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CHINESE MAINSTREAM MEDIA COVERAGE OF IRAN: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS (2013-2019)

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ABSTRACT

China proposed the "Belt and Road" initiative in 2013, which received positive responses from many countries around the world and became one of the hot spots in domestic and overseas reports. Iran is China's important strategic partner in West Asia. China and Iran have always maintained good-neighborly and friendly exchanges. This paper selects six mainstream media in mainland China (People's Daily, Xinhua, China Network, China Daily, China News Agency, and CCTV) reported on Iran from September 1, 2013 to December 31, 2019. Based on the statistical analysis of the communicators and communication regulation, content and text discourse, channel layout and reporting capacity, and presentation mode of Iranian reports, this paper summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of the mainstream media in mainland China in foreign reports. In the future, it will strive to be more balanced and diversified in the reporting theme, more in-depth and insightful in the content, and use scientific and technological innovation in the reporting form.

INTRODUCTION

China and Iran are traditional friendly countries and their friendship can be traced back to the second century BC. On August 16, 1971, China and Iran formally established diplomatic relations. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, high-level visits between China and Iran increased, and friendly cooperative relations in various fields such as trade, diplomatic support to name a few continued to develop. In recent years, bilateral relations between China and Iran have maintained a positive and steady development momentum. At present, China-Iran relations have entered a new stage of development. The exchange of high-level official delegates between the two sides havedeveloped mutual political vision and understanding toward each other resulting in the promotion of economic and trade cooperation and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Media plays an important role to connect people and countries in one bond in contemporary times. On July 21, 2019, the Iranian embassy in China announced to exempt Chinese citizens from getting visas for visiting Iran.

In August 2019, the news agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran officially launched its Chinese website in Tehran to further strengthen and the mutual cooperation and understanding between the two sides. The launching of the Chinese website started new ventures for media cooperation between the two countries. In the contemporary era, few people have personal access to events and happenings outside their own world. Most people depend upon various media for accessing information about people, events, and other countries. Thus, media have become a mirror that reflects the world and its happenings and play a significant role in shaping the image and attitudes of the people about countries and societies (Ji, Hu & Muhammad, 2016)[1]. From this perspective, media as messengers of information play an important role to strengthen ties exchanges between countries. Investigating the image of India in Chinese media,Li(2013) [2]found marginal coverage of India. He noted that on 28 October 2013, Sina, the most popular news portal for Chinese netizens, published only 50 articles about India out of its around 10,000 articles displayed on its site. Likewise, Yousaf&Ji (2017) [3]found that the framing of China Pakistan

Economic Corridor, a flagship project of One Belt, One Road Initiative, was national interest orientated. The Iranian and Indian press framed it as a threat to their national interests whereas the Pakistani press framed it as an initiative aimed at enhancing economic cooperation and connectivity between all the countries engaged in the project. This indicates that media representation of other countries is a multilayered phenomenon.The Chinese and Iranian media have been engaged in mutual cooperation for a long time.On January 22, 2016, China and Iran held a media dialogue. Moreover, from January 5 to 8, 2018, China Radio International, the press counselor of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the president of the Islamic news agency in China, the general representative of the audio-visual organization of Iran in China, China net and relevant comrades of China Asia Africa Development Exchange Association went to Yangzhou City for a series of discussions, visits, and interviews to better understand each other through the eyes of media. This study, therefore, intends to explore the coverage of Iran, one of the important Countries in the Middle East regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, in the Chinese media. The findings of the study are pertinent in the sense that they enhance our understanding of how the Chinese media covers Iran.

Communicators and regulations of Iranian coverage

Analysis of the communicators of the report: Since the One Belt, One Road Initiative was put forward, from the analysis of the source media of six websites reporting Iran by mainstream media in mainland China. It is found that reporting is more focused on organizations and individuals. (Jin, 2020)[1]

The reporting mainly focused on the following categories: political parties, government organizations, people's organizations,and relevant communication organizations. The media organizations and business reporting platforms include official media and media organizations (such as Xinhua news agency, CCTV, people's daily, China Daily) and commercial websites or private media (such as Baidu, Sina, Tencent, etc.); foreign affairs service organizations and mutual presence between China and Iran Embassies and consulates(Jin, 2020)[4]. From the perspective of authors and their affiliates, the reporters involved in reporting on the "Belt and Road" initiative are relatively senior journalists and scholars who have long-term observation and reporting experiences on Chinese subjects (Li, 2018) [5].There are also some government workers and members of the diplomatic service who are engaged in journalism. This indicates that the sources of the message are relatively fixed. The reporters copy and edit the information and finally presented it to the audience.

