

Threat vs. Pragmatism: A Comparative Study of Media Framing of China's Artificial Intelligence in The New York Times and Asahi Shimbun

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Abstract. Artificial intelligence (AI) is gaining momentum and has already become one of the spheres of technological rivalry among leading powers in the world. The fast-developing AI sector in China has therefore gained a lot of attention globally. As major players of global science and technology, mainstream media in the U. S. and Japan are main platforms that construct international attitudes towards AI advancements in China, and as such, their differences in narratives and discursive construction are of great interest. This paper discusses China-related AI news by the Asahi Shimbun in Japan and the New York Times in the U.S. in the period between December 2022 and March 2026. In their coverage of AI in China, the two media exhibit drastically different narrative logics. The New York Times uses the threat narrative framework, among other strategies, to fit an undesirable image of the AI development in China, motivated by the U. S. technological anxiety against China. Conversely, during the simultaneous occurrence of Chinese and Japanese scientific and technological collaboration and geopolitical chess-play, the Asahi Shimbun takes a more practical approach in its reporting, based on the possibilities of collaboration that Chinese AI development can bring. These differences are, in essence, based on the divergent U.S. and Japanese strategic positions on Chinese AI and the interests of Japan in its industrial sector. The results give specific information on how to maximize international communication in the AI industry.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Media Framing, Comparative Media Analysis, Geopolitics of Technology

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and significance

The launch of ChatGPT in late 2022 marked a new phase of rapid AI development, transforming it into a key factor reshaping the global techno-political landscape. Concurrently, breakthroughs in China's AI industry, exemplified by DeepSeek, signal a shift from a unipolar to a more pluralistic and competitive global AI arena [1].

The breakthrough progress China has made in popularizing AI globally will strongly drive positive transformations across multiple sectors, including agriculture, energy, and healthcare [2]. Taking the global AI copyright dilemma triggered by DeepSeek as the entry point, Hu analyzed the underlying narrative competition and pointed out that technological innovations from Chinese AI enterprises are breaking the Western-dominated discourse hegemony [3]. The widespread application and strategic indispensability of digital technologies have not only reshaped the traditional landscape of international relations but also systematically institutionalized digital geopolitics as an emerging domain in which technological capability has become the new currency of national power [4]. Consequently, U.S. and European media often deploy a "geopolitical security risk" framework, politicizing technical issues and advancing a "China tech threat" narrative—a reflection of media narratives being shaped by national interests and strategic positioning [1,5].

This study, therefore, investigates not only the manifestation of these narrative differences but, more importantly, the underlying formation mechanisms. As noted in Ma's study, media capital in developed countries such as the United States and Japan is highly concentrated, holding an essentially monopolistic position in global information sources and discourse power [6]. These divergent national stances—U.S. "technological anxiety" towards its "primary strategic competitor" and Japan's "contradiction between strategic alignment and industrial cooperation"—are hypothesized to manifest in corresponding media narratives. This study investigates these hypothesized narrative divergences and their formation mechanisms.

1.2. Literature review and identified gaps

The existing literature has documented that The New York Times devotes particular attention to the sociopolitical impacts of China's scientific and technological development in its coverage, with a focus on issues such as security, surveillance, and privacy protection [7]. Meanwhile, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) identifies AI as a strategic imperative for enterprises to maintain competitiveness, and stresses that the military must accelerate the application of AI, or it will face the risk of compromised ability to prevail in future conflicts [8]. Wang et al. used the sentiment analysis to analyze the coverage of the New York Times on China-related news and discovered that the newspaper often resorts to the discursive resource of stability when reporting on China-related news, and the ideological bias behind such an intervention should be questioned [9]. A discourse analysis of the reporting of the New York Times on Huawei in 2018-2023 by Li reveals that the newspaper has methodically built the image of Chinese technology companies as a security threat by choosing what is reported on and how to evoke negative emotions [10]. In the ecological discourse analysis, Liu analyzed the coverage of AI in The New York Times and discovered a strong ideological influence in its reporting on the development of AI in China [11]. Li et al. contrasted the science and technology coverage of China Daily and The New York Times and discovered that there is a dramatic difference between the aspects of self-representation and other-representation of China in its science and technology image construction, with The New York Times mainly emphasizing on the competitive threats [12].

