



Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of Female Image Construction in *China Daily*: A Case Study of Reports on Female Astronaut Wang Yaping

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Abstract— *The image of Chinese women in official media is a crucial component of China's national image. The story of Wang Yaping, an outstanding female astronaut, is widely promoted worldwide, influencing foreign perceptions of the country. Using Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model as a guiding framework, this study analyzes how China Daily constructs Wang's image. The study yields three major findings: (1) China Daily depict Wang as a space hero to China, a female role model and a knowledge disseminator, linking her personal achievements to national development and emphasizing her qualities such as persistence and approachability; (2) the newspaper balances the authenticity and vividness, provides properly detailed and concise reports and demonstrates objective and immersive narrative of Wang's story; (3) Wang's image combines the people's aspirations and social mainstream values, encourages women to pursue higher achievements and creates a positive international image for China. This study may investigate a new perspective to the field of female image research in China.*



Keywords— *Critical Discourse Analysis, news discourse, female image construction, astronaut, corpus.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Telling the stories of Chinese women effectively contributes to telling the China's story well. Over the past decades, Chinese women have experienced profound social changes, excelling in diverse fields and fulfilling their aspirations. Their stories not only reflect individual empowerment but also enhances the national image. Scholars worldwide have shown considerable interest in studying the portrayal of Chinese women in media discourse (Wallis, 2006; Feng, 1992; Li & Zhang, 2015). However, few studies focus on the construction of Chinese women's image from the perspective of prominent figures

in specific fields. Given the public's interest in these remarkable women, their representation holds significant role in shaping the image of Chinese women as a whole. Therefore, it is essential to examine how media constructs female images in China by focusing on influential individuals.

Wang Yaping, a distinguished female astronaut who completed two manned flights in 2013 and 2021, set inspiring examples for women to bravely pursue personal achievements. As the first Chinese woman obtaining this achievement, her name has been a prominent symbol across the world and frequently mentioned on the reports in *China*

Daily, both a window for international exchanges and a voice for the government. Her image in such an official platform would impact foreigner's perceptions of both Chinese women and China.

Employing Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CACDA) as a theoretical lens, this study combines qualitative analysis with corpus analysis to offer a thorough and comprehensive examination of female image in China's media discourse. Drawing on a self-build corpus of 67 articles from *China Daily*, the study analyzes the discursive construction of Wang Yaping's image in terms of high-frequency words, collocates, intertextuality and socio-cultural factors to answer three questions: (1) What images does the newspaper construct about Wang Yaping? (2) How are these female images constructed discursively in the news reports? (3) What are some of the major factors influencing the construction of the female image in the news reports?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of female image has been a prominent topic in China, particularly in literature and art with extensive analysis of both domestic and foreign works from ancient to modern times. Important accomplishments include Dai (1994) on marginalized women in Chinese films, Wang B. (2006) on female roles in revolutionary operas, and Li L. (2021) on feminist awakening in traditional operas. In literature, Wang J. et al. (2006) explore women's struggles in Su Tong's work, and Zhao D. (2014) examines female image in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Compared to them, the study of women's media image is not so massive in number but also productive from 1990s (Feng, 1992; Li Q., 2007; Liu M. & Liao, 2007; Xu M. & Qian, 2002). The 2008 Beijing Olympics further inspired studies, such as Yu's (2009) diachronic analysis of female athletes' media representations and Hong and Song's (2014) study on tennis player Li Na. However, these works primarily adopt communication perspectives rather than linguistic ones. More recently, some linguists investigate Chinese women's image in domestic newspaper (Li N., 2017), Western media (Li N. & Zhang, 2015; Li Lixin, 2019) and literature work (Qiu & Zhao X., 2017; Yang, 2019; Li J. & Hu S., 2022)

with the preference of Critical Discourse Analysis.

For scholars worldwide, female image study is always a key focus across various sociocultural and media contexts. In advertising, Konstantinovskaia (2020) explores Japanese television commercials, revealing a blend of kawaii culture, traditional gender roles and postfeminist values. Besides, McCann (2021) analyzes British magazines, observing how romantic and sexual narratives promote an updated hegemonic femininity. In political discourse, Felicia (2021) examined Nigerian political cartoons, highlighting semiotic strategies that both reinforce and challenge gender inequality. Hu and Kearney (2021) focus on Twitter where women's discourse reflects traditional gender patterns. Studies on body image include Bouvier and Chen (2021) who reveal gendered representations in health packaging, and Tranchese and Sugiura (2021) who find shared misogynistic discourse in pornography and digital communities.

