An Analysis of the Construction of China's Image in Chinese and English Culinary Documentaries From the Perspective of Transitivity

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This study explores how *Discovering China: A Culinary Journey* and *A Bite of China Season 1* construct China's image using Halliday's transitivity system. By analyzing material, mental, relational, and verbal processes, it highlights differences in narrative strategies and cultural perspectives. While *Discovering China* focuses on dynamic actions and the host's experiences, *A Bite of China* emphasizes human-centered storytelling and cultural depth. The study underscores language's role in shaping national identity and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: China's image, transitivity, documentary, cultural narrative, cross-cultural communication

Introduction

This study analyzes *Discovering China: A Culinary Journey* and *A Bite of China Season 1* using the transitivity system to explore linguistic differences in constructing China's image. It examines how language strategies influence cultural communication and national image representation from a cross-cultural perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) identifies three main functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday, 2000; Hu, Zhu, Zhang, & Li, 2017). The transitivity system, as part of the ideational function, categorizes human experiences into six process types: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. These processes reflect how language users organize and interpret the world.

Based on this, this study applies Halliday's transitivity system to analyze the subtitles of the documentaries *Discovering China: A Culinary Journey* and *A Bite of China Season 1*. It explores the similarities and differences in their transitivity process choices, uncovering the ideological tendencies behind linguistic forms and providing theoretical support and practical insights for optimizing China's image discourse.

Research Design

Corpus Selection

The corpus includes subtitles and dialogues from *Discovering China: A Culinary Journey* (four episodes, ~50 minutes each) and *A Bite of China Season 1* (five episodes, ~40 minutes each). Both focus on Chinese food culture, offering comparable durations and relevant content for analysis.

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Corpus Creation

Subtitles were extracted and organized into an Excel-based corpus. KH Coder 3.0 was used to analyze word counts and distributions, supporting transitivity analysis. Key statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Word Counts of the Two Documentaries

	A Bite of China Season 1	*Discovering China: A Culinary Journey*
Episode 1	3,805	7,992
Episode 1	3,504	7,411
Episode 1	3,284	7,528
Episode 1	4,213	7,903
Episode 1	3,996	
Total	18,802	30,834

Data Analysis

KH Coder 3.0 was used for word frequency analysis. High-frequency words, identified and ranked, reflect core linguistic tendencies and provide insights into how each documentary constructs China's image.

Results and Discussion

Through analysis, this study finds that the two documentaries exhibit notable differences in their use of material, mental, relational, and verbal processes within the transitivity system. The following sections will examine these four types of processes in detail.

Material Process

In *Discovering China: A Culinary Journey*, verbs like "fry" and "roast" emphasize precision, traditional techniques, and the artistry of transforming ingredients. In contrast, *A Bite of China Season 1* uses verbs like "捕鱼" (fish), "采笋" (gather bamboo shoots), and "挖藕" (dig lotus roots) to depict ingredient sourcing and processing, showcasing China's food diversity and its connection to nature.

Example 1: She's putting in egg and wheat flour and she's deep frying it.

(*Discovering China: A Culinary Journey*, Episode 1, Beijing Chapter)

Example 2: 广西京族三岛上的渔民曾经以高跷捕鱼的方式得到浅海的鱼虾。

(*Fishermen from the Jing ethnic group in Guangxi once used stilts to catch fish and shrimp in shallow seas.*)

(*A Bite of China Season 1*, Episode 1, Gifts from Nature)

In Example 1, verbs like "put" and "fry" describe a series of linked cooking actions, creating a fast-paced narrative that highlights the dynamic and creative aspects of cooking, building anticipation for the final dish. While in Example 2, the verb "捕鱼" (catch) depicts outdoor ingredient gathering at a slower pace, emphasizing the harmony between humans and nature while showcasing the freshness of natural ingredients and the beauty of traditional labor.

These choices emphasize respect for natural resources, harmony between humans and the environment, and regional culinary philosophies.

Mental Process

Discovering China: A Culinary Journey focuses on the host's emotions and cognition, while *A Bite of China Season 1* highlights others' emotional connections to food.

Example 3: It's like a journey that <u>I've</u> always <u>dreamt</u> about.

(*Discovering China: A Culinary Journey*, Episode 1, Beijing Chapter)

Example 4：馕是<u>维吾尔族人</u>最喜欢的主食。

(Naan is the most <u>beloved </u>staple food of <u>the Uyghur people</u>.)

(*A Bite of China Season 1*, Episode 2, The Story of Staple Foods)

In Example 3, "dream" reflects the host's expectations, while Example 4 uses "喜欢" (love) to show the Uyghur people's emotional connection to food culture.

Relational Process

Discovering China: A Culinary Journey often uses metaphoric expressions, while *A Bite of China Season 1* relies on direct, factual statements.

Example 5: Freshness to us <u>is like</u> the Eldorado.

(*Discovering China: A Culinary Journey*, Episode 4, Guangdong and Taiwan Chapter)

Example 6：尼西在香格里拉<u>是</u>气候最为宜人的所在。

(*Nixi <u>is</u> the most pleasant place in Shangri-La in terms of climate.*)

(*A Bite of China Season 1*, Episode 5, Secrets of the Kitchen)

In Example 5, "be like" links freshness to "Eldorado", evoking emotional resonance. In Example 6, the direct statement conveys objective information with clarity and precision.

Verbal Process

Discovering China: A Culinary Journey uses verbal processes to evoke emotional resonance, while *A Bite of China Season 1* emphasizes factual knowledge and cultural values.

Example 7: The people here are obsessed with chilies, <u>claiming</u> they have a medicinal quality driving out the cold west climate.

(*Discovering China: A Culinary Journey*, Episode 2, Sichuan Chapter)

Example 8：丁村人把加工成粉末状的谷物都<u>称</u>之为面。

(The people of Ding Village <u>refer to</u> all grains processed into powder <u>as</u> "flour".）

(*A Bite of China Season 1*, Episode 2, The Story of Staple Foods)

In Example 7, "claiming" reflects locals' admiration for chilies, sparking interest in food culture. In Example 8, "称" (refer to) defines "面" (flour) and highlights regional food diversity.

Narrative Style and Cultural Perspective

This study analyzes *Discovering China: A Culinary Journey* and *A Bite of China Season 1* using transitivity systems to explore linguistic differences in constructing China's image. It highlights contrasts in cultural perspectives, communication strategies, and language's role in shaping national identity.

Discovering China: A Culinary Journey uses subjective, engaging language for international audiences, while *A Bite of China Season 1* emphasizes psychological insights and objective explanations, offering deeper cultural meaning. The former's dynamic cooking actions enhance entertainment, while the latter focuses on labor-intensive ingredient collection, reflecting ecological and cultural significance.

Narrative styles also differ: *Discovering China* employs metaphorical, story-driven expressions, appealing internationally but lacking depth, while *A Bite of China* integrates storytelling with harmony-focused philosophy, delivering humanistic care with less emotional resonance.

This study highlights the vital role of language in shaping national image and offers insights into cross-cultural communication and global storytelling.

Funding

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