

**Portrayal of China in the national
Urdu-language press of Pakistan**

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Abstract

Public discourse on China is widespread in Pakistan. How China is depicted in the national press of Pakistan remains to be examined academically. The current study aims to dwell on the images of China in the editorial genres of the popular Urdu press of Pakistan. The findings of the study suggest that contrary to the global media depictions of China, there is an overarching 'favorable' image of China in the popular press of Pakistan and that that China is predominantly presented as 'trustworthy ally' of Pakistan. The study found no significant differences in the images of China in the chosen newspapers. The discussion elaborates the possible explanations for the over-arching pro-China frame in the news media of Pakistan.

'China is the only country that supports and provides help to Pakistan in all fields of life' (Editorial, *Nawa-e-Waqt*, 10 June, 2015).

'Xi's visit to Pakistan is a historic'. (Editorial, *Daily Express*, April 22, 2015).

Keywords: National image, China, Pakistani newspapers, framing, Editorial/ Op-Eds

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Introduction

National image has remained one of the major concerns of states around the globe. China is no exception. As major source of 'soft power', states everywhere have become attentive to their national images and mobilize all possible resources to manage favorable images and to ameliorate unfavorable and stereotypes of their governments and themselves among the foreign public. China's greatest strategic threat is arguably its national image shaped by the powerful global media. While China projects its image as a 'peace-loving country' among many other projected images, the global response and image portrayal to China may not be similar as desired by China (Wang, 2003; Zhan & Wu, 2017). Despite an abundance of studies on China image in the media, little attention has been conferred upon how China is being represented beyond the Western media gaze particular in Pakistan wherein the China discourse is so widespread. This study aims to add to the existing literature on media Depictions of China by exploring its images in the non-western media contexts.

Media and national images

Loosely conceptualized as the prevailing perception of one country among the public of other countries, national image is a complex phenomenon shaped by the interplay of various forces including news media, ideology, culture and diplomatic and political relations between countries (Peng, 2004; Xie & Page, 2013). In the modern times, one of the major sources of image construction of foreign nations and peoples' perceptions about others countries are the ubiquitous news media which bring closer the distant countries and their images to home audiences and which in return shape the favorable or distorted perceptions of a foreign country among the home audiences (Choi, 2010, 2018; Zhang, 2010; Zhang & Boukes, 2019; Lim & Seo, 2009; Xia & Page, 2013). Long ago Lippmann (1922) had noted that the media significantly influenced the public opinion, including those of the foreign-policy makers' views and actions by forming what Lippmann calls 'pictures in our heads' illustrating reality of issues. Some studies have however have challenged this dominant paradigm of media effects and instead have noted that the media had a 'minimal effect' on public and elite views (see Lazarsfeld, *et al.* 1944). However, modern scholarship provides an increasing evidence of the powerful effects of media on peoples' perceptions and influence on foreign policy making process (Dennis & Merrill, 1991; McCombs & Shaw, 1993, 72).

Although an extant academic scholarship on media representation of China is available mainly drawn from the Western media milieu demonstrating often unfavorable images and negative *Othering* of China (see Peng, 2004; Stone & Xiao, 2007; Golan & Lukito, 2015; Ooi & D' Arcangelis, 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2017; Wang, 2003; Goodman, 1999; Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; Li & Cyr's, 1998; Sparks, 2010; Huang & Leung, 2005; Lee , 2002, Wilnat & Luo, 2011; Wu, 2006; Kobland, Du & Kwon, 1992; Mawdsley, 2008 among many others), hitherto, no academic research is available to determine how China is being represented in non-Western media contexts. The current study aims to fulfill this extant academic lacuna by exploring images of China in a conservative section of press in Pakistan. China looms high both in the public mind and official discourses of Pakistan yet despite an abundance of scholarship on their diplomatic relations and geopolitics it remains to explore how China is being represented in the news media of Pakistan. The current study attempts to fulfill this gap by exploring it from a media perspective. To be specific, it aims to analyze whether and to what extend China is depicted in favorable and unfavorable terms in the popular Urdu press of Pakistan in terms of its relations toward Pakistan and China image *per se*.