Research by I.B et al. Western media has positioned China as a quest to gain technological advancement and lead as an exportation of its authoritarian system of governance [13]. Other studies have revealed that the technological achievements of China are often depicted as having been gained illegitimately, a theme that conforms to the wider discourse of dissatisfaction [14]. This evidence also supports the technological anxiety behind The New York Times coverage on the topic of China. This is consistent with the narrative competition theory, which suggests that tech rivalry is a competition over discursive power as well [15]. It is also noteworthy that the research indicates that

Japanese media could have a more technology- and opportunity-oriented narrative than the U. S. "threat" frame [1]. Gerald Matthews et al. further explained the construction mechanism of news framing, explaining that media coverage is not an objective, a neutral reflection of reality, but rather is strongly influenced by certain ideologies and interests requirements [16]. Long added that this media bias is not just manifested in the dimension of issue selection, but extends to all dimensions of discursive expression and meaning-making [17]. Moreover, the media institutions' news reporting is not always objective and neutral, which is what is referred to as media bias. Biases in the media may have such a negative influence on society since biased news reporting can influence the election process or the way people see social problems [18]. It is against this background that a structured system of analysis of divergences in the narrative of China-related AI news in mainstream U. S. and Japanese media, as well as an inquiry into the forces behind such differences, is a highly practical imperative.

1.3. Guiding questions and hypotheses

1.3.1. Research questions

What are some of the differences in how The New York Times and Asahi Shimbun set their agenda, frame, and choose sources when reporting on the development of AI in China?

Do the two media outlets have significant differences in their emotional tendencies of China-related AI reports, and what are the factors?

What are some of the underlying reasons and causes, based on the respective national backgrounds of the U. S. and Japan, that led to these noted narrative differences?

1.3.2. Research hypotheses

H1a: The New York Times has a much more negative emotional inclination in its AI reports about China in comparison to The Asahi Shimbun.

H1b: Compared with The New York Times, The Asahi Shimbun presents more negative emotions in China-related science and technology reports.

H2: The New York Times uses more narratives reflecting technological anxiety, whereas the adversarial framing of The Asahi Shimbun is less evident in topics related to pure technological industries and economic cooperation.

2. Research design

This study is mainly based on content analysis, with some descriptive and inferential stats thrown in. It also runs inter-group difference tests to double-check whether the findings actually hold up.

News articles were retrieved from LexisNexis, Factiva, ProQuest, and the official websites of The New York Times and Asahi Shimbun for the period December 1, 2022, to March 31, 2026, using the keywords: "China," "artificial intelligence," "AI," and "generative AI." After merging results and removing duplicates, articles were screened based on headlines and leads, followed by a full-text review to ensure relevance to China's AI development, resulting in the final sample.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa on a randomly selected subset of the sample. All variables exceeded the acceptable threshold ($Kappa > 0.87$). A detailed coding scheme was developed based on the research questions. The actual number crunching was done using SPSS. Chi-square tests were used to look at differences between categories, along with t-tests and binary or multinomial logistic regression. The study controlled for factors such as the type of issue, the source,

and the publication date. On top of that, the manual coding results were checked again against outputs from automated sentiment analysis tools to cross-validate everything.

Besides all the stats, this study also pulled out a few representative quotes from news articles to serve as qualitative examples. These specific pieces of text support the quantitative findings and add a bit more depth to the study. Finally, the findings are interpreted and discussed by integrating perspectives from communication studies and international relations theory.

3. Preliminary data analysis

3.1. Data collection and sample construction process

The researcher performed a sample study utilizing the database systems ProQuest, LexisNexis, Factiva, and Dow Jones, as well as the official websites of The New York Times and The Asahi Shimbun. The keywords used in the searches were China AND "artificial intelligence" OR "AI" OR "generative AI" and the date range was set for January 1, 2023, to March 31, 2026. This ensured the samples were highly relevant to the study.

To a maximum degree, content not related to news was excluded, such as adverts, comment abstracts, and text messages. Preserving the sample's analytical quality, complete news reports and commentaries were selected. Reports that were not related to China's AI development were also removed, including those that merely mentioned China without referring to AI, as well as those that discussed AI without mentioning China. The kept eligible articles were subject to a second round of manual interpretation.

3.2. Final sample determination and descriptive statistics

Following the deduplication and initial screening, 157 valid samples (N=157) were obtained after the pre-established screening criteria were applied. Among these 76 samples were provided by The Asahi Shimbun (N1=76), which is 48.4% of the total, and 81 by The New York Times (N2=81), which is 51.6% of the total. In general, the two media sources had quite similar sample sizes. The number of samples increased drastically during the second half of 2025 and reached its peak in early 2026.