Analysis of communication regulation: The reports should abide by certain news ethics. The principles of equality and mutual benefit and the principle of people-oriented respect are some of the goals the reports are considered to meet. The media platforms should respect the economic, political, and cultural differences between the two countries and each other's national interests. However, this does not mean that reports should not be objective, fair,and accurate in nature.

Macro control analysis

Source control analysis of reports: By randomly selecting 30 reports (10 positive reports, 10 neutral reports, and 10 negative reports) on Xinhua from September 1, 2013, to December 31, 2019, it can be found that half of the news reported were from official Iranian or western media sources. For example, Chinese Embassy in Iran, the news agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, state television of Iran, Mehr news agency of Iran, radio and television of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRIB), Tasnim news agency of Iran, Fars news agency of Iran, etc are some of the sources Chinese media platforms cite while reporting Iran. On the other hand, Western Media platforms included CNN, Reuters, BBC, AFP, AP, Fox News Channel, and Wall Street Journal. It shows that on the whole, in international communication reports, Chinese media are careful and diverse in choosing sources of information. In order to report the truth and accuracy, they paid special attention to the official media that have a good reputation and credibility. The people who are included in the news as commentators are also well-known and have a professional background in the field.

Hot spot control analysis of reports: Concerning hot topics in Iran, such as Iran's oil, Iran's nuclear issue, and US sanctions against Iran are some of the very hot and sensitive issues in Iran. The Chinese media closely follow the development of the incidents and carry out continuous reports or series of reports.However, due to the special geographical location, resources, ethnic groups, religions, global stability and security, and various other issues are intertwined in Iran. Therefore, the Chinese media are extremely cautious when reporting these multi-layered issues In November and December 2019,the CCTV news channel reported that Iran actively retaliated against US sanctions in multiple ways. For instance, Iran held demonstrations against US sanctions, the speaker of the Iranian parliament held a press conference offering that The United States and Iran should work together to solve core issues. At the same time, with the gradual improvement of China's comprehensive soft national power, China has gradually gained its own voice among the world's major media outlets.Therefore, China is becoming more assertive and active in international relations. The purpose of this project is to improve the image of China on the global stage. In this regard,"a handful of state-run media conglomerates have been designated as pioneers of this undertaking,which aims to foster a much friendlier atmosphere for global media coverage of China's ongoing modernization and development agenda without creating ideological tensions or disputes"(Hu &Ji ,2012)[6].

Micro control analysis

Expression control analysis
Kurt Lewin, an American social psychologist, put forward the theory of gatekeeper. He pointed out that there are gatekeepers at every level of communication. Only that information enters the communication channels for dissemination that meets the gatekeepers' standards. In terms of network control, it is mainly about content shielding, including deleting or prompting to modify the terms that are not professional, easy to cause misunderstanding, or have serious knowledge errors or insults and slanders. It also includes the timely deletion of violent and terrorist audio and video that do not conform to the relevant laws and regulations of the state, and illegal video that flows in from abroad （Jin, 2020)[4].When foreign reports are involved, news editors strictly control and filter out the contents that violate the political position of the authorities and incite sensitive topics. At the same time, consideration is given to the field, scope, length, and quantity of reports. As an important partner of China's "Belt and Road" initiative, when

reporting Iran, China will report on the positive news of Iran's government and people's image based on objective truth. The reports are mostly long and the background information and sequence of events are elaborated. As for the negative news, it is played down and the length is shortened and summarized the events, or even not report them at all.

METHODS

We utilized content analysis to analyze the coverage of Iran in mainstream Chinese media. We used Iran as a keyword to search reports on Iran in the Baidu, a Chinese search engine, Sogou search engine, Google search engine at the same time. The results are shown in Table 1.

Media	Number of news
China net	1207
The people.net people.	86573
China Daily	31938
Xinhuanet.com	5317
National search news	92
CCTV (video)	77379

In terms of information in the Chinese language, Google is nearly three times that of Baidu, while in terms of information in the English language, Google is 32 times that of Baidu. The comparison indicates that the Chinese search engine, Baidu, blocked many foreign news reports. One of the reasons for this shielding effect is China's special national conditions and interests. Iran is located in the Middle East, an oil-rich country. It remains in the international media for many reasons such as its atoms program and human rights issues. As a result of these issues, the most of coverage accorded to Iran by the Western and European countries is negative and stereotypical in nature. Keeping in view the special relations with Iran, the Chinese media filters most of the sensitive and negative information about Iran. This also happens in the case of vicious and irresponsible comments of netizens. The Chinese authorities monitor cyberspace and filter the negative information about the countries which are important for the country's national interest.

