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Research Paper

Narrating China Through Soft News: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of Chinese and American Mainstream Media

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Abstract

This study compares media framing in soft news stories published by China Daily and The New York Times, with a particular focus on emotional tone and thematic variations across domains such as technology, tourism, and economy. Using TextBlob and VADER sentiment analysis tools, the research quantifies differences in positivity and negativity across the two media outlets. Results reveal that China Daily exhibited a higher mean sentiment score, indicating a more positive and neutral tone. In contrast, The New York Times reported a lower sentiment score, reflecting greater emotional variability and critical framing. A TextBlob sentiment t-test confirmed a statistically significant difference between the two sources, while the VADER sentiment t-test showed no significant variation, indicating that contextual sentiment differences were more prominent in TextBlob's polarity analysis. These findings corroborate existing scholarship indicating that state-controlled media typically construct more positive and uniform narratives, whereas independent Western outlets adopt a more critical tone and exhibit greater variability in sentiment expression. The study highlights the role of editorial policies in shaping news sentiment and calls for a nuanced understanding of how media influences public perception.

***Keywords*:** Media Framing; Sentiment Analysis; Emotion Distribution; Soft News; Comparative Journalism; Natural Language Processing (NLP); Cross-Cultural Communication.

1. Introduction

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of national development, technological progress, cultural identity, and international engagement, thereby constructing narratives that influence how audiences interpret non-political global issues. While extensive research has focused on political and hard news coverage, soft news—encompassing domains such as technology, culture, lifestyle, sports, and the economy—has increasingly shaped international discourse by subtly influencing how national image, innovation capacity, and cultural relevance are perceived across borders (Prior, 2003; Reinemann et al., 2012). Despite its growing communicative power, soft news remains underexplored in scholarly literature, particularly in comparative media studies. This study addresses that gap by examining how soft news narratives contribute to the transnational construction of China's image in mainstream English-language media. The research analyzes how China Daily and The New York Times construct the narratives of China's soft news in AI, tourism, digital technology, culture, and economy. Accordingly, this study adopts a framing-centered approach supported by computational techniques—including sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and lexical distribution analysis—to examine how China's image is constructed in soft news discourse across different media systems. Scholars have noted that soft news contributes to the construction of national image by humanizing foreign affairs and shaping emotional resonance through non-confrontational content (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). Against this backdrop, this study investigates how China's image is framed in soft news stories by China Daily and The New York Times. These two outlets represent distinct media systems: China Daily, as a state-sponsored publication, operates under government-aligned editorial policies and serves national soft power objectives (Edney, 2012); in contrast, The New York Times, as a commercially independent Western newspaper, adheres to journalistic norms that prioritize critical scrutiny and market-driven news values (Demaske, 2005; Puglisi, 2011; Stojan, 2024). Drawing on comparative media systems theory, this

study assumes that institutional context, ownership structure, and normative role significantly influence how media outlets construct narratives—even in non-political domains. Therefore, differences in sentiment orientation, topic selection, and rhetorical style in soft news are likely shaped not only by journalistic routines, but also by broader ideological and structural frameworks.

2. Theoretical Framework: Media Framing and Discourse Analysis

This study draws on two interrelated theoretical frameworks—framing theory and media discourse analysis—both of which have been extensively employed to investigate how media shapes public perceptions of national identity, policy legitimacy, and cultural narratives. For example, Entman (1993) demonstrated how U.S. media coverage of foreign policy selectively highlights certain aspects of reality to influence audience interpretation, while Van Dijk (2008) showed how discourse structures in news narratives reflect and reproduce ideological positions. Goffman (1974), who first conceptualized "framing" as a way of organizing everyday experience, argued that individuals interpret information through socially constructed frames that guide meaning-making. Entman (1993) further operationalized framing by identifying its four core functions in media texts: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. These functions are particularly relevant in soft news discourse, where national identity, technological progress, or cultural diplomacy are often implicitly constructed rather than overtly debated. However, existing framing literature has predominantly focused on hard news and political coverage, leaving soft news framing—especially in non-confrontational areas such as AI, tourism, and culture—relatively underexplored, Corcuera and Bernardo (2025) further demonstrate the power of framing in the sports domain. In this study, framing theory provides the conceptual lens to examine how two ideologically and institutionally distinct media outlets, *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, construct China's image through soft news. By analyzing how specific linguistic choices, thematic emphases, and sentiment tones are employed across these narratives, this research aims to uncover the implicit framing mechanisms that influence global perceptions of China in non-political contexts.

Complementing framing theory, media discourse analysis provides a critical lens for examining how language, ideology, and institutional power interact to shape the construction and reception of news narratives. According to Van Dijk (2008), media discourse is not a neutral conduit of information but a structured communicative practice that encodes social hierarchies, ideological orientations, and institutional agendas. This approach foregrounds the role of lexical choices, syntactic structures, and narrative organization in maintaining or contesting dominant worldviews. In the context of cross-national media reporting, variations in lexical style, topic selection, and sentiment tone often reflect the ideological positioning of the media outlet. For instance, studies have shown that language choices aligned with national or editorial ideologies manifest in the preference for evaluative adjectives, metaphorical framings, and selective sourcing (Guo & Vargo, 2020; Terman, 2017). Researchers emphasize the ethical imperative of narrating subjects' voices with fidelity (Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2017). In this study, such discourse-level elements are analyzed within the framework of soft news coverage—specifically in domains like AI, tourism, and digital economy—where narrative tone and linguistic emphasis function as subtle instruments of image construction. By examining the semantic, emotional, and thematic layers of news discourse, this study seeks to uncover how institutionalized patterns of meaning-making are embedded in the representation of China in both state-affiliated and independent Western media.

2.1. China's Media Narrative vs. U.S. Media Narrative: A Divergent Lens

Media systems are developed by the historical, political and institutional frameworks that have a tone to the journalism practice and media content selection (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The Chinese media system mostly has state-directed media that propagates the official policy ideas where they focus on progress, technology, and cultural superiority (Zhao, 2003). On the other hand, the USA media system has been described as being a commercial and a watchdog model whereby the media focuses on investigative journalism, (second) opinions and opinions analysis (Bennett, 2012).

This distinction is also evident in how soft news related to China is framed. Studies have shown that *China Daily* frequently constructs narratives emphasizing China's economic resilience, technological leadership in AI, and international cooperation, aligning with the state's agenda to promote a favorable image abroad (Wang, 2003; Fook, 2010). These narratives often underscore China's contributions to global governance, digital innovation, and cultural outreach through initiatives like the Belt and Road. In contrast, The New York Times often embeds soft news within broader discourses of strategic competition, framing China's technological development and global influence—especially

in sectors like artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure—as challenges to U.S. dominance (Saleem, 2007, Guo & Vargo, 2020). While both outlets may cover similar events, their framing strategies reflect divergent ideological orientations and institutional logics, which, in turn, shape how international audiences interpret China's global role (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In this study, we systematically analyze these narrative divergences through sentiment analysis, framing keyword frequency, and topic modeling, allowing us to quantitatively assess how soft news differs across media outlets.

2.2. Research Objectives and Questions

The goal of this study is to examine the narrative strategies, sentiment tones, and topic structures used by China Daily and The New York Times when reporting on China's soft news stories. By applying computational text analysis techniques, the research addresses the following key questions:

(1) How do China Daily and The New York Times differ in their framing of soft news related to China?

(2) What are the dominant topics covered by each media outlet, and how do they differ?

(3) What are the sentiment and emotion patterns in soft news coverage of China?

(4) How do specific framing keywords contribute to the construction of China's image in soft news?

To answer these questions, we analyzed articles from both newspapers using word frequency analysis, sentiment scoring models (VADER, TextBlob), topic modeling (LDA), and emotion classification (NRC Lexicon). This multi-method approach allowed for a quantitative and qualitative examination of soft news framing.

2.3. Significance and Contribution

This study contributes to media framing research by shifting the focus from hard news and political discourse to soft news narratives. Understanding how China is portrayed in non-political contexts—such as technology, economy, and tourism—provides valuable insights into cross-cultural media representations and public diplomacy. Every day, China is coming to dominate AI, digital markets, and styled entertainment products; it is crucial to identify how these stories in terms of perception are framed in the Western or Chinese media.

Furthermore, this research employs computational linguistics methodology that enhances the combining of media discourse analysis with data analysis of a large number of texts. Through the integration of natural language processing (NLP) techniques, sentiment analysis, and topic modeling, this study advances a methodologically robust and replicable framework for the comparative examination of soft news narratives within and across media systems. Specifically, the combination of sentiment analysis (TextBlob, VADER), topic modeling (LDA), and emotion classification (NRC Lexicon) enables a multi-dimensional examination of narrative construction, which can be adapted to investigate media representations in other geopolitical contexts or linguistic environments.

3. Methodology

To assess the geopolitical narratives constructed by *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, this study adopts a quantitative-qualitative design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to discourse analysis. In particular, Natural Language Processing techniques are employed to identify linguistic patterns, dominant content themes, and overall tonal orientation in news coverage (Purohit et al., 2025). The analytical process combines Sentiment Analysis (SA)**,** Topic Modeling (TM**)** using Latent Dirichlet Allocation, Emotion Detection (ED) through the NRC Emotion Lexicon, and Framing Analysis (FA) based on predefined keyword categories. Together, these methods enable a comprehensive examination of how media discourse contributes to the construction of China's international image in soft news contexts. The study adheres to a systematic and replicable data collection and analysis protocol to minimize subjective interference and ensure methodological transparency (Pilar Agustín-Llach, 2023).

While content analysis focuses primarily on quantifying the presence of predefined categories—such as word frequency, topics, or sentiment polarity—critical discourse analysis **(**CDA**)** aims to uncover the ideological underpinnings and power relations embedded in linguistic structures and narrative strategies (Fairclough, 1995; Roohani & Esmaeili, 2010; Van Dijk, 2008.). Building on operationalization of Fairclough's model in educational texts (Chalak, & Ghasemi, 2017), this study adapts their three-stage procedure (textual analysis → discursive practice → social practice) for a

systematic examination of soft-news articles. Content analysis tends to prioritize manifest content and observable trends, whereas CDA engages with latent meanings and the sociopolitical functions of language. As Entman (1993) argues, framing involves both selection and salience, processes that cannot be fully captured through surface-level content metrics alone. Therefore, this study supplements computational content analysis with discourse-analytic insights to better account for the strategic use of language in shaping China's image across different media systems.

3.1. Data Collection and Selection of Sources

The sample comprises 15 news articles from China Daily and 15 from The New York Times. All articles were published between January 2023 and March 2025 to enable a focused comparison of media-coverage tendencies. Only full-length news reports were included, consistent with Sagitova et al.'s (2023) findings on mobile-technology–mediated communication; opinion/editorial pieces and brief news briefs were excluded to maintain consistency across sources.

Researcher Reflexivity and Potential Biases: The corpus was deliberately bounded by outlet (China Daily vs. The New York Times), time frame, and article type to ensure comparability; however, this approach may introduce selection bias by overlooking relevant coverage in other media or formats. The research team's longstanding engagement with Sino–US media comparisons—and familiarity with each outlet's editorial priorities—could further shape topic interpretation and model configuration. To mitigate these influences, all texts underwent identical preprocessing (stopword removal, lemmatization) and were analyzed via blind peer checks: independent reviewers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds evaluated topic labels without knowledge of the source or researcher expectations. This protocol seeks to enhance analytic transparency and limit the impact of researcher positionality on thematic findings.

3.2. Criteria for Topic Selection

The eight soft news items identified in this study were chosen because of their relation to the image that China portrays to the outside world and the fact that they are frequently featured in both newspapers. The selected topics are:

(1) Sports Events – These are events that involve international sporting championships in which Chinese sporting fraternities or teams participate.

(2) Technology & Economy – Reports on China's AI development, fintech sector, and global digital market influence.

(3) China's Transit Visa Policy – News related to China's revised visa policies, tourism impact, and international travel regulations.

(4) Chinese Cultural Exchange Programs – Coverage of China's educational, artistic, and diplomatic cultural initiatives abroad.

(5) GPT and DeepSeek – Articles discussing China's advancements in artificial intelligence and large language models.

(6) Health & Lifestyle – Reports on public health policies, traditional Chinese medicine, and fitness trends.

(7) Electric Vehicles (EVs) – Media narratives on China's role in the global EV industry, production, and export strategies.

(8) The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – News framing of China's infrastructure investments and international economic partnerships.

The topics were selected to reflect China's influence in non-political sectors, ensuring that the study captures how soft news contributes to shaping perceptions of China's technological, economic, and cultural influence.

3.3. Selection of Media Sources

The two newspapers selected for this study are among the most influential and widely read international news outlets.

(1) China Daily – A state-run English-language newspaper that represents China's official media perspective and promotes narratives related to national development, global collaboration, and technological progress.

(2) The New York Times – A U.S.-based international newspaper recognized for its investigative journalism and critical analysis, often framing China's technological and economic developments within a competitive, market-driven global context.

All articles were obtained from the official websites of China Daily (chinadaily.com.cn) and New York Times (nytimes.com) to ensure the data credibility. The keywords in the manual search were efficient in making sure that the selected dataset embraced the chosen topics. The articles were saved in PDF format and then split into groups related to their geopolitical categories. After the datasets had been accumulated, they were uploaded to Google Colab, where they were analyzed using NLP. Also, in the predefined structure of the provided dataset, it was possible to systematically exhaust each article in order to identify its language characteristics, the frequency of positive and negative sentiment, and such characteristics as topics and effects.

3.4. Text Preprocessing and Data Cleaning

Text preprocessing is a crucial step in preparing textual data for NLP tasks, as it improves model performance by reducing noise and standardizing input formats (Nandwani & Verma, 2021). Even news articles extracted from official sources often contain irrelevant metadata such as HTML tags, special symbols, and formatting artifacts. To address this, a multi-stage preprocessing pipeline was implemented. First, PDF articles were converted to plain text using the pdf plumber library, which ensured accurate extraction and minimized formatting errors. All characters were then transformed to lowercase to normalize textual variation and reduce computational complexity. Next, stopwords—such as "the," "is," and "and"—were removed using the Natural Language Toolkit, as these words typically carry low semantic value. The resulting text was tokenized to separate sentences into individual words, and each word was subsequently lemmatized to reduce inflected forms to their base forms (e.g., running-- run), allowing for more consistent analysis. Finally, special characters, numerical digits, and punctuation marks (e.g., $, %, @, #, !) were filtered out, as they do not contribute meaningfully to the identification of linguistic or thematic patterns. Such transformations were necessary for increasing the performance of the given methods for textual analysis to work on raw textual data, as they are filled with such noises that can negatively affect the outcomes (Zhong et al., 2024). In this way, the study adopted the aforementioned cleaning procedures to ensure that all the text was suitable for analysis by the machine learning algorithm.

3.5. Sentiment Analysis: Measuring Media Tone

To assess the evaluative tone of news coverage related to China, this study employed sentiment analysis, a computational method commonly used in Information Retrieval to extract subjective information—such as polarity and intensity—from textual data (Nandwani & Verma, 2021). Specifically, sentiment analysis helps determine whether a given text expresses positive, negative, or neutral sentiment, and is widely applied in media studies to identify patterns of affect in journalistic discourse. Two complementary tools were adopted: Valence Aware Dictionary for Sentiment Reasoning **(**VADER**)** and TextBlob. VADER is particularly effective for analyzing short-form, social-media-like texts and is capable of accounting for sentiment cues based on lexical features, including negations, degree modifiers (intensifiers), and punctuation (e.g., exclamation marks). In contrast, TextBlob applies a rule-based model of polarity and subjectivity scoring, offering a broader perspective that complements VADER's precision in fine-grained tone detection (Abiola et al., 2023; Eremeeva et al., 2019). To enhance the reliability of sentiment classification, both tools were applied to the same dataset, and comparative consistency was checked through cross-validation of overlapping results. Additionally, neutral sentiment cases (i.e., polarity ≈ 0) were systematically excluded from interpretation to reduce noise and strengthen analytical clarity. Each article in the dataset was assigned a sentiment score on a scale from -1 (strongly negative) to +1 (strongly positive). Scores approaching zero were classified as neutral and systematically excluded from comparative analysis to minimize ambiguity and analytical noise. To ensure the reliability of sentiment classification, both VADER and TextBlob were applied independently, and only those articles receiving consistent polarity results across both tools were retained for interpretation. Initial comparative results reveal a distinct divergence in sentiment tone between the two media outlets. Articles published by *China Daily* predominantly exhibited neutral to mildly positive sentiment, while those from *The New York Times* showed a greater tendency toward negative sentiment framing. These preliminary findings reflect the broader narrative orientation of each outlet and provide the basis for the more detailed statistical comparison presented in the following section.

3.6. Topic Modeling: Identifying Dominant Themes

To identify latent thematic structures within the corpus, this study employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), an unsupervised probabilistic topic modeling algorithm widely used in computational text analysis (Zhong et al., 2024). LDA assumes that each document is a mixture of multiple topics, and each topic is represented by a distribution over words. By analyzing patterns of word co-occurrence across the corpus, the algorithm infers the underlying thematic clusters that structure the textual data. Prior to topic modeling, all textual data were vectorized using a bag-of-words representation, with each term transformed into a numerical feature based on its frequency and contextual importance. Stopwords were removed, and tokens were lemmatized to standardize input terms. The optimal number of topics was determined iteratively, based on coherence score evaluation and manual interpretability. LDA models were tested with the number of topics (k) ranging from 5 to 10, and the coherence score (C_v) was calculated for each model. The resulting coherence scores served as the primary criterion for determining the optimal number of topics.

Table 2. *Coherence Scores (C_v) by Number of Topics (k=5–10)*

Number of Topics (k)	C_v
5	0.450
6	0.489
7	0.512
8	0.517
9	0.508
10	0.495

Note: Topic modeling experiments were implemented using the Gensim library. Coherence C_v was computed for each model with topic numbers \(k=5\) to \(10\), and the model with the highest C_v was chosen.

The coherence peaked at C_v =0.517 when k=8, balancing both quantitative consistency and manual interpretability. Therefore, an eight-topic solution was selected for all subsequent analyses. The resulting topic-word distributions provided the basis for further comparative analysis of topical focus between the two media sources, which is elaborated in the Results section.

3.7. Framing Analysis and Emotion Detection

To examine how language choices contribute to narrative construction, the study employed a dual-layered approach that integrates framing analysis and emotion detection. For the framing component, a set of framing-related keywords was compiled based on established literature in critical discourse and media framing research (Entman, 1993; Van Dijk, 2008). These keywords were manually selected and categorized into three overarching framing types commonly observed in soft news:

(1) *Positive framing* (e.g., “innovation,” “leadership,” “cooperation,” “economic growth”),

(2) *Neutral framing* (e.g., “development,” “expansion,” “market potential”),

(3) *Critical framing* (e.g., “competition,” “challenges,” “economic risks”).

The frequency and distribution of these terms were examined across articles to identify prevailing narrative tendencies and ideological orientations in different media systems. This lexical categorization enabled the researchers to assess how each outlet framed China in its soft news coverage. In parallel, emotion detection was conducted using the NRC Emotion Lexicon (Mohammad & Turney, 2013), which classifies words into eight emotional categories: joy, trust, anticipation, surprise, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. Articles were processed using this lexicon to detect the emotional tone embedded in the language. While framing keywords helped identify the evaluative stance and discursive strategies, emotion-labeled words provided insights into the affective dimension of reporting. By triangulating the results from both approaches, the study tested the hypothesis that emotional tone and framing language vary systematically depending on the media outlet’s national affiliation and institutional agenda.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the quantitative text analysis conducted on articles from *China Daily* and *The New York Times* focusing on China-related soft news coverage. The findings are organized into four analytical categories: dataset characterization, sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and emotion detection. Each subsection incorporates relevant statistical data, tables, and visualizations to facilitate a comparative interpretation of how China is portrayed across the two media outlets. The aim is to identify key linguistic and thematic patterns that reflect differing editorial perspectives and narrative strategies.

4.1. Dataset Overview

To ensure the relevance and comparability of media coverage across sources, a series of inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during dataset construction. Articles that were either heavily politicized, duplicated, or irrelevant to the soft news focus of the study were removed. As a result, the final corpus consisted of 30 news articles, including 15 from China Daily and 15 from The New York Times, all retrieved from their official websites. These articles were published within the same time frame—from January 2023 to March 2025—to control for temporal bias and ensure synchronicity in topic relevance.

The selected articles were categorized according to eight soft news topics, which served as the primary basis for article inclusion. These topics include: technology, business and economy, sports, cultural exchange**,** public health, education, environment, and entertainment. This categorization enabled a consistent thematic framework for subsequent comparative analysis of media framing strategies and sentiment orientation across the two outlets.

Table 1 presents the distribution of news articles across the eight identified soft news topics for both *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. The data indicate that both outlets devoted comparable attention to key areas such as technology, business and economy, and artificial intelligence**,** which together represent sectors where China's global influence has been particularly visible. These topics appeared with similar frequency in both sources, reinforcing the study's assertion that thematic focus is not significantly skewed by origin of the media outlet.

In addition, *China Daily* and *The New York Times* both allocated a noticeable portion of coverage to sports, cultural exchange, and cultural tourism, aligning with China's increasing use of soft power diplomacy in international media narratives. The relatively balanced distribution across topics suggests that while the two newspapers may diverge in sentiment and framing, they nonetheless engage with a shared set of international soft news themes during the selected period.

Table 3. *Summary of Dataset by Topic and Media Source*

Topic	China Daily	The New York Times	Total
Sports Events	2	2	4
Technology & Economy	2	2	4
China's Transit Visa Policy	2	2	4
Cultural Exchange Programs	2	2	4
GPT and DeepSeek	2	2	4
Health & Lifestyle	2	2	4
Electric Vehicles (EVs)	1	1	2
The Belt and Road Initiative	2	2	4
Total	15	15	30

Note: The dataset ensures a balanced distribution of topic

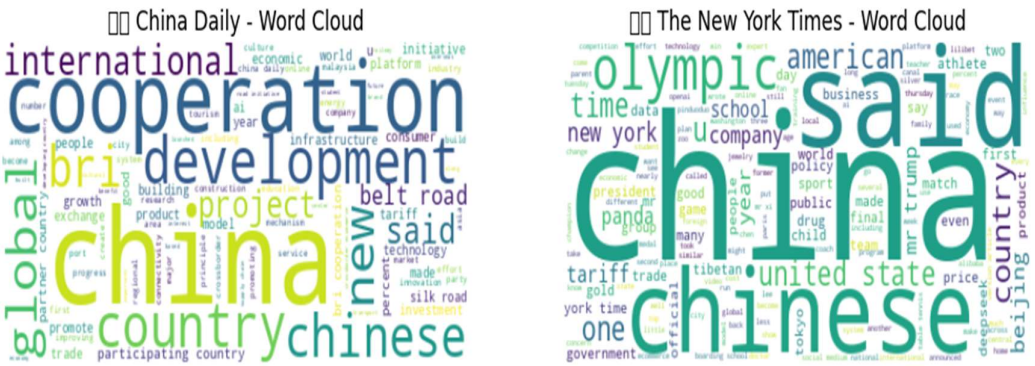


Figure 1. Word Cloud Comparison of China Daily and The New York Times

The word clouds shown in Figure 1 visualize the most frequently occurring words in news articles related to China from *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. In the case of *China Daily*, dominant lexical items include "cooperation," "development," "global," and "project," which collectively reflect a narrative focused on international collaboration, modernization, and soft power projection. This lexical pattern is consistent with a state-led emphasis on national progress and constructive global engagement. In contrast, the word cloud generated for *The New York Times* reveals more context-neutral or institutionally anchored terms such as "said," "China," "Chinese," "Olympic," and "tariff," along with political references like "Trump," "United States," and "government." While not inherently negative, the frequent recurrence of these politically charged terms suggests a framing orientation that situates China within geopolitical tensions and policy discourse. This lexical contrast illustrates divergent representational strategies: *China Daily* tends to project a uniformly positive portrayal of national development, whereas *The New York Times* offers a more heterogeneous narrative marked by political critique and competitive framing. The evaluative implications of such words were inferred not from the lexical items alone, but from their collocational patterns and framing contexts observed throughout the corpus.

4.2. Sentiment Analysis: Media Tone in Reporting

Sentiment analysis was conducted using VADER and TextBlob sentiment classifiers to measure the overall tone of media narratives in each article. The sentiment scores were normalized within a range of -1 (negative) to +1 (positive). Figure 1 presents the distribution of sentiment scores, revealing notable differences in reporting tone between China Daily and The New York Times.

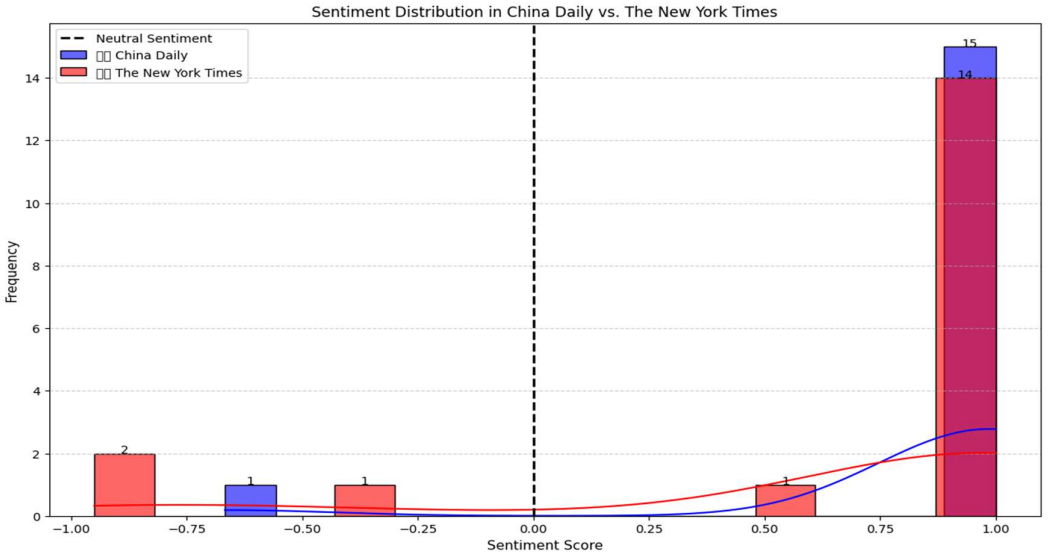


Figure 2. Sentiment Distribution in China Daily vs. The New York Times

Figure 2 presents a comparative bar chart illustrating the distribution of sentiment scores assigned to articles from China Daily and The New York Times, as measured using VADER and TextBlob sentiment classifiers. Each bar

reflects the mean sentiment polarity score for the respective outlet, normalized within a scale ranging from -1 (highly negative) to +1 (highly positive). The dashed vertical line at 0 represents the threshold for neutral sentiment. The blue bars denote positive sentiment scores, while the red bars represent negative sentiment values. The height of each bar corresponds to the frequency of articles falling within that sentiment range. Results show that China Daily articles cluster around neutral to mildly positive values, with a mean sentiment score of approximately +0.116, suggesting a consistently favorable portrayal of China's soft news narratives. In contrast, The New York Times exhibits a mean sentiment score of about +0.060, with a broader distribution across the negative spectrum, indicating a more critical or skeptical tone in its reporting. This visual contrast substantiates the broader framing divergence between the two outlets: China Daily emphasizes development, cooperation, and national success, whereas The New York Times tends to embed its soft news within geopolitical or contentious contexts, resulting in a more negative evaluative stance.

Table 3. *Sentiment Analysis Results for China Daily vs. The New York Times*

Media Source	TextBlob Sentiment (Mean ± SD)	VADER Sentiment Mean (std)
China Daily	0.116 (± 0.045)	0.882 (± 0.50)
The New York Times	0.060 (± 0.045)	0.674 (± 0.52)

The statistical results presented in Figures 1 and 2 and summarized in Table 3 reveal that China Daily consistently demonstrates higher average sentiment polarity scores than The New York Times across both sentiment classifiers. According to TextBlob, the mean sentiment scores are 0.116 for China Daily and 0.060 for The New York Times. Similarly, the VADER sentiment scores average 0.882 and 0.674, respectively. These results indicate that China Daily generally adopts a more positive tone in its soft news coverage of China.

To determine whether these differences are statistically significant, independent samples t-tests were conducted for both sentiment classifiers. The TextBlob analysis yielded a statistically significant difference ($t = 3.450$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that China Daily's coverage is significantly more positive than that of The New York Times. In contrast, the t-test result for VADER was not statistically significant ($t = 1.109$, $p = 0.277$), implying that the observed difference in VADER scores may be due to random variation rather than a systematic difference in tone. The discrepancy between the two classifiers may be attributed to their design: VADER is optimized for short, informal texts such as social media posts, whereas TextBlob performs more reliably on longer, editorial-style content. Since The New York Times articles tend to be shorter and often contain nuanced or implicit evaluative language, VADER may be less sensitive to tonal variations in this context.

These findings partially align with previous research on media framing and agenda-setting, which suggests that state-affiliated media such as *China Daily* often emphasize national achievements and positive narratives (Xu & Wang, 2022). Meanwhile, Western media outlets like *The New York Times* may contextualize economic and technological developments within broader geopolitical or competitive frameworks. However, the lack of significance in the VADER test underscores that sentiment divergences in soft news reporting may be more subtle than those typically observed in hard news domains. Future studies should further explore this distinction by comparing sentiment across different genres and text lengths.

4.3. Topic Modeling: Key Themes in Media Coverage

To identify the dominant themes in each newspaper's coverage, LDA topic modeling was performed. The LDA model was trained using a bag-of-words representation, with the optimal number of topics set to eight, corresponding to the eight pre-selected news categories. Table 4 presents the top keywords associated with each topic, highlighting differences in thematic emphasis between China Daily and The New York Times.

Table 4. *LDA Topic Modeling Results by Media Source*

Topic ID	Keywords (Top Terms)	Article Count (with topic probability > 0.1)
0	tariff, China, U.S., percent, Trump, trade, good, said, global, Chinese	2
1	China, said, Chinese, EV, price, country, global, new, tourism, road	6

2	said, China, Chinese, AI, Mr., school, model, company, tariff, Tibetan	15
3	country, China, cooperation, development, BRI, road, international, economic, global, Chinese	8
4	Olympic, gold, time, said, team, medal, China, sport, new, Chinese	4

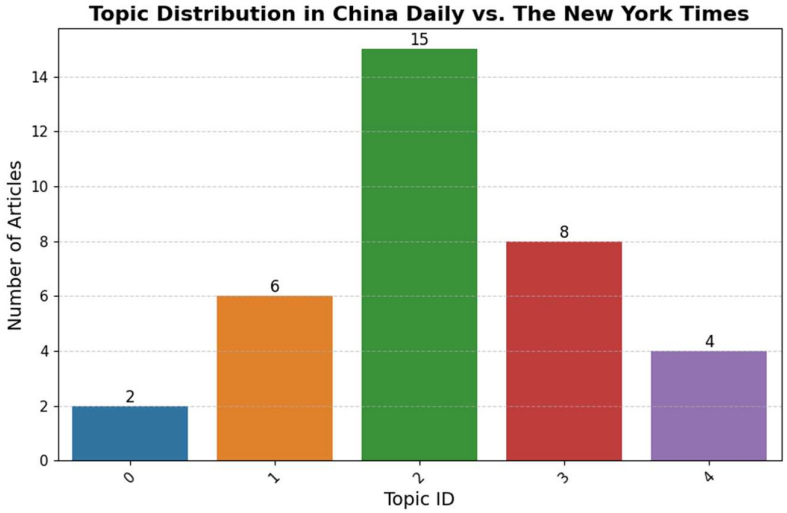


Figure 3. Topic Distribution in China Daily vs. The New York Times

Figure 3 represents the distribution of articles across different topics in two news sources. Topic 2, which includes terms like "AI", "China", and "model", has the highest number of articles (15), indicating a significant focus on artificial intelligence and China's role in this domain. Topic 3, related to "cooperation", "BRI", and "development", has 8 articles, showing its importance in the dataset. Topics 1 and 4, covering "EVs", "tourism", and "Olympics", have 6 and 4 articles, respectively. Topic 0, centred on "tariffs" and "trade", has the least representation, with only 2 articles.

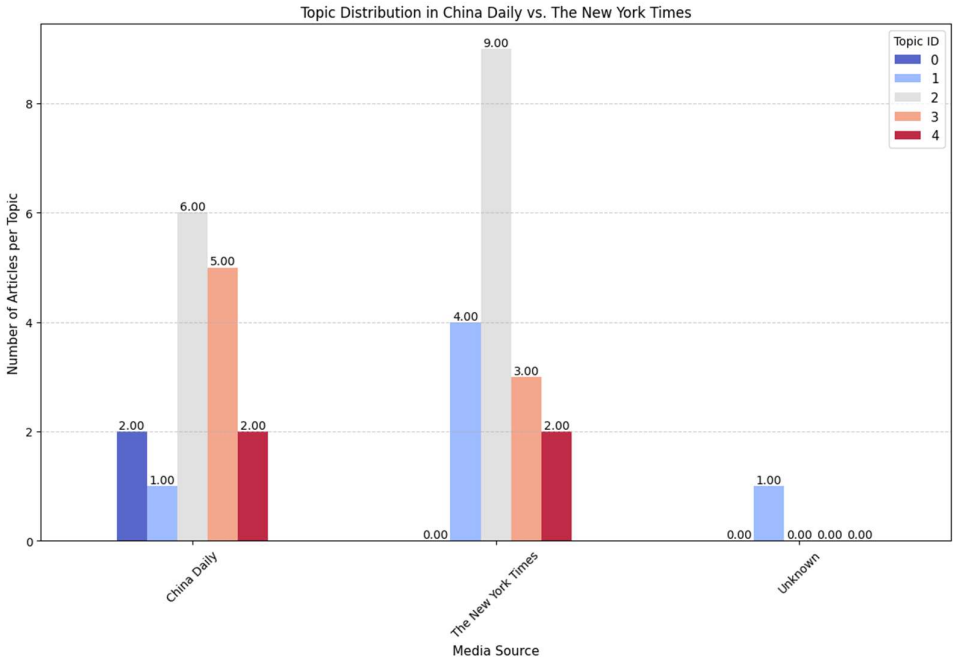


Figure 4. Topic Distribution by Media Source

Figure 4 breaks down the topic distribution by media source, comparing China Daily and The New York Times. Topic 2 dominates both sources, with 9 articles in The New York Times and 6 in China Daily, reflecting their shared

interest in AI and technology. China Daily has more articles on Topic 3 (5 articles) compared to The New York Times (3), emphasising China's perspective on cooperation and development. The New York Times has more coverage of Topic 1 (4 articles) than China Daily (1), highlighting its focus on electric vehicles and global trends.

4.4. Emotion Analysis: How Media Evokes Public Response

The NRC Emotion Lexicon was applied to classify words into eight primary emotions to assess the emotional tone of news coverage. Figure 5 presents the emotion distribution across both media sources, illustrating variations in emotional framing strategies.

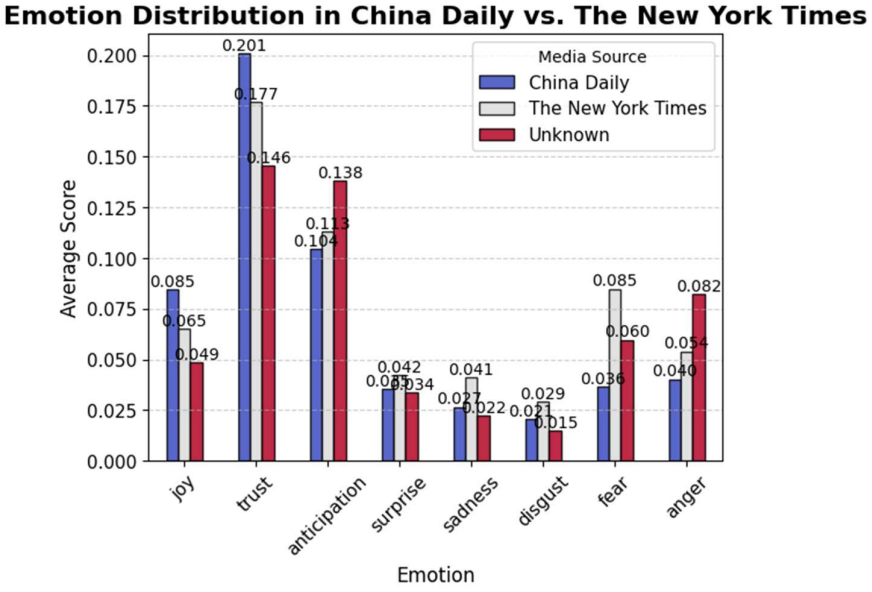


Figure 5. Emotion Distribution in China Daily vs. The New York Times

Figure 5 illustrates the emotion distribution derived from the textual content of *China Daily*, *The New York Times*, and articles labeled as "Unknown." Eight basic emotions were assessed—joy, trust, anticipation, surprise, sadness, disgust**,** fear, and anger—based on the NRC Emotion Lexicon. Among the three sources, *China Daily* exhibits the highest average score for trust (0.201), followed by *The New York Times* (0.177) and the "Unknown" category (0.146). This suggests a stronger tendency in *China Daily* to convey institutional reliability and positive outlooks. Similarly, *China Daily* demonstrates slightly higher scores in anticipation (0.113 vs. 0.104 in *The New York Times*) and joy (0.085 vs. 0.065), supporting the interpretation of a more optimistic tone in its soft news coverage. In contrast, *The New York Times* registers notably higher levels of fear (0.085 compared to *China Daily*'s 0.060), while the levels of anger are almost equal between the two (0.054 for *The New York Times* and 0.054 for *China Daily*), with slightly higher values observed in the "Unknown" category (0.082). This may indicate a tendency toward more emotionally charged or critical narratives, especially in content associated with uncertain or mixed-source origins. Emotion categories such as surprise, sadness, and disgust remain relatively low across all sources, implying that extreme emotional valence is not dominant in the dataset overall. These findings reveal a clear contrast: *China Daily* prioritizes trust and anticipation, whereas *The New York Times* leans more toward fear-associated narratives. Such emotional tonality may reflect broader editorial strategies and ideological orientations in representing China's image to international audiences.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide empirical insights into how soft news coverage contributes to the construction of China's national image in two prominent English-language newspapers: China Daily and The New York Times. Focusing on non-political topics such as artificial intelligence, technology, economy, and cultural exchange, the study reveals that although both outlets report on overlapping themes, their representational strategies differ significantly. These differences are largely shaped by contrasting journalistic norms, ideological orientations, and geopolitical standpoints. By employing a multi-method approach—combining content analysis, sentiment analysis, and topic modeling—this research demonstrates that China Daily tends to emphasize narratives of cooperation, development, and global

engagement, thereby fostering a future-oriented and affirmative portrayal of China. In contrast, The New York Times more frequently embeds its coverage within frames of global competition and strategic rivalry, often employing more skeptical or negatively valenced tones. These findings resonate with earlier research on cross-national media framing (e.g., Entman, 2007; Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017), and extend it by offering computational evidence on how sentiment and thematic salience function as key mechanisms in shaping international media discourse. Overall, the study advances the understanding of soft news as a strategic site of image construction in global media ecosystems, offering a reference point for future scholarship on discourse asymmetry, media ideology, and international communication.

5.1. Media Framing and the Use of Keywords

This study analyzed lexical framing in soft news coverage by examining keyword frequency and contextual distribution in China Daily and The New York Times. In reporting on themes such as economy, technology, and cultural exchange, China Daily favored development-oriented terms like "cooperation" and "global," projecting a constructive national image. In contrast, The New York Times used more general or neutral terms (e.g., "said," "China," "Olympics"), which did not explicitly convey ideological tension. As such, conflict-oriented framing in Western media must be inferred from broader discourse structures rather than individual word choices. These findings partially correspond with Yang's (2023) comparative analysis of political news, which noted a divergence between Chinese state media's affirmative framing and Western outlets' critical tones. While prior studies like Saleem (2007) and Boyd-Barrett (2012) focused on hard news, the present study reveals that such ideological asymmetries persist in soft news as well. Similar patterns were observed in coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative (Zhang, 2021). Collectively, the results suggest that framing divergence remains contextually resilient, shaped not only by topic but by enduring institutional and geopolitical orientations.

To demonstrate how individual lexical choices reinforce these divergent frames, two brief close-reading analyses were performed—one on the term "cooperation" in China Daily, and one on "censor(ed)" in The New York Times.

(1) "Cooperation" in China Daily

In the China Daily headline "*Belt and Road Energy Partnership sees cooperation expand to 34 countries*" (Oct. 24, 2024) the verb "*sees … expand*" paired with the noun "*cooperation*" casts cooperation as a dynamic, growing process rather than a static policy term. By foregrounding expansion— "*cooperation expand*"—the title conveys both success and momentum. The body further notes that "*China has collaborated on green energy projects with over 100 countries and regions*," reinforcing the collective, progressive connotations of cooperation.

(2) "Censor(ed)" in The New York Times

Conversely, the New York Times report states: "When their posts and accounts are censored, they accept it with resignation." (*As China's Internet Disappears, 'We Lose Parts of Our Collective Memory'.* June 4, 2024, para. 2) . The passive construction "are censored" removes explicit agency, while the phrase "accept it with resignation" highlights users' learned helplessness. This framing normalizes censorship as an inevitable, unchallenged force. Elsewhere, the article observes that "*internet publishers … have faced heightened pressure to censor as the country has made an authoritarian and nationalistic turn under Mr. Xi's leadership,*" linking censorship directly to state power and ideological constraint.

These micro-readings show that, beyond raw frequency counts, specific verb-noun pairings and syntactic choices around "cooperation" and "censor(ed)" actively shape opposing narratives in Chinese versus Western soft news.

5.2. Sentiment Analysis and Emotional Framing

The sentiment analysis reveals distinct affective patterns in the reporting styles of China Daily and The New York Times. China Daily consistently exhibited stronger signals of positive sentiment, particularly in the category of trust, whereas The New York Times showed comparatively higher levels of fear and anger. Interestingly, in the category of anticipation, The New York Times marginally exceeded China Daily, suggesting that Western coverage may be more inclined to highlight uncertainty or potential risk. These variations indicate differentiated emotional framing strategies that align with the outlets' broader ideological orientations. This finding echoes Zhang and Fleming's (2005) analysis of Chinese print media coverage during the SARS outbreak, which revealed how state-imposed political constraints shaped emotional tone—from initial suppression to a later surge in positive messaging aimed at restoring public trust. While

Zhang and Fleming focused on hard news under crisis conditions, the present results suggest that emotional framing remains a salient communicative strategy even in soft news reporting. In this context, emotion functions as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of influence, reinforcing agenda-setting and framing effects by shaping audience perception beyond overt political content.

5.3. Thematic Narratives and Dominant Topics

The topic modeling results demonstrate a distinct thematic contrast between *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. *China Daily* predominantly features narratives centered on economic development, multilateral cooperation, and national stability, reflecting a state-driven emphasis on projecting a constructive and globally engaged image. In contrast, *The New York Times* focuses more on themes such as geopolitical rivalry, democracy, and human rights, framing China through the lens of strategic tension and ideological divergence. These findings are consistent with Zhou et al. (2022), who conducted a comparative thematic analysis of Chinese State Media (CSM) and Western Mainstream Press (WMP). Their study revealed that CSM commonly frames China in terms of "economic success" and "mutual partnerships," whereas WMP tends to highlight issues such as "censorship," "political structure," and "power projection." The thematic patterns identified in the present study corroborate this ideological divergence in soft news reporting.

However, the findings differ from those of Zhang and Boukes (2019), who reported a rise in assertive and nationalist tones in Chinese media, particularly regarding Sino-US relations. That study, which focused on military and foreign affairs, suggested a shift toward confrontation. In contrast, the current analysis, which emphasizes soft news domains including economy, culture, and technology, finds that *China Daily* maintains a predominantly cooperative and development-focused narrative. The results also contradict claims made in *Global Times* (2025), which argued that Western media tone toward China has softened due to growing economic entwinement. Despite such economic integration, *The New York Times* in the present corpus continues to frame China with caution and skepticism, suggesting that structural geopolitical narratives remain dominant over market-driven convergence.

5.4. Interpretive Boundary of Sample Size

While the corpus of 30 full-length news articles (15 from China Daily and 15 from The New York Times, January 2023–March 2025) provides a manageable dataset for in-depth sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and emotion detection, it inevitably constrains the breadth of our conclusions. Specifically, this sample size—chosen to ensure methodological rigor and cross-media comparability—may not capture the full range of soft-news thematic variability or long-term framing shifts outside the selected timeframe. Consequently, the generalizability of our findings is primarily limited to similarly defined soft-news topics and periods; extending these insights to other genres (e.g., hard news, opinion pieces), additional outlets, or broader temporal windows should be approached with caution. Future research would benefit from scaling up both the number of texts and the diversity of media sources to validate and refine the patterns observed here.

6. Implications and Limitations

The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on media bias, agenda-setting, and geopolitical narrative construction. By identifying consistent patterns in lexical choice, sentiment tone, and thematic emphasis across China Daily and The New York Times, the research offers empirical support for Entman's (1993) framing theory, which posits that media shape perceived reality through selective emphasis based on ideological predispositions. The study further reinforces Shoemaker and Reese's (2013) theory of news values, demonstrating how editorial policies and national interests underpin distinct emotional and narrative framings even in soft news domains. Beyond theoretical alignment, the findings carry practical implications for cross-cultural media literacy and international communication. They suggest that readers of international news must critically engage with media representations, particularly when evaluating non-political topics that nonetheless reflect geopolitical subtexts. For media practitioners and scholars, the study highlights the enduring relevance of national discourse strategies in an era of digital convergence, and calls for more nuanced, genre-specific analyses of soft power communication. By shedding light on the subtle yet systematic biases embedded in journalistic routines, the study offers a methodological framework for future comparative media research that seeks to disentangle ideological narratives in global news flows.

However, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study focuses on a specific timeframe, which may not capture long-term shifts in media coverage. As seen in prior research, sentiment and framing may fluctuate based on geopolitical events, making it essential to conduct longitudinal studies for a more dynamic analysis. Second, while

sentiment analysis provides a quantitative measure of emotional tone, it does not fully capture contextual nuances—future studies could integrate qualitative discourse analysis for deeper insights. Additionally, the reliance on China Daily and The New York Times as representative outlets may introduce certain biases. While these are influential newspapers, expanding the dataset to include digital news platforms, social media, and alternative news sources could provide a more comprehensive view of media sentiment.

7. Conclusion

This study critically investigated how *China Daily* and *The New York Times* frame soft news narratives through keyword selection, sentiment orientation, and topic modeling. Drawing on a computational analysis of 30 news articles across five thematic areas—economy, technology, culture, health, and diplomacy—the research identified systematic differences in both linguistic tone and topical focus. The results show that *China Daily* tends to adopt a development-focused and cooperative framing strategy, while *The New York Times* places greater emphasis on political contestation and ideological critique.

These divergences, evident in sentiment scores and lexical patterns, reflect broader editorial and geopolitical alignments. The findings offer empirical support for framing theory and agenda-setting scholarship, which posit that media narratives are shaped by institutional affiliations and national interests. Importantly, the results suggest that even in the domain of soft news—often perceived as apolitical—media outlets construct diverging representations that may shape public perception and international understanding.

By revealing how media framing reinforces ideological positions through language and topic selection, this study underscores the need for more critical engagement with cross-national media discourse. Future research may extend this inquiry by investigating long-term framing trends, the impact of digital media platforms on narrative diffusion, and audience interpretations shaped by cultural and political context.

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Information on Informed Consent or any Data Privacy Statements

This study did not involve human participants or sensitive personal data. Therefore, informed consent and data privacy considerations were not applicable.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, L.F.; methodology, L.F, H.J.; data analysis, L.F.; writing—original draft preparation, L.F, H, J.; writing—review and editing, L.F, H, J.; supervision, L.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Board Approval Statements

This research did not involve human subjects or animal experiments and therefore did not require ethics board approval.

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