

STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF PRIZE-WINNING WORKS IN THE CHINA NEWS AWARDS (INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION CATEGORY, 2016–2025)

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Received 30 January 2026

Revised 21 April 2026

Accepted 24 April 2026

Abstract

This study examines the structural features of award-winning international communication works recognized by the China News Award (International Communication Category) from the 26th to the 35th sessions, covering 2016 to 2025. It uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative grounded analysis, to analyze a complete set of 396 works. The analysis focuses on five key dimensions: reporting themes, journalistic genres, media platforms, language usage, and attitudinal orientation.

The findings reveal a highly stable and institutionalized structural paradigm, characterized by a focus on strategically important issues, a dominant narrative style that prioritizes depth, a hierarchical media platform configuration with traditional mainstream media at the core, a stratified language structure that emphasizes Chinese for narrative stability and English for external engagement, and a strong positive attitude, with over 80% of the sample expressing such an attitude. The consistent reproduction of these characteristics over a decade suggests that award-winning international communication practices function as a professionalized, strategically coordinated system, rather than a collection of disjointed editorial efforts. This study advances the field of international communication research by providing systematic and empirical evidence of established communication patterns.

Keywords: International Communication, China News Award, Structural Characteristics

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Introduction

Research Background

In the context of accelerated globalization and heightened geopolitical communication, international communication has become a strategic domain where nation-states compete to assert discourse power, gain legitimacy, and secure symbolic recognition. Mass media, a key player in this domain, significantly influences not only the dissemination of information but also the development of national narratives, the shaping of public perceptions, and the facilitation of cross-cultural understanding (Thussu, 2018). Through agenda-setting, framing, and narrative construction, media institutions exert long-term influence on the global public sphere and on how countries are perceived.

Scholars widely recognize that international communication has evolved beyond a neutral exchange of information across borders. It has become a structured and strategic activity, deeply shaped by power dynamics, institutional frameworks, and ideological rivalries (Castells, 2010; Melissen, 2005; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). In this context, mass media serves as a critical tool for the dissemination of soft power and public diplomacy (Nye, 2004, 2011).

Against this backdrop, China's international communication practices have attracted increasing scholarly attention. With its rapid economic growth, expanding political influence, and active global engagement, China is a central participant in global governance and a focal point of international media discourse (Shambaugh, 2013). However, China's international media image is often shaped by external narratives dominated by Western media systems, which tend to emphasize ideological differences or political controversies (Sun, 2010; Zhao, 2018). In response, China has taken proactive steps to strengthen its international communication capabilities by reinforcing media organizations, increasing multilingual content production, and adopting more forward-looking narrative strategies.

Within this broader strategic adjustment, the China News Award (CNA) plays a unique institutional role. Established as the most authoritative national journalism award in China, the CNA includes a dedicated International Communication Category designed to recognize outstanding journalistic works that effectively convey China's stories, perspectives, and values to international audiences. The winning works in this category go beyond ordinary media texts; they serve as officially recognized models of China's international communication efforts, embodying both professional journalistic standards and strategic communication objectives.

Research Problem and Significance

While there is a growing body of research on China's international communication strategies, most previous studies have focused on policy discussions, changes in media systems, or specific case studies involving media outlets such as CGTN or Xinhua News Agency (Li, 2019; Sun, 2021). Few studies have systematically and empirically analyzed award-winning international communication texts as a unified corpus, especially with regard to their structural

and strategic aspects. More importantly, previous research often treats media content as a fragmented product rather than as part of an integrated strategic system. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing all 396 winning works from five structural dimensions, providing systematic empirical evidence of institutionalized communication patterns

Research Question

According to the background provided, this study aims to answer the following question: What are the structural features of the winning works in the China News Award (International Communication Category) in terms of themes, genres, media platforms, language usage, and attitudinal orientation?

Research Contributions

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. By integrating agenda-setting, framing, and strategic narrative theories into a unified empirical framework, it advances the theoretical study of international communication and reveals how these theories collectively operate in China's international media practices. Unlike previous research that relied on limited samples or single-case studies, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the entire population, covering 396 award-winning works over a decade. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for media practitioners seeking to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of international communication strategies

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

International Communication Research

International communication research has evolved significantly, beginning with early studies on information flow and media imperialism, and later expanding to analyze discourse power and symbolic politics. Early scholarship emphasized asymmetrical communication frameworks, primarily controlled by Western media organizations, and highlighted issues of cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1976). As globalization and digital media became more prominent, later research focused on networked communication, transnational audiences, and hybrid media systems (Castells, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). Thussu (2018) argues that international communication should be analyzed within the broader context of geopolitical dynamics, emphasizing the interplay among media narratives, diplomatic efforts, and security issues.

