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A critical discourse analysis of China's national image construction: insights from the Swahili news corpus

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Abstract: With the increasing frequency of China–Africa interactions, the importance of Swahili in China–Africa relations is steadily growing. However, there is still a notable lack of research on Swahili news corpora and discourse analysis. This study adopts both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine China's national image construction through media under the critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework. Focusing on the mainstream media China Radio International (CRI), a micro corpus was built to analyse word frequency, word clusters and concordance lines, with the aim of exploring linguistic features and discourse structures of news reports. The findings indicate that by covering China's efforts in promoting China–Africa affairs with positive discourse, CRI generally holds a positive attitude in news reports to construct a responsible global actor role. Meanwhile, CRI's discourse construction also exhibits an imbalance in lexical choice with a tendency to emphasize positive achievements while downplaying challenges and difficulties. This reflects underlying power dynamics, socio-cultural influences, and ideological tendencies. This study could provide a reference for optimizing the construction of China's image in Africa through African indigenous language media.

Keywords: Swahili; news corpus; discourse analysis; China–Africa relations

1 Introduction

Swahili, as a significant indigenous language in Africa, is widely used in education, media, and government affairs across East Africa. In recent years, with the acceleration of globalization and the increasing frequency of international interactions, China–Africa relations have become increasingly close. Swahili has become particularly important in fostering connections between China and Africa, especially in the domains of radio broadcasting and media. As a key medium for national information

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dissemination, official mainstream media plays a significant role in international communication and the construction of national image. China Radio International (CRI), one of China's major international media outlets, has been instrumental in shaping China's national image and amplifying China's voice through its Swahili news channel.

Despite the growing importance of the Swahili language in China–Africa relations, systematic research on Swahili corpus remains relatively scarce in China. This study uses Swahili news texts as samples, collecting news texts from the “China/World” (China/Dunia) section of the CRI website from 2023 to 2024 through web crawling to establish a specialized micro news corpus. Under the guidance of critical discourse analysis framework, the study explores the linguistic features and discourse structures of news reports in constructing China's image. By employing corpus-based methods of high-frequency wordlist, word clusters and concordance line, this research aims to elucidate the attitudinal tendencies of media when reporting on China–Africa relations and to exhibit the national image of China in these interactions.

Furthermore, the discussion examines power relations, social-cultural implications, and ideological tendencies in CRI's reporting to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between media and the nation. The study provides a new perspective on Swahili discourse analysis and aims to offer discourse optimization strategies to enhance the construction of China's image in Africa, thereby promoting the sustainable development of China–Africa relations and the construction of China's discourse system in Africa.

2 Literature review

In recent years, the Chinese government and academia have attached great importance to the research on national image. Chinese scholars generally believe that the national image reflects the comprehensive strength and overall influence of a country. Liu (2002) defines that national image refers to the projection of a country's objective state in public opinion. It is a comprehensive reflection of the impressions, views, attitudes, and evaluations held by society about a country. Cheng (2007) argues that national image is primarily a form of subjective consciousness, highlighting the positive aspects of a nation or a country's spiritual temperament. Li (2008) indicated that national image refers to a representation of a country on the international stage, namely, the overall impression and perception of the country by other countries.

Overseas scholars hold different views about national image. Boulding (1959) argued that a national image reflects the collective cognition and evaluation of a

nation by the international community, representing its internal view of itself. According to Anderson (1983), nations are perceived as imagined communities rather than geopolitical entities and sovereign spaces where people and institutions reside.

Nowadays, since the media holds the power to influence public opinion, international reporting and political commentary in mass communication directly affect the public's understanding, perceptions, and attitudes toward a particular country. Based on the importance of media discourse in shaping national image, Liu (2002) argued that media is not only a channel through which the public obtains information about the world but also an important gateway for a country's image to enter the international community. Thus, media discourse plays a crucial role in national image studies. In this study, national image is defined as the perceptions and impressions of China held by other countries.

Fairclough, in his book *Language and Power* (1989), established a three-dimensional model of description, interpretation and explanation to reveal how discourse practices are shaped by social realities and how they influence social realities. While critical discourse analysis (CDA) has achieved significant results in revealing the relationship between power and discourse, it has also faced some controversies. For example, Fowler (1979) mentioned that the textual samples in CDA are too few to be representative, and the interpretation of discourse lacks objectivity and systematicity. Stubbs (1996) argued that CDA only targets small excerpts of text, thus lacking sufficient credibility. In response to these criticisms, some scholars have begun to incorporate corpus linguistics methods into CDA to enhance its scientific rigor and empirical basis, leading to the development of the "corpus-based critical discourse analysis" research branch. By relying on large-scale authentic language data, corpus-based methods strengthen the empirical nature and comprehensiveness of the research. The efficiency and reproducibility of this approach overcome the limitations of traditional discourse analysis, which often deals with small corpora and strong subjectivity. Thus, it has helped develop the discovery and verification of new linguistic phenomena in CDA. Combining CDA with media discourse analysis reveals how the media constructs and perpetuates the norms and ideologies of discourse, offering a valuable approach for engaging with national image studies.