In summary, both Chinese and foreign scholar pay attention to various expressions of female image. However, to my knowledge, few studies analyze Chinese women's representation through the lens of a prominent figure with a CACDA approach. Therefore, this study may investigate a new perspective to the field of female image research in China.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research adopts CACDA as an analytical framework to examine discursive construction of female image from the perspective of Three-dimensional Model proposed by Fairclough.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) seeks to contribute to social change by analyzing simple linguistic forms, exposing the ideologies implicit in texts and explaining the sociocultural conditions of their existence, production and role in power struggles. This approach is a detailed analysis of a limited number of discourse samples (Fairclough, 1992), which pose challenges to balance depth and breadth (Hardt-Mautner, 1995). However, computer-assisted corpus tools provide quantitative indicators that offer analysts possible starting points of qualitative analysis (Hardt-Mautner, 1995). This integration allows CACDA to

combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research. Therefore, it has gained significant traction among scholars worldwide (Flowerdew, 1997; Baker and McEnery, 2005; Baker et al., 2013; Tang & Ma, 2013; Hu K. & Tian, 2018) with its application continuously expanding (Xu Z., 2024; Yan & Hu K., 2024).

Adopting a socio-cultural approach, Fairclough's three-dimensional model is an influential and practical entry point for discourse analysis. The theory holds that "each discursive event can have three dimensions of facets: it is a spoken or written language text, it is an instance of discourse practice involving the production and interpretation of text, and it is a piece of social practice" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 94). From this viewpoint, Fairclough introduces a three-stage model for discourse analysis, as illustrated in the following figure:

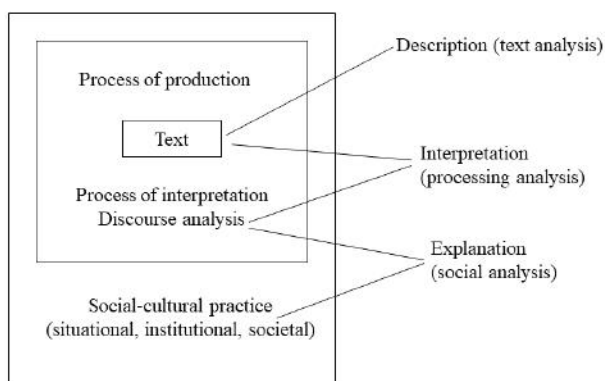


Fig.1. Dimensions of Discourse (Fairclough, 1995, p. 98)

Description involves the systematic examination of linguistic features within a text. Fairclough (1989) describes this stage as "concerned with the formal properties of text" (p. 26). This process entails analyzing specific linguistic aspects, including vocabulary, grammar, and textual sections. It guides the present study to explore the construction of Wang Yaping's images behind high-frequency words and collocates.

Interpretation is the examination of discourse practices involving the production, distribution, and consumption of texts. Fairclough (1992) notes that text productivity is often expressed through intertextuality, which refers to the insertion of fragments of existing texts into new texts in an explicit or implicit way with the aim of achieving some

communicative goals. It inspires the present study to adopt news sources and reporting modes, two indicators of intertextuality, to examine discursive techniques used in image representation.

Explanation is the process of social-cultural practice analysis. This stage emphasizes the "relationship between interaction and social context" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 26). It means that the historical, social and cultural factors must be taken into consideration, highlighting the indispensability of external macro factors and media image shaping.

This theoretical framework guides the present study to transition from surface-level lexical choices in corpus to deeper socio-cultural contexts, enabling a comprehensive examination of constructed images and the social background underpinning their construction.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study examines *China Daily*'s reports on Wang Yaping in terms of description, interpretation, and explanation. The descriptive analysis addresses research question (1) by exploring multiple images represented by textual and lexical choices. The author generates wordlists of self-built corpus through AntConc4.1.2, selects distinct words as analysis target and investigates their connotations and functions in contexts. The interpretative analysis is related to question (2), focusing on the intertextual technologies used to achieve specific goals in image representation. This stage involves analyzing news sources and reporting modes in the corpus. Explanatory analysis concerns question (3), identifying socio-cultural factors influencing image construction. Given *China Daily*'s role as official media, this stage connects state values with portrayed images of Wang.