Table 2. Relevant search quantity of three search engines

Search Engine	Iran(in Chinese）	Iran （in English)
Baidu	76100000	45400000
Sogou	7564313	1344857
Google	212000000	1470000000

RESULTS

Content and text discourse of Iran Report

Number of reports: From September 1, 2013, to December 31, 2019, the mainstream media in mainland China reported a large number of reports on Iran. Through the search of the "Iran" keyword on the designated website in the specified period of time, we can see that the number is increasing, and there are more and more reports on Iran.The number of reports for the whole year of 2019 has reached its peak in five years. To a certain extent, since the "Belt and Road" initiative was proposed, China has paid more attention to the countries along the "Belt and Road" and has good news sensitivity. Table 3 number of reports on Iran by the six major mainstream media in China from September 1, 2013, to December 31, 2019.

Table 3 . Nnumber and growth rate of China's three media reports on Iran from 2013 to 2019

	The people.net	China News	Xinhuanet.com
2013.09.01-2014.12.31	360	310	160
2015.01.01-2015.12.31	260	160	350
2016.01.01-2016.12.31	330	310	530
2017.01.01-2017.12.31	290	220	380
2018.01.01-2018.12.31	400	300	410
2019.01.01-2019.12.31	460	530	670
Growth rate	0.28	0.71	3.19

Report content: On the whole, it is mainly political content, supplemented by economic content and cultural content. After the proposal, the dominant position of the political framework has not changed, but it shows a trend of strengthening the economic, cultural, and other themes. After the "Belt and Road" initiative, the distribution of the three major themes of politics, economy, and culture is more balanced, and the presentation of the Iranian country is more comprehensive. The routine foreign reports are mainly sports reports and diplomatic reports.In particular, U.S. sanctions against Iran and Iran's anti-sanctions account for 70% of all reports. In terms of content and material, it is mainly based on factual reports. There are special comment and interview sections in the media, but on the whole, comment, interview, and video only account for a few. In terms of the length of the report, the middle part accounts for the majority.

Reporting tendency: Positive reports are more prominent. Reporting tendency refers to the specific attitude and value judgment when reporting or commenting on news facts, which can be divided into positive report, neutral reports, and negative reports. After the "one belt, one road" initiative was put forward, the trend of China's mainstream media's reporting on the Iran countries weakened the negative reports and highlighted the trend of positive reports. In terms of the number of news reports, neutral reports are the most, followed by positive reports and negative reports are the least. Positive reports mainly focus on cultural exchanges, technological breakthroughs, and Iran's unique position on the Silk Road. China people.com.cn reported on June 5, 2014, that "former ambassador to Iran: Iran has a unique position on the Silk Road" and October 15, 2019 "sharing the light and shade feast". "One Belt, OneRoad" has become an important keyword. The negative reports are concentrated on terrorist attacks, air crashes, demonstrations, and other disasters and social unrest, and few are in daily entertainment. The Chinese media's coverage of Iran is relatively concentrated, focusing on the government and official level. A large number of reports are political, diplomatic, economic, military, sports, culture, and so on. Chinese media shape Iran's national image mainly by political image, involving the exchange of visits between the top officials of China and Iran.The main focus of the Chinese government and the media is on the countermeasures to the situation, not on the statements made by the Chinese government. For example, the U.S. sanctions against Iran only reported the progress of the incident, and the attitudes of both sides did not mention the official position of the Chinese government.

Political context: Iran belongs to the Middle East region, with a special geographical environment and a complex political background, especially the US-Iran relationship, which has a direct impact on world peace and stability.

Before the "Belt and Road" initiative was put forward, the People's Daily reported on Central and Eastern European countries using "EU", "NATO", "anti-missile", "refugees" and other background keywords in the context of Western politics. Western politics is the background framework.(Zhang,2019) [7]After the "Belt and Road" initiative was proposed, the frequency of similar words was greatly reduced, and the words "Belt and Road" were very frequent. It can be seen that after the "Belt and Road" initiative was proposed by the mainstream Chinese media, reports on Iran got rid of the previous Western framework and showed a "de-Westernization" trend. Instead, the "Belt and Road" report was used, and the report became more and more show China's own characteristics .