The application of computational methods to empirical media language analysis patterns has made large-scale analysis possible. More and more scholars have begun to apply corpus-based research methods to CDA regarding environmental, social and other issues.

When it comes to foreign scholars' studies, Putri and Mardiah (2024) employed Corpus-Assisted critical discourse analysis (CACDA) to explore the differing reporting attitudes toward the murder of George Floyd in ten news articles from two mainstream media, CNN and Aljazeera. Elsoufy (2024) used CDA and contrastive collocation analysis to compare the discourse on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance

Dam in Egyptian and Ethiopian news sources, identifying linguistic and ideological biases that reflect each country's national interests by analyzing two online English corpora. Ndlovu and Nikabs (2023) explored how African news media reported and constructed Africa's image during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analyzing reports from ten news agencies in various African countries, the study found that African media played a complex role in shaping public perceptions of Africa and the pandemic. Attia and Romero-Trillo (2022) analyzed media coverage of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, examining reports from Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, BBC, and CNN in Arabic and English. They highlighted that American media discourse often negatively depicts Syrian refugees and contextualizes their impact.

In China, some scholars have applied corpus research methods to conduct CDA on Chinese and Western media news. Yang and Wang (2023) analyzed 21 China-related environmental news stories from *The New York Times* using corpus-based discourse analysis to explore how topoi shape China's national image as a country prioritizing economic growth over the environment, and recommended more transparent environmental communication. Qian and Wang (2023) explored *People's Daily*'s discourse construction on the topic of "carbon peak and carbon neutrality" by analyzing word frequency, collocation, and concordance analysis in a 1,753 news reports' corpus. The study revealed *People's Daily* enhanced public awareness and acceptance of carbon neutrality by introducing new discourse frameworks. Li (2024) systematically analyzed the portrayal of Beijing in corpus consisting of 4,138 reports from *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* during the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed a relatively positive image of Beijing. Wang (2019) discussed the portrayal of Chinese enterprises in English news from countries along the "Belt and Road Initiative" by analyzing a corpus of 9,735 reports about Chinese enterprises in English media, finding that media held an objective and neutral attitude towards the development of enterprises. Han and Chen (2018, pp. 19–30), based on the transitivity system theory, conducted an analysis of news texts about the "Chinese Dream" in Chinese and Western media, exploring their discourse differences in constructing China's image based on a 45 foreign news reports and 72 Chinese news reports corpus.

Compared to international research, media discourse analysis in Africa remains relatively underdeveloped. Recent studies have started to focus on this area. Xie and Xia (2023) analyze reports on China–Africa relations on the English website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They investigated China's national image and diplomatic strategies in China–Africa relations, discovering that the Chinese perspective on China–Africa relations primarily focused on cooperation and development, constructing a sincere and friendly brotherly partner image. Sheng (2022) analyzed Nigerian English media reports on China from 2015 to 2021, revealing that

China's national image in Nigeria is positive with its contributions in infrastructure, education, agriculture, and public health recognized by Nigerian media.

In summary, although corpus-based CDA research in China has made certain progress, it still has some shortcomings. First, domestic and foreign scholars mainly focus on Western countries and their related media with insufficient attention to African regions. These studies tend to concentrate on English and Chinese media, resulting in limited research on media content in local languages. Second, regarding research samples, domestic corpus studies mainly focus on a few media outlets, and the representativeness of corpus sources need further improvement. Therefore, there is an urgent need to conduct corpus-assisted CDA on African and Swahili media, an area that has not yet started in China.

3 Methodology

This study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA). According to Fairclough (1995), CDA contains three dimensions including text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. Based on this framework, the first step involves a detailed linguistics examination of the media texts in the corpus. Through the high-frequency words, what aspects media had paid attention can be learned. The second step, by focusing on trigram clusters and concordance lines, is to contextualize specific words in order to reveal what attitudes are held to analyze the stance of media's reports. Finally, the analysis moves to a broader social context, investigating what national image is intended to construct through media discourse. Building on the research questions above, this section shows how the Swahili news corpus was built by confirming resource of news reports, collecting data, and excluding irrelevant reports and images. Procedure of analysis of corpus with CDA framework is also detailed in this part.

