The Construction of China's National Image of *New York Times* from the Perspective of Interpersonal Function ——A Case Study of China's First Lady Peng Liyuan

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Abstract:

In the current global context, the construction of a country's national image is not only a matter of one's soft power, but also involves the international media image. This thesis is based on the interpersonal function to analyze China's First Lady Peng Liyuan-related news reports on The New York Times, aiming to study China's national image reflected by the image of China's First Ladyon western media. The study of the China-related reports in the American main stream media is of great significance to understand the views of the main stream media and society towards China in the United States, to improve the international communication system of China, and eventually to build up the positive image of China.

Key words: Interpersonal Function; *The New York Times*; National image; Peng Liyuan

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of new China, with its rapid economic development and positive participation in international affairs, China has been gradually becoming a focus of attention in the international community. The phenomenon of what has happened in China or what Chinese people have done has been becoming focus in the international media. The more attention has been drawn to China, the more attention will be put on the image of China.

First Lady system originated in the United States, traditionally the First Lady didnot show more political connotations. In the 20th century, due to the rapid development of mass media culture, the important role and irreplaceable public functions of the First Lady has been a great concern.

The language used in news reports is a text of language users' choices. News report has long been an important field for linguistic analysis. According to Halliday, interpersonal meta-function concerns the manners in which people use language to realize the dynamic meaning, and express one's attitude and then influence the hearers. Briefly speaking, the usage of language is to satisfy needs of human being. In this thesis, the author applies Halliday's Theory of Interpersonal Function to figure out how the reporters adopt the linguistic resources to express the interpersonal meaning behind the news reports.

2. Literature review
2.1 Previous Studies on Interpersonal Function

Malinowski(Eggins, 1994) first used the concept of "phatic communion" to describe the interpersonal function of language when he studied the language of the natives on the Trobrinad Islands (Hu Z.L, 2005). This kind of language is frequently used in the process of building and maintaining the social relationship between the strangers. It helps the strangers to create a good atmosphere and convey their feelings. J.R.Firth's research (1957)is influenced by the anthropologist Bronislow Malinowski's theory when he participates in the study of linguistic functions, and then his depth study enriches Malinowski's theory. He puts forward that the observation of a language can by means of the social perspective and claims that language can help understand the social nature of human beings. Similarly, M.A.K.Halliday is deeply influenced by his teacher Firth's opinion (Zhu Y.S.&Yan S.Q,2001). They all emphasized the importance of the social function of language. With the deepening of the research, Halliday's theory and method have been broadened. Finally his research results can be summarize as the Systemic Functional Linguistics(SFL).In SFL, Halliday claims that language is a multifunctional system, which can be divided into three categories: interpersonal function, ideational function and textual function. According to Halliday(2001), interpersonal resources in one language are usually connected with building social relations. These resources are used to analyze how people interact, how to influence their behavior, how to express people's viewpoint on things in the world, especially how people convey and share their true feelings.

2.2 Previous studies on China's national image

Studies abroad on China's image started at the beginning of the 1970s. American scholars unfolded thorough research in the forming, developing and changing of China's national image and its influence on the frame of Sino-US relation. Many kinds of researches results emerged and monographs and collected papers about China's national image also appeared, among which the most representative ones are Kusnitz's *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: America's China policy, 1949-1979* (1984), and Hood's *China's Media, Media's China* (1994), Harold Robert Isaacs's *Images of Asia: American Views of China and India* (1972), and so forth. These works have great influence on the West's attitudes and opinions on Chinese image.

In our country, researches about China's national image attract increasingly broad interest as well. Researches' focuses are mainly on history, international relations, international relations and politics, media and so on. Li Xiguang (1996) publishes a book named *Behind the Dewoniied China*, in which China's national image through Western media especially in the media of United States is discussed. Guan Wenhu (2000) is another influential scholar, who systematically researches national image in his book *The Theory of National Image*. *China 's Image: China's Image by Intemational View* (2006) and *Image of China in World Mainstream Media*(2006) cooperatively written by Liu Ji'nan and He Hui discuss influence exerted on China's image from political, economic, military and cultural perspective by using mass-communication, sociology and international relation studies.

2.3 National image & First Lady

In public diplomacy, "First Lady " represents their national manners and image. Their good performance in diplomatic activities can strengthen governments' influence, as well as promoting soft power and transmitting the positive national image. The tradition that "First Ladies" participate in diplomatic activities has been established by Song Meilin, Bruni and Michelle Obama. "Michelle Obama is the first African-American first lady in American history. She keeps a great balance between of being a political partner and a wife and mother. Also, she is good at avoiding various political questions and talking more about her family and charity career. Michelle has shortened the distance between common people and the presidential family by her gentle image(WEN Yu, 2013)." Ever since Peng Liyuan has appeared in the global public view as China's first lady, everything about her has become a hot topic, either in terms of appearance, performance or her dressing style. "Recently, the foreign reports about President Xi's visiting to other countries with his wife have fully showed the charm of first lady and the harmonious relationship between President Xi and his wife has generated a positive effect on establishing the leader's image and transmitting the national image(DOU Weilin, GUO Shuqi, 2014)."