The details of corpus building are as follows. The news containing "Wang Yaping" from March 1, 2012, to January 1, 2024, was searched on the *China Daily* website. After imputing the link of research results in data-collection software Octopus, 75 pieces of news were downloaded automatically. Through the similarity detection in Wcopyfind 4.1.5 and automatic coding in Tree Tagger 3, 8 articles were deleted because of repeatability and 67 articles were reserved to establish the corpus, which consists of 67

articles, 27720 tokens and 3644 types. Out of 67 articles, only ten focus on Wang herself. Among these, only six contain cited information, and thus they were selected as objects of analysis in the interpretation stage.

V. THREE-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE REPORTS

5.1. Descriptive Analysis: Multiple Images Behind

Table 1 High-frequency Nouns in the Corpus

No.	Word	Freq.	%	No.	Word	Freq.	%
1	space	589	0.985	11	students	83	0.441
2	china	328	0.912	12	crew	81	0.529
3	astronauts	228	0.868	13	module	77	0.500
4	wang	213	0.912	14	zhang	75	0.426
5	mission	207	0.750	15	nie	72	0.515
6	shenzhou	169	0.500	16	country	68	0.515
7	spacecraft	139	0.603	17	launch	65	0.382
8	station	136	0.529	18	orbit	64	0.471
9	astronaut	125	0.662	19	program	61	0.471
10	yaping	98	0.897	20	people	50	0.412

Following a preliminary filtering of the data in Table 1, it was found that the high-frequency nouns could be divided into three types. The first type consists of China Aerospace-related words, such as “space” “astronaut(s)” “beijing” and “shenzhou”. The second type are personal names, including “yapping” “zhang” and “nie”. The third type comprises “space lecture-related nouns”. During the mission, Wang Yaping conducted three space lectures, leading to the frequent appearance of related terms in the news like “students” “schools” and “lecture”. These three kinds of words and their contexts underline different aspects of Wang’s representation in *China Daily*.

5.1.1 A Space Hero to China

- (1) It is planned that the **country** will launch a **space** lab after three **spacecraft** have completed docking experiments with **Tiangong 1**, which was launched in 2011. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.12)
- (2) **Astronauts** Zhang Xiaoguang, Nie Haisheng and Wang Yaping wave to the welcoming crowd after they go out of

Textual and Lexical Choices

This part deals with description stage with high-frequency nouns and collocates analyzed, in order to summarize the images constructed behind them. After importing the self-built corpus into AntConc 4.2.4, the author generated the high-frequency nouns and collocates of “Wang Yaping”.

Shenzhou X spacecraft’s return capsule on Wednesday morning. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.26)

It is obvious that China Aerospace-related nouns constitute the largest proportion and appear more frequently than other words. Sentence (1) illustrates the typical context of China Aerospace-related nouns, where descriptions of the launch mission highlight China’s technological achievements, thereby constructing an image of China as a “major aerospace power”. In most articles, Wang is mentioned only as an astronaut carrying out the mission. Thus, among all her representations, the most prominent and significant is her role as part of China’s manned space program as shown in example (2); she is an extension of the image of a “major aerospace power”. This emphasizes her collectivist side rather than her individuality. From another perspective, these China aerospace-related terms create a discourse atmosphere that conveys the message of significant achievements in Chinese aerospace technology, reaching a world-leading level. As the first Chinese female astronaut to enter space, Wang is not only a witness and

participant in this historic event but also one of its contributors. Her frequent mentions closely associate her personal accomplishments with the macro achievements of the nation, thereby shaping her image as a “space hero”. This connection elevates the stature of her image, reinforcing her significance in the narrative of China’s advancements in space exploration.

The repeated appearance of other names among high-frequency nouns further supports these points. Given that these articles were retrieved using “Wang Yaping” as the keyword, their frequency is notably high, reinforcing the notion that Wang is not the focus of the reports. The names of other are often seen in phrases like, “*Astronauts Zhang Xiaoguang, Nie Haisheng, and Wang Yaping (from left to right) greet the welcoming crowd*”. When announcing selected pilots, introducing mission arrangements, reporting flight achievements, and celebrating aerospace accomplishments, the three astronauts, including Wang, are often mentioned together. This consistent association firmly binds them together, forming a collective identity as “space hero”.

