

## *Original Paper*

# A Multimodal Construction of China's National Sports Image by China Daily in the Away-Game Context

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### **Abstract**

*This study takes the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics as a case study to explore how Chinese media construct the national sports image through multimodal discourse in an away-game context. Addressing the gap in existing literature, which predominantly focuses on home-game events, this paper analyzes 30 multimodal news reports from China Daily. It adopts the framework of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), integrating transitivity analysis, Visual Grammar, and Intersemiotic Complementarity theory to examine the synergistic construction mechanisms of verbal and visual modalities. The findings reveal that China Daily presents a credible image through material processes and objective data; shapes a lovable image via emotional expressions and an equal perspective; and portrays a respectable image using cultural symbols and willpower. Consequently, it accomplishes the multidimensional construction of a “credible, lovable, and respectable” image in an away-game context. This paper broadens the away-game dimension in national sports image research and provides references for the multimodal communication strategies of Chinese media in international sporting event coverage.*

### **Keywords**

*China Daily, multimodal discourse analysis, Chinese sports image, away-game context, Milano Cortina Winter Olympics*

### **1. Introduction**

In the new era, shaping a national image through sports has emerged as a significant approach [1]. Pan suggests that shaping the national image through competitive sports aligns with the earnest expectation of telling China's story well in the new era [2]. Huang et al. point out that China should leverage the affinity of sports soft power to continue its role as an advocate, builder, and defender of a community with a shared future for mankind, thereby shaping a popular Chinese image on the international stage

[3].

A natural, intrinsic connection exists between mega sporting events and the construction of a national image. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz note that world-class events like the Olympic Games command global attention [4]. Maurice Roche further suggests that mega-events provide host countries with a window to showcase their national achievements, cultural charm, and values to the world [5]. Home-game events, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, have been confirmed to exert a positive impact on Chinese national image[6][7]. The host country achieves national image self-construction through controllable elements such as opening ceremonies and venue designs[8][9]. However, existing research exhibits a distinct home-game bias, with insufficient attention paid to how Chinese media construct the national image in an away-game context where the host country controls the media agenda and the stage for cultural display is restricted. A survey report reveals that foreign audiences perceive a prominent utilitarian issue in Chinese sports and a lack of ethnic characteristics in its visual image, indicating that there is an urgent need to explore how Chinese media can alter international audiences' existing perceptions and mitigate negative images in an away-game context [10]. The Milano Cortina Winter Olympics, at which the Chinese delegation achieved its best overseas performance, serves as an ideal case.

In recent years, research related to multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) has rapidly gained popularity. MDA refers to the phenomenon of communicating through multiple means and symbolic resources, such as language, images, sounds, and actions [11][12]. Kress and van Leeuwen developed Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) into the Visual Grammar theory. The Intersemiotic Complementarity theory, introduced by Royce, explores the synergistic role of the interaction between images and texts in constructing overall meaning [13]. These three theories synergize to form the core framework of MDA and have been initially applied in the discourse analysis of sports news, providing a solid reference for this study [14][15][16].

Guided by MDA, this study employs transitivity analysis, Visual Grammar and Intersemiotic Complementarity theory to analyze 30 text-image news reports from China Daily covering Milano Cortina Winter Olympics. It aims to address the following three research questions:

- (1) What transitivity strategies are employed by the texts in the multimodal reports to present the Chinese sports image?
- (2) What visual grammar strategies are utilized by the images in the multimodal reports to present the Chinese sports image?
- (3) What Intersemiotic Complementarity relations are established between the images and texts to construct the Chinese sports image?

Theoretically, this study broadens the away-game context dimension in national research and offers new case applications for multimodal discourse analysis; practically, it provides strategic references for Chinese media to better tell China's story and construct a multidimensional national image in future away-game events.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Research on Sporting Events and National Image

With the rapid development of globalization and information technology, national image has increasingly become an essential calling card for countries to enhance their comprehensive strength and international influence, gradually becoming a focal point in academic circles. Scholars worldwide have endowed it with multidimensional definitions. Foreign research began earlier and encompasses diverse dimensions: the concept of national image was initially proposed by Boulding, who posited that a national image is not an objective existence but a combination of a country's self-perception and the perception of other countries, emphasizing its subjectivity and duality [17]. Entman and Shoemaker also highlighted the critical role of media in constructing a national image [18][19], while Nye viewed the national image as a vital carrier of soft power [20]. From the perspective of international communication, Kunczik argued that a national image is the sum of international audiences' cognition, emotion, and behavior toward a country, jointly shaped by international news, media coverage, and cultural information [21].

Domestic scholars commenced their research relatively late, maintaining a strong practical orientation. Approaching from a news communication perspective, Xu first argued that a national image is formed during the flow of international news, grounding his research in China's external communication practices [22]. Guan and Sun proposed a more comprehensive definition, stating that a national image is the overall evaluation of the country itself, its activities, and achievements by domestic and international publics, covering politics, economics, culture, and other aspects. This definition has been widely cited in subsequent research [23][24]. Zhang and Xu further noted that a national image is the comprehensive cognition and overall impression of a country by the international public, resulting from the interaction between subject and object, and jointly constructed by the media and the public [25]. These definitions collectively reveal that a national image combines objective existence with subjective cognition. It reflects national strength while serving as the product of continuous mediatized practices. In the new era, building a leading sports nation has become a crucial goal for comprehensively building a modern socialist country in China. Existing research demonstrates that both the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics positively influenced the establishment of a favorable national image. In the research domain of sporting events and national image, existing achievements display a pronounced home-game bias. Research on home-game events, represented by the 2008 and 2022 Olympics, is relatively thorough. It explores how the host country constructs its national image through opening ceremonies, venues, and cultural exhibitions. Concurrently, abundant research examines how Western media coverage constructs the Chinese sports image [26][27]. While these studies contribute to understanding how China utilizes domestic sporting events to shape its national image, they primarily focus on self-construction. By contrast, research regarding how China constructs its national sports image during away-game sporting events remains inadequate. The survey by Zhou

and Wan indicates that foreign audiences perceive a prominent utilitarian issue in Chinese sports, alongside a lack of ethnic characteristics, global perspective, and sports elements in its visual sports image. This finding indirectly reveals that in an away-game context, when Chinese media cannot control the stage, addressing the established cognition of international audiences and repairing negative images are precisely the issues requiring profound investigation. As the overseas Winter Olympics where the Chinese delegation achieved its best results, the Milano Cortina Winter Olympics provides an ideal research sample for this topic.

### *2.2 Research on the External Communication of China Daily*

In 2013, General Secretary Xi Jinping put forward the earnest expectation to “tell China’s story well and spread China’s voice well,” providing direction for the country’s external communication. As an authoritative platform for China’s external communication, China Daily is one of the Chinese media outlets with the highest reproduction rate by foreign media, playing a significant role in showcasing China's image. For a long time, academia has conducted extensive research on the external communication of China Daily, primarily focusing on politics and international affairs, economics and trade cooperation, culture and social livelihood, as well as science, technology, and sustainable development. Chen and Wang analyzed China Daily’s coverage of economic cooperation and regional exchanges among Belt and Road countries [28]. Wang et al. focused on news reports regarding poverty alleviation, integrating critical metaphor analysis with national image construction [29]. Li et al. analyzed economic reports during the Qatar World Cup to explore their role in shaping China’s image as an economic powerhouse [30].

The low-political nature of sporting events makes them an important domain for telling China’s story. Zeng argues that in the context of globalization, international discourse power in the sports domain can optimize China’s sports image and elevate its international status [31]. Wan et al. further note that a sports image fosters national pride internally and enables foreign audiences to recognize, accept, and identify with China’s image externally. However, compared to the fruitful research in political and economic fields, studies related to China Daily’s sports coverage are noticeably insufficient. Yang et al. analyzed the shaping strategies of the “Ice and Snow, Shared Dream” national image in the coverage of the Asian Winter Games [32]. Zhong studied the feasibility of national image construction by comparing reports on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics from China Daily and The Washington Post [33]. Additionally, there are relevant studies on the Beijing Winter Olympics and the Beijing Olympics [34][35]. Overall, existing research largely concentrates on China Daily’s coverage of mega sporting events where China acts as the host, providing a solid theoretical foundation for this paper. In comparison, research on China Daily’s sports event coverage, particularly within an away-game context, remains inadequate. Based on this research gap, this study utilizes the Milano Cortina Winter Olympics as a typical away-game event to examine how China Daily tells the Chinese sports story in this context.

### *2.3 Research on Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Visual Grammar, and Intersemiotic Complementarity*

Multimodal discourse analysis, grounded in Halliday's SFL theory, refers to the phenomenon of communication through various means including language, images, sounds, and actions. Biologists suggest that humans possess five sensory channels including sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste, leading to five corresponding communicative modalities, among which the visual modality relates most closely to discourse analysis. Scholars across various fields have explored and theoretically constructed multimodal research. O'Toole analyzed artworks from a rank-scale perspective [36]. Kress and van Leeuwen constructed an analytical framework for Visual Grammar centered on representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. They incorporated all social semiotics resources that function in meaning construction such as language, images, and sound into the scope of analysis, providing a theoretical basis and analytical method for MDA. Lemke investigated image-text relations in scientific articles [37]. Martinec, Salway, and Unsworth discussed image-text relations in both traditional and new media in detail [38][39]. Royce proposed the Intersemiotic Complementarity theory, exploring the synergistic effect of interactions between images and texts in advertisements to construct overall meaning, as well as multimodal synergy in second-language classroom teaching. Collectively, these studies expanded the application scope of SFL's metafunction theory.

Domestic research commenced in the 21st century. Based on the works of Kress and van Leeuwen, Li noted that MDA plays a significant role in deepening the understanding of the production process of multimodal signs and the social semiotic meaning of language [40]; Zhu researched the theoretical foundation and methodology of multimodal discourse, proposing evaluation criteria [41]; Zhang introduced a comprehensive analytical framework for multimodal discourse that incorporates cultural context, situational context, and the semantic stratum into the system, broadening the boundaries of research [42]. Domestic MDA primarily focuses on the educational sector and video texts [43][44][45]. In the realm of sporting events, MDA offers a novel perspective for interpreting relevant coverage. News headlines, lead paragraphs, and event photographs in sports journalism can all serve as meaning carriers for examination. In recent years, the application of MDA in sporting event research has become increasingly enriched, yet a home-game bias remains evident. Jin took the promotional posters of the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games as the research object and conducted an analysis based on Visual Grammar theory, revealing the internal mechanism of how multimodal symbols synergistically construct Hangzhou's city image. Zuo conducted an MDA of China Daily's coverage of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Mao focused on the multimodal discourse strategies in CGTN's coverage of the Beijing Winter Olympics. All these studies utilized Chinese host events as research subjects to explore multimodal discourse construction in a home-game context.

In summary, MDA, Visual Grammar, and Intersemiotic Complementarity theory have formed a mature framework for multimodal discourse analysis, which has been fully verified and applied in major international sporting events. However, research focusing on the multimodal discourse construction by Chinese external communication media in an away-game event context remains scarce. Furthermore,

scholars have yet to systematically explore away-game events like Milan Winter Olympics where the Chinese delegation achieved outstanding results. Based on this, utilizing MDA as the overarching perspective and combining Visual Grammar and Intersemiotic Complementarity theory, this study will investigate how verbal and visual modalities synergistically interact in China Daily's coverage of the Milan Winter Olympics to construct the Chinese sports image. This effort will address gaps in existing research and enrich multimodal studies within the field of sports journalism.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

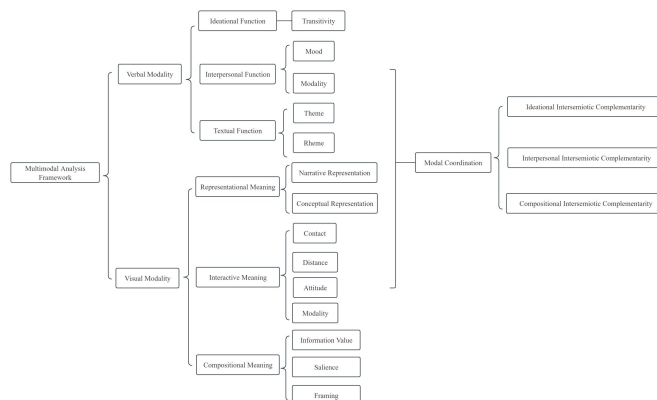
The theoretical foundation of multimodal discourse analysis originates from SFL. Halliday posits that language is a social semiotic and proposes the three metafunctions of language: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function. The above theories provide the theoretical basis for analyzing the verbal modality in this study. This research will focus extensively on the transitivity system within the verbal modality. This system typically comprises six major processes: material process, mental process, relational process, verbal process, behavioral process and existential process.

Building upon this foundation, Kress and van Leeuwen proposed the Visual Grammar theory, which is applicable to the study of visual modalities such as images, colors, and layouts. They transferred the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions from SFL to the visual modality, correspondingly proposing representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. Representational meaning focuses on the content and manner presented by an image, divided into narrative representation and conceptual representation based on vectors. Interactive meaning concerns the relationship among the image maker, the content presented in the image, and the image viewer, which is realized through contact, social distance, attitude, and modality. Compositional meaning explains how an image organizes interactive and representational meanings into a meaningful whole, divided into three aspects: information value, salience, and framing.

To reveal the connections between different modalities in multimodal discourse, Royce proposed the Intersemiotic Complementarity theory, advocating that "the verbal and visual sign systems complement each other in their ways of expressing meaning within a single text." Built on social semiotics and SFL, this theory is primarily used to analyze the synergistic operation patterns between the visual mode and the verbal modality in multimodal discourse. Royce extends the three metafunctions of language to ideational intersemiotic complementarity, interpersonal intersemiotic complementarity, and compositional intersemiotic complementarity. Ideational intersemiotic complementarity refers to the mutually enhancing and complementary effects achieved when images and texts present ideational meaning. This is realized through relations such as repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, and collocation. Interpersonal intersemiotic complementarity involves how texts and images collaborate to achieve interpersonal communication. Compositional intersemiotic complementarity elaborates on how texts and images synergistically and complementarily present the overall meaning of the discourse.

In summary, the three theories are inherently connected yet distinct in focus, jointly supporting this

study from different angles. As shown in Figure 3-1, Halliday’s transitivity system provides the analytical paradigm for dissecting the verbal modality in China Daily’s sports news; Kress and van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar is utilized to explore how news images present the Chinese image through different meanings in an away-game context; Royce’s Intersemiotic Complementarity theory establishes the image-text synergy analysis framework, revealing how China Daily constructs the Chinese sports image through multimodal collaboration.



**Figure 3-1. Multimodal Analysis Framework**

#### 4. Research Methodology

Modern media technology has increasingly driven news reporting toward multimodality, making image-text reports the mainstream format for news discourse. In this study, searches were conducted on the official China Daily website using keywords such as “Milano 2026”, “Winter Olympics” and “Team China”. The search time frame spanned from one week before the opening ceremony to one week after the closing ceremony. After excluding reports with low relevance to the Chinese sports image, a final selection of 30 multimodal news reports was established as the research object. Among these, there were 8 pre-match preparation reports (including pre-match training, preparation, and interviews), 13 event and competition reports (including the competition process and award-winning moments), 5 character stories (including athletes’ experiences, spirits, and personal growth), and 4 comprehensive reviews (including event summaries and evaluations). Each report integrates both verbal and visual modalities, presenting rich and complete content to the readers.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. First, a corpus of multimodal reports on the Milano Cortina Winter Olympics was established. The news items were categorized by theme, and the corpus was cleaned. All texts were imported into UAM Corpus Tool 6.2 for transitivity analysis to calculate the frequencies and percentages of the six major processes, thereby analyzing how the selected discourse constructs the Chinese sports image. Second, all images were extracted and coded in an Excel spreadsheet based on the pre-established categorization principles of Visual Grammar theory. The percentages were statistically analyzed according to the three major meanings—representational, interactive, and compositional. Only the most dominant meaning type was

selected for each image to explore the meaning construction of the images. Finally, employing Royce's Intersemiotic Complementarity theory, observational methods were utilized to classify and statistically analyze the ideational, interpersonal, and compositional intersemiotic complementarity between images and texts, discussing the significance of image-text synergy in constructing the Chinese image.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China mandates the need to “tell China's story well, make China's voice heard, and present a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China.” Utilizing MDA as the theoretical framework and taking the three value dimensions of “credible, lovable, and respectable” as macro value orientations, this study abstracts six specific dimensions of the Chinese sports image: outstanding athletic capability, solid developmental progress, youthful vigor, approachable demeanor, indomitable perseverance, and cultural self-strengthening. The subsequent analysis will unfold based on these dimensions. It should be noted that when analyzing each dimension, this study solely selects the most explanatory theoretical perspective for focused elaboration.

### 5.1 A Credible Chinese Sports Image

“Credibility” emphasizes authenticity and public trust, providing a solid foundation for shaping the lovable and respectable Chinese image [46]. In an away-game context, credibility must address two core issues: how to demonstrate that athletes' excellent results stem from capability rather than chance, and the level of public trust associated with the overall development of Chinese winter sports.

#### 5.1.1 Outstanding Athletic Capability

Outstanding athletic capability refers to the competitive demeanor displayed by Chinese athletes through their hard power, brilliant performances on the field, and exceptional results. It addresses the question of whether Chinese athletes can win at the individual competitive level. In an away-game context, China loses the advantages of home venues, audiences, and agenda-setting power. Consequently, material processes become the most objective and compelling discursive method of description. As shown in Table 5-1, all clauses in the selected discourse contain a total of 1,957 transitivity processes. Among these, the material process, verbal process, mental process, and relational process are the primary types, accounting for 68.5% (N=1343), 14.3% (N=280), 9.1% (N=178), and 7.0% (N=138), respectively. The material process is the dominant type in this corpus. The discourse frequently employs verbs such as “win,” “claim,” and “defend” for narrative purposes, focusing on objective behaviors like athletic movements, technical performances, and match results, thereby reconstructing authentic competition scenarios.

**Table 5-1 Transitivity Analysis Statistics**

Process Type	Frequency	Percentage
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Material Process	1343	68.5%
Mental Process	178	9.1%
Relational Process	138	7.0%
Verbal Process	280	14.3%
Behavioral Process	9	0.5%
Existential Process	13	0.7%
Total	1961	100.1%

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

For example, in reporting Ning Zhongyan's gold medal win in the men's 1,500m, the text states: "Ning **got off** to a flying start and pushed hard with each stroke while gliding through the curves smoothly to complete the 1,500m ahead of Nuis." This clause contains three material processes, vividly describing Ning's actions of starting, pushing hard, and controlling the curves. Similarly, "Gu **went out flying** from the go as she **connected** a series of dazzling moves during the rail section, and **landed** three big air tricks." Three verbs are linked to present a complete technical action chain from start and connection to landing. Another example, "Sun **kept** his patience behind hot favorite Dandjinou, **launched** a fierce attack in the final lap, and **crossed** the line almost simultaneously with Van't Wout," vividly describes Sun Long's tactical rhythm in the short track speed skating race: conserving energy to observe the opponent, exerting force to overtake, and sprinting with full strength at the end. China Daily uses action processes as the core of its constructive discourse, objectively presenting athletes' performances through complete action chains, which provides solid discursive evidence for their outstanding capability.