As shown in Figure 1, this trend is in close correlation with the technological breakthrough of DeepSeek and the intensification of the China-US chip war, which portrays that the alteration of technology and the rivalry between the two countries have a major effect on media agenda-setting. Meanwhile, The New York Times had a somewhat larger sample than The Asahi Shimbun due to its more international coverage and more attention to the China-U.S. technological rivalry. This finding aligns with the real output trend of Chinese-related AI news in the key media outlets in the U.S. and Japan. After deliberating on problematic entries and changes in the coding manual, two coders independently coded the 157 samples and recorded their scores. Then a Kappa test was carried out to determine the coding results of the two coders. The results of the tests demonstrated that the coding of themes, frame, sentiment, and source had a Kappa of 0.89, 0.87, 0.88, and 0.86, respectively. The Kappa coefficients in all dimensions were at least 0.87, which was good inter-coder reliability, satisfying the standards of the research.

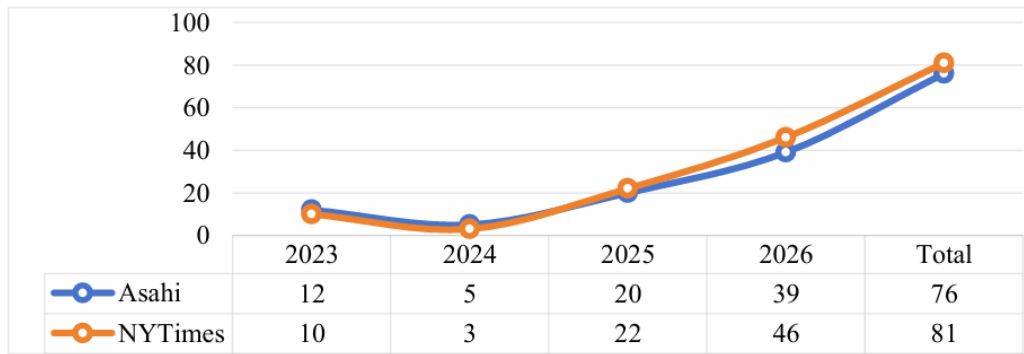


Figure 1. The changes in the number of reports by the two media outlets

4. Result

4.1. Divergent agendas: topic selection and focus

Table 1. Layout distribution

Science and Technology section	68	43.3%
International section	57	36.3%
Business section	22	14.0%
Opinion section	8	5.1%

Table 1 presents the layout distribution of the 157 sample articles, which are mostly concentrated in the science and technology, international, and business sections. They are distributed as follows: 68 articles are in science and technology section, and this represents 43.3% of the total samples; 57 articles are in international section, where it represents 36.3 percent of the total samples; 22 articles are in business section, and it is 14.0 percent of all samples; 8 articles are in opinion section, and it is at 5.1 percent of all samples. This observation shows that the artificial intelligence (AI) of China in the areas of technological, international and business aspects is mostly reported by mainstream media in the United States and Japan. The science and technology segment focuses on the competition and development of the AI technology itself, the international one is on the games behind AI geopolitically, and the business segment is on the market impact and economic worth of the AI industry.

Table 2. Differences in topic selection

	Chip Competition	DeepSeek	Industrial Policy	Security Risks	Talent	Global Governance
Asahi	19 (25.00%)	4 (5.26%)	38 (50.00%)	6 (7.89%)	2 (2.63%)	7 (9.21%)
NYTimes	29 (35.80%)	13 (16.05%)	12 (14.81%)	15 (18.52%)	4 (4.94%)	8 (9.88%)

Table 2 reveals a stark contrast in editorial priorities regarding China's AI. The Asahi Shimbun concentrated its coverage on China's AI industrial policy (50% of its reports), whereas The New York Times gave primacy to the China-U.S. chip competition (35.8% of its reports). A chi-square test confirmed that these differences in topic distribution are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 44.77$, $p < .001$). It is important to note that The New York Times also reported much more on security risks (18.5%) than Asahi (7.9%).

In the case of the New York Times, 81 reports were reviewed, out of which the topic of chip competition was the main one, 29 articles or 35.80 percent of the total. Security risks made up 18.52% (15 articles), DeepSeek 16.05% (13 articles), global governance 9.88% (8 articles), industrial policy 14.81% (12 articles), and talent 4.94% (4 articles).

The fact that chi-square analysis showed that the topic distribution in the two media outlets was extremely different ($X^2 = 44.77 > 11.07$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed the results of the chi-square test. In particular, the New York Times paid more attention to the competition of chips, that is, 35.80% of its total coverage. Conversely, the reports of the Asahi Shimbun were more inclined toward industrial policy (50.00%) and chip competition (25.00%).