5.1.2 A Female Role Model

Table 2 Collocates of “Yaping”

No.	Word	Freq. L&R
1	female	22
2	astronaut	20
3	zhigang	18
4	haisheng	17
5	xiaoguang	17
6	guangfu	15

In contrast to her male colleagues, the name of Wang is consistently accompanied by the gender marker “female”. This term appears 22 times in proximity to her name (as shown in Table 2), as in the phrase, “*commander Nie Haisheng, astronaut Zhang Xiaoguang, and female astronaut Wang Yaping*”. Besides “female”, the term “woman” is also used to emphasize her gender, as illustrated in “*The three astronauts — Nie Haisheng, Zhang Xiaoguang, and Wang Yaping, a woman*”. Given traditional societal norms which often default to male dominance and participation in various fields, it is necessary to explicitly

denote female member’s gender in order to highlight their contribution. This practice reflects one of the strategies employed in China to promote and embody gender equality. As the first Chinese woman to accomplish extravehicular activities, Wang has once again shattered the male-dominated narrative in this domain, emerging as a role model for women. Her courage serves as an inspiration, encouraging more Chinese girls to pursue careers in high-end industries, thus carrying symbolic value.

(3) She said the first jump was done among excitement and curiosity, but fears preoccupied her when she started the second jump.

“We girls all cried while singing an inspiring song ‘A Hero Never Dies’ on our way back after the training,” she said. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.10)

The news coverage of Wang is relatively limited; however, it also enhances her image as a female role model through relevant stories. In example (3), Wang described the scene during her first parachute jump alongside other female pilots. Faced with this daunting challenge, she expressed excitement and curiosity, reflecting the courage of women in confronting extreme situations and their enterprising spirit in exploring and transcending the unknown. While the term “cried” may carry connotations of fragility, in this context, it more accurately reflects their resilience against challenges. The song “A Hero Never Dies” honors the spirit of courage and mutual support in difficult times, illustrating the pilots’ unwavering commitment to their ideals after overcoming obstacles and warm friendship in their career. These are vivid and deep embodiment of “female role model”.

5.1.3 A knowledge disseminator

(4) Zhang ... to camera and record a **lecture**, which will be given by his teammate Wang to middle and elementary **school students** in China. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.10)

(5) She is preparing for the **lecture** and expressed full confidence about the upcoming lesson. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.10)

(6) “I like all these demonstrations, the gyro and water ball ones particularly. They are all impossible on Earth. How wonderful,” said Qian Jianghai. (*China Daily*,

2013.6.20)

The space lecture-related words play an indispensable role in the construction of the image of Wang. Most contexts of these words are similar to examples (4) and (5), which provide a literal narration of staff arrangements, lecture preparations, and procedures. Example (4) indicates Wang’s role as a lecturer and emphasizes her direct engagement with students, showcasing her as a bridge between space and education. Example (5) highlights her confidence and full preparation, further enhancing her image as a knowledgeable and approachable teacher. Besides, several reports cited reactions of students to reinforces such impressions. Example (6) shows that the lecture opened a new world to Qian whose scientific thinking was stimulated, verifying the value of space class and Wang Yaping. Therefore, the frequent occurrence of words such as “lecture” “school” and “students” reveals her enthusiasm to education and her active role in inspiring the next generation. These

elements collectively contribute to Wang’s portrayal as a pioneering female astronaut who not only excels in her professional field but also passionately engages with youth, embodying the ideals of empowerment and knowledge sharing.