Channel layout and reporting capabilities for reporting to Iran: The media in mainland China have a strong ability to report on Iran. The embassies of the two countries exchange information. China also has foreign correspondents who can obtain first-hand information in a timely and accurate manner and return it to the country. In addition, some government websites have also published relevant news. The media can obtain information from it. Each media has its own official website and has launched WeChat public account, Weibo account, and Tiktok. China.com, China Daily, CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, and other media have developed mobile clients, and they have also updated relevant reports on time. The Iranian Embassy in China has an official Weibo, and the Chinese Embassy in Iran has opened an official WeChat public account,and update text or video content on time. In terms of we-media, there are 137 official account numbers in Iran, and only 72 in Turkey, which is located in Western Asia. Focus on major events in Iran and report openly and fairly.For example, the various restrictions imposed by the United States, something closely related to the local situation, or in the fields of history, tourism, and study abroad.Officials and non-governmental media worked together to give a panoramic view of Iran's current situation. In addition to news coverage of recent events, the Chinese media such as China has a network of "Chinese point of view" columns, in the "opinion database" column, the Chinese media have made special comments on the topic. Like"Under the pressure of extreme pressure, Iran and Iraq are coming closer and more obvious", "Iran's future with the shoes and applause", "One belt, one road" investment in political risk in Iran,and other commentary articles, so that people can have a deeper understanding of Iran's national political situation. By collecting reports on Iran and Turkey from six mainstream media in mainland China from September 1, 2013,to December 31, 2019. It can be seen that although it is also in West Asia, the number of Chinese reports on Iran is significantly higher than that of Turkey.

Table 4.Comparison of the number of reports by six major Chinese media on Iran and Turkey

National media	Iran	Turkey
China Net	1207	830
People's Network	86573	69720
China Daily	31938	16435
Xinhua.net	5317	3918
Guosuo News	92	117
CCTV(video)	77379	40605

Presentation of reports on Iran

Content setting: There are still some deficiencies in the coverage of Iran by China's mainstream media, such as insufficient coverage depth, too official reporting perspective, concentrated reporting topics, and weak civil discourse power. There are certain subject preferences and reporting imbalances.The fixed field of the report also has a great influence on the overall image construction of the country, and it is easy to lead to "tagging" and "aesthetic fatigue". Most of the reports are major conferences or leaders' diplomatic activities, and they have little performance in the ordinary life and religious activities of the people. This will lead to an incomplete and in-depth understanding of Iran's national image, and the image of "disaster-prone" is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, with a less positive image. Although the initiative was proposed by China, the "Belt and Road" initiative is a road of win-win cooperation. Reports should reflect the cooperation between the two countries, not just China's unilateral assistance to other countries. Only the achievements are reported, and the risks and challenges are rarely involved. At the same time, most of the reports are only superficial explanations of the facts, the depth and breadth of the reports are not enough, and the accuracy and standardization of the reports need to be improved.It may lead to anincomplete understanding of the domestic audience, and the final communication effect will be greatly reduced. However, it is worth mentioning that the Chinese media has always maintained a relatively neutral and objective position on Iran's reports. When reporting such conflict events and sensitive news as social unrest, a large number of official authority's words or other reliable information sources are quoted, and multiple sources are balanced. When reporting news, the source information of famous news agencies or news organizations around the world is widely adopted, and Chinese journalists stationed abroad are dispatched to report the latest situation of Iran on time. The timeliness of news is relatively high.

Title Preparation: "The language of the title is the focus of the article, which is a key factor directly related to whether the online readers are interested in browsing the article, and also a vane for readers to judge the tendentiousness and guidance of online media reports."(Zhao,2019)[8]Most of the titles are single-line titles, which summarize the main facts and are simple and clear. In the pursuit of truth and effectiveness, some news headlines go to the next level, skillfully use punctuation, catchwords, etc., localize the words, focusing on the humanistic and artistic colors, lively and eye-catching. For example, CCTV reported on April 30, 2015, that Iran is preparing for the "nuclear" war by seizing the arms of merchant ships.CCTV.com reported on April 30, 2015: measuring the poison step of Silk Road in Iran. Guangzhou Daily reported on July 19, 2015: the world is so big, the next stop is Iran. The title does not regenerate rigidly. But some titles are not standardized, the content of the title is not clear, so people still don't know why after reading. Or it may be misleading. As the people's Daily reported, "Iran has made a breakthrough in this field that has scared the United States",The title does not indicate any key information and should be made more complete as appropriate. A certain proportion of netizens, judging the news content through the news title, or just roughly reading the introduction part, are likely to lead to the rise of prejudice in a short period of time, and then leave an irrational evaluation, or identify with irrational evaluation.

