin, 2022). Related empirical studies have also confirmed this issue (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018; Bauerlein & McWhirter, 2021).

Before attempting to change the media's stereotypical representations of Chinese women, it is essential to thoroughly understand and clarify this topic, as such understanding can facilitate more effective correction of these stereotypes. In recent years, growing attention to the international image of Chinese women has prompted some scholars to examine how they are represented in international media (Yang, 2014; Bie & Billings, 2015; Zhang, 2017; Ling & Berkowitz, 2018; Seo, 2021; Zhang & Caple, 2021; Yoong & Lee, 2023; Yu & Tian, 2023). However, existing research remains scattered and lacks systematic synthesis. More importantly, the field is still short of studies that synthesize the literature using systematic and transparent approaches. Traditional literature reviews still have shortcomings in terms of literature selection and transparency (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021), which also affects the systematic integration of knowledge and the further development of theoretical frameworks in this field.

Given these gaps in the literature, this study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) of the representation of Chinese women in international news media. By reviewing research from the past decade, it aims to summarize the main representations, identify research gaps, and provide guidance for future studies in this field.

II. METHODOLOGY

As a scientific inquiry, a literature review must demonstrate its validity, reliability, and replicability (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The review protocol, especially for systematic reviews, is essential (Brereton et al., 2007; Okoli & Schabram, 2015), as it can significantly enhance the reliability, transparency, and reproducibility of the review by minimizing researcher bias in data selection and analysis, thereby improving the overall quality of the literature review (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). This systematic literature review is conducted based on the eight-step process proposed by Xiao and Watson (2019) and the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2010).

Xiao and Watson (2019) outlined an eight-step process for conducting a systematic literature review: (1) Formulating the research question; (2) Developing and validating the review protocol; (3) Searching the literature; (4) Screening and selecting studies; (5) Assessing quality; (6) Extracting data; (7) Analyzing and synthesizing data; and (8) Reporting the findings (p. 10), as illustrated in Figure 1.

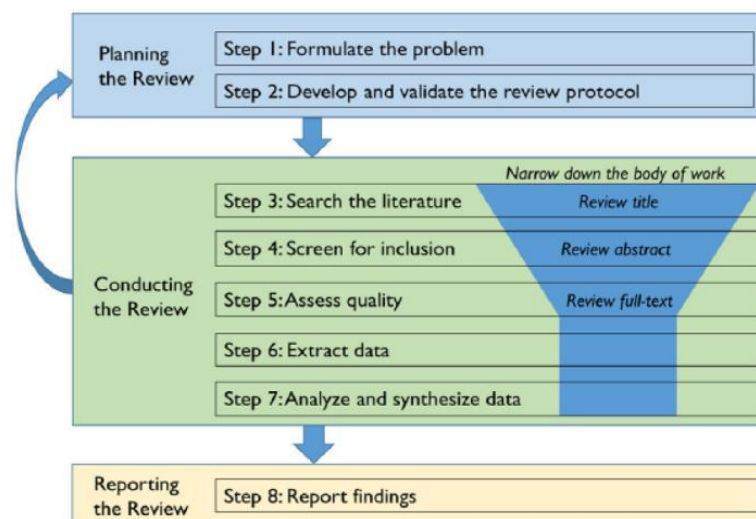


Figure 1. The Process of Systematic Literature Review (Xiao & Watson, 2019)

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is a widely used reporting guideline for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher et al., 2010). The PRISMA statement consists of a 27-item checklist and a four-phase flow diagram, which provide detailed guidance on literature collection and reporting from title and structured abstract to conclusions and funding sources (Lu et al., 2023). The flow diagram covers the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. PRISMA is particularly valuable for organizing and standardizing the review process, offering step-by-step guidance before, during, and after literature retrieval. This review integrates the eight-step process of Xiao and Watson (2019) with the PRISMA guidelines.

A. Formulation of Research Questions

A literature review should be guided by clear research questions (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The selection of literature, data extraction, and analysis are all oriented towards addressing these questions, which form the core of the review

(Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). The research questions for this review are derived from two sources: first, by drawing on relevant previous studies (such as Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Len-Rios et al., 2005; Macdonald, 2006); and second, by referencing the PICO framework (Richardson et al., 1995; Lockwood et al., 2015) commonly used in qualitative research, in which “P” stands for the population or problem, “I” for the phenomenon of interest, and “Co” for the context. Based on these considerations, three key elements were identified: Chinese women (population), their discursive Construction (phenomenon), and international news media (context). Accordingly, this review addresses two research questions:

(1). What is the current state of research on the representation (i.e., discursive construction) of Chinese women in international news?

(2). According to existing studies, how are Chinese women represented in international news discourse?

A descriptive coding and frequency analysis will be used to address the first question, while a qualitative approach will be applied to the second.