5.2. Interpretative Analysis: Discursive Techniques in Image Representation

The interpretative analysis deals with the discursive tools employed by *China Daily* in the representation. Actually, it takes full advantages of intertextuality to achieve objectivity while implying their attitudes and stances through others’ voices. News sources, which refer to the originator of the words quoted by the reporter, are normally divided into three types: specified sources, semi-specified sources, and unspecified sources (Xin, 2005). Reporting modes involve direct speech and indirect speech. Their distributions in selected articles are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3 Distributions of News Sources and Reporting Modes

	News Sources			Reporting Modes	
	Specified	Semi-specified	Unspecified	Direct	Indirect
Number	35	1	0	33	7
Percentage	97.22%	2.78%	0	81.5%	17.5%

Obviously, reporters in *China Daily* prefer specified news sources and direct reporting modes, avoiding the use of unspecified sources. This choice guarantees its objectivity and authority as an official newspaper. In addition, this arrangement also influences the vividness of language, reliability of information and richness of description, thus contributing to the image construction. Further study begins with news sources analysis.

The originators mentioned in the corpus are “Wang Yaping” “Morgan” “Qian Jianghao” “Nie Haisheng” and others. The wordings of Wang Yaping, which account for 61.11% in total quotations, are distributed across five news reports. Morgan, the first the first teacher to travel into space, and Qian, the student watching space lecture, appear in reports about Wang’s class. Nie Haisheng as well as Wang’s other colleagues usually occurs when it comes to the appraisal of her.

(7) “They take care of me as their own younger sister in life, but I wish to be their comrade-in-arms,” said Wang. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.10)

(8) “All over the world, we are really very excited,” Morgan wrote. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.17)

(9) “Sometimes we ‘d like to give her a helping hand, but she just would not take a hand in help,” said Nie Haisheng, commander astronaut in the mission. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.10)

It can be seen from above examples that *China Daily*’s constructs the image of Wang in two major ways. First of all, the stance, views and attitude of the two people are reflected through the quotation of their utterances, so as to imply the character’s personalities, such as optimism and persistence. For example, in (7), the interdependent mind of Wang is underlined. Secondly, journalists will cite other people’s words to supplement the image of the figure, or acknowledge

her achievements. These people often have a direct connection to Wang, and their identities are clear enough to increase credibility. Example (8) is excerpted from a letter that Morgan wrote to Wang after she completed her space lecture. “All over the world” and “excited” show the importance of this teaching with Morgan’s position making this judgment more convincing. This portrayal is a kind of implicit appraisal, where there are no notable judgements but imply the recognition of Wang. Instead, example (9) is an explicit one. This quotation illustrates Wang’s self-reliance and determination, qualities that align with her resilience in overcoming challenges without relying on others’ assistance. In fact, the reporters achieve the integration of direct and indirect characterization through the alternation of news sources, enhancing the validity and comprehensiveness of her image.

In the distributions of reporting modes, although direct speech is the dominant approach, the proportion of indirect speech is notably higher compared to semi-specified news sources. It appears that, on the premise of authenticity and credibility, journalists could employ various forms of quotations to enhance character portrayal.

(10) “I’d like to demonstrate that my generation is willing to embrace challenges.” (*China Daily*, 2013.6.10)

(11) She said the first jump was done among excitement and curiosity, but fears preoccupied her when she started the second jump. (*China Daily*, 2013.6.10)

(12) Wang was “talented in sports and seemed untiring”, said her teacher, Wang Zhixing. (*China Daily*, 2012.6.13)

(13) Wang said she would like to demonstrate that their generation was willing to embrace the challenges.

In direct speech, reporters do not alter the speaker’s words, allowing their emotions to be clearly conveyed. However, the processed indirect speech fails to do that. For example, the indirect forms of (10) can be demonstrated like (14). In indirect speech, “I” is replaced with “she” and “my” with “their”. The original use of “I” more effectively captures the speaker’s strong will, specifically Wang’s determination to overcome difficulties independently. Additionally, “my generation” links her with peers, showcasing not only her pioneering spirit but also serving as a persuasive appeal to tempering ourselves in hardships.

Only first-person pronouns can directly convey her initiative. In contrast, third-person pronouns like “she” and “their” introduce a sense of detachment, distancing readers from her inner emotions and limiting their ability to fully engage with Wang’s persistence.

Indirect speech can also simplify the lengthy discourses, increasing information intensity. Wang’s original description of her first and second parachute jumping is more concrete than example (11), such as the details of flight environment, but the reporter captures her emotional transition through “excitement” “curiosity” and “fears”. Therefore, the concise lexis helps readers to grasp her complex emotions quickly and turn into following content. In the corpus, some indirect speeches are mixed with direct speeches, as shown in example (12). Instead of citing Zhiqing’s whole comments on Wang Yaping, the reporter extracts the most representative one to emphasize her quality as “talented” and “untiring”. This selective citation highlights Wang’s notable characteristics through the words of a respected acquaintance who could add credibility.