The focus of ideas presented in this topic is an indication of the critical interests of mainstream U. S. and Japanese media in the development of AI in China. To begin with, the competition of AI and controls over chips between the United States and China is the main center of AI competitions all over the world, and is the first issue of the Western media. Second, DeepSeek-related events, being a breakthrough in the field of AI in China, have been a focus of the Western media because they have a global impact. Third, the Western media are interested in evaluating the Chinese AI industry and policies through the prism of its industrial policies and the present stage of its development. Fourth, threats of security and ethics, which are the main theme that the Western media promotes to popularize the theory of the threat of AI in China, and one of the main manifestations of their ideological views.

Regarding differences in topic distribution between the two media outlets, the Asahi Shimbun devoted a slightly higher proportion of its reports to industrial policy, talent, and research and development compared to the New York Times, with a greater emphasis on industrial and technological perspectives. The New York Times, by contrast, allocated a slightly higher proportion of coverage to security and ethical risks as well as global governance, focusing more on ideological and geopolitical perspectives. Such differences are closely related to the varying positioning and concerns of the two media outlets.

4.2. Contrasting frames: threat vs. opportunity

Table 3. Differences in reporting framing

	Competitive Confrontation	Threat and Risk	Opportunity and Development	Cooperation and Neutrality
Asahi	36 (47.37%)	5 (6.58%)	32 (42.11%)	3 (3.95%)
NYTimes	44 (54.32%)	30 (37.04%)	4 (4.94%)	3 (3.70%)

Table 3 reveals notable differences in the reporting frameworks of the two media outlets, with statistical significance ($X^2(3)=40.32$, $p<0.001$) and a large effect size (Cramer's $V=0.51$). Specifically, the Asahi Shimbun showed a stronger preference for the Opportunity and Development Framework, which accounted for 42.11% of its reports. The New York Times, by contrast, frequently adopted the Threat and Risk Framework, using it in 37.04% of its coverage. This created a clear divergence in their core narrative frameworks.

4.3. Polarized sentiment: negative dominance vs. neutral pragmatism

Table 4. Differences in sentiment

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Asahi	19 (25.00%)	57 (75.00%)	0 (0.00%)
NYTimes	52 (64.20%)	29 (35.80%)	0 (0.00%)

Table 4 presents the results of testing differences in emotional tendencies of Sino-related science and technology reports between the two media outlets. There was an extremely significant difference in the distribution of emotional tendencies between the Asahi Shimbun and the New York Times ($X^2(1, N=157)=24.32, p<0.001, \Phi=0.39$).

Specifically, the New York Times focused primarily on negative emotional reports, accounting for 64.20%, while the Asahi Shimbun focused on neutral ones, accounting for 75.00%. The results of the hypothesis test indicate that H1a was fully supported and H1b was falsified; that is, the New York Times showed a significantly stronger negative emotional tendency than the Asahi Shimbun.

4.4. Sourcing strategies: official/corporate vs. international media

Table 5. Differences in source selection

	U.S. officials	International media	Western enterprises	Chinese	Japanese
Asahi	10 (13.16%)	59 (77.63%)	3 (3.95%)	0 (0.00%)	4 (5.26%)
NYTimes	42 (51.85%)	23 (28.40%)	16 (19.75%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)

Table 5 shows that a chi-square test of the data revealed distinct differences in the source selection strategies of the two media outlets ($X^2 = 48.11, df = 3, p < .001$). The New York Times relied significantly more on U.S. official sources (51.85%) and Western corporate sources (19.75%). In contrast, the Asahi Shimbun quoted "international media" sources more frequently (77.63%).

4.5. Discursive markers: lexical evidence of technological anxiety

A supplementary keyword assessment focusing on strategic confrontation and technological anxiety made use of this divide. Such terms were present in greater quantity and density in The New York Times, contributing to its "threat" narrative. The Asahi Shimbun's lexicon, in contrast, was dominated by neutral, industry-related terms, focusing on practical collaboration and market dynamics, with confrontational terms largely absent, except for direct geopolitical articles.

The two media's lexical choices greatly differed, enabling the confirmation of research hypothesis H2 and demonstrating in a self-evident way the New York Times' confrontational technological anxiety narrative as opposed to the Asahi Shimbun's pragmatic cooperative narrative.

5. Discussion

5.1. Beyond dichotomy: explaining divergent frames through national strategic logics

The quantitative results provide several clear trends: The threat frame of the New York Times, a negative tone, and geopolitically-oriented sourcing are in sharp contrast to the opportunity frame of

the Asahi Shimbun, a neutral tone, and industry-oriented sourcing. This is not a mere divergence but a consequence of the very different strategic rationale of the U. S. and Japan towards the technological ascendancy of China.