3.1 Data collection

The corpus used in this study comprises news reports from the "China/World" (China/Dunia) section of the Swahili channel of China Radio International (CRI), representing China's official stance. These reports cover interactions between China and African countries as well as other countries worldwide. The corpus includes a total of 1,132 Swahili news reports from the CRI website from March 2023 to July 2024, forming a small specialized corpus. According to the original texts, reports that mention China less than three times are considered inadequate as valid material. To exclude reports that merely mention China in passing without substantive relevance,

a threshold was set that each report must contain the word “China” at least three times. This criterion helps ensure that the selected reports contain specific descriptions, evaluations, or discussions related to China, rather than incidental references. While frequency alone does not guarantee a deep engagement with China’s image construction, setting this baseline increases the likelihood that the retained corpus includes meaningful discourse on China’s role, actions, perceptions and stances. This filtering process enhances the representativeness of the data for further analysis. Images and image captions were removed, and final corpus contains a total of 572 reports with a total token count of 93,739 words. The token counts for “China” and “Afrika” in the corpus are 3,132 and 298 respectively.

3.2 Procedures of data analysis

The study employs high-frequency word lists, trigram analysis, and concordance lines for data analysis. In the first stage, the study employs the corpus analysis software AntConc 3.5.9 to generate a list of high-frequency wordlist of the reports corpus. This step identifies the frequently occurring keywords, determining the countries or organizations closely associated with China in the news reports. Based on the results of the high-frequency wordlists, the search term “China na...” (China and ...) is used to generate a list of word clusters, with the cluster size set to trigram(three-word cluster). The trigram cluster “China na...” phrase presented in a table format reflects the discourse differences in news reports about various countries.

The results from the word clusters are filtered to focus specifically on content related to China and African countries. This allows the study to examine CRI’s tendencies, attitudes, and strategies in constructing China’s image in Africa. Furthermore, the identified word clusters were used as search terms to extract concordance lines focusing on reports between China and African countries. The concordance span was set to L5-R5 for the analysis. The selection of representative concordances is based on collocation patterns, syntactic structures, and pragmatic functions. First, in terms of collocation patterns, the selected examples include frequently occurring and stable combinations. Syntactically, the examples demonstrate the target phrases in various grammatical environments to ensure diversity and representativeness in the data. In terms of pragmatic functions, the selected examples encompass key themes such as diplomatic relations, economic cooperation, technological exchanges, and cultural interactions. They also cover different temporal dimensions, including historical retrospects, ongoing collaborations, and future developments, while involving various roles such as governments, high-ranking officials,

businesses, media, and civil society organizations. These criteria systematically reflect the typical usage of the target phrases in Swahili news reports and highlight their significance in discourse on China–Africa relations. Concordance lines are then analyzed by reading in detail to uncover discourse patterns, such as recurring themes, evaluative language and implicit attitudes.

Building on the findings from the text and discourse practice analysis, the study explores the broader discourse characteristics of CRI's construction of China's national image in news reports. By embedding the results into China–Africa relationship context, how CRI portrays China's role and relationship in Africa is also examined. Based on these insights, recommendations are proposed to optimize reporting strategies for enhancing China's image in African contexts.

4 Results

By using AntConc 3.5.9 to analyze the corpus, high-frequency possessive markers and conjunctions in the Swahili reports were excluded, retaining only content words. A frequency analysis identified the 20 most representative content words in the news reports (Table 1).

In addition to the four keywords “China” (China), “nchi” (country), “rais” (president) and “xi” (xi) used most commonly of the reports in the theme of China and its international interactions, it can be learned that “maendeleo” (development) and “ushirikiano” (cooperation) appear most frequent, indicating China's active role in promoting international cooperation and global development. “mbili” (two) has appeared 522 times in the corpus with collocation of “pande mbili” (bilateral, both

Table 1: Top 20 high-frequency wordlist of the corpus (English in brackets).

Words	Freq.	Words	Freq.
China (China)	3,132	pande (side/lateral)	392
nchi (country)	1,021	kimataifa (international)	367
rais (president)	861	mkutano (meeting/summit/forum)	318
Xi (Xi)	747	Marekani (America)	312
maendeleo (development)	633	Afrika (Africa)	298
ushirikiano (cooperation)	628	kuhimiza (promote)	264
mbili (two)	522	dunia (world)	260
pamoja (together)	505	uchumi (economy)	221
uhusiano (relationship)	498	umoja (union)	201
zaidi (over)	430	mazungumzo (conversation)	189

sides) and “nchi hizo mbili” (these two countries) which demonstrate China’s interaction with other countries. After checking the concordance of the word, it is found that the word has frequent occurrences with “nufaisha” (be beneficial to), “imarisha” (consolidate), “boresha” (improve) and “endeleza” (promote) among the verbs, and “uhusiano” (relationship) and “ushirikiano” (cooperation) among the nouns (Table 2). The context shows that CRI paid attention to China’s international relationship and its role in the stage of the world. The CRI seems to construct the related issues of international communication and cooperation in a positive way. Words such as “kunufaisha” (to benefit) and “kuboresha” (to improve) appear

Table 2: The representative concordance of “mbili” (two) (English in brackets).