Methodology

This study is theoretically guided by the notion of framing theory which in simple terms could be defined as "the way events and issues are organized and made sense of" (Reese, 2001, p.7). Different from the agenda-setting function of media which main deals what issues or events have been covered in the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1974), framing involves, "the presentation of issues" (de Vreese, 2005; p. 53) which eventually may influence the public perceptions of a foreign country.

Frames are perceptual schemes employed by communicator and audiences to organize and make sense of issues and events about the social world (Giltin, 1980; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). By selecting and emphasizing some aspects of a topic or social reality while excluding equally important others, news frames construct discourse on a phenomenon in ways the discourse producers believe will make sense for the audiences and which in return will influence the receivers and the readers reasoning and beliefs about events covered (see Schudson, 2003; Goffman, 1974; McCombs & Ghanem, 2003 among others).

The current study examines the media framing of China during 2015-2018 in the two conservative national dailies of Pakistan namely *Daily Express* and *Daily Nawa-e-Waqt*- two major vernacular national dailies with the highest circulation and widest readership. Both the selected dailies have a conservative outlook and providing a window on the views available to a mass audience in Pakistan (Akhtar, 2000; Shah, 2010). In contrast to the elite English newspapers of Pakistan, the vernacular press of the country caters to the general masses who cannot read English. Further, it is notorious for its polemical editorial agenda towards the West in general and the United States in particular (Jan, 2015). It closely adheres to the Islamic ideology of Pakistan and in contrast to the elite English counterpart, plays the dominant role in public opinion formation on salient national and global issues (Jabbar, 1994) besides acting as major sources of public knowledge and information on the outer world. The print media (specially the vernacular one) still remains to be the integral part to Pakistan's public life (Shah, 2010). Both the selected dailies belong to two major media giants. While *Daily Express* belongs to the Lakson Group, *Nawa-e-Waqt* –the oldest Urdu daily belongs to the Nawa-i-Waqt Group of Publications. The rationale to select newspapers over other outlets lies in the fact that the serious and informed readers still prefer to read newspapers for more detailed analysis and the newspapers have a particular role in shaping the reading public's geopolitical imaginaries about global affairs (Mawdsley, 2008).

The chosen time duration of 2015-2018 is significant for couple of reasons. First, Pakistan and China are getting further closer diplomatically by shifting their longstanding geopolitical relations to what is being dubbed as geo-economic relations under the framework of Belt and Road Initiative of which Pakistan is an important stakeholder (Hameed, 2017). Furthermore, during the chosen period many visits have been made by the top officials of both countries on the top being the visit of President Xi Jinping in 2015. Last, not least, China is increasing its engagement in the symbolic arena of Pakistan by building collaborations with Pakistani news media outlets, establishing Confucius institutes in a number of universities, exchange of journalists and academics between the two countries in addition to some Chinese language media outlets operative in the capital city of Pakistan. These increasing footprints of China and the deepening of ties between the two countries has elicited much debates and discussions both in national and global media circles thus deems plausible to examine both for theoretical and empirical significance. Finally, according to the Pew Global Attitudes Project 2012, Pakistan ranks at top having favorable opinions toward China over the successive years (85%

in 2012, Pew, 2012 as cited in Xie & Page, 2013). Are there similar attitudes and frames prevalent in the news media of Pakistan toward China? All editorial and opinion genres that appeared in the two dailies during the chosen time period i.e. 2015-2018 related to China were selected from the online archives which can be accessed freely. In total, 233 editorials and Op-Eds were selected that were directly related to China and Pakistan's relations with China. The rationale for selecting editorials lies in the fact that they are the most important news genres of any newspapers reflecting and articulating the newspapers' institutional and ideological underpinnings on important topics (Lee, Li & Lee, 2011; Ryan, 2004). Op-Eds in the newspapers are important sections providing a platform to articulate and interpret salient issues and foreign policy affairs by experts aimed at impacting both policy and public opinion (Golan & Carroll, 2012; G. Day & Golan, 2005). The editorial stances of newspapers reinforce the news frames as both have symbiotic relationship (Mishra, 2007). Thus examining them is as examining the overall ideological and institutional underpinnings of a newspaper. To meet the research goals, three questions were raised vis-à-vis China's images and China-Pakistan ties as follow:

RQ1: What dominant frames the popular Urdu press of Pakistan used to frame the China-Pakistan relations during the chosen period?