Mass Media Communication Strategy

Mass media communication strategy involves the planned and coordinated use of media resources to achieve specific communication objectives. Hallahan et al. (2007) point out that strategic communication requires purposeful message design, audience targeting, and channel selection. In international communication, strategy is evident not only in content choices but also in structural decisions such as genre selection, media platform prioritization, and language arrangement. Napoli (2011) states that media institutions balance reach, credibility, and risk control when selecting communication channels. Studies on China's mass

media strategy show a preference for depth-oriented genres and institutionally credible platforms (Sun, 2010; Li, 2019).

China News Award and International Communication.

The China News Award has largely been evaluated according to the standard of journalistic professionalism, particularly as it relates to report quality as well as ethics and institutional standards. Utilizing institutional theory, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) suggest that journalism is embedded in structured regulatory contexts where normative roles and professional practices are defined and regulated. This kind of institutional configuration in the Chinese setting is bound up with state-oriented governance, and therefore, institutional forms are used to ensure and standardize journalistic output. The China News Award thus may be positioned as an institutional tool that not only measures journalistic excellence, but also strengthens normative expectations in the media world. The International Communication Category notably features criteria pertaining to cross-cultural effectiveness and global reach, indicative of an outward-facing orientation. As such, these awards can be interpreted as institutionally endorsed models of international communication strategy and therefore a robust and credible corpus for empirical investigation.

Theoretical Framework

The present study combines three mutually reinforcing theories.

The Agenda-Setting Theory, proposed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, explains how the media assign priority to certain issues and influence their prominence in public perception through consistent and prominent coverage. This theory provides a framework to analyze the concentration of themes and the hierarchy of issues in international communication.

Framing Theory, as proposed by Entman (1993) and Scheufele (1999), examines how the media shape public perception by defining issues, assigning causes, and endorsing specific interpretations through narrative frameworks. Framing Theory enables the explanation of genre preferences and attitudinal orientations.

Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014) explores how coherent, long-term narratives are constructed to legitimize political actors and inform audience understanding. This theory provides a macro-level framework to analyze how structural attributes collectively contribute to the national image

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative grounded analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The grounded analysis follows the principles of Charmaz (2014) and the foundational theories of Glaser and Strauss (1967), ensuring that thematic categories are derived from the corpus rather than imposed by pre-established frameworks.

Research Object and Sample Selection

The research examines all award-winning works in the International Communication Category of the China News Award, covering the 26th session in 2016 through the 35th session in 2025, for a total of 396 works. A full-sample strategy eliminates selection bias and ensures representativeness. These works come from national news agencies, television broadcasters, newspapers, and digital media platforms, representing a wide range of media organizations.

Analytical Units and Coding Framework

Every work can be analyzed through five fundamental dimensions: theme (the central topic), genre (the journalistic format), media platform (the channel of distribution), language (the language or languages used), and attitudinal orientation (the evaluative perspective). A coding manual with clear definitions and inclusion criteria was developed and structured.

Operationalization of Key Variables

Themes were determined by the most prominent issue, and 29 categories were identified. Genres were classified according to conventional journalistic categories. Media platforms were divided into three groups: traditional media, including television, newspapers, and radio; digital media, encompassing apps and websites; and institutional hybrid forms. Language use was categorized as Chinese, English, multilingual, or other languages. Attitudinal orientation was classified as positive, neutral, or negative based on explicit value assessments and narrative context.

Coding Procedure and Reliability

The coding process involved two stages: first, a pilot coding phase was conducted on 10% of the sample to refine definitions; then, trained coders independently coded the entire sample. For all variables, intercoder reliability, measured by Krippendorff's alpha, exceeded the 0.80 threshold, indicating a high level of consistency (Krippendorff, 2018; Lombard et al., 2002).

Findings

Thematic Distribution of Reporting Content

Analysis of thematic distribution reveals a highly concentrated but hierarchically organized agenda. Although 29 thematic categories are identified, only a few disproportionately dominate the coverage.

Table 1. Top Thematic Categories

Rank	Reported Themes	Frequencies
1	People-to-People Diplomacy	41
2	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	34
3	Local Culture	36
4	Revolutionary History	23
5	National Governance	27

The most common themes reported– people-to-people diplomacy, local culture, the Belt and Road Initiative, ecological protection, and national governance– form a stable core agenda. Peripheral themes such as judicial cooperation and the global economy appear only occasionally. This distribution shows that award-winning works do not cover many issues but instead focus on a few culturally accessible and strategically aligned topics.

Genre Characteristics

The analysis of journalistic genres reveals a strong emphasis on depth-oriented narrative forms. Of the 17 identified genres, news features, series reporting, and documentaries together make up 63.07% of the total sample.

Table 2. Genre Distribution

Rank	Journalistic Genre	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	News Feature	100	26.95%
2	Series Reporting	85	22.91%
3	Documentary	49	13.21%
4	Integrated Reporting	34	9.16%
5	Correspondence	29	7.82%

News briefs and live broadcasts, genres known for rapid information dissemination, occupy peripheral positions. The structure of this genre shows a clear tendency to construct meaning rather than compete for information, thus promoting cross-cultural understanding and reducing interpretive uncertainty.