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research questions

(1) What is the distribution and function of the different resources in the mood system in the news reports?

(2) What are the effects of the choices of different modal verbs in the modality system?

(3) What kind of image has been built by Peng Liyuan?

3.2 Research subject

All the news reports used in this thesis are all downloaded from the official website of *The New York Times* (http://international.nytimes.com/).Typing in the key word "Peng Liyuan", the researcher got 70 results in total. Then the researcher chooses all the 16 news reports during the time span from March 2013 to December 2013, for the year 2013 was the first time that Peng Liyuan appeared in the public as China's First Lady.

3.3 Research method

The thesis takes both the qualitative and quantitative analysis. Based on the theory of interpersonal function, the author mainly analyze those news reports from the perspective of mood and modality, specifically, tense of mood and modal verbs of modality.

4. A case study of the news reports on Peng Liyuan

4.1. The Analysis from Mood System and Modality System

4.1.1 Choice of Tense

As a component of finite in mood system, temporal modal refers to primary tenses of past, present and future and acts as the marker of interpersonal relationship.

In these reports, the writers intend to remind the reader of the background and the impression of the news related to China's first lady Peng Liyuan. Tense holds the functions of carrying out interpersonal meanings and embodies the characteristics of truthfulness, responsiveness, freshness and predictability of the news reports of Peng Liyuan. The following two tables are trying to show the results of distributions of the tenses in the reports:

Table 4.1 The distribution of tenses in each report

Text	Past tense	Present tense	Future tense
T1	28	15	1
T2	16	25	3
T3	2	8	1
T4	10	22	2
T5	7	10	0
T6	12	21	0
T7	9	15	1
T8	16	20	4
T9	3	16	3
T10	10	17	5
T11	17	15	5
T12	1	8	1
T13	19	8	1
T14	9	20	0
T15	11	8	1
T16	8	27	0

Table 4.2 The statistics of tense proportion

Texts tense	Past tense	Present tense	Future text	Total
Frequency	178	255	28	461
Percentage	39%	55%	6%	100%

Through analyzing all the reports selected, it's not difficult to find that past tense and present tense are the most common used. The future tense is seldom used. The detailed distribution is: present tense takes the largest portion in reports with the number of 255 and 55 percentages; past tense totals the number of 178. The future tense only takes the number of 28 and occupy only 6 percentages. Based on the data in the two tables, it clearly reveals that the portion of the three tenses is different and each tense has its own function in realization of interpersonal meaning. In these reports, the writer plays the role of information-giver. That means he must report what has happened and describe the factual event of the performance to the reader. In order to realize that goal, past tense and present tense become the writer's best choice. Only through this way, the reader may believe that all the reports are just recorded and conveyed without distorting. Especially the present tense, people often use it to describe facts objectively. So there's no doubt that the present tense takes the predominant proportion in these reports. For example:

(1) China's First Lady Strikes Glamorous Note.

(2) Peng Liyuan, China's new first lady, is glamorous, fashionable and one of her nation's best-known singers, a startling contrast to her dour-looking predecessors.

(3) As she accompanies her husband, President Xi Jinping, on his first trip abroad as China's leader, Ms. Peng appears ready to carve out a new role for herself.

(4) They await the moment when Ms. Peng and Mrs. Obama stand with their husbands at a state visit, either in Washington or Beijing, a lineup that is likely to happen in the next four years.

All the sentences are selected from one report(Text 2). As table 4.1 shows, this report contains 25 present tense. This report is a typical one, which record the situation that Peng Liyuan accompanied her husband to Moscow as China's first lady for the first time and the global community's impression of her. When the writer is expressing his appreciation to her or his expectation of her, he used present tense mostly.

Now Peng Liyuan has not only attracted much spotlight for herself as China's most glamorous first lady, but also gained much attractiveness to her husband and the Chinese government. She is President Xi's wife as well as an excellent political partner. On the other hand, most of the time, Peng Liyuan is mentioned together with her husband, not independently. Unlike Peng Liyuan, Michelle Obama has a much closer relationship with the public and has many reports about her own. The reason behind is that the First Lady has become a tradition in the United States and it has a long history.

When talking about Peng Liyuan, *The New York Times* isused to comparing her with their own well-known and fashionable first lady Michelle Obama. As two of the most famous first ladies, Peng Liyuan and Michelle have caught many eyes from all over the world. And *The New York Times* focuses on the interaction between the two first ladies.

