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**Narrative Constitution of Identities and Profiles of
Multinational Corporations of China: A Case Study**

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Abstract

Under the context of the ‘Trade War,’ Chinese multinational corporations are experiencing difficulty in overseas markets due to retarded globalization. Therefore, they have become increasingly aware of the significance of presenting themselves to foreign markets through ‘telling good stories.’ Narratives in these contexts are reframed from Chinese into English corporate profiles of these multinational corporations, so as to present the corporate identities of these corporations as more acceptable to target foreign stakeholders.

This paper purports to investigate how profiles of Chinese corporations in the domestic market are reframed for overseas markets. This paper thus creates a case study of English corporate identities of the corporate profiles of the CRRC (China Railway Rolling Stock Corporation), the world’s largest supplier of rail transit equipment. A combination of content analysis and thematic analysis is used in the data analysis. Narrative reframing strategies from source to the target texts are examined and analyzed by content analysis. Thematic analysis is employed for identifying the corporate identities constructed through this data.

Keywords: Narrative, reframing strategies, corporate identities, corporate profiles, multinational corporations

Introduction

Since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (*China Going Global: between ambition and capacity* 2017: 3), China has become “the new champion of economic cooperation, trade and globalization” (Lu 2018). As early as 2009, China replaced Germany as the world’s largest exporter of commodities (Diego Trindade d’Ávila Magalhães 2018: 4). An increasing number of multinational corporations in China (MNCs) are looking into expanding into markets abroad. Nevertheless, the road to new markets has not been easy. Rising protectionism (*2017 Report on the Sustainable Development of Chinese Enterprises Overseas*, 2017: 54), fear of

China's 'economic aggression' (White House Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy 2018: 2), slow recovery from the economic crisis of 2008 (*World Economic Outlook, April 2019: Growth Slowdown, Precarious Recovery* 2019: 35), The 'Trade War,' starting in 2018 (Lukin 2019), and possible influences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ajami 2020) in 2020 have posed great challenges for MNCs in China to go global.

To cope with the challenges, the Chinese government called for telling 'China's stories' well in international communication (Xinhua 2018), in which China's corporations are important subjects (Niansheng and Ao 2017). For MNCs, corporate profiles enjoy prominence in corporate communications among others (Capriotti and Moreno 2007: 88). More of Chinese MNCs are attaching importance to the translation of their corporate profiles.

Literature review

Narrative Reframing

Narratives, in sociology, are "storied ways of knowing and communicating" (Kohler Riessman 2005: 2), not only representing but also (re)producing reality (Mura 2015: 226). Any text in any subject, written or unwritten, could be one of the four types of narratives proposed by Somers and Gibson: "ontological (personal), public, conceptual and meta-narratives" (Somers and Gibson 1994: 30). Corporate profiles are public narratives, according to this categorization.

The narrative approach is an umbrella term in research as it does not have a unified methodology and as it could be joined with tools borrowed from other areas. Mona Baker introduced framing theory into the narrative study in translations, and for the first time she mentioned the idea of "(re)framing" (Baker 2006: 111), employing 'reframing' to refer to the mediating and adapting process from source texts which are already framed to the target texts which are to be framed again "to present a movement or a particular position within a certain perspective" (Baker 2006: 106). Further, she put forward four key (re)framing strategies in narratives of translation and interpretation, including temporal and spatial framing, selective appropriation of textual material, framing by labelling and repositioning of participants. Mona Baker's theoretical framework was based on analyzing media translation. But how the four (re)framing strategies are used in different registers of texts, for example, corporate profiles, and whether there are new ones that could influence the (re)framing of narratives, remains to be seen.

Narrative Constitution of Corporate Identities

In social science, identity is a difficult term (Steph Lawler 2014). Some scholars consider it to be "a unique and individual possession," while some consider it to be "a social and collective process" (Steph Lawler 2014: 2).

To identify how identities are constituted by narratives, Somers (1994) stated that narrative identities are constituted within "relational settings of contested but patterned relations among narratives, people, and institutions" (Somers 1994: 626). According to Somers, a relational setting is "a pattern of relationships among institutions, public narratives, and social practices" which "must be explored over time and space." Here time does not refer to the time indicators, but to the "shifting relationships among the institutional arrangements and cultural practices" (627). Likewise, space in the relational setting refers to "the cross-cutting character" "contingent on the interaction" of institutions linked to each other in a matrix (627). In Figure 1 below, the relational setting through which narratives constitute identities are shown.

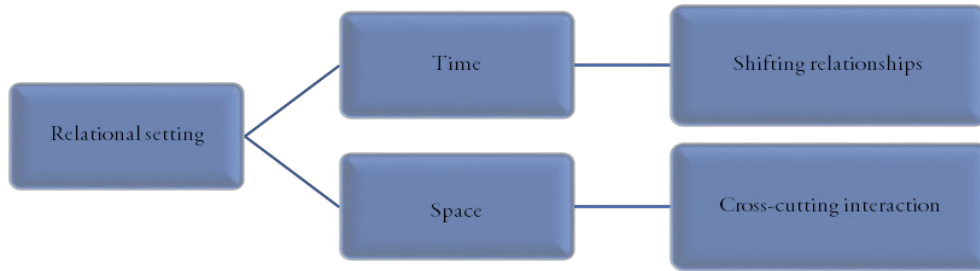


Figure 2 Relational setting in narrative constitution of identities

Methodology

Narrative study is an umbrella term with reduced unified methodology. Therefore, it borrows tools from other fields. In this study of the narrative constitution of corporate identities, a combination of content analysis and thematic analysis is employed.

Content analysis is “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristic,” including “both human-coded analyses and computer-aided text analysis” (Neuendorf 2012: 19). Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt 2017). Content analysis is efficient in detecting explicit messages such as reframing strategies in this study, but with “little focus on exploring relationships and connections between categories” (Robinson 2011: 199). In contrast, thematic analysis deals with latent level themes beyond what has been said (Maguire and Delahunt 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis

The study samples Chinese corporate profiles, and the English translated corporate profiles of the CRRC. The CRRC is the world’s largest supplier of rail transit equipment, and is a centrally-owned multinational corporation, based in China, with headquarters in Beijing, with 46 wholly-owned and majority-owned subsidiaries, and over 180,000 employees. U.S. lawmakers targeted the CRRC, casting the rail car maker as a threat to U.S. cyber security and industry, at a time when the corporation was bidding on the Washington D.C. subway project in 2019 (Alper and Lampert 2019). In all, it is a typical example of a multinational corporation of China going global.

The motives for selecting factors influencing its corporate profiles are:

- 1) CRRC is a railway construction multinational corporation based in Beijing, China.
- 2) CRRC has an average transnationality index in the top 100 multinational corporates list (CEC and CEDA 2019).
- 3) Both profiles have a complete structure with a holistic organization. Both are written in clear and conventional language for a corporate profile. From a preliminary survey of the two texts, it is clear that the English profile is translated from the Chinese profile.

The data collection process was conducted with a combination of Atlas.ti and manual coding. For data analysis, this study used a combination of content and thematic analysis. Details of reframing strategies employed are recorded and analyzed by content analysis. Themes are gathered and analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results

Narrative Reframing Strategies from Chinese to English Corporate Profiles

The proportions of narrative reframing strategies for the CRRC corporate profile translated from Chinese to English are presented in Figure 2 below. Of the four reframing strategies stated by Baker, reframing through selective appropriation is mostly used in the translation, whereas temporal and spatial reframing is the least employed. Aside from these four, two new strategies emerge; narratives are overstated in translation, and the number of staff in the target text does not match with that in the source text.

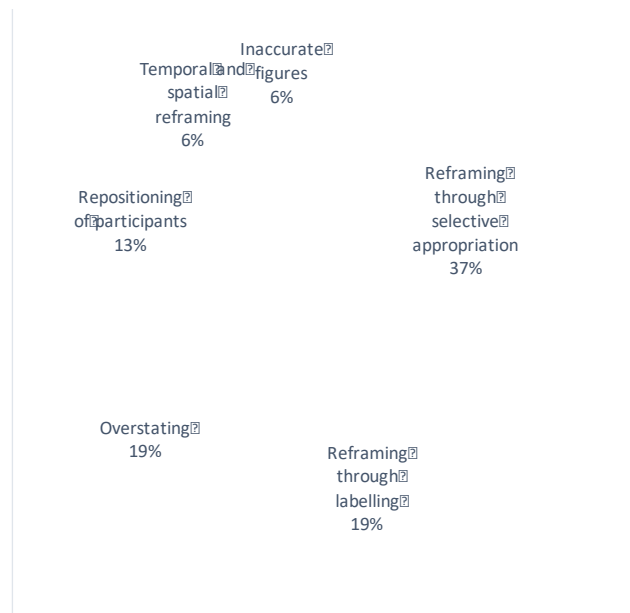


Figure 2 Proportions of reframing strategies from Chinese to English in the CRRC corporate profile

In Table 1 below, the strategies and content related to the strategies are analyzed. Relevant to reform and innovation, the narrative in the present tense in the Chinese profile is changed to future tense in the English profile. Though a small change, coherence in the text is achieved as it resonates with the future aims in the subsequent paragraph. Through selective appropriation, details about what the corporation can do for the target market are added. By contrast, policies and slogans familiar to Chinese stakeholders but confusing to foreign stakeholders are deleted. In reframing through labelling, generalization and specification, the two commonly used strategies (Zhang and Qin 2017: 8) are employed. Business scope and innovation aim are stated in a more general way, while future mission is specified in the target text. By repositioning participants, the quality of several listed products is understated, and the spontaneity of the corporation is mitigated. Contrary to this, the global ranking of the corporation is strengthened, as is the number of staff.

Strategies	Content
Temporal and spatial reframing	Present tense -- future tense in stating reform and renovation
Reframing through selective appropriation	Addition: Revenue, corporate social responsibilities and reform and innovation Deletion: policies and slogans

Reframing through labelling	Generalization: business scope and innovation aim
	Specification: future mission
Repositioning of participants	Products as a representative – products as part of the whole
	CRRC as a builder – CRRC as a becomeer
Other strategies	Overstatement: upgrade the level of the corporation
	Inaccurate figures: number of the staff (more)

Table 1 *Reframing strategies and contents*

Identity Constitution through Narratives

Identity constitution occurs within a setting of temporal and spatial relationships in narratives (Somers 1994). The temporal aspects of this relationship indicate the shifting among institutional arrangements and cultural practices, where the spatial aspects indicate a cross-cutting character among institutions in a matrix. Therefore, the themes of the two dimensions of a relational setting are explored and analyzed.

The shifting within the English corporate profile of CRRC is simple. Following descriptions of the present achievement in manufacturing, the profile goes on clarifying the future aim of “innovation, reform and internationalization”(CRRC > *About Us* > *Company Profile*). The shifting from present successes in manufacturing to aiming at becoming a high-end producer is set here.

The cross-cutting character in the narrative of the English profile is more obvious. The narrative in the profile relates to three institutions in the matrix with which it is involved: Global ranking, the world and the stakeholders. Of the three, the profile cites more of global ranking as an objective benchmark to foreground its capacity. This relates to the world as well to show its openness. Relating to the stakeholders, though less than the previous two, is appealing in that the stakeholders are addressed as the second person listener directly.

Viewed in the relational setting of time and space, the corporate identity presented in the English profile of CRRC is clear. CRRC wants to project itself as a robust, open, responsible and qualified rail manufacturer to its foreign stakeholders.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper takes an empirical approach in order to examine how narratives in the Chinese corporate profiles of Chinese MNCs are reframed in their English profiles to fit into the target market. The paper discusses the corporate identities of Chinese MNCs constituted in narratives in their English profiles. The results show that Chinese MNCs employ diversified reframing strategies in telling stories of themselves. In addition to the strategies widely used in news translation, new strategies such as overstating and using inaccurate figures are adopted. To face the challenges in going global, Chinese MNCs relate to other institutions by more than just stating intra-organizational shifts. They emphasize their global ranking and willingness to shoulder more corporate social responsibilities.

Attempting an empirical case study is efficient in that it identifies the reframing strategies and corporate identities constituted. However, identities cannot be categorized unless the entities share similar narrative identities and relational setting (Somers 1994). Judging corporate identities from only one case study, irrespective of the extent to which the sample becomes representative, is accompanied by a high level of risk of bias. Therefore, more samples must be studied to obtain a holistic and systematic view of the corporate identities of Chinese MNCs.

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