RQ2: What was the dominant tone of the press toward the image of China?

RQ3: Are there significant differences between the two dailies for the two measures i.e. the tone toward the relations and the image of China?

Analytical approaches

Image here refers to the assertion, attitudes, labeling, lexical choices and negative and positive evaluations of China in the chosen newspapers. Two approaches are generally applied to measure the media images and framing of foreign countries namely the relationship path and well-being path (image study). The former is concerned with how do media perceive the foreign country's relationships with their home country while the latter is concerned with how do the news media evaluate/ assess the foreign country's own image i.e. the images of the country *per se* (Zhang & Boukes, 2019). For example according to the relationship path China can be framed as a friend, partner, cooperator or a foe, strategic competitor or rival of another country. In similar veins, China's own images can be conceptualized as rising power, peace loving, stable, and economically strong and a prosperous society or an authoritarian or hegemon etc according to the well-being path approach. According to Manheim & Albrighton (1984) two dimensions of national image portrayed in the media are visibility and valence. Visibility refers to the amount of the media coverage a country receives while the valence refers to the media content available either favorable and unfavorably on the country (p. 645). References like 'progress', 'rising power', 'peace-loving' etc depict a country in favorable lights, while assertion and judgments and representations like, 'authoritarian', 'hegemon', 'geopolitical threat' etc cast negative light on a country.

These conceptual approaches to measure media attitudes have been used in previous studies on China and other countries (see Lim & Seo, 2009; Wilke & Achatzi, 2011; Erzikova, Haigh & Sampiev, 2016; Zhang & Boukes, 2019; Zhang & Wu, 2017). The current study takes into consideration both approaches i.e. how the relations between the two countries are framed and how do the media construct China's own images. In accordance with the previous studies on media frames and tones/ attitudes (Entman, 1991; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2008; Choi, 2010; Doui & Lauricella, 2014; Zhang & Boukes, 2019) each newspaper's framing strategies can be measured by considering both the tone and dominant frames gleaned from the overall coverage. Tone here refers to a 'favorable', 'unfavorable' and 'neutral' representation of China in an individual article. In a similar vein on the basis of the previous studies (Lim & Seo, 2009; Zhang & Boukes, 2019; Doui & Lauricella, 2014) we measured the frames toward China-Pakistan relations categorized 'positive frames', 'negative frames' or 'neutral frames' which are considered a reliable measurement of media favorability/ tone and frames toward a foreign country (see Xie & Page, 2013; Choi, 2010; Zhang & Boukes, 2019).

Editorials and Op-Eds labeling for example China as a 'friend' of Pakistan was considered as 'positive frames', labeling China as a 'competitor of Pakistan' was measured as "negative frames". A non-judgmental and non-value driven/ factual article was coded as 'neutral frame'. Likewise, an article asserting as "China is a stable and peaceful rising power" was coded as 'favorable', similarly articles asserting China as 'authoritarian state' were coded as 'unfavorable'. A 'neutral' tone referred to cases in which a news article did not clearly impart a 'favorable' and 'unfavorable' attitude toward China. A random sample of 25 articles from both newspapers was coded to assess the inter-coder reliability (Holsti, 1969). One of the authors and a graduate student coded this random sample yielding a high degree agreement between the coders at 92.25 percent for the two categories (relations between the two countries and China's image *per se*) which falls in the acceptable range (Riffe, *et al.* 1998: 128). Articles were double coded if they were related to both relation and China's own images.