The threat narrative published by the New York Times is a discursive presentation of the U. S. strategic posture, which perceives China as a major strategic rival. This position produces a widespread technological anxiety that aims at preserving hegemony [11]. The editorial practices of the newspaper, including a focus on competition in the field of chips, the risks of insecurity, the high level of sourcing in official and corporate circles in the U. S., and a negative and securitized language use, are working together to create a social agreement that justifies policies of containment and cultivates support in favor of technological competition.

The more practical and subtle reporting of Asahi Shimbun is the manifestation of the dual-positionality of Japan: a key U. S. ally that must remain strategically aligned, and a key economic partner that is a significant part of the Chinese industrial environment. Such a structural contradiction requires a bifurcated narrative strategy. It is very restrained in the use of the threat frame in geopolitical coverage, with a cautionary resonance of alliance issues. Nonetheless, in most of its coverage of industry and technology, it uses a neutral, opportunity-based frame, focusing more on reporting on industrial policy, market forces, and cooperative possibilities- a direct expression of the significant material interests that Japan has in the development of AI in China. Such a compartmentalized strategy enables the newspaper to maneuver its conflicting national interests.

5.2. Theoretical contributions: advancing narrative competition and image "other-construction"

This paper confirmed the theory of narrative competition, as postulated by Retzmann, which was a competition that was fierce within the science and technology sector between the U.S., its allies and China. It was not an ordinary battle of technological might; the essence was the battle of discourse power of defining what Chinese AI is and how perceptions about what Chinese AI really is can be shared with the world [13]. The New York Times was relentlessly trying to identify the Chinese AI as a threat, and some reports in Asahi Shimbun were inclined to consider it as a development opportunity or reality- these are the tangible expression of the concept of narrative competition.

This work also contributed to the research conducted by Li Hui et al. about the image of other-construction of China [12]. Earlier researchers have assumed a rather homogenous image of China in the Western media, but this paper has found that there are considerable variations in the coverage of Chinese AI and science and technology across allies of the U. S. These variations were based on the interests of each country, the geographical location, and the relevance of the country to the industry in China. Using the example of the Asahi Shimbun, its pragmatic reporting due to its strong connections to the Chinese science and technology sector, assisted the world in understanding that Chinese AI is not all about the threat narrative, allowing it to create a platform on which to challenge the unitary negative assessment of Chinese AI in the West.

Integrating these lessons, this paper suggests a National Strategic Logic → Media Narrative model of analysis. According to the model, the overall strategic posture of a country (e.g., competitor vs. conflicted partner) determines the fundamental interests of the country, which in turn motivate and limit the narrative structures embraced by its mainstream media. The model can be used to explain and predict the variations in international technology reporting outside the U. S.-Japan-China environment with a parsimonious tool.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Key findings

This comparison paper explains one of the core differences in how the most prominent U. S. and Japanese media portray China as an AI power. The New York Times uses a systematic approach of a so-called threat narrative, which is typified by a pre-occupation with geopolitical rivalry (e.g., chips), negative affect, and sourcing that resembles that of U. S. official and corporate views. In sharp contrast, the Asahi Shimbun advertisement uses a more pragmatic narrative, being more concerned with the coverage of industrial policy, keeping a neutral stance, and referring to international media sources, which is also indicative of their interest in the dynamics of the market and opportunities of cooperation.

This opposition is not a simple editorial choice but a logical difference that is based on the geopolitical logic of the two countries. The threat frame of the U. S. media is a strategic stance of technological rivalry and fear against a main strategic rival.

6.2. Research significance

On the theoretical level, this research experimented with the relevance of narrative competition theory to science and technology communication. It added to the differentiated studies of the process of other-construction of the scientific and technological image of China and disrupted the natural perception of homogeneity of the Western media discourse on China. This paper suggested a three-level transmission model of national strategic positioning - core interest demands - media narrative framework, an analysis framework of narrative analysis that can be applied to other international communication research.

At the applied level, this research categorized the narrative logic and formation processes of mainstream media coverage of artificial intelligence in China, the United States, and Japan. The results allow the stakeholders, both communicators and policymakers, to develop differentiated strategies of engagement and create a more informed context of international techno-industrial cooperation.

6.3. Limitations and future research directions

The study's focus on one outlet per country means its findings cannot be generalized to the American and Japanese media landscapes as a whole. Additionally, the study's focus on discourse production leaves open the actual narratives' impact on audience perception, creating a gap between the discourse production and reception.

To address the gap between discourse production and reception, future studies should include a media audience component, utilizing mixed methodology (surveys, interviews, etc.) to determine the impact of media framing on audience perception. Furthermore, the study would benefit from a larger sample, incorporating more media from and outside the two countries to increase the generalizability and strength of the findings.

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