B. Development and Validation of the Review Protocol

After thorough discussion and preliminary searching by the research team, the review protocol for this study was finalized (see Table 1). In line with the recommendations on “research field maturity” proposed by Kraus et al. (2020), this review limits its search scope to literature published between 2014 and 2024 to better illustrate the development trajectory and latest findings in the field. Given the focus on the representation of Chinese women in international media, the scope includes not only English-language media, but also media from non-English-speaking countries such as French, Chinese sources, to enrich the research perspective. In addition, advances in machine translation technology (such as DeepL Translator, Microsoft Translator) and the availability of multilingual resources have made it possible to extract main content and insights from non-English articles. Similar approaches in previous studies (Xue et al., 2019) provide a useful precedent; therefore, no language restrictions were imposed in this review. Furthermore, to ensure academic rigor, only peer-reviewed academic papers were included.

TABLE 1
INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA FOR THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2014.01-2024.12	Before 2014 or after 2024
Document type	Journal articles	Review articles, book chapters, books, dissertations, conference proceedings, etc.
Subject area	Social sciences; arts and humanities	Medical sciences, public health, environmental sciences, engineering, and other non-social science disciplines, etc.

C. Literature Search

(a). Database Selection

Guided by the review protocol, the research team conducted a literature search. Based on the evaluation of mainstream academic databases by Gusenbauer and Haddaway (2020) and with reference to similar literature reviews (Hashmi et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2025), this study selected Scopus and Web of Science as the primary search databases.

(b). Search Terms

Kitchenham and Charters (2007) noted that the basic search terms should be derived from the research questions. Therefore, the basic search terms for this study were identified as “Chinese women” “representation” and “news media”. Wanden-Berghe and Sanz-Valero (2012) emphasized that comprehensiveness is more important than precision during the search process. Therefore, to retrieve more comprehensive and inclusive results, this study enriched the basic keywords by using a thesaurus, reviewing keywords from previous studies, and consulting experts. Various search strategies, including the use of Boolean operators, were applied to construct the final search queries (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
SEARCH STRINGS USED IN THE SELECTED DATABASES

Database	String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY= (“Chinese woman” OR “Chinese women” OR “Chinese female” OR “Chinese girl” OR “Chinese lad” OR “China woman” OR “China women” OR “China girl” OR “China lad”) AND (“represent” OR “portray” OR “discourse” OR “coverage” OR “framing” OR “image” OR “stereotype” OR “identit” OR “narrative” OR “news” OR “depiction” OR “report” OR “press” OR “newspaper” OR “media”)
Web of Science*	TS= (((“Chinese” NEAR/3 woman) OR (“Chinese” NEAR/3 women) OR (“Chinese” NEAR/3 female) OR (“Chinese” NEAR/3 girl*) OR (“Chinese” NEAR/3 lad*) OR (“China” NEAR/3 woman) OR (“China” NEAR/3 women) OR (“China” NEAR/3 female) OR (“China” NEAR/3 girl*) OR (“China” NEAR/3 lad*)) AND (“represent” OR “portray” OR “discourse” OR “coverage” OR “framing” OR “image” OR “stereotype” OR “identit” OR “narrative” OR “news” OR “depiction” OR “report” OR “press” OR “newspaper” OR “media”))

*Because Web of Science supports proximity operators, the NEAR/3 function was applied to broaden the search scope. Following Krallinger et al. (2017), NEAR/3 can increase recall while maintaining semantic relevance.

During the identification and screening stages, manual searches were also conducted in databases such as Taylor & Francis, Sage Journals, and the first 20 pages of Google Scholar to further expand the literature pool.

D. Screening for Inclusion

Using predefined search terms and restrictions, 529 records were retrieved from Scopus and 397 from Web of Science. Following title screening, 27 and 126 studies were retained, respectively. Searches in Taylor & Francis and Sage Journals, employing the same strategy, yielded 14,935 and 31,023 records, from which 34 and 19 studies were retained. A complementary search in Google Scholar with the keywords “Chinese women” “media” “representation” and “newspaper” (first 20 pages) identified 11 additional potentially relevant studies. In total, these searches produced 217 potentially relevant records. After removing 40 duplicates, 177 unique studies remained for further screening. Titles and abstracts were then reassessed against the inclusion criteria. At this stage, 163 articles were excluded for one or more of the following reasons: (1) focusing on topics other than the external representation of women, (2) addressing non-news media formats (e.g., television, film, advertising), or (3) examining representations in domestic (Chinese) rather than international news media. When abstracts lacked sufficient information to determine eligibility, the full text was consulted. Four of the 14 articles that underwent full-text assessment were excluded for not aligning with the review’s scope. The remaining ten articles proceeded to quality appraisal to evaluate their relevance to the representation of Chinese women in international news media.