Findings

In the present study we examined how the two major national dailies *Daily Express* and *Nawa-e-Waqt* framed and represented the relations between China and Pakistan and China's own imageries during 2015-2018. A total of N= 233 articles were selected for the final analyses including 139 and 94 from *Daily Express* and *Nawa-e-Waqt* respectively; out of which 65 articles from *Daily Express* and 71 articles from *Nawa-e-Waqt* were related to specifically the relations between the two countries. Likewise, 111 articles were most closely related to China or made references to China in the editorial and opinion genres including 37 from *Daily Express* and 74 from *Nawa-e-Waqt*. The single editorial/opinion piece was the unit of analysis. An article was double coded if it had mentioned both the relations and China's image due to which an increase is seen in the breakup categories than the actual total number. In accordance with the analytical strategies aforementioned, the articles were examined critically for the tones/ favorable and unfavorable

representation of China on the one hand, and the frames employed by the outlets in making sense of the relations between the two countries name China and Pakistan.

Table 1: Retrieved news articles

Newspaper	Database	No. of articles
<i>Daily Express</i>	Online Archives	139
<i>Nawa-e-Waqt</i>	Online Archives	94
		N= 233

Frames of coverage

Regarding RQ1 on the frames used to make sense of the ties between the two countries, an overwhelming majority on the relations had an unambiguously ‘positive frames’ regarding the China-Pakistan relations. In the *Daily Express*, the overall tone regarding the relations between the two countries is almost 85% (N=65) having ‘positive frames’. In the *Nawa-e-Waqt*, 86% (N=71) of articles used ‘positive frames’ in referring to the relations between the two countries as shown in Table 2 below. Both the dailies overwhelmingly used positive frames in their editorial discourses on Pakistan’s relations with China. Furthermore, the neutral frames overweigh the negative frames. Thus the overall negative frames tend to be negligible suggesting overwhelmingly positive frames employed by the two dailies while refereeing to and framing the ties between the two countries. Some of the illustrative examples that suggest and positive framing in the editorial excerpts on the relations between the two countries are mentioned below that could help us how these two dailies use various framing and linguistic devices to suggest the relations between the two countries. For example, the conservative daily *Nawa-e-Waqt*, in many of the editorials and opinion commentaries while referring to the ties between the two countries uses highly positive moral linguistic terms to China and its relations with Pakistan.

Table 2: Frames employed on China-Pakistan relations

Positive Frames		Negative Frames		Neutral Frames		Total	
Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>
<i>Daily Express</i>	84.5	55	4.7	3		10.8	7
	100	65					
<i>Nawa-e-Waqt</i>	86	61	2.9	2		11.1	8
	100	71					
$\chi^2 = 1.87, p > 0.05$							

Both the conservative dailies employed ideologically driven and valued-laden lexical choices in their references and judgments to the relations of Pakistan with China. As the following excerpts from both the dailies illustrate:

Undoubtedly the ties between China and Pakistan are higher than mountains and deeper than oceans (Editorial, *Daily Express*, May 21, 2015)

China is not only our neighbor, but also a friend who has stood side by side with Pakistan as a neighbor since Pakistan's very inception (*Daily Express*, Opinion, October 10, 2018).

Using the metaphorical language to refer to the relations is a common lexical choice and linguistic practice employed by both dailies in number of articles in referring to China and Pakistan relations with China. In a number of editorials and opinion genres lexical choice like, 'brother China', 'our sincere friend', 'our neighbor', 'Pakistan's only ally that can be trusted', 'China as a trustworthy ally', 'long live Pak-China friendship' etc to mention a few. Lexical choices on the part of the discourse producers are important as they suggest the ideological orientations of the newspapers or text producers on the one hand and indicate and socio-cognitive ideologies behind such word selection (e.g. Thetela, 2001; Richardson, 2007). In a number of opinion and editorial pieces of the newspapers, highly exaggerated and moral terminologies and metaphorical language was employed to make sense of the relations between the two counties as illuminated below:

Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to China will further strengthen and sweeten the existing higher than mountains, sweeter than honey and deeper than ocean friendship between China and Pakistan. His visit to China will bring peace, prosperity and stability to the whole region (Editorial, *Nawa-e-Waqt*, November 1, 2018).

In a similar vein using a similar linguistic and highly moralized language, the *Daily Express* puts the relations between the two countries as follow:

With China's cooperation, Pakistan will overcome its energy crises. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor will open new doors of prosperity for the country... For all this, why the Pakistani nation should not be grateful to China (Editorial, *Daily Express*, April, 20, 2015).