No.	L5 (Left context)	Search term	R5 (Right context)
1	unaoendelea kunufaisha (be beneficial to) mbili pande zote (it will be continuously beneficial to bilateral)	mbili	. Amesema FOCAC imekuwa jukwaa muhimu (. He said FOCAC has been an important stage)
2	kuendeleza uhusiano (relationship) kati ya mbili pande (promote relation between both sides)	mbili	. Amesema China inaiunga mkono kithabiti (. He said China firmly support)
3	uhusiano (relationship) kati ya nchi hizo mbili (relationship between these two countries)	mbili	. Bibi Mao ameleeza kuwa China (. Ms. Mao had explained that China)
4	kuboresha (improve) uhusiano kati ya mbili nchi (to improve relationship between two countries)	mbili	. China inapenda kuendeleza kufanya kazi (. China is willing to make continuous effort)
5	kuinua uhusiano (relationship) kati ya nchi mbili (to erect relationship between two countries)	mbili	hadi kufikia ngazi ya uhusiano (relationship) (up to level of relationship)
6	ushirikiano (cooperation) kati ya nchi hizo mbili (cooperation between these two countries)	mbili	katika mambo halisi, na kuleta (in practical work, and let)
7	ya kuimarisha (consolidate) ushirikiano mbili wa pande (of consolidating cooperation of both sides)	mbili	kwenye nyanya mbalimbali. Rais Erdogan (in various fields. President Erdogan)
8	mawasiliano na ushirikiano (cooperation) mbili wa pande (communication and cooperation of both sides)	mbili	, na kutoa mchango mpya katika (, and making new contribution in)
9	kuendeleza (promote) urafiki wa pande mbili hizo (to promote friendship between both sides)	mbili	, kulinda maslahi ya msingi na (to protect primary interests and)
10	kuimarisha (consolidate) uungaji mkono mbili wa pande (to consolidate support of both sides)	mbili	, na kuzidisha ushirikiano (cooperation) wa kunufaisha (, and increase beneficial cooperation)

frequently, reflecting the media outlet's emphasis on China's positive actions and interactions on the global stage, thereby portraying China as a responsible major country.

According to the high-frequency wordlist, Table 3 shows the trigram clusters with search term which related to China and other countries' interaction "China na ..." (China and ...). Cluster size was set to minimum 3 and maximum 3 to generate relevant trigram clusters which describe bilateral relations. Irrelevant content of international relationships are excluded.

From Table 3, it can be seen that in addition to reporting on the relationship between China and Western countries, the trigram clusters "China na Afrika" (China and Africa) and China and other African countries such as "China na Kenya" (China and Kenya) also appear with high frequency. This suggests that the CRI Swahili channel's news reporting not only covers China's interactions with Western countries but also places significant emphasis on its engagements with African nations. The analysis of trigram clusters further confirmed CRI's emphasis on China's communication efforts with Africa. It provides a clearer direction for subsequent co-occurrence analysis, which allows a deeper exploration of how CRI constructs China's national image in Africa through media discourse.

Fairclough (1995) indicated discourse practice is the process of text production and text consumption. The concordance feature of the corpus facilitates large-scale lexical co-occurrence analysis, and helps revealing how media produce the reports and how the reports are consumed by the public. Table 4 shows the concordance lines in the corpus for the of words "China na Afrika" (China and Africa).

Table 3: Trigram clusters of relationship between China and other countries (English in brackets).

Rank	Cluster	Frequency
1	China na Marekani (China and America)	91
2	China na Afrika (China and Africa)	79
3	China na Russia (China and Russia)	43
4	China na Ufaransa (China and France)	40
5	China na Ulaya (China and Europe)	14
6	China na Kenya (China and Kenya)	11
7	China na Asia (China and Asia)	10
8	China na Tanzania (China and Tanzania)	10
9	China na Misri (China and Egypt)	5
10	China na DRC (China and Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC)	4

Table 4: The representative concordance of “China na Afrika” (China and Africa) (English in brackets).

