

PhD title: Understanding China's National Image in Europe – A Constructivist Study of Media Representations of China in Four European Media Outlets

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Abstract

China's rise, both as an economic power and as a geopolitical actor, has sparked ongoing debates in Europe over whether it should be understood mainly as a strategic partner, an economic competitor, or even a systemic rival. These debates are deeply intertwined with media representations, which shape public perceptions and policy discourses. This thesis investigates the representation of China in European media from 2013, when Xi Jinping assumed office, to early 2019. It examines how three main EU institutions (the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union), two key EU advisory committees (the European Economic and Social Committee and European Committee of the Regions), and four representative European media outlets (*Politico.eu*, *Euronews*, *EUobserver*, and *Euractiv*) frame China-related issues, especially on the debates surrounding China's Market Economy Status (MES) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

This research addresses the central question of how European media construct discourses about China and tests the hypothesis that China's increasing assertiveness under Xi Jinping has contributed to its discursive construction as a 'systemic rival' in European media. The thesis situates these representations within constructivist international relations theory, emphasising the role of discourse in shaping national identities and international images. It explores how thematic emphases, linguistic

patterns, and discursive strategies in media texts reflect and reproduce the evolving dynamics of EU-China relations.

Using a constructivist framework and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research examines the language, narratives, and power dynamics embedded in media texts. Combined with a quantitative content analysis of 1,418 articles, this methodological approach provides both a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how China's image is constructed. This analysis concentrates on the MES and BRI to examine how European media depict China's economic and geopolitical position.

The findings reveal that European media coverage of China adopts a predominantly neutral to moderately negative tone, with a broader narrative of rivalry framing EU-China relations. While EU institutional papers cautiously frame China as a potential partner, media outlets critically emphasise issues such as economic competition, governance concerns, and geopolitical tensions. This critical stance is most pronounced in debates over MES and BRI, where China is often depicted as a rule-breaker in global trade and a strategic challenger through its initiatives.

Within EU-China relations, the way media depict China has changed over time, showing the broader shifts in the relationship. These discourses fluctuate between narratives of cooperation and rivalry, mirroring the broader complexities of contemporary international politics. The changing tone and focus of media coverage reveal how China is constructed as a partner, competitor, or systemic rival, depending on geopolitical developments and issue-specific contexts. This thesis situates these discursive dynamics within the broader framework of an emerging multipolar world

order, one increasingly defined by fluid alignments and pragmatic partnerships, rather than fixed ideological blocs.

The study concludes by highlighting the need for more balanced and nuanced media representations to foster constructive dialogue between China and Europe. It also highlights the broader relevance of its methodological approach, offering insights for future research on media and international relations in a rapidly evolving global context.