Tones of coverage

Regarding RQ2 about the images of China, a clear majority in both *Daily Express* and *Nawa-e-Waqt* on the images of China had an unambiguously 'favorable' representation of China. In the *Daily Express*, 89% (N=37) had a 'favorable' image of China. In *Nawa-e-Waqt*, the total number of articles with 'favorable' image of China stood at 98.6 % (N=74). Looking closely at the overall favorability scores of the image of China combined in both dailies, it reveals that an overwhelming 95%

(N=111) of the articles had 'favorable' image of China as demonstrated at Table 2 below. Moreover, a closer look suggests that *Nawa-e-Waqt* had a bit higher percentage 89.6 % of 'favorable' representation of China against the 89% of *Daily Express*. Finally in both the dailies, the 'unfavorable' representation was limited to very few articles standing at a negligible percentage of less than 1%. Like the framing of the relations between the two countries which was often represented using moral terms, China's own imageries were equally constructed in moralistic and humanistic terminologies casting a highly favorable light on China.

Table 3: Tone in the coverage toward China

	Favorable		Unfavorable		Neutral		Total	
	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N
<i>Daily Express</i>	89	33	2.7	1			8.3	3
100		37						
<i>Nawa-e-Waqt</i>	98.6	73	0	0			1.4	1
100		74						
$\chi^2 = 5.64, p > 0.05$								

Some of the excerpts from both the dailies included below as exemplars would suggest the highly positive lexicons, metaphors, catchphrases and linguistic and framing devices the conservative dailies employed in their editorial and opinion commentaries in constructing the images of China. The following are some of the illuminating excerpts often appeared in both the dailies:

China is global force and its development is an example for other countries (Opinion, *Daily Express*, September 6, 2018).

China's economic and political system has proved to be the most successful model of the world. By studying it seriously, Pakistan can ameliorate its political and economic system (Opinion, *Nawa-e-Waqt*, May 25, 2015).

The above excerpts cast China in a positive light representing it as an 'exemplary' for other countries including Pakistan. Intriguingly, China's political system is equally eulogized for being the most 'successful' in the world and to be emulated in Pakistan. In other words, it is supposed by the discourse producers that Pakistan's current economic and political system is a nonfunctional and can only be improved by following the 'China model' of its economic and political governance. In a number of articles China's Belt and Road Initiative is framed with highly positive terminology of 'development', 'connectivity', 'prosperity' and 'to end conflict' in the region and the globe over. As the following representative excerpts demonstrate:

China's Belt and Road Initiative is to end the conflicts and to bring prosperity to the world (Editorial, *Nawa-e-Waqt*, May 17, 2017).

China is being viewed with great honor in the global politics due to its objective, unbiased, principled/rule based and its love for peace (Editorial *Daily Express*, May 11, 2017).

By using the metaphors, catch phrases and value-driven language, the newspapers in their discourse on China and Pakistan's relations with China not only articulate and interpret China and Pakistan's China policy but equally pass moral judgments and recommendations (Entman, 1993) for other countries particularly Pakistan to emulate China. In other words, the conservative press of Pakistan employed the 'China Model' as a 'master narrative' in the editorial and opinion commentaries and failed to provide any alternative frames on the relations and China *per se*, thus reinforced and naturalized the state-driven policies and hegemonic voices with no counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1995). Finally, to answer RQ3 to glean if there were any significant differences in the frequencies of tones and frames of the categories employed by the two dailies regarding the relations and the images of China, a Chi-square test as predicted did not reveal any difference between the two dailies both on the relations and favorability of China.