Picture reference: It can be seen from the table statistics that most of the reports can use pictures in the article.So that

readers in the reading process are not too monotonous, and the combination of graphics and text will make it easier for readers to understand the text content. However, there is a lack of original pictures, most of which are pictures of meetings and speeches of leaders. Most of the pictures are rigid and inflexible, not reflecting on people's daily life. There are a few vivid pictures, and some of them are poorly targeted with the corresponding news. There are some pictures related to the scene of war and riot, and some photos of corpses and blood should be mosaic processed.

Video material: The first is that there are fewer original films and documentaries related to Iran, and there is less communication between film and television. The introduction of the film is not enough and the introduction is insufficient. The documentary is mostly based on the "Belt and Road" link, introducing Iran's culture, history and religion. CCTV network "Home in the distance" video, shows the theme and content of the "Belt and Road" which is basically consistent with the scope of the picture and text report, or even narrower. The content of the video coverage is concentrated on the political, military, and diplomatic aspects.

Suggestions for improving Iranian reports

The theme of the report is more balanced and diversified, listening to the voice of the people: Broaden the coverage and make in-depth reports on the political, economic, cultural, social, and other fields of countries along the line, so as to promote people's comprehensive understanding of Iran. Considering the diversity of the actual situation, we should avoid one-sided coverage and stereotype. Regarding the reports of the Belt and Road Initiative ,"most of them are the holding of government meetings, high-level government officials attending international conferences to vigorously promote the Belt and Road Initiative , and the release of local government matching policies.But in the analysis of the sample text, we can see that the expression of discourse, the choice of reporting angle, and the use of words make the original rigid way to achieve soft expression, making the news framework more vivid and easy to accept."(Jia,2019) [9]News reports must retain the authority of experts and scholars, but at the same time, they should also be close to the masses, enhance their voice, and report the practical benefits brought by the " Belt and Road " from the perspective of the masses, so that people can talk about their feelings and suggestions and raise their participation. At the same time, we should also pay attention to enhancing the humanity and interest of the report.From the title to the text writing, it should be both reasonable and interesting. The articles cited from the extranet must also consider the different social and cultural backgrounds of the two countries. The translation strives to localize and let more and more people understand the connotation of "Belt and Road".

The report content is more in-depth and insightful, focusing on training professional talents: "'Belt and Road'has plenty of external reports, and the report pays more attention to dynamic and continuity, and lacks quality in-depth reports. It is not enough to win only in quantity, but also in quality and depth to improve the level of external reporting. "(Wang,2019)[10]Through data statistics, it can be seen that the reports of China's mainstream media on Iran are mostly dynamic news, presenting a series of fact broadcasts, which can be carried out on Iran's historical origins, development

obstacles, and root causes of conflicts with Western powers. The integration of topics makes reporting more systematic, making it easier for the audience to find and understand. Relevant diplomats and historians can be employed to develop columns, to tell in-depth Iranian knowledge, to elaborate on the context of the problem, and to answer questions for the public. We should not only pursue quantity, but also quality. We should cultivate a team of journalists with strong comprehensive strength, attach importance to interdisciplinary talents, have solid theoretical and business capabilities, a broad global vision, not only understand the international situation and current events but also have their own unique views, proficient in foreign languages, to better build a bridge for friendly exchanges between the two countries.

Innovate the form of a report and use science and technology to help the report: At present, almost all the reports about Iran by the mainstream media in China are written content, only CCTV broadcasts news, which is video content. In the face of lengthy words and uninspired video images, it is difficult for the audience to have patience and interest to browse completely. In the era of new media with the rapid development of science and technology, media workers can increase tricks, optimize information dissemination scenes, VR, dynamic news, H5, news visualization game. Take the 2017 summit cooperation forum as an example, the VR of "Shining on the Silk Road" screened in the venue,and leads people to see and feel the scene along the road, Yamal gas field in the snow in the Russian Arctic,Wanli Huangsha oilfield in Taklimakan, and Horgos compressor station in border city. The video uses VR technology to show the construction achievements of energy investment cooperation between China and overseas from a unique perspective.(Wang,2019)[10]Immerse the audience in the news and experience Iran's national destiny and customs in a dynamic way, It not only passively receives information but mobilizes their enthusiasm in interaction and actively explores information.Or relying on big data algorithm technology, customized news for users.In the news report on Iran, targeted at the audience's interest, accurate communication can be achieved, thus improving the coverage of the news, and both sides of the audience and the media will win.

Conclusion

Both China and Iran play an irreplaceable role on the world map. In the context of the "Belt and Road", cooperation should be deepened. The "Belt and Road" initiative provides both opportunities and challenges for the mainstream media's communication work. If the media want to build bridges between China and foreign countries, they should also explore effective strategies for the two countries' ensemble.

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