5.3. Explanatory Analysis: State-Guided Values in Image Construction

While the first two stages analyze what kinds of and how images of Wang are constructed in *China Daily*, this section solves the last question: what are the major factors that influence the construction of the female image in the news reports?

In China, political responsibility is a primary characteristic of mainstream media (Liu S. et al., 2020). Under the slogan “Connecting China, Connecting the World” *China Daily* also undertakes the mission of promoting China’s voice, theories, and ideas and presenting a true, multi-dimensional and comprehensive view of China to the world. Therefore, *China Daily*’s reporting of Wang Yaping inevitably carries political intentions, both explicit and implicit, by emphasizing qualities that align with core government values in order to reinforce these ideals within its audience.

China Daily presents Wang Yaping in a positive perspective, showcasing her journey from rural origins to outer space. The reports narrate how she pursued higher education through perseverance and effort, became an

outstanding pilot and embarked on space missions. Her story is epitome of an ordinary person achieving their dreams through hard work, corresponding to values that many Chinese people cherish—diligence, kindness, and the pursuit of progress—while also resonating with the government’s initiative to promote a social atmosphere of equality and justice. Her image resonates with both societal aspirations for personal success and state-guided values of dedication.

Wang’s representation as a woman extends and reflects the national image, symbolizing China’s evolving stance on gender equality. Since the founding of New China, the Party and the government have actively promoted gender equality, with unprecedented slogans such as “women hold up half the sky” appearing during this period. This slogan liberated women from domestic roles and integrated them into social production, catering to both gender equality and the country’s developmental strategies (Wallis, 2006). Wang’s breakthrough against gender bias enhances the female participation in traditionally male-dominated fields and contributes social progress and national development. Her story inspires more women to surpass internal and external limitations and achieve personal success while also implies government’s commitment to supporting women’s development. This reflects China’s achievements in promoting gender equality. As a window for international exchange, *China Daily* utilizes this nuance to shape China’s global image as a country pursuing freedom, equality and justice.

From another perspective, *China Daily*’s coverage of Wang lacks personalized expression. The reports mainly highlight her positive minds in overcoming gender bias and emphasize her achievements, but seldom depict the discrimination and setbacks she may have faced. In other words, the journalists describe her story in a positive light, but offer little discussion of her stance on “opposing gender discrimination”, which might challenge traditional views more directly. This portrayal of her character is selective. On the negative side, this approach simplifies the real challenges women face, potentially obscuring the public’s understanding of gender issues. On the positive side, such an approach avoids directly bringing sharp gender conflicts to the forefront, helping to maintain social harmony and

stability. Furthermore, as an international platform, *China Daily*’s positive reporting can prevent certain foreign media with ulterior motives from exaggerating gender issues and smearing China through it.

VI. DISCUSSION

From above analysis, the study reveals three major findings. First of all, *China Daily* depicts Wang Yaping as a space hero to China, a female role model and a knowledge disseminator. These positive images emphasize her personality traits and connect her personal progress to national development, highlighting the collective perspective in her identity. Secondly, *China Daily* makes an appropriate arrangement of different news sources and reporting modes, providing properly detailed and concise reports and balancing the authenticity and vividness. Through this arrangement, the news reports combine direct and indirect characterization to shape her image, enhance the appeal of her portrayal and improve the readability of the reports. Lastly, the image construction of Wang is influenced by the country’s will. It combines the people’s aspirations and social mainstream values, contributing to social harmony and also creates a positive international image for the country.

VII. CONCLUSION

Findings of this study could offer certain suggestions for *China Daily* in its coverage of female figures, particularly special individuals like Wang Yaping. Official media hold unique advantages in accessing information on such figures. Therefore, within acceptable extent, it could further explore and present her personality and viewpoints to meet foreign readers’ expectations to a more personalized individual. In the meanwhile, upon reflection of the entire study, several limitations could be identified, such as the lack of a comparative perspective between Chinese and Western media. Analyzing differences between them may further identify the strengths and weaknesses of *China Daily*, improving its cross-cultural communication capability.

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