Media Platform Distribution

Media platforms are distributed, reflecting a hierarchical and institutionally anchored structure. Television and newspapers are traditional mainstream media and serve as the dominant channels.

Table 3. Media Platform Distribution

Rank	Media Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Television	118	29.65%
2	Newspaper	92	23.12%
3	News App	52	13.07%
4	Radio	47	11.81%
5	Website	44	11.06%

Digital platforms provide an important supplementary layer, but social media appears only marginally ($\leq 1.51\%$). This pattern indicates that institutional credibility and controllability are prioritized over immediacy or interactivity.

Language Use

Language analysis shows a stratified linguistic structure. Chinese-language works make up the largest proportion, followed by English.

Table 4. Language Use

Rank	Language Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Chinese	204	51.52%
2	English	111	28.03%
3	Multilingual	44	11.11%
4	Other Languages	37	9.34%

Chinese employs a strategy in which core narratives are stabilized in the source language before being disseminated externally. English serves as the primary language for outward communication, enabling direct interaction with global audiences.

Attitudinal Orientation

The distribution of attitudinal orientation is highly asymmetrical. Positive reporting represents 81.57% of all work.

Table 5. Attitudinal Orientation

Rank	Attitudinal Orientation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Positive	323	81.57%
2	Neutral	43	10.86%
3	Negative	29	7.32%
4	-	1	0.25%

Positive attitudes are most associated with development, governance, and cooperation themes. This structure demonstrates a clear value orientation, emphasizing affirmation and constructive engagement

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This study analyzes the findings by integrating agenda-setting, framing, and strategic narrative theories.

From the agenda-setting perspective, the distribution of reporting themes indicates a long-term focus on managing salience. Award-winning works tend to concentrate on a narrow range of culturally familiar topics rather than addressing a wide array of diverse issues. This suggests that, in institutionalized international communication, agenda-setting functions as a strategic effort to enhance issue visibility and maintain narrative continuity, rather than as a short-term competition for attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

From a framing perspective, the prevalence of depth-focused narrative genres suggests that meaning is created more through the gradual buildup of narrative elements and contextual layering than through direct ideological confrontation. Storytelling structures incorporate frames, allowing interpretations to develop progressively. This non-adversarial approach to framing enhances interpretive clarity and reduces cross-cultural opposition (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999).

From a strategic narrative perspective, the results show consistent narrative coherence in award-winning works. Coherence is achieved not through rigid message uniformity, but through thematic consistency, collectively presenting China as a responsible global participant with a profound cultural heritage and effective governance. The hierarchical use of language suggests that narrative consolidation occurs not only within domestic institutional contexts but also prior to international dissemination (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

These findings can also be situated within the broader context of empirical research. Previous studies on China's international media have mainly used case-study methods (Jiang, 2022). In contrast, this study's analysis of the entire population demonstrates that the observed patterns are not anomalies but are integral to a stable, institutionally sustained paradigm. Compared to others, Western international broadcasters display greater genre diversity and more frequent use of conflict frames (Entman, 2004; Thussu, 2018). Chinese award-winning works exhibit a unique profile: they rely less on immediate responses, feature stronger contextual elements, and are nearly devoid of adversarial narratives. These differences reflect distinct media systems and strategic objectives.

Conclusion

This study shows that award-winning international communication works display highly consistent structural patterns across all five dimensions: thematic concentration on strategically significant issues; dominance of depth-oriented narrative genres; reliance on authoritative mainstream media platforms; hierarchical language configuration (Chinese for stabilization, English for outward engagement); and a strongly positive attitudinal orientation. The consistent replication of these patterns over a decade demonstrates that China's internationally acclaimed communication efforts constitute a stable, professional, and strategically aligned system, rather than a collection of disjointed editorial contributions.

This study advances agenda-setting and framing research by integrating them into the context of institutionalized international communication and substantiates strategic narrative theory with empirical evidence. In practice, it provides a framework for understanding international communication as a long-term, institutionally supported process. The limitations are twofold: first, the exclusive emphasis on award-winning works, which may reflect exceptional rather than typical practices; second, the lack of analysis of audience reception. Subsequent studies should investigate international audiences' perceptions of these structural features and undertake comparative analyses across different nations.

Contribution and future research

The study contributes to the literature on international communication by analyzing 396 award-winning works from the China News Award (International Communication Category) between 2016 and 2025. The results provide empirical evidence that these works exhibit stable structural trends in reporting themes, journalistic genres, media platforms, language use, and attitudinal orientation. This evidence helps define how China's international communication is strategically and institutionally constructed through award-winning media practices. The study also demonstrates the potential applicability of agenda-setting, framing, and strategic narrative theories in explaining communication patterns in the Chinese context. Researchers can further explore these topics by examining non-award-winning works, conducting cross-country comparative studies, and analyzing audience reception to deepen the understanding of how international communication messages are produced and interpreted.

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