E. Quality Assessment

Although quality assessment is not always essential for certain types of descriptive and commentary reviews (Xiao & Watson, 2019), it is crucial for fully understanding, comparing, and synthesizing research findings (Ludvigsen et al., 2016; as cited in Xiao & Watson, 2019). To ensure the scientific rigor of the included studies, the authors employed the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) developed by Hong et al. (2018) to assess the quality of the ten selected articles. The research team reviewed each article’s methodological design, study population, and analytical procedures, with particular attention to the consistency of sampling, research methods, and data analysis. Assessment was based on the five MMAT criteria, using “yes,” “no,” and “cannot tell” as response options. Only articles meeting at least three criteria were included. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion among the authors. Ultimately, all ten articles met the minimum methodological and analytical quality requirements, with seven fully meeting all criteria and three meeting four criteria. This process ensured the validity and reliability of the findings presented in this review.

In total, this systematic review included 10 articles identified through database searches for further analysis. To ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies, a snowballing approach was employed based on these 10 articles, conducting both backward and forward searches until data saturation was reached.

Additionally, the initially retrieved articles were imported into Google Scholar, where the first 10 pages of “related articles” were reviewed, yielding 21 potentially relevant studies.

Following full-text screening and quality assessment, 8 additional articles were included in the final analysis stage.

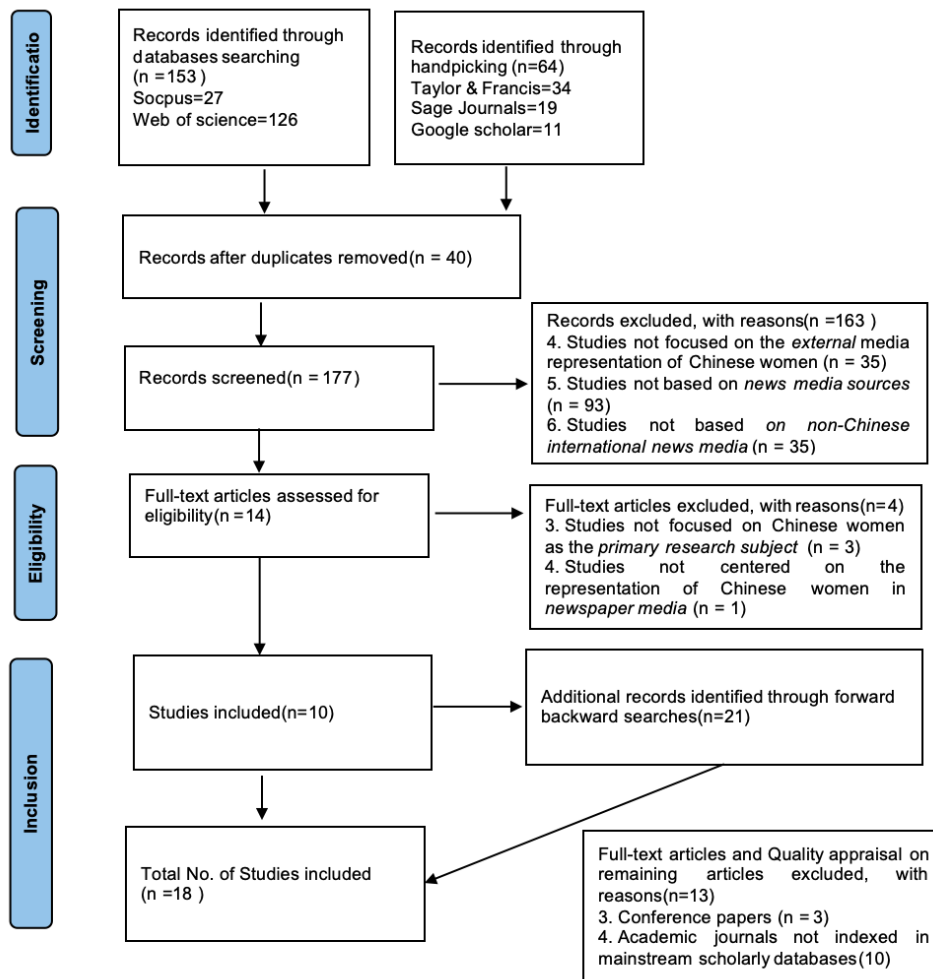


Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram for the Selection of Studies on the Representation of Chinese Women in International Newspaper Media

Ultimately, through database searches, manual searches, and secondary literature searches, a total of 18 articles entered the data analysis phase. All articles met the inclusion criteria and were almost entirely from well-known journals. The entire screening process is shown in Figure 2.

F. Data Extraction

This study employed an integrated approach, combining descriptive analysis and qualitative analysis to systematically outline the state of research and to examine in depth the representations of Chinese women in international news media.

In the descriptive analysis phase, each included article was coded along seven dimensions.

TABLE 3
CODING DIMENSIONS FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Category	Sub-category	Details to Record
1. Publication Information	Publication Year	The year the study was published
	Journal Title	Name of the journal
	Journal Ranking	Ranking (e.g., SSCI Q1/Q2, based on Web of Science JCR categories)
2. Author Information	Disciplinary Field	Field of study (e.g., Media Studies, Linguistics, Sociology)
	National Affiliation	Determined by the country in which the first author's affiliated institution is located
3. Media & Country Focus	Media Outlets	Names of the selected newspapers
	Country	Country/region of the selected media
4. Research Subjects	Target Group/Individuals	Specific people or groups under study
5. Time Frame	Period Covered	Categorised as: < 1 month / 1–6 months / 6 months–2 years / 2–5 years / > 5 years
6. Research Method	Methodological Approach	Classified as <i>Quantitative</i> / <i>Qualitative</i> / <i>Mixed Studies</i> (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003)
7. Theoretical Framework	Applied Theories	Theories explicitly applied in the study (multiple theories should be coded separately)

To ensure consistency, the research team conducted coder training prior to formal analysis and resolved discrepancies through trial coding and discussion.

In the qualitative analysis phase, thematic synthesis was employed (Whittemore & Knafel, 2005; Flemming et al., 2019) to integrate data from diverse research designs. The procedure followed the steps proposed by Kiger and Varpio (2020).

TABLE 4
ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE OF THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

Step	Description
1. Familiarisation	Repeated, active reading of the full texts to develop a holistic understanding of the data.
2. Generating Initial Codes	Extracting fine-grained, relevant information related to the research questions.
3. Developing Themes	Identifying patterns, similarities, and relationships among codes to construct themes that reflect the dataset as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

To enhance reliability, the research team coded the data independently and reconciled differences through discussion.

This dual analytic framework enables both the quantitative mapping of research characteristics and the qualitative identification of representation patterns and related topics, thereby facilitating the detection of gaps in the literature and guiding future research directions.

G. Data Analysis and Synthesis

Following data extraction and coding, the review systematically synthesized the collected information. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted, summarizing the essential characteristics of the literature in tables and figures to visually present the current state of research. Subsequently, in line with the approach of Xiao and Watson (2019), descriptive contents were refined and elevated to analytical themes, forming an interconnected and logically coherent thematic framework.

H. Reporting Findings

On this basis, the review proceeded to the final stage of the systematic literature review, reporting the findings. This study followed the integrative review approach of Mohamed Shaffril et al. (2021), highlighting the main trends, key findings, and existing gaps in the current body of research, and providing brief recommendations for future research directions in light of the analysis.

III. RESULTS

A. Descriptive Findings: Overview of the Research State

(a). Publication Year, Journals, and Journal Rankings

Between 2014 and 2024, a total of 18 peer-reviewed journal articles examined the representation of Chinese women in international news media, averaging 1.8 publications per year and showing an overall upward trend. The years 2021, 2023, and 2024 were particularly productive, each with three publications. Although these articles were published in different journals, their disciplinary focus was relatively concentrated: seven appeared in communication and media studies journals (e.g., Chinese Journal of Communication; Journalism; Communication & Sport), seven in social and cultural studies journals (e.g., International Review for the Sociology of Sport; Asian Studies Review), and two in language and discourse analysis journals (Language & Communication; Discourse, Context & Media). With the exception of 2019 and 2022, each year featured at least one article in an SSCI Q1 or Q2 journal, indicating the sustained academic value of this research topic.

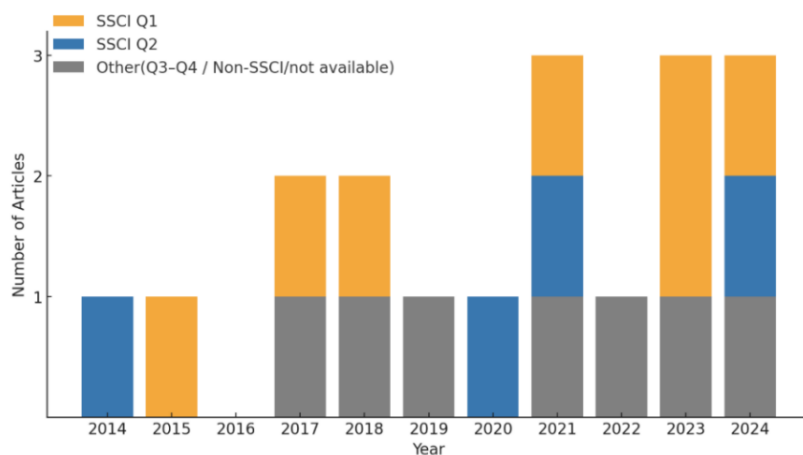


Figure 3. Number of Articles per Year and SSCI Q1/Q2 Proportion

(b). *Author Affiliation*

The authors in this study’s dataset are affiliated with institutions in six countries. The largest proportion is from China (8 authors, 44.4%), followed by the United States (6 authors, 33.3%). Spain, South Korea, Australia, and Malaysia each have one author (5.6%). This distribution corresponds, to some extent, with the media selection and the focal countries discussed later in the study.

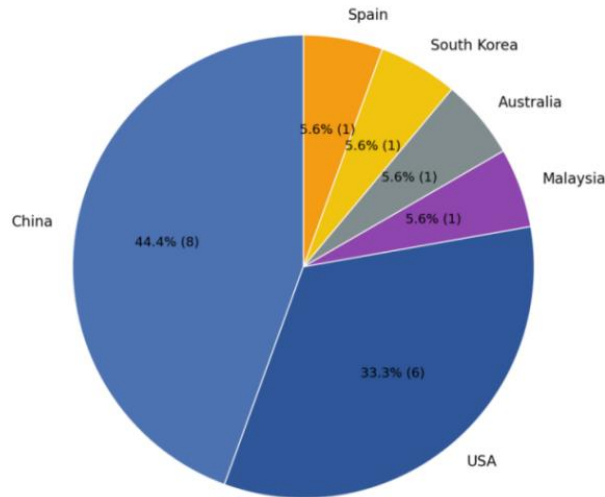


Figure 4. Distribution of Articles by Author Affiliation

(c). *Media and Country Focus*

Statistics indicate that, in studies examining the representation of Chinese women in international newspaper coverage, the three most frequently selected media outlets are The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Guardian. Among them, The New York Times holds a clear advantage, accounting for 11 out of 18 studies (61.1%), making it the most frequently cited media outlet. Correspondingly, the United States is the most frequently examined country, with 14 studies focusing on the representation of Chinese women in U.S. news media (77.8%), followed by the United Kingdom and Australia, each with four studies (22.2%). Overall, the research is concentrated primarily on traditional, developed, English-speaking countries, with limited attention to Asia (only two studies, 11.1%) and very few studies addressing representations in African, South American, or European media.

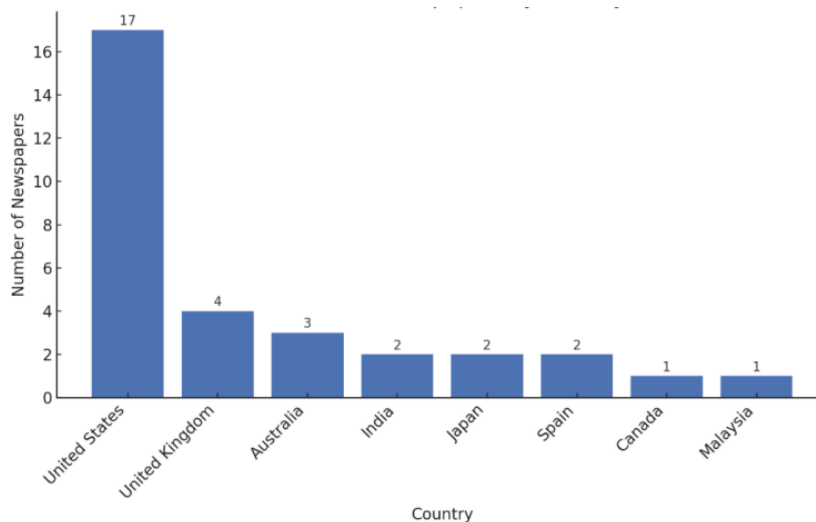


Figure 5. Country Distribution of Selected Media Outlets

(d). *Focus of Scholarly Attention*

Statistical results (Figure 6) indicate that China’s First Lady, Peng Liyuan, is the most frequently examined individual (n = 4; e.g., Zhang, 2017; Wang, 2018). The next most studied figures are Chinese elite female athletes, such as Ye Shiwen (Bie & Billings, 2015; Vegas, 2017), Li Na (Zhao & Knijnik, 2021; Zhang & Caple, 2021), and Gu Ailing (Eileen Gu) (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Zhang & Shi, 2024). In addition, the representation of overseas Chinese women has gradually drawn scholarly attention (Cahill, 2020; Yoong & Lee, 2023; Xu & Wu, 2024). Overall, the literature reveals

a clear tendency toward individualization, with researchers focusing more on specific iconic figures than on collective representations.

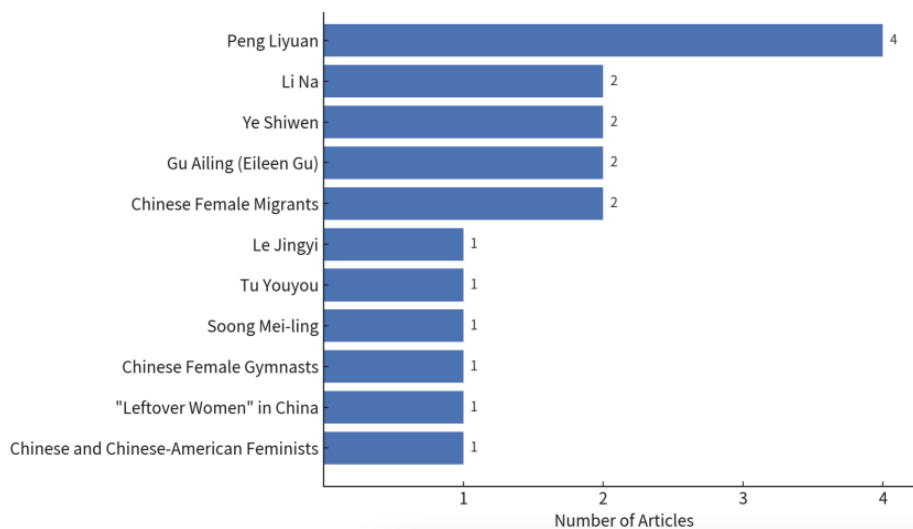


Figure 6. Focus of Scholarly Attention: Key Figures in Studies on the Representation of Chinese Women

(e). *Timeframe of Subject Selection*

Statistics indicate that the timeframes chosen by scholars for their studies are predominantly concentrated within the past two decades, with the longest span reaching 18 years (Zhou et al., 2022) and the shortest lasting less than one month (Yang, 2014; Bie & Billings, 2015; Zhao & Wang, 2024). Coding of the time ranges in the 18 reviewed articles shows that five studies (27.8%) covered periods of less than one month, three studies (16.7%) spanned one to six months, and one study each (5.6%) covered six months to two years and two to five years. The largest proportion, eight studies (44.4%), examined periods longer than five years. Overall, most research focuses on the representation of modern Chinese women in international news since 2000.

(f). *Research Methods*

Among the 18 studies that entered the data analysis stage, 11 employed qualitative methods (61.1%), three used quantitative methods (16.7%), and four adopted a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques (22.2%). In qualitative studies, discourse analysis ($n = 4$, 26.7%; e.g., Yoong & Lee, 2023; Yu & Tian, 2023), text analysis ($n = 3$, 20%; e.g., Ling & Berkowitz, 2018; Seo, 2021), and framing analysis ($n = 2$, 13.3%; e.g., Yang, 2014; Zhang & Shi, 2024) were the most common methods. Quantitative studies predominantly applied content analysis ($n = 3$, 75%; e.g., Bie & Billings, 2015; Wang, 2018), while mixed-methods research frequently integrated critical discourse analysis with corpus linguistics (e.g., Zhang, 2017; Zhang & Caple, 2021).

(g). *Research Theories*

The theoretical frameworks in this study fall into five categories: discourse analysis theories (e.g., CDA, DHA, Social Actor Theory), ideological theories (e.g., Ideology Theory, Interpellation, Neoliberal Subjectivity), media theories (e.g., Framing Theory, News Values Theory), gender theories (e.g., Gender Stereotypes, Transnational Feminism, Intersectionality), and state and society theories (e.g., Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Cultural Memory). While over half of these appear only once in the reviewed literature, Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) (e.g., Yoong & Lee, 2023; Xu & Wu, 2024), Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) (e.g., Bie & Billings, 2015; Wang, 2018), and Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2008) (e.g., Zhang, 2017; Zhang & Shi, 2024) are the most frequently cited. These three core frameworks provide both the linguistic-structural basis for analyzing representations of Chinese women in French media and key tools for revealing their underlying ideological and geopolitical drivers.

B. *Qualitative Findings*

Thematic analysis was conducted on all included analytical articles, resulting in the themes presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5
OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS OF QUALITATIVE THEMATIC SCREENING

No.	Author/s & Year	Drawn themes
1	Yang (2014)	Body and appearance; Suspicion discourse; Instrument of the state; Metaphors of the nation and politics
2	Bie & Billings (2015)	Body and appearance; Suspicion discourse; Instrument of the state; Metaphors of the nation and politics
3	Zhang (2017)	Body and appearance; De-subjectification; Instrument of the state; Metaphors of the nation and politics
4	Vegas (2017)	Suspicion discourse; Instrument of the state; Metaphors of the nation and politics
5	Wang (2018)	Body and appearance; De-subjectification; Instrument of the state
6	Ling & Berkowitz (2018)	Body and appearance; Instrument of the state; De-subjectification; Metaphors of the nation and politics
7	Chao & Zhang (2019)	Body and appearance; Instrument of the state; De-subjectification; Gendered discourse
8	Cahill (2020)	Body and appearance; Resistance/Empowerment discourse; Metaphors of the nation and politics; Racialization and Othering
9	Seo (2021)	Body and appearance; Suspicion; Instrument of the state; Metaphors of the nation and politics
10	Zhao & Knijnik (2021)	Individualism; Independence/Autonomy; Exceptional achievement; Marketized individual; Cultural bridge
11	Zhang & Caple (2021)	Individualism; Resistance/Empowerment discourse; Independence/Autonomy; Exceptional achievement; De-nationalization
12	Zhou et al. (2022)	Gendered discourse; Suspicion discourse; Instrument of the state; Metaphors of the nation and politics; Exceptional achievement
13	Yoong & Lee (2023)	Sexual/Moralizing discourse; Objectifying discourse; Threatening/Criminalizing discourse; Racialization and othering
14	Yu & Tian (2023)	Individualism; Resistance/Empowerment discourse; Independence/Autonomy
15	Haygood & Scott (2023)	Body and appearance; Instrument of the state; Agency/Disempowerment Discourse; Metaphors of the nation and politics
16	Xu & Wu (2024)	Threatening/Criminalizing Discourse; victimization discourse; Labor exploitation discourse; Friendly exchange discourse; Racialization and othering; Gendered discourse
17	Zhao & Wang (2024)	Suspicion discourse; Racialization and othering; Metaphors of the nation and politics
18	Zhang & Shi (2024)	De-nationalization; Marketized individual; Suspicion discourse; Racialization and othering; Metaphors of the nation and politics

After synthesizing the themes from the included studies, three core themes were identified to answer Research Question 2 and to reveal the construction of Chinese women's representation in international news.

(a). *Instrumentalized and De-Subjectified Female Images Under National Narratives*

Whether depicting Chinese athletes or the First Lady, international media often represent Chinese women as extensions and symbols of national power, diminishing their individual subjectivity and highlighting their function in serving state interests. Such portrayals frequently focus on women's bodies, attire, silence, and subordinate roles to construct a "controllable national image" emphasizing a compliant, gentle, and voiceless representative identity.

For example, athletes such as Ye Shiwen and Le Jingyi are not only subjected to scrutiny over their performance and age but are also framed as "tools" produced by the Chinese system (Yang, 2014; Bie & Billings, 2015; Vegas, 2017; Seo, 2021). Their achievements are transformed into metaphors of state manipulation and fraud, reinforcing perceptions of China as rule-breaking and morally questionable. Peng Liyuan, in Western media coverage, is most often presented as a graceful and elegant "First Lady," with reporting centering on her clothing and demeanor, rarely addressing her education or political views. This framing underscores her role as an accessory in soft diplomacy and cultural exchange rather than as an independent political actor (Zhang, 2017; Wang, 2018; Ling & Berkowitz, 2018; Chao & Zhang, 2019). Similarly, coverage of scientist Tu Youyou tends to stress her collectivism and obedience to the state, downplaying the autonomy of her accomplishments (Zhou et al., 2022).

Overall, these representations politicize and nationalize the bodies and appearances of Chinese women, positioning them as carriers of national imagery rather than as social actors with autonomous voices and independent status.

(b). *The Image of the Modern, Independent, and Empowered "New Woman"*

In sharp contrast to the instrumentalized and de-subjectified images mentioned above are some Chinese women who embody self-agency, such as Li Na and the "leftover women". They strive to carve out a space for themselves in the national, market, and cross-cultural contexts, and are reported on as "individual strivers," "transnational figures," and "cultural representatives," demonstrating a stronger sense of self-awareness and agency. While media affirm their achievements, they often emphasize their independence from national systems and their breaking of traditional stereotypes. For instance, Li Na is portrayed as an independent woman resisting institutional constraints, committed to self-expression and self-management (Zhao & Knijnik, 2021; Zhang & Caple, 2021), whereas the "leftover women" group is depicted as modern urban women pursuing true love and gender equality (Yu & Tian, 2023). Taken together,

these representations constitute a Western-empowerment-oriented understanding of the “new Chinese woman.” However, such empowerment discourse, while affirming women’s independence, also implicitly reflects a tendency to interpret Eastern women through Western value standards.

(c). The Representation of Chinese Women as “Heterogeneous Others”

The third category focuses on Chinese women who are structurally oppressed and marginalized. They are often portrayed as “outsiders,” “threats,” or “non-typical” figures, labeled as challengers to morality and social order. In constructing such images, media discourses often intertwine gender, race, class, and national identity, producing an intersectional othering. For example, Malaysian English-language media portray Chinese female immigrants as “dangerous seductresses,” “family destroyers,” and “commodities for trade,” viewing them as outsiders threatening local men and family order (Yoong & Lee, 2023); in Japan, Chinese women are often depicted as criminals, victims, or exploited laborers, with a strong gendered and ethnicized connotation (Xu & Wu, 2024). Even a mixed-race rising star like Eileen Gu has faced scrutiny over her identity choices and political stance, being labeled a “traitor” and “opportunist,” and placed within the narrative framework of ideological conflict between China and West (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Zhang & Shi, 2024). Overall, such representations of Chinese women as “heterogeneous other” reflect a self-construction rooted in exclusion and moral superiority.

The above categories reveal the diverse constructions of Chinese women’s representations in contemporary international discourse: they are either instrumentalized as national symbols, depicted as independent and empowered “new women” or othered as outsiders. The selection of figures and the variation in their representations reflect the expectations and ideological projections of international media and societies toward the roles of Chinese women.