**Table 5-2. Representational Meaning Statistics**

Type	Process Type	Frequency	Percentage
Narrative	Action Process	41	56.9%
Representation	Reactional Process	10	13.9%
Conceptual	Classificational	5	6.9%
Representation	Process		
	Analytical Process	5	6.9%
	Symbolic Process	11	15.3%
Total		72	99.9%

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The visual modality reinforces the presentation of athletes' competitive levels. The representational meaning of the visual modality embodies the conceptual relations among people, places, and events in

the images. As Table 5-2 illustrates, this study calculated 72 valid images, including 51 narrative representation images (accounting for 70.8%) and 21 conceptual representation images (accounting for 29.2%). The primary processes constructing representational meaning in the selected corpus are the action process (56.9%), the symbolic process (15.3%), and the reaction process (13.9%). Classificational and analytical processes hold lower proportions, both at 6.9%. This indicates that China Daily centers on the dynamic processes of athletes in its photographic coverage. The action process emphasizes the behavior and action tendency of the actor, often utilized to display the competitive states of athletes across various events, such as speed skating (Figure 5-1), freestyle skiing (Figure 5-2), and ski jumping (Figure 5-3). Taking Figure 5-1 as an example, the image captures Ning Zhongyan leaning forward in a streamlined posture, drawing back his left arm to gather power, and tucking his right arm forward to reduce resistance. These elements collectively form a visual vector that showcases his exquisite technical execution and the moment of a full-speed sprint, highlighting the outstanding ability of the Chinese speed skater. Meanwhile, the striking national flag pattern on his uniform binds him to the Chinese sports image, transforming this action into a concrete expression of an image of excellence.



Figure 5-1 Speed Skating

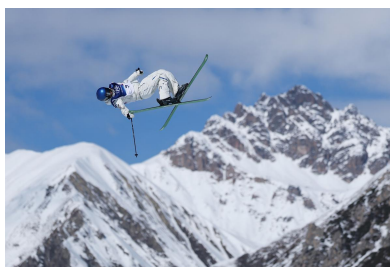


Figure 5-2 Freestyle Skiing



Figure 5-3 Ski Jumping

Table 5-3 Interactive Meaning Statistics

Type	Realization	Frequency
Contact	Demand	12
	Offer	60
Social Distance	Close Shot	12
	Medium Shot	52
	Long Shot	8
Attitude	Frontal	43
	Profile	28
	Back	1
	Eye-level	52
	High Angle	12
	Low-Angle	8

Modality	High Modality	72
	Low Modality	-

*Note.* A single image can be coded simultaneously across multiple sub-dimensions of attitude.

The interactive meaning of an image embodies the relationship among the image maker, the presented content, and the viewer. As shown in Table 5-3, at the contact level, offer images account for the vast majority with a frequency of 60, indicating that the images predominantly provide information objectively without establishing direct contact with the viewer. For instance, in Figure 5-4, figure skaters Sui and Han have their gazes locked onto the trajectory of their movements and onto each other, without looking at the camera. Their focus is entirely concentrated on the pairs skating performance, forming no direct contact with the audience. This strategy directs the audience's attention more toward the skaters' physical postures and the competition itself, allowing them to intuitively perceive the outstanding artistic level of the two athletes. Furthermore, offer images dilute emotional interaction between readers and athletes, objectively presenting professional competence and avoiding excessive emotional narration. This renders the outstanding Chinese sports image more persuasive in an away-game context.



**Figure 5-4 A Figure Skater Performing Difficult Movements**

### 5.1.2 Solid Developmental Progress

Solid developmental progress addresses whether the development of Chinese winter sports is firmly established at a macro level. In an away-game context, the development of China's winter sports industry can easily be overlooked, lacking the authoritative endorsement of a host identity. China Daily constructs the image of solid developmental progress through the relational process in the transitivity system and the analytical process in representational meaning.

In the transitivity system, the relational process emphasizes attribution, identification, or ownership among things, representing static relations between entities. Statistics show that the relational process accounts for 7.0% of the transitivity analysis. Although the overall proportion is not high, it is concentrated in macro summary and commentary news reports, primarily used to introduce identity,

status, and data. In an editorial elaborating on the positioning of Chinese winter sports, the author writes: “Winter sports are also part of the Healthy China 2030 initiative.” Here, “are” serves as an attributive relational process verb. Winter sports, acting as the Carrier, bear the attribute of the “Healthy China 2030” plan, institutionalizing the winter sports as part of a strategic framework and emphasizing the importance of developing the winter sports industry. In a report on the Chinese delegation, the sentence “This will be the largest delegation China has ever assembled for an overseas Winter Olympics” uses “be” as an identifying relational process verb, indicating that this delegation is the largest in China’s history of participating in overseas Winter Olympics, thereby emphasizing its scale and status. Evidently, though limited in proportion, static attributive relational processes lay the groundwork for an image of solid progress.

Within the visual modality, China Daily demonstrates a steady and advancing Chinese sports image via the analytical process in representational meaning. The analytical process refers to the structural relationship between a whole and its parts, displaying the attributes, characteristics, or composition of an object. Accounting for 6.9% of representational meanings, it plays a role in presenting Olympic village facilities and localized scenes of Olympic venues. As shown in Figure 5-5, the image presents the scene of the Chinese delegation attending the opening ceremony at the San Siro Stadium in Milan. The panoramic view of the entire stadium constitutes the whole, while the Chinese delegation forms a part. This composition signifies that the Chinese delegation is an organic component of the Milan Winter Olympics, a grand sporting feast. The neat, uniform formation of the delegation members waving national flags delivers a direct visual impact to the readers, highlighting the sheer scale of the Chinese delegation. The visual modality and the verbal modality complement each other, jointly reflecting a solid sports image of Chinese winter sports from both the perspective of institutional guarantees and delegation size.



**Figure 5-5. Chinese Delegation Attending the Opening Ceremony at San Siro Stadium in Milan**

In constructing the credible image, China Daily responds to the challenges of achievements being easily attributed to chance and overall development being easily ignored in an away-game context through two dimensions: outstanding athletic capability and solid developmental progress. At the verbal modality level, Chinese hard power is objectively described via material processes, while

achievements are integrated into national strategic narratives through relational processes. At the visual modality level, spectacular event moments are presented via action processes, and the scale of the Chinese delegation is illustrated via analytical processes. The text and images synergize to construct a credible discourse system ranging from individual competition to overall industrial development in an away-game environment.

### 5.2 *A Lovable Chinese Sports Image*

“Lovable” refers to China’s gentle characteristics, emphasizing Chinese charm built upon the foundation of “credibility,” which often wins the affection and recognition of the international community by showcasing ethnic customs and modern development[47]. In an away-game context, due to insufficient understanding, foreign media sometimes engage in stigmatization and negative reporting about China, making it challenging for Chinese athletes to display genuine emotions and personal charisma internationally. Cao Wanhong et al., in their study of CGTN’s short videos on the Winter Olympics, pointed out that sports coverage needs to present the national spirit by documenting everyday behaviors to better shape the Chinese sports image [48]. China Daily constructs the “lovable” Chinese sports image through two dimensions: youthful vigor and an approachable demeanor.

#### 5.2.1 Youthful Vigor

Youthful vigor refers to the dynamic vitality exhibited by the new generation of athletes. The vivid expressions and highly energetic postures of athletes in the competition arena can effectively bridge the distance with overseas readers. This is primarily presented through mental processes, reaction processes in representational meaning, as well as demand contact and modality values in interactive meaning.

As indicated in Table 5-1, within the verbal modality, mental processes signify perception, affection, cognition, and desideration, accounting for 9.1%, and frequently appear in discourse representing young athletes. In a report on Su Yiming winning bronze in the Big Air event, he is quoted: “I’m really **happy** and **proud** of myself to earn this medal at my second Olympic Games.” Here, “happy” and “proud” involve emotional mental processes, expressing Su Yiming’s self-approval and recognition. He was not disappointed by securing a bronze medal; rather, he was proud of withstanding the pressure to complete highly difficult maneuvers. Through candid discourse, the athlete constructs positive emotions, embodying the image of a vigorous youth. He subsequently adds, “I’m truly **delighted** and **honored** to wear the national colors, representing my country on the Olympic stage again.” Su connects his personal honor with national honor through “delighted” and “honored,” expressing his personal joy and pride first, followed by the honor of representing his country. This reflects patriotism naturally flowing from the individual’s heart, demonstrating the sincerity and warmth of young athletes.

In the visual modality, reaction processes in representational meaning account for 13.9%, mostly presenting the athletes’ gazes. Regarding contact in interactive meaning, demand images appear 12 times, mostly signifying direct eye contact between the athletes in the frame and the readers; these

instances often overlap with reaction processes. As shown in Figure 5-6, Gu Ailing stands sideways, holding her silver medal to her chest with her left hand, tilting her head to reveal a radiant smile to the audience. This is both a demand image and a reaction process, directly establishing an emotional connection with the audience and conveying the intention of sharing the joy of winning with the readers. As an athlete with international influence, Gu does not project a superior, untouchable image; instead, she shows her innocent and lively side. In an away-game context, a sincere smile or gaze can transmit friendly signals to international readers, forging an emotional bond between them. Furthermore, all images in this corpus adopt a naturalistic coding orientation, employing high-saturation techniques to capture photos with vibrant colors and clear details. The striking “Chinese red” in most photos forms a stark contrast with the snow, ice, and blue sky, enhancing the visual impact and conveying the youthful spirit of the athletes.



**Figure 5-6. Eileen Gu winning the Silver Medal in Slopestyle**

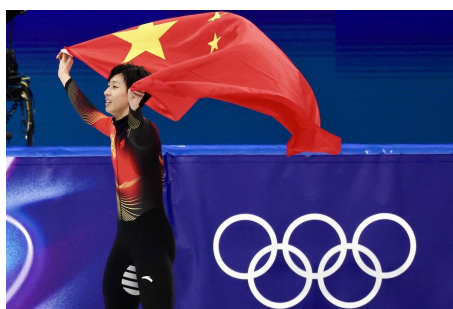
### 5.2.2 Approachable Demeanor

In an away-game context, Chinese athletes are prone to being positioned in a scrutinized status by international audiences, or placed on an elevated pedestal, creating a sense of distance from the viewers. China Daily constructs an equal posture of “de-othering” with readers through verbal processes in the text modality and social distance in the visual modality.

In the verbal modality, the verbal process describes the act of communication via language, playing a crucial role in constructing interpersonal relationships. Statistics show that verbal processes account for 14.3% of transitivity processes, ranking second. The prominence of verbal processes indicates that China Daily incorporated a vast amount of discourse from athletes, coaches, or staff in its away-game coverage, endowing the reports with a polyphonic nature. When interviewed about whether he had adapted to life at the Milano Cortina Winter Olympics, “I am okay with pasta, and to be honest, I think it (Italian food) has a lot in common with Chinese food,” Ning said after being spotted at his table during a media tour of the village on Thursday. Through direct dialogue, the athlete expressed acceptance of Italian food and proactively pointed out similarities between Chinese and Italian cuisines.

Rather than isolating themselves, Chinese athletes are willing to embrace different dietary habits and discover commonalities with their own food. Furthermore, the phrase “to be honest” adds a human touch to the expression. Similarly, the discourse of the host country’s staff was also recorded: “What we always say is ‘food is fuel’, which means to be sure that we are offering the athletes the things they actually need,” she said. This staff member expressed the service philosophy that Olympic Village catering is athlete-centered. By selecting the host's discourse, the report not only reflects the standard of the Olympic Village but also places the athletes in a well-treated position. The interaction between the two conveys a harmonious atmosphere between the host and China.

In the visual modality, interactive meaning embodies the interactive relationship between the participants in the image and the viewers through social distance and attitude. Regarding distance, different ranges represent varying degrees of intimacy. The medium shot occurs 52 times, far exceeding close shots and long shots. The medium shot, representing social distance, prevents readers from feeling either overly intimate or excessively alienated. Taking Figure 5-7 as an example, the image is shot from a medium distance, allowing viewers to clearly observe Sun Long's posture from the knees up. He raises his arms high, holding the national flag, and turns to the camera to celebrate his silver medal, with the flag unfurling in the wind. The lens at social distance enables Sun Long to display his outstanding athletic achievements without subjecting readers to subjective emotional manipulation via a close-up, nor making him appear estranged via a long shot. Concurrently, in the dimension of perspective, both frontal and eye-level perspectives appear frequently, 43 and 52 times respectively, indicating that the photographer and the athlete are on the same horizontal level, presenting visual equality. This profoundly reflects that in an away-game context, Chinese athletes are neither highly revered sports idols nor looked-down-upon underdogs, but rather poised and unassuming competitors.



**Figure 5-7. Sun Long Waving the National Flag after Winning the Silver Medal**

In shaping the lovable image, the two dimensions of “youthful vigor” and “approachable demeanor” mitigate the alienation caused by distance and the problem of athletes easily being “otherized” in an away-game context. In the verbal modality, candid mental processes of young athletes are used for emotional interaction, and multi-party dialogues are constructed via verbal processes. In the visual modality, emotional connections between competitors and audiences are

established through reaction processes, while medium shots and eye-level angles create a more egalitarian perspective. Textual and visual reports complement one another, portraying Chinese athletes as approachable and warm figures.

### 5.3 *A Respectable Chinese Sports Image*

The respectable Chinese image stems from the indomitable, relentless, and courageous spiritual character of the Chinese nation. It deepens overseas audiences' understanding of China on a more profound and broader level, built upon the foundation of being credible and lovable. In an away-game context devoid of the host's home-field sentiment, achievements are often reduced to a string of numbers, and cultural symbols are easily overlooked. In response, China Daily accomplishes the away-game construction of a respectable image through reports emphasizing willpower and an attitude of cultural confidence.

#### 5.3.1 Indomitable Perseverance

Indomitable perseverance refers to the tenacious fighting spirit and unyielding character displayed by the Chinese delegation on the competitive stage. The athletes' struggles are often reduced to numbers on the medal tally, but the injuries and perseverance behind those numbers deserve to be explored and understood by overseas readers. Reporting on the Chinese team missing a medal due to a collision, the text reads: "Although **shocked** and wounded, Sun will **never give up** fighting and is expected to compete in the men's 5,000m relay," Liu Shaolin said. Liu described Sun Long's mental process of being shocked and his physical state of being wounded after the collision, but the negative expression "never give up" downplays the preceding setback, demonstrating the athlete's indomitable willpower. Notably, the speaker is not the injured Sun himself but his teammate, reflecting that "personal resilience" is not just a slogan but a quality recognized by peers and companions. Similarly, after an error in the short track speed skating relay, Liu stated in an interview, "Of course, it **felt** a bit regretful... but I **think** everyone skated really well... It's a team event, so we lose together and we win together." "Felt" and "think" represent emotional and cognitive mental processes respectively, indicating the regret in Liu's heart. Yet, his statement "we lose together and we win together" shows he does not shift the blame for the mistake onto anyone else; "we" highlights his profound sense of collective honor. This expression elevates personal resilience into the shared spiritual foundation of the team.

Regarding the visual modality, in offer images, the participants in the frame do not establish direct eye contact with the viewers, which allows for a more objective presentation of the athletes' underlying resilience. As shown in Figure 5-8, after Sun Long was injured, his knee was bandaged, and he left the field carrying the injury. The camera did not intentionally dramatize the pain but truthfully recorded the scene. Under this shooting strategy, displaying the scars is itself an expression of resilience: an athlete can be knocked down but will not be defeated. This objective, unpretentious filming method shapes the athletes' tenacious image. Words and images complement each other to form an action-matching structure, allowing international readers to see what makes the athletes respectable behind the medals: the respectability of Chinese athletes lies not in perpetual victory, but in their unyielding attitude when

facing failure and setbacks.



**Figure 5-8. Sun Long Leaving the Field after Being Injured**

### 5.3.2 Cultural Self-Strengthening

Cultural self-strengthening refers to the Chinese cultural posture demonstrated by athletes on the Winter Olympic stage. In the two host events including the Beijing Olympics and the Beijing Winter Olympics, China was able to construct its sports cultural image through opening ceremonies, venue designs, and cultural performances. However, in an away-game context, available resources are limited, and displays are generally confined to micro-levels such as apparel and gestures. China Daily transforms athletes into powerful cultural symbols by constructing symbolic processes in images and utilizing intersemiotic complementarity between texts and images.

As shown in Table 5-2, the symbolic process accounts for 15.3% of representational meanings, making it the second-largest process category. This indicates that more than half of the images carrying conceptual meaning convey significance beyond the picture itself. As shown in Table 5-4, the synonymy relation in ideational intersemiotic complementarity in this corpus accounts for 52.8%, meaning that over half of the texts and images are highly consistent in their ideational meanings.

**Table 5-4 Ideational Intersemiotic Complementarity Statistics**

<b>Ideational Complementarity</b>	<b>Intersemiotic Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Repetition	30	41.7%
Synonymy	38	52.8%
Antonymy	4	5.6%

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The most typical example is the image of Sui and Han performing a fist-and-palm salute to the audience during their curtain call. As shown in Figure 5-9, this image not only presents the physical act of the athletes taking a bow but also transmits Chinese martial arts culture and etiquette traditions. In

Western countries, the most common expressions of gratitude are blowing kisses or bowing, which are passionate and unrestrained; the Chinese fist-and-palm salute better conveys Chinese-style humility and respect. Simultaneously, the athletes chose the soundtrack of the Chinese poetic dance drama *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* for their program, and their costume design incorporated motifs of green mountains and clear waters. This conveyed Chinese aesthetics, bringing traditional landscape paintings to life vividly in the host's arena.



**Figure 5-9. Sui Wenjing and Han Cong performing the fist-and-palm Salute**

In the report covering Sui and Han, the text elucidates the fist-and-palm salute: “Sui and Han acknowledged the crowd, their coaches and finally each other, with a **fist-and-palm salute**, a common gesture **featured in Chinese kung fu movies**, bidding an emotional farewell to the Olympic stage **in a uniquely Chinese way.**” The phrase “a fist-and-palm salute” helps readers better understand this cultural gesture, and the subsequent sentence connects it to kung fu movies, allowing readers to interpret an unknown cultural symbol through known experiences, ultimately elevating it into a national symbol. This paragraph and the image synergize to form a typical intersemiotic synonymy relationship, allowing the cultural significance to be better conveyed in the away-game context. Han Cong also stated, “I hope our last dance will be remembered as an inspiration to youngsters and as a promotion of **Chinese culture** in the world of figure skating.” He hopes that Chinese culture can better integrate into the professional system of figure skating, becoming an object of memory and discussion. Even more noteworthy is that a Canadian athlete chose the *Butterfly Lovers* violin concerto as background music during the competition, stating: “It’s a love story—the Chinese Romeo and Juliet... I was excited to bring something different here.” He likened it to the story of Romeo and Juliet, embodying a vivid example of cross-cultural communication. In an away-game context, Chinese culture not only transmits the Chinese image but also begins to attract the attention of foreign athletes, harmoniously coexisting with Western culture and achieving creative transformation through communication. In summary, the culturally confident and strong Chinese sports image, spanning from individual spirit to profound cultural heritage, has earned the respect of international audiences.

In portraying the respectable image, the two dimensions of “indomitable perseverance” and “cultural

self-strengthening”respond to the challenges of competition results being reduced to mere numbers and cultural displays being restricted in an away-game context. In the text reports, mental processes exhibit athletes’ resilient attitudes in the face of setbacks. In the image reports, offer images display scars and perseverance, while symbolic processes convey profound cultural symbols. Intersemiotic synonymous complementarity deepens cross-cultural communication. In an away-game context, China successfully breaks through from being scrutinized to achieving self-construction.

## 6. Conclusion

Employing multimodal discourse analysis as the theoretical framework and taking the “credible, lovable, and respectable Chinese image”as the macro value orientation, this study explored the multimodal construction strategies used by China Daily for the Chinese sports image in an away-game context. Through a systematic analysis of multimodal news reports, this study finds that China Daily presents a credible image through material processes and objective data; shapes a lovable image via emotional expressions and an equal perspective; and portrays a respectable image using cultural symbols and willpower. These findings provide strategic references for telling China’s story well and constructing a multidimensional national image in future away-game event coverage.

This study also has limitations. First, the corpus was drawn exclusively from a single media and was not contrasted with reports from other international media, making it difficult to more clearly highlight the specific impact of the away-game context. Second, the analysis focused solely on the static multimodal combination of text and image without dynamic modalities such as video and audio. Third, the coding work was primarily completed by the researcher alone and there is room for improvement in coding reliability. Future research could expand the types of media and modalities, and introduce control samples from home-game contexts, thereby further deepening theoretical and practical explorations into the multimodal construction of the national image in away-game contexts.

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