4..1.2 Choice of Modal Verbs

Through analyzing the news reports of Peng Liyuan, the author lists all the modal verbs in all reports and counts the appearance frequency of the modal verbs in the following:

Table 4.3 Modal auxiliaries in the 16 pieces of the news reports

Modal verbs	Will/ would	Must	Should	Can / Could	May / Might	Can't	Total
Frequency	74	1	11	20	12	5	123
Percentage	60%	1%	9%	16%	10%	4%	10

Table 4.4 Halliday's division of the values of modality （Halliday，2000：76）

	Low	Median	High
Positive	can, may, could, might, （dare）	will ， would ， should，is/was to	must， ought to, need， has/had to
Negative	Needn't, doesn't/didn't+ need to， have to	Won't, wouldn't, shouldn't, （isn't/wasn't to)	Mustn't ， oughtn't to, can't, couldn't, (mayn't, mightn't, hasn't/hadn't to）

From table 4.1, it's easy to find the number of uses of "will/would" is much greater than other modal verbs among these reports. As a modal verb, "will/would" is often used to express a strong intention or expectation to a certain thing at present. The predominant use of "will/would" indicates that the writers want to show the western media's approval and expectation of China's first lady Peng Liyuan.

For example:

(1) I think she will definitely add points for her husband.

(2) Ms. Peng's star power will push the diplomats into the background.

(3) First, Peng Liyuan and Michelle Obama will be with their husbands at Sunnylands, and it would be great if there were a global initiative on which they could cooperate.

As we can see from above, Here the modal verb "will" is employed to show the strong certainty and expectation of the writers who have already deeply impressed by Peng Liyuan. Through using the modal verb "will", the writers expressed their positive feelings and encouraged the readers to be confident about what they have reported.

Frequently uses the modal verb "can/could", mostly to express some personal feelings. For example:

(1) "As a renowned singer, Peng can publicize Chinese culture and deliver a big push to the country's soft power."

(2) "In the folk singer category, no one can surpass her."

(3) "It could make her into a diplomatic idol."

As we can see, the examples selected including "can" or "could" are all quoted from other people, taking other people's feelings to express their own opinions and approval towards Peng Liyuan.

Combined table 4.3 and table 4.4, we can find that modal verbs of median values take a large percentage, over half of the total number. The use of modal verbs of low value or high value will make readers feel that the reporters are lack of confidence or over confident. Median value modal verbs can overcome the shortness of the two. Therefore, they are the best choices for the writers to express their feelings. It is noticeable that when concerning soft power

construction, the presidential couple's relationship, Peng Liyuan's charity work, her fashion style, her singing career and the new look of China's First Lady presented by her, the writers always chose verbs to show their certainty. It is indirectly showed that western media affirms her intellectual political image, charity image, family image, professional image and personal image. It not only increases the affinity of China's leaders, but also makes an effort in spreading Chinese spirits and styles.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of the Thesis

Through reading all the 16 selected news reports and the analysis above, the features of interpersonal function can be concluded as follows: the past and the present tense are most frequently used, especially the present tense. For the modal verbs, modal verbs of median value take largest percentage. Besides, the collocation of verbs is easy to be summarized into several aspects. And from all these aspects the author can conclude where the western media put their focus on and what their attitudes are. In the process of China's national image construction, the construction of First Lady's image is the most critical element in this thesis. The artistic charm Peng Liyuan has displayed and the attainment in her self-cultivation which derived from Chinese culture are the key factors that why she attracts more attention from western media. And as China's First Lady, she has the opportunities to show all her good qualities to the whole world.

Since China's reform and opening up, the social and economic construction have made great achievements. The future development of a country has much to do with its national image. Therefore, to build a great national image has always been an important diplomatic issue for China. And the national image and the state leaders' image are interdependent. For people from foreign countries, their cognition of a certain country partly comes from their impression of the state leaders' image. First Lady is the image ambassador of the international stage. They represent the image of the whole country and the country's leaders in different diplomatic activities. First Lady Diplomacy is a key way to construct and show their national image.

5.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This thesis has achieved its overall aim of attempting to discuss China's national image in The New York Times on the basis of interpersonal function, but there are still several limitations. First of all, we only chose The New York Times even though it is representative and prestigious. If we could choose more mainstream magazines or newspapers to analyze the Peng Liyuan-related news reports, we would get a more objective, fair and comprehensive understanding of the China's national image. Second, the researcher has limited capability. It cannot be ensured that the analysis are all correct and acceptable. Third, the theoretical

foundation interpersonal function and its analytical methods are not perfect, they still have their limits.

In light of the outcomes of the study, the author finds that there is a lager room to make a deeper study on the construction of China's national image. Firstly, in terms of the materials, the author only chooses 16 news reports, it may be better for the researcher to make a corpus study of Peng Liyuan-related news. It will concretely show the linguistic features of the news reports. Secondly, in order to uncover the implicit linguistic features of the news discourses, it is better for the researcher to make a comparative study.

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