IV. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS, RESEARCH GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

A. Predominance of Researchers With Asian Backgrounds

Although the authors of the relevant literature are affiliated with institutions in multiple countries, further examination of their backgrounds reveals that most have close cultural ties to China or Asia—many bear names indicative of Asian heritage, are citizens of Asian countries, or are first- or second-generation immigrants raised in Western nations such as the United States. The predominance of scholars with Asian backgrounds in this field reflects on the one hand, their strong interest and motivation toward issues of cultural identity, collective memory, and cross-cultural exchange. On the other hand, it also indicates that research on this topic remains largely confined within the Asian scholarly community. In the future, it will be important to promote greater diversity among researchers, attracting more scholars from non-Asian backgrounds in order to broaden research perspectives and enhance the global influence of this field.

B. Comparative Studies Dominate, With a High Degree of Concentration in Media and Figure Selection

Existing research on the international media representation of Chinese women predominantly adopts a comparative design, focusing mainly on horizontal comparisons between Chinese and Western media, cross-national newspaper analyses, and contrasts between Chinese and foreign female public figures. In terms of media and figure selection, studies are heavily concentrated on mainstream U.S. newspapers (particularly *The New York Times*), as well as media from other English-speaking developed countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, as well as their representative figures. American media, in particular, occupy a central position in the discourse of this field. In contrast, there is a noticeable lack of attention to media from Asia, Africa, South America, and other European countries, resulting in significant regional imbalance.

This highly comparative and concentrated research approach reflects scholars’ strong focus on Western standards and Western discourse power. It not only seeks to understand how Western societies perceive Chinese women but also attempts to respond to the opposing and interactive dynamics between Chinese and Western public opinion. However, this West-centric, Sino–Western comparative framework has led to a narrow research perspective, resulting in an insufficient overall understanding of the image of Chinese women in the global diverse media context. It has overlooked the unique interpretations and representations of the image of Chinese women in other regions of the world, particularly in the “Global South”. In the future, research urgently needs to break free from the “Western-centric” framework and expand into broader regional and cultural contexts to achieve a more diverse and enriched perspective.

C. The Selection of Figures Studied Exhibits Individualization, Modernization, and Domestication Characteristics

Current research on the international media representation of Chinese women demonstrates a clear trend toward individualization, modernization, and a domestic (China-based) focus in subject selection. First, studies often concentrate on highly visible and distinctive figures, particularly prominent women in politics and sports. This reflects Western media and academic preferences for “individual” and “iconic” figures, aligning with their narrative emphasis on personal experiences and notable achievements. Second, research subjects are predominantly drawn from the modern and contemporary periods, underscoring the topical relevance and contemporary resonance of the issue. Third, the focus frequently remains on women residing within China, indicating foreign media and audience interest in the lived experiences of women in Chinese society, and reaffirming the media’s role as a bridge in cross-cultural cognition,

for groups with little direct interaction, the media often serves as the primary source of understanding.

This pattern suggests that future research should strive for a more balanced selection of subjects across multiple dimensions, individual and collective, domestic and overseas, contemporary and historical, in order to enrich the overall and diversified understanding of Chinese women's representations, thereby advancing the comprehensive development of this field.

D. National Orientation Prevails Over Gender Perspective

Based on the systematic coding and categorization of keywords from 18 representative studies, this research identifies four core thematic areas in the study of the international image of Chinese women: (1) national image and international relations; (2) gender and women's image; (3) discourse analysis; and (4) news and media. Some keywords exhibit thematic overlap, reflecting the multidimensional nature of this issue.

The results show that the theme of "national image and international relations" dominates, with a significantly higher number of related keywords than those under the "gender and women" category. This indicates that the academic community currently views Chinese women primarily as carriers of national image, diplomatic symbols, and soft power, rather than focusing solely on their gender identity, gender relations, or social circumstances. Meanwhile, research on "Discourse Analysis" and "News and Media" also shows high activity, indicating that scholars not only examine what the media "says" and how it "says" it, but also explore "who is speaking" "through which channels" and "to whom", that is, the production, dissemination, and reception mechanisms of news.

Future research should expand its thematic dimensions and theoretical perspectives, incorporating multicultural contexts while balancing national and gender dimensions, to promote the diversification and globalization of research on the image of Chinese women.

V. CONCLUSION

This review represents the first comprehensive effort to systematically examine the discursive construction of Chinese women in international newspaper coverage. It maps the current state of research, identifies the dominant discursive patterns across different national and media contexts, and highlights the underlying cultural logics embedded within this discourse.

A major limitation of this review lies in the relatively small corpus of studies available, which narrows the scope for producing a fully integrated synthesis or a deeply layered interpretation of the discursive portrayal of Chinese women in global media. Yet this limitation is itself revealing it reflects the topic's underdeveloped status in global scholarship. In contrast to the substantial and theoretically rich work on groups such as Muslim women in international communication, studies on Chinese women remain limited in both scale and conceptual depth, underscoring the urgent need for more sustained and in-depth inquiry.

By establishing a baseline understanding of the media discourse about Chinese women in non-Chinese news media, this review provides a foundation for future large-scale, cross-cultural, and cross-platform research, particularly employing critical discourse analysis or corpus linguistics. Given the global significance of Chinese women as a demographic group, their international image warrants sustained and expanded scholarly attention.

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