

Discursive Strategies in the Self-Construction of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area's International Image: A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Study of *China Daily*

Wen Gong

School of Foreign Studies, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, China

Email: gongw@lingnan.edu.cn

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Abstract

This study examines how *China Daily* discursively constructs the international image of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA). Drawing on a corpus of 3533 news reports published between 2019 and 2025, comprising approximately 2.53 million tokens, it adopts a corpus-based critical discourse approach integrating Fairclough's three-dimensional model, Appraisal Theory, conceptual metaphor analysis, and narrative analysis. Quantitative keyword and collocation analyses are combined with qualitative examinations of semantic prosody, metaphorical framing, and narrative strategies. The findings reveal three mutually reinforcing dimensions of positive self-representation. First, lexical choices and positive semantic prosody foreground economic development, technological innovation, and regional integration. Second, construction, growth, and connectivity metaphors portray the GBA as a purposefully designed, dynamically evolving, and globally connected region. Third, progress narratives, human-interest framing, and strategic source selection organize regional developments into coherent accounts of achievement. The study extends corpus-based critical discourse analysis by demonstrating the interdependence of evaluation, cognition, and narration, and suggests that greater source diversity, culturally distinctive metaphors, and more nuanced narratives could strengthen the credibility and resonance of the GBA's international communication.

Keywords

Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), International Image, Self-Construction, Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), comprising nine municipalities in Guangdong Province together with the Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions, was formally elevated to a national development strategy in the 2017 Government Work Report and received its definitive policy blueprint with the release of the *Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area* on February 18, 2019. Since then, the GBA has been positioned as a world-class city cluster and a global innovation and technology hub, with its aggregate economic output surpassing 13 trillion RMB by 2022, rendering it one of the largest and most economically dynamic bay areas in the world. As a strategic pivot of China's reform and opening-up in the new era, the GBA serves not only as an engine of regional economic integration but also as a critical window through which the international community observes China's development trajectory, governance capacity, and long-term strategic intentions.

The international image of the GBA carries significant implications for China's broader national image and its pursuit of international discourse power. In an era characterized by intensifying geopolitical competition and the growing salience of soft power (Nye, 2004), the capacity to shape favorable international perceptions has become a strategic asset for nations and regions alike. Nation branding scholars have long argued that a region's international image is not a natural reflection of objective reality but a socially constructed product mediated through discourse, representation, and strategic communication (Anholt, 2007; Kotler et al., 1993). In this sense, the GBA's international image is both a discursive artifact and a site of struggle where competing narratives—Chinese and international, official and unofficial—contend for interpretive authority.

Previous research has revealed a notable disparity between how the GBA is represented by Chinese media and how it is portrayed by international media. Studies based on international media coverage have found that foreign reports tend to focus disproportionately on economic indicators and technological achievements while paying limited attention to the region's cultural heritage, social governance, and institutional innovations (Du & Hou, 2020; Xu & Zhang, 2022). This disparity—what Chinese communication scholars have termed the gap between “self-shaping” and “other-shaping”—poses fundamental challenges to the GBA's international communication efficacy. While existing scholarship has extensively analyzed international media's construction of the GBA image, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how Chinese English-language media strategically construct the region's image for international audiences. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the discursive strategies employed in *China Daily's* coverage of the GBA, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of China's self-representation

in global media discourse.

1.2. Research Questions

This study addresses the following three interrelated research questions:

RQ 1: What lexical and semantic patterns characterize *China Daily*'s representation of the GBA, and how do these patterns embed value orientations?

RQ 2: What metaphorical frameworks are systematically deployed in constructing the GBA's international image, and what cognitive schemas do they activate?

RQ 3: What narrative strategies are employed to position the GBA favorably within global discourse, and how is source selection used to establish discursive authority?

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends the application of corpus-based critical discourse analysis to the study of regional image construction, offering a systematic analytical framework that integrates quantitative linguistic evidence with qualitative interpretive analysis. By integrating Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model with Martin and White's Appraisal Theory and drawing on insights from soft power theory (Nye, 2004), nation branding (Anholt, 2007), and strategic narrative studies (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014), the study develops a multi-layered analytical framework that moves beyond purely linguistic description toward a more comprehensive understanding of the ideological and strategic dimensions of media discourse.

Practically, the findings provide empirically grounded insights for optimizing international communication strategies concerning the GBA and other Chinese regional development initiatives. By identifying the specific discursive mechanisms through which *China Daily* constructs a favorable GBA image, the study offers actionable recommendations for enhancing narrative persuasiveness, diversifying source representation, and developing more culturally resonant metaphorical frames. These insights are particularly timely given China's stated goal of building "a discourse system and narrative system that matches its comprehensive national strength and international status."

2. Literature Review

2.1. International Image, Place Branding, and Soft Power

The concept of place image has been extensively theorized in marketing, communication, and urban studies. Kotler et al. (1993) defined place image as the "sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place," emphasizing the crucial role of media and strategic communication in shaping these perceptions. Lynch (1960) pioneered the study of city imageability, establishing foundational frameworks for understanding how urban environments are cognitively repre-

sented through elements such as paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Building on these foundations, Anholt (2007) developed the concept of “competitive identity,” arguing that nations and regions must actively manage their brand images across six interconnected dimensions—tourism, exports, governance, people, culture and heritage, and investment and immigration—to compete effectively in the global marketplace of perceptions.

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (2004), provides a complementary theoretical lens for understanding the strategic significance of international image construction. Nye defines soft power as “the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion,” arguing that a nation’s culture, political values, and policies constitute important resources for influence when they are perceived as legitimate and attractive. In this framework, media discourse serves as a critical conduit through which soft power resources are communicated and projected to international audiences. The construction of a favorable international image for a strategic initiative like the GBA can thus be understood as an exercise in soft power projection, where discursive strategies aim to generate attraction, legitimacy, and voluntary alignment among international stakeholders.

More recently, strategic narrative theory has emerged as a powerful framework for understanding how actors construct and communicate stories about international politics to shape the preferences and behaviors of others (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014). Strategic narratives are defined as “communicative tools through which political actors construct, disseminate, and enforce a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al., 2013: p. 5). This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, as it directs attention to how *China Daily*’s GBA coverage functions as a form of strategic narrative construction—seeking to shape international understandings of the GBA’s identity, purpose, and trajectory through systematically organized discursive practices.

2.2. Self-Shaping versus Other-Shaping in China’s International Communication

A substantial body of research indicates that China’s international image has been predominantly other-shaped rather than self-shaped. Within Chinese international-communication scholarship, this imbalance is frequently characterised as a communicative asymmetry—a gap between the positions China seeks to project and the extent to which they are received and credited abroad. Framed in these terms, the issue is less a matter of communicative substance than of structural condition: uneven access to agenda-setting platforms, entrenched narrative frames, and asymmetrical attributions of credibility within the global media system all constrain how any national voice is heard. This asymmetry therefore points both to the structural constraints of the global media order and to the case for more

effective self-representation strategies.

In the specific context of the GBA, several empirical studies have examined the other-shaped image constructed by international media. [Du and Hou \(2020\)](#) conducted an empirical analysis of 545 reports from 182 international media outlets, finding that foreign coverage predominantly focused on economic and technological dimensions while relying heavily on elite sources and centering on Hong Kong as the primary geographical anