

A Critical Discourse Analysis on Japanese Media Coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative*

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This study analyzes 81 NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) reports on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from January 2020 to January 2024. It examines the changing themes, strategies, and attitudes towards the BRI. Findings reveal that during the COVID-19 pandemic, NHK focused on China's "vaccine diplomacy" and aid, portraying China as a proactive global player, while suggesting competition. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the BRI forum, NHK's coverage shifted towards geopolitics and international cooperation, showing skepticism and caution. Future efforts should emphasize improving communication with Japan to highlight the positive outcomes of the BRI and counter negative perceptions.

Keywords: international changes, Japanese media, China, Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

Since President Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, it has made significant progress in various fields. As the BRI advances, academic interest in its discourse has increased. For example, Liu (2020) traced changes in Japanese media attitudes, from negative to rational and eventually supportive, though recent events like COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict may have impacted these perceptions. Liu, Xu, and Zhai (2021) examined media coverage of President Xi's 2019 European visit, finding increased influence of Chinese media. However, the analysis was limited by the small sample size.

Thus, this study examines changes in Japanese media's coverage of the BRI since the COVID-19 pandemic using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is an interdisciplinary method that explores the complex relationships between language, power, and ideology. Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA), a key approach in CDA, places discourse within its historical context to scientifically analyze social issues, holding significant academic value in international discourse studies (Xiang, 2013).

Corpus Selection

This study uses 81 NHK reports on the BRI, collected from the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), Japan's only public media institution that operates independently of commercial interests, relying on public licensing fees. NHK's news reports are widely regarded as authoritative in Japan.

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Using the keyword 「一带一路」 (Belt and Road Initiative) on NHK's official website, the reports were gathered covering the period from January 2020 to January 2024, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. The total character count for the corpus is 68,868, analyzed using KH Coder (Higuchi, 2017). Reports from January 2024 were excluded from this analysis.

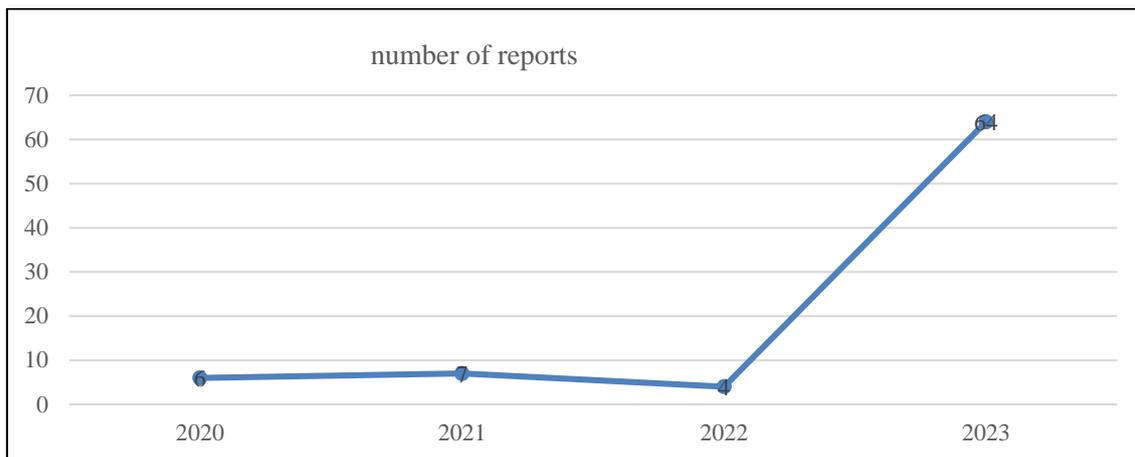


Figure 1. Trend of NHK's coverage on the Belt and Road Initiative.

As shown in Figure 1, the number of reports on the BRI was relatively low from 2020 to 2022 but surged to 64 in 2023. This increase likely reflects the global economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Belt and Road International Cooperation Forum held in 2023.

Based on key international events and changes in report themes since 2020, the study divides the coverage into two phases: the first phase (COVID-19 period, January 2020-January 2022) with 14 reports, and the second phase (Russia-Ukraine conflict and Belt and Road International Cooperation Forum period, February 2022-January 2024) with 67 reports.

Strategic Analysis

This section uses Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) to focus on two major discourse strategies: argumentative strategy and perspectivation strategy (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 45) to explore NHK's true attitude and objectives towards the Belt and Road Initiative.

Argumentative Strategy

The argumentative strategy refers to showing the author's attitude or the rationality of evaluations through different debate topics (Liu, 2020). The main debate topics involved include: useful/beneficial, useless/unhelpful, definition, danger or threat, humiliation, justice, responsibility, redundancy, finance, facts, figures, law and rights, history, culture, abuse, etc. Affirmative or negative judgments on these debate topics can serve to confirm positive or negative descriptions in a debate (Tian, 2009, p. 158).

Using the argumentative strategy to examine the data, it can be observed that NHK employed the debate topics of danger or threat, as well as figures, to interpret the Belt and Road Initiative in both phases.

In the first phase, as shown in Examples (1), NHK utilized the danger or threat debate topic by contrasting China's "vaccine diplomacy" with the international aid provided by the United States-led G7, Japan, and India. The intent was to portray China as a highly threatening competitor and an adversary. This indirectly conveyed NHK's negative skepticism about China's Belt and Road Initiative.

(1) ワクチンの提供を受けてワンニアラッチ保健相は「日本政府の多大な支援がなければ実現しなかった」と述べ、感謝の意を表しました。インド洋の要衝になっているスリランカでは、中国が巨大経済圏構想「一带一路」を通じてインフラ投資を進めているほか、中国の企業が製造したワクチンおよそ 1000 万回分を供給して、いわゆる「ワクチン外交」を展開しています。(2021.8.1)

(Regarding the vaccine provision, Sri Lanka's Health Minister Wanniaratchi expressed his gratitude, stating, "This would not have been possible without the substantial support of the Japanese government." Sri Lanka, which is becoming a key strategic point in the Indian Ocean, is also seeing China advance its infrastructure investments through the massive economic zone initiative, "Belt and Road". Additionally, Chinese companies have supplied about 10 million doses of vaccines, thereby carrying out so-called "vaccine diplomacy".)

In the second phase, the "danger/threat" debate was also used frequently. First, the term "Russia-Ukraine conflict" in Japanese is translated as 「ロシアのウクライナ侵攻」 (Russia's invasion and attack on Ukraine), which shifts the conflict from being a bilateral issue between Russia and Ukraine to a one-sided aggression by Russia against Ukraine, carrying a certain negative connotation. As mentioned earlier, NHK's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict frequently mentions China and the "Belt and Road" initiative. For instance, as shown in Example (2), it attempts to associate the "Belt and Road" initiative with geopolitics and hegemonism.

(2) (マスロフ氏は)「プーチン大統領はアジアでの広域的な連携を拡大する必要性を唱えることになるだろう」と述べ、プーチン大統領としては、ウクライナ侵攻を続ける中、欧米への対抗軸の構築を目指し「一带一路」を推進する中国とともにアジア諸国との連携を強化するねらいがあります。(2023.10.17)

((According to Mr. Masurof) "President Putin will likely advocate for the expansion of broad regional cooperation in Asia," stating that, while continuing the invasion of Ukraine, President Putin aims to strengthen ties with Asian countries alongside China, which is promoting the "Belt and Road" initiative, in order to build a counterbalance against the West.)

Analysis of the use of debate strategies in the reports reveals that NHK held a skeptical and resistant attitude towards the "Belt and Road" initiative in both phases.

Perspective Strategy

Perspective strategy refers to the use of linguistic means to position the author's viewpoint, expressing the author's involvement or detachment. These linguistic means include quotations (direct quotations, indirect quotations, or free indirect quotations), quotation marks, discourse markers, and metaphors, among others (Wodak & Mayer, 2009, p. 89).

An examination of the use of perspective strategy reveals that NHK frequently employs indirect quotations and occasionally uses direct quotations to express its views and attitudes toward the "Belt and Road" initiative in both phases. However, the sources of direct quotations differ between the two phases.

In the first phase of the reports on "vaccine diplomacy", the indirect quotation form 「とみられます」 (which translates to "it is believed that" or "it appears that") is used extensively. This expression conveys that China's foreign vaccine aid is seen as one of the means to advance the "Belt and Road" initiative. The ultimate goal is to strengthen cooperation and expand international influence, with a strong sense of detachment.

(3) 中国は、アフリカ諸国や巨大経済圏構想「一带一路」の参加国などに積極的にワクチンを提供する姿勢を示していて、開発をさらに加速させることで、国際社会での影響力を強めていくねらいがあるとみられます。(2020.6.20)

(China has shown an active stance in providing vaccines to African countries and countries participating in the massive economic zone initiative “Belt and Road”, and it is believed that by accelerating development further, China aims to strengthen its influence in the international community.)

In addition, a small amount of direct quotes is used, as shown in Example (4), with the main sources of information being countries, organizations, or individuals that oppose or question the “Belt and Road” initiative, such as the G7.

(4) バイデン政権高官は 11 日、「これまでわれわれは、中国の『一帯一路』に代わる前向きな選択肢を示してこなかった」と認めただうえで、G7 各国とともに、途上国の立場や地球環境に配慮した、高い水準のインフラ支援を提供することによって「『一帯一路』に打ち勝つことができる」と強い自信を示しました。(2021.6.13)

(A senior official from the Biden administration acknowledged on the 11th, “Until now, we have not presented a positive alternative to China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’,” and expressed strong confidence that by providing high-quality infrastructure support, with consideration for the positions of developing countries and the global environment, along with the G7 countries, they could “outdo the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’.”)

In the second phase, the indirect quotation form is also predominantly used. For example, as shown in Example (5), “とみられます” is used to indirectly and subtly express that China’s Belt and Road Initiative aims to expand regional and international influence.

(5) 巨大経済圏構想「一帯一路」を掲げる中国としては、モルディブとの関係強化で、インド洋一帯での影響力のさらなる拡大を図っていくものとみられます。(2024.1)

(As China, which advocates the massive economic zone concept of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, strengthens its relationship with the Maldives, it is believed to be aiming for further expansion of its influence in the Indian Ocean region.)

In addition, the second phase also includes some direct quotations, but unlike the first phase, as shown in Example (6), the direct sources of these quotations are mostly from China or countries along the “Belt and Road” initiative. According to the author’s statistics, there are a total of 40 direct quotations in the second phase related to the “Belt and Road” initiative. Of these, 13 quotations come from countries, organizations, or individuals who oppose or question the initiative, while 27 quotations come from China or countries, organizations, or individuals that support the “Belt and Road” initiative, accounting for 67.5% of the total.

(6) 中国外務省によりますと、会談で習主席は、67 年続く両国の友好関係を強調した上で「中国はシリアとほかのアラブ諸国の関係改善を支持する。シリアとともに『一帯一路』を通じた協力を進めたい」と述べました。一方、シリアの国営通信によりますとアサド大統領は「国際舞台での中国の建設的な役割に希望を持っている。内政への干渉や、南シナ海などで緊張を作り出すことによって中国の役割を弱めようというあらゆる試みを拒否する」と述べました。(2023.9.22)

(According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the meeting, President Xi emphasized the 67 years of friendship between the two countries, stating, “China supports the improvement of relations between Syria and other Arab countries. We hope to advance cooperation with Syria through the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative.” On the other hand, according to Syria’s State News Agency, President Assad stated, “We have hope in China’s constructive role on the international stage. We reject any attempts to weaken China’s role by interfering in internal affairs or creating tensions in places like the South China Sea.”)

From the analysis of the application of the perspectivization strategy in the reports, it can be observed that although both stages primarily use indirect quotations, with direct quotations serving as supplementary, the direct

quotes in the first stage predominantly represent opposing or questioning perspectives. In contrast, the direct quotations in the second stage largely reflect supportive or favorable viewpoints. This shift indicates that NHK's attitude and perception of the "Belt and Road" initiative, although generally hesitant and cautious, gradually softened over time.

Conclusion

Analysis of NHK's reports on the Belt and Road Initiative shows that NHK's coverage, strategies, and attitudes have evolved in stages. In the first phase, during the COVID-19 pandemic, NHK focused on China's "vaccine diplomacy" and international aid, portraying China as using vaccine aid to boost its global influence, while subtly hinting at competition. In the second phase, covering the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Belt and Road International Cooperation Summit, NHK's focus shifted to geopolitics and international cooperation, with a slight shift in its attitude toward the BRI, though it remained cautious.

Overall, NHK, representing Japanese media, has maintained a skeptical attitude toward the BRI, portraying China as a competitor to the U.S. and its allies, including Japan. However, this skepticism softened over time, especially with the Belt and Road International Cooperation Summit.

Comparing this with previous studies, we see that Japanese media's attitude toward the BRI evolved from negative interpretations to rational reporting and participation. After the pandemic, media reverted to a "negative interpretation", but events like the BRI Summit have helped improve China's image.

Looking ahead, China should enhance its communication through diplomatic channels and Japanese media to highlight the positive impacts of the BRI, which could help reduce misunderstandings and negative perceptions. Increased transparency in the initiative's goals and progress will foster greater trust and cooperation.

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