No.	L5 (Left context)	Search term	R5 (Right context)
1	zimeonyesha kuwa, biashara kati ya (it has indicated that, business between)	China na Afrika	imeongezeka (increase) kwa utulivu katika miezi (has increased with energy in months)
2	uwezo wa ushirikiano (cooperation) kati ya (cooperation ability between)	China na Afrika	katika kuboresha (enhance) mnyororo wa viwanda (in enhancing industrial connection)
3	ushirikiano wa uwekezaji (investment cooperation) kati ya (investment cooperation between)	China na Afrika	umenufaisha (be beneficial to) pande hizo mbili, (had been beneficial to both sides.)
4	Anaona kuwa ushirikiano (cooperation) kati ya (He believes cooperation between)	China na Afrika	umeleta faida kubwa (create great benefit) na utaimarishwa (consolidate) (had created great benefit and it will be consolidated)
5	Ushirikiano wa kilimo (agricultural cooperation) kati ya (Agricultural cooperation between)	China na Afrika	umepata matokeo makubwa (great achievements) ukiwa na (had harvested great achievements with)
6	mawasiliano kati ya watoto (communication between children) wa (communication between children of)	China na Afrika	umezinduliwa mjini Beijing. Sherehe ya (had started in Beijing. Ceremony of)
7	na mazungumzo ya viongozi wa (and talks of leaderships of)	China na Afrika	yalifanyika kwa mafanikio (achieve great success) , ambapo pande (had held with great success, with sides)
8	ni umwamba wa habari. Amesema (are pleasant news. He said)	China na Afrika	zinatakiwa kuimarisha ushirikiano (consolidate cooperation) wa karibu (should consolidate close cooperation)
9	mshikamano na ushirikiano (cooperation) kati ya (insisting cooperation between)	China na Afrika	, na imeongoza ipasavyo ushirikiano wa (, and it has been leading cooperation of)
10	Baraza la Ushirikiano (cooperation) kati ya (Forum of Cooperation between)	China na Afrika	(FOCAC) katika utoaji wa mikopo ((FOCAC) in loan)
11	wa Uchumi (economy) na Biashara (trade) ya (of economy and trade of)	China na Afrika	Ikiwa na kaulimbiu ya “Kuongeza (with theme of “Increase”)
12	juhudzi za pamoja (joint effort) kati ya (joint effort between)	China na Afrika	ili kuimarisha ushirikiano (cooperation) na kulinza (in order to consolidate cooperation and protect)
13	mwaka uliopita, uhusiano (relationship) kati ya (last year, relationship between)	China na Afrika	umeendelea kukua (grow) kwa kina, na (had continued to grow in depth and)
14	“dunia ya kusini” (Southern World)inayowakilishwa na (“Southern World” represented by)	China na Afrika	inashamiri (spread) na ina athari kubwa (is spreading and it has a great influence)
15	wa muda mrefu kati ya (of long period between)	China na Afrika	na kufunzana (mutual learning) kati ya staarabu (and mutual learning between civilizations)

In the context of CRI's reports on China–Africa relations, the production of these texts demonstrates a deliberate selection and emphasis on positive narratives. The reports focus mainly on achievements in economic and trade cooperation as well as cultural exchanges, conveying an optimistic outlook for future collaborations. Key lexical choices, such as "biashara" (trade), "uwekezaji" (investment), and "kilimo" (agriculture), reflect targeted areas of cooperation. These terms are strategically positioned alongside phrases like "ushirikiano wa uwekezaji" (investment cooperation) and "ushirikiano wa kilimo" (agricultural cooperation), which highlight mutual benefits ("umenufaisha pande hizo mbili") and significant results ("umepata matokeo makubwa"), reinforcing the intended message of win-win outcomes.

The reports also employ verbs that indicate progress and action, such as "ongezeka" (increase), "tilia maanani" (pay great attention to), "imarisha" (consolidate), "himiza" (promote), and "funzana" (learn from each other). These choices aim to portray China–Africa cooperation as dynamic and continually advancing. Furthermore, adjectives and complements like "yenye mustakabali wa pamoja" (with a shared future), "wa kivitendo" (practical), and "nyanja mbalimbali" (various fields) are carefully included to underline China's respect for Africa and to frame the partnership as inclusive and progressive.

Besides "China na Afrika" (China and Africa), the discourse of reports on China and other African countries is also worth discussing. Table 5 shows some concordance results describing "China" with Kenya, Tanzania and DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo).

From the table, it can be observed that "kibalozi" (diplomatic) and "uhusiano" (relationship) appear frequently, indicating that China highly values maintaining and developing diplomatic relations with East African countries. Frequent mentions of terms like "kibalozi" (diplomatic) and "uhusiano" (relationship) indicate a deliberate focus on highlighting the importance China places on maintaining and developing these relationships. The reports characterize China's relationships with Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo as both partnerships ("wenzi") and friendships ("marafiki"), presenting a dual narrative. On a macro level, these reports underscore the long-term stability of these relationships, while on a micro level, they symbolize the deep bonds of friendship between the peoples of these nations. CRI recognizes the friendship and strong ties between China and African countries as demonstrated in Example 1, and emphasizes these close relationships through specific lexical choices.

Example 1:

Bw. Wang Yi amesema, **tangu kuanzishwa kwa uhusiano wa kibalozi, China na Tanzania zimekuwa marafiki na wenzi wazuri ambao wanahehimiana**, kuaminiana na kuijendeleza kwa pamoja. Ameongeza kuwa anapenda kushirikiana na mwenzake wa Tanzania, kuimarisha mazungumzo na ushirkiano kati ya wizara za mambo ya nje za China na Tanzania, **kuhimiza**

Table 5: The representative concordance of “China na...” and other African countries (English in Brackets).