Discussion

Existing academic research on the media representations of China has mostly focused on the media images of China in the Western media. There still exists a wide gap to gauge how China is being imagined beyond the Western media discourse. The goal of the current study was thus twofold. Firstly, to examine the media representations of China beyond the Western media gaze. Second, since China looms high both in the public consciousness and official rhetoric of Pakistan yet hitherto remains unexamined in order to know how the news media of Pakistan imagines China and frame Pakistan's relations with China. Moreover, do the news media frames on China reinforce and are in congruent with those of Pakistan's official policy discourse. To that end a content analysis with the interpretive examples revealed that China has an overwhelming 'favorable' representation in the popular Urdu press of Pakistan. Further, the ties between the two countries are equally represented in an ambiguously 'positive frame'. It is intriguing to see that an otherwise conservative press which is infamous for the polemical agenda and anti-West and ant-US narratives has an overwhelming pro-China frame. These findings could have theoretical underpinnings thus call for some potential explanations. Three possible theoretical explanations could help to make sense of the findings of the study. First, the diplomatic relations and the bonhomie between the two states might have influenced the media discourses both at conscious and unconscious level. Extant research on media and foreign relations suggests that the media narratives on international affairs tend to be influenced by the political relations between the two countries, the economic and political systems within

which the news media embed and foreign policy stances of a country (see Peng, 2004; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2008) and that the news media discourse on foreign policy tend to be in congruent with the official policy standpoint of countries (Chang, 1986, 1993; Yu & Riffe, 1989; Merrill, 1995; Dorogi, 2001). Keeping in view the findings and analysis, it seems to suggest that the conservative press reinforced and even naturalized Pakistan's official policy narratives on China by regurgitating the official phrases and metaphors about the relations between the two countries dubbed as 'higher than mountains, deeper than oceans and sweeter than honey' (Ahmed, 2018; Shah, 2018). Regarding the overarching positive imageries of China, besides the influence of political and diplomatic relations, the public opinion of the country could be another explanatory factor shaping the pro-China frame. Pakistan is one the top ranked countries having highly favorable public opinions on China.

These opinions might have a reciprocal effect on media's pro-China frame in the country. Furthermore, the predominant pro-China framing revealed in this study seems to be in congruent with the findings of (Xie & Page, 2013) that the less developed and poor countries have more favorable image of China as compared to the more developed societies. Another potential explanation for the pro-China frame may lie in the journalistic culture of Pakistan which is argued to differ from the 'Westernized' ideals of journalistic norms and professional values as prior research demonstrates (Akhtar & B.Pratt, 2017). Studies have shown that Islamic obligations of telling the 'truth', seeking 'justice' and serving the 'public interests' coupled with 'defending Pakistani interests' and ethnocentric and nationalistic tendencies said to prevalent in the journalistic culture of Pakistan (Pintak, 2014; Pintak, Nazir, 2013). Further, studies have also noted that the political affiliations, religion and national identity of Pakistani journalists do influence their world views and that the stiff competition among the news media organizations results in pro-government news media coverage (Akhtar & B.Pratt, 2017). Given these journalistic tendencies, it can be argued that news media might consider defending Pakistan's relations with China and projecting China in positive limelight is in the 'national interest' of the country. Additionally, the findings of the study reinforce the argument raised in the prior research on Pakistan's vernacular /Urdu press being outlets for the promotion of government perspectives rather than exercising their own editorial independence (Akhtar, 2000). Finally, at a broader theoretical level, the findings while comparing them with the predominant unfavorable representation of China in the Western media as mentioned in the preceding part of the article can be interpreted by arguing that the international news making tends to remain ethnocentric, nationalistic and even state-centered and that the media institutions as McQuail has rightly noted are deeply embedded in the sociopolitical environment they operate (McQuail, 1994). The news media at least in the conservative one in Pakistan seem to reinforce and reproduce the dominant policy narratives of Pakistan on China. If the job of the press is to act as a 'watch-dog' rather than a 'lap-dog' it is safe to conclude that news media in Pakistan failed to provide any alternative discourse on China by

going beyond the official policy narratives. Instead it acted as a ‘mouthpiece’ of the official policy makers and managers of Pakistan’s foreign policy

This study has many limitations. It takes into consideration only the popular Urdu section of the press which is though widespread is not the representative of the entire media landscape of Pakistan. Future studies can examine do the liberal elite English press of Pakistan share the similar views on China’ policy and China images. Field interviews from the journalists could be yet another fascinating academic venture to enhance our understanding of the visible and invisible forces that shape the media narratives on China in Pakistan.

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