No.	L5 (Left context)	Search term	R5 (Right context)
1	kibalozi (diplomatic) .Bw. Wang amesema tangu (diplomatic. Mr. Wang said since)	China na Kenya (China and Kenya)	zianzishe uhusiano wa kibalozi (diplomatic relationship) miaka 60 (established diplomatic relation 60 years)
2	teknolojia (technology) kati ya wawekezaji wa (technology among investors of)	China na Kenya	ili kutimiza manufaa ya pamoja (mutual benefit) (in order to achieve mutual benefit)
3	Mmoja, Njia Moja” (The Belt and Road initiative) kati ya (The Belt and Road initiative between)	China na Kenya	umepata maendeleo makubwa (great success) , ukiongoza katika (had achieved great success under the guidance of)
4	ushirikiano wa kiuchumi (economic cooperation) kati ya (economic cooperation between)	China na Kenya	kuendana na Pendelezo la Ukanda (the Belt and Road initiative) (with the Belt and Road initiative)
5	China inauchukulia uhusiano kati ya (relationship between) (China has taken relationship between)	China na Kenya	kwa jicho la kimkakati (with a strategic view) , ikiongozwa (with a strategic view, with the guidance)
6	Amesema China inapenda kushir-ikiana (cooperate) na (He said China would like to cooperate)	China na Tanzania (China and Tanzania)	hadi kuwa ushirikiano wa kimkakati (strategic relationship) (in strategic relationship)
7	mnara wa urafiki (friendship) kati ya (milestone of friendship between)	China na Tanzania	na kati ya China na (and between China and)
8	zaidi ya uhusiano (relationship) kati ya (besides relation between)	China na Tanzania	na China na Afrika. Hayo (and China and Africa. This)
9	“Huu ni mwaka wa 60 tangu (“It has been 60 years since)	China na Tanzania	zianzishe uhusiano wa kibalozi (diplomatic relationship) , ikiwa (established diplomatic relation)
10	kuanzishwa kwa uhusiano wa kibalozi (diplomatic relationship) ,	China na Tanzania	zimekuwa marafiki (friends) na wenzi (partners) wazuri (had been good friends and partners)
11	kwenye kuhimiza uhusiano (promote relationship) kati ya (in promoting relation between)	China na Tanzania	. Amesema China inapenda kushir-ikiana (cooperate with) na (. He said China is willing to cooperate with)
12	inatilia maanani uhusiano (relationship) kati ya (it had pay great attention to relation between)	China na DRC (China and DRC)	na anapenda kufanya juhudu pamoja (make joint effort) (and he is willing to make joint effort with)
13	inatilia maanani uhusiano kati ya (it paid great attention to relationship between)	China na DRC	, na anapenda kufanya juhudu pamoja (, and he would like to pay joint effort)
14	wa pande zote kati ya (of all-round between)	China na DRC	yawanufaishe (be beneficial to) zaidi watu wa nchi (is beneficial to citizens of countries)

Table 5: (continued)

No.	L5 (Left context)	Search term	R5 (Right context)
15	kati ya vyombo vya habari vikuu vya (among major media of)	China na DRC	na kupanua mabadilishano (expand communication) ya watu (and expand communication of people)

kutekeleza maoni makuu ya pamoja yaliyofikiwa na marais wa nchi hizo mbili, na kutoa mchango zaidi kwa ajili ya maendeleo endelevu ya uhusiano wa wenzi wa kimkakati wa **pande zote** kati ya China na Tanzania. (CRI's Swahili report, 28 April 2024)

Mr. Wang Yi stated that **since the establishment of diplomatic relations, China and Tanzania have been good friends and partners who respect each other**, trust one another, and develop together. He added that he looks forward to working with his Tanzanian counterpart to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the foreign ministries of China and Tanzania, **promote the implementation of the key consensus reached by the presidents of the two countries**, and make greater contributions **to the sustainable development of the comprehensive strategic partnership** between China and Tanzania. (English translation)

The “Belt and Road Initiative” (Pendekezo la Ukanda Mmoja, Njia Moja) serves as a focal point in these reports, with CRI emphasizing its role in strategic cooperation (“ushirikiano wa kimkakati”) between China and East African nations. Collocates such as “nufaisha” (be beneficial to), “panua” (expand), and “maendeleo makubwa” (great achievements) emphasize the mutual benefits and developmental opportunities arising from this collaboration. When it comes to the context, it can be observed that CRI has not only seen the progress of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, but also highlighted its significant status in China–Africa cooperation (see Example 2). These lexical expressions are carefully selected to highlight the depth and scope of China’s cooperative efforts in the region, and it demonstrates CRI aims to emphasize the mutual achievement and China’s role in China–Africa cooperation to African audiences.

Example 2:

Amesema Ujenzi wa pamoja wa “**Ukanda Mmoja, Njia Moja**” kati ya China na Kenya umepata maendeleo makubwa, **ukiongoza katika ushirikiano kati ya China na Afrika**, kuweka mfano wa kuigwa na **kutoa mchango mkubwa katika kujenga jumuiya yenyehatma ya pamoja kati ya China na Afrika**. (CRI's Swahili report, 15 December 2023)

He said that the joint construction of the “**Belt and Road Initiative**” between China and Kenya has made significant progress, **leading the way in China–Africa cooperation**, setting an example to follow, and **making a major contribution to building a “Community with a shared future between China and Africa”**. (English translation.)

Overall, the text production process reflects effort by CRI to construct a narrative that aligns with China's strategic goals in Africa. By emphasizing key areas of cooperation, selecting language that conveys mutual benefit and progress and framing the relationship as inclusive and forward-looking, these reports aim to shape a positive perception of China–Africa relations and garner public support for deeper collaboration.

5 Discussion

5.1 An attempt to reconstruct the global discourse system with news reports

News reports serve not only as a medium for information dissemination, but also as a site where power relations are articulated and contested. In international news discourse, major powers typically hold a superior position in discourse power. The case of CRI illustrates an active attempt to challenge the prevailing Western-dominated discourse system on global affairs.

Liu (2002) indicated that major powers, due to their inherent international authority, solid material and technological foundation, have become both information giants and media empires with international discourse power that far surpasses that of small and weak nations. The traditional global discourse system has been marked by a bipolar confrontation, demonstrated by Western nations holding discourse power over the rest of the world. CRI's coverage of Africa seeks to counter this hegemony by framing China–Africa relations as equal partnerships. This is a notable contrast to Western media's portrayal of Africa through a lens of dependency and crisis. The framing strategy contributes to reposition China within the global discourse by emphasizing cooperation, mutual benefit and the “Global South”.

According to King (2006), in contrast to the Western countries, China consistently views Africa from a positive and constructive perspective, and China–Africa cooperation is characterized as a mutually beneficial relationship. When Western media keep mentioning Africa's challenges to reinforcing a hierarchical relationship, CRI downplays power imbalances and highlights successful cooperation such as “Jumuia ya Binadamu yenyen Mustakabali wa Pamoja” (Global Community of Shared Future) and “Pendekezo la Ukanda Mmoja, Njia Moja” (Belt and Road Initiative). This aims to reshape African public perceptions of China's role and foster recognition of its contributions while implicitly challenging the Western countries' traditional dominance in global discourse. But, on the other side, this approach also raises questions about the extent to which CRI's narrative fully escapes power asymmetry.

While Fairclough and Wodak (1997) indicated that power relationships and ideologies are discursive, indeed, CRI has challenged the Western-dominated discourse system through its discourse construction and has likely contributed to the multi-polarization of the global discourse system although the basic framework continues to be dominated by Western major powers. Merely relying on positive discourse choices and downplaying the difficulties and challenges in China–Africa cooperation is more about shaping a positive external image. Overall, the current purpose of CRI's discourse construction is to counter the distortion of China–Africa cooperation by Western media, indicating that the influence of Western discourse hegemony remains widespread.

5.2 Social-cultural implications of CRI's discourse construction in Africa

According to Fairclough (1995), sociocultural practice is the social and cultural goings-on which the communication event is a part of. In CRI's discourse construction, it employed optimistic words which accurately convey China's stance on China–Africa cooperation. This approach is distinct from the hegemonic and value-exporting tendencies of Western nations. Different from the Western-dominated discourse system, CRI's news reports tend to construct a mild and amicable discourse system that enable African audiences to better comprehend China–Africa interactions.

However, while CRI's positive lexical choices reinforce a favorable portrayal of China–Africa relations, they may also oversimplify or overlook challenges within this cooperation. On one hand, this selective discourse risks downplaying African perspectives on issues such as debt sustainability, labor relations, and governance concerns. On the other hand, it is now emerging as a growing discursive power that represents China's counter-narrative against Western values. For instance, when Western media depicts “Belt and Road Initiative” as China's strategy of global expansion, CRI strategically employs positive lexical choices to articulate China's stance to Africa audiences, thereby counterbalancing the asymmetry in global discourse power. Preference of discourse choice manifests China's will to share values of joint development with the world, especially Africa. Tang (2015) referred that media's discourse both reflects and shapes social culture. Practice of CRI did demonstrate its efforts in constructing oversea discourse system with Chinese characteristics.

Despite these efforts, the influence of CRI's discourse remains limited compared to the entrenched presence of Western media in Africa. Zhang (2019) indicated that Western liberal media concept has rooted in many developing countries, including

most African nations, resulting them to align more closely with the West while distancing themselves from China. Many African audiences still rely on BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera, whose coverage of China greatly differs from CRI's portrayal. The historical dominance of Western narratives in African discourse system has shaped preconceived notions of China, making it challenging for CRI's counter-narrative to gain widespread legitimacy. Additionally, CRI's approach, while emphasizing optimism, does not always align with the majority of African audiences' lived realities, potentially limiting its credibility and reception.

5.3 Impact of reporting strategies on CRI's news reporting

CRI's reporting strategies have contributed to the diversification of the global discourse system. Liu (2002) argued that the fundamental concept of media shaping a national image of a country refers to the core that a country's media constructs both its own image and that of other nations based on a worldview and values with ideological tendencies. The reporting strategies adopted by media outlets influence not only the content of news reports but also the methods of presentation and lexical choices. CRI's coverage of China–Africa cooperation reflects a distinct approach that emphasizes China's contributions while aligning with China's broader global communication strategy.

To counterbalance the distortion and misunderstanding, specified lexical choices are selected. Wei and Pan (2018, pp. 79–81) referred that in the fields of politics, economy, and military so-called "hard news," Western mainstream media have long dominated, shaping and widely disseminating China's image. According to the corpus-based analysis, CRI's reports frequently employ optimistic and affirmative language to underscore China's contributions while placing less emphasis on controversial aspects of its engagement in Africa. Terms such as "Jumuiya ya Binadamu yenye Mustakabali wa Pamoja" (Global Community of Shared Future) and "ushirikiano wa pande mbili" (bilateral cooperation) has shown concordance with China's global development stance and proposition. This discursive practice aligns with China's broader international communication strategy, which seeks to promote a positive and credible national image effectively in Africa. However, such an emphasis on positive narratives can sometimes lead to an incomplete representation of challenges. This may potentially affecting the credibility of the discourse among diverse international audiences.

While different media outlets naturally adopt distinct framing strategies, an effective international communication approach benefits from a more balanced and comprehensive narrative. According to Zhang (2019), Western and developing countries that promote the concept of a free press tend to view conflict-centered

news values and production as superior and more marketable, and conversely, they often simply label Chinese news communication as mere “positive reporting” and brand it as “propaganda.” However, China’s oversea communication is not superficial “reporting positively”. On one hand, the way CRI frames China–Africa cooperation as a win-win relationship contributes to legitimizing China’s presence in Africa; on the other hand, it constructs an image of China as a global participant that prioritizes mutual development without political interference. But, if a broader range of perspectives including discussions on challenges and areas for improvement is integrated, news reports of CRI could possibly enhance transparency and engagement. Providing coverage that acknowledges complexities can help foster greater trust and resonance with global audiences.

CRI’s discourse construction plays a significant role in China’s mutual development strategies. A well-balanced and informative reporting style is more likely to foster constructive international dialogue while portraying China’s image as an active and responsible global participant. By adopting a more inclusive reporting strategy, such as featuring third-party expert analyses, local African perspectives, and policy discussions, CRI is able to further enhance the credibility and influence of its narratives in the international media landscape.

6 Conclusions

By conducting a corpus-based CDA, this paper examines content related to China–Africa relations in the Swahili broadcasts of China Radio International (CRI) and initiates a corpus analysis from a critical discourse perspective. The analysis of high-frequency wordlist, trigram clusters and concordance lines reveals CRI constructs discourse around China’s active role in fostering China–Africa cooperation. CRI’s reports use positive vocabulary to express favorable evaluations and supportive attitudes towards China–Africa cooperation, showcasing China’s positive image as a responsible global player strengthening international ties.

Further corpus-based analysis indicates that economic trade, cultural exchange, and political diplomacy are focal areas of China–Africa cooperation, portraying China’s cooperative and friendly role in China–Africa relationship. However, there are deficiencies in the diversity and balance of CRI’s reporting. On one hand, the coverage predominantly highlights positive cooperative relationships while lacking sufficient discussion on challenges and controversies in the process; on the other hand, the persistent use of positive language and the strong emphasis on China’s role may inadvertently create an imbalanced portrayal, potentially influencing how China’s image is perceived in Africa. Hence, in the future, Chinese Swahili media should ensure a comprehensive discussion in external discourse construction,

avoiding an emphasis solely on positive aspects while neglecting other dimensions of events.

This study provides a new analytical direction by focusing on the construction of China's image within the news discourse of indigenous African language. To enhance the effectiveness of China–Africa engagement, Chinese media should not only develop a deeper and comprehensive understanding of China's policies towards Africa and clearly define the specific contours of China's national image construction in Africa, but also refine the framework of China's image construction in African discourse. Fostering a more localized approach by incorporating African perspectives can improve African audiences' understanding of China.

Additionally, the influence of Chinese Swahili media in Africa remains limited compared to Western media, highlighting the need to expand China's discourse influence in African media landscapes. The current availability of Chinese media corpus is insufficient for a thorough analysis of China's national image in Africa. Subsequent studies should consider developing a parallel corpus of native Swahili media to facilitate comparative studies, thereby enriching the understanding of China's representation in Africa from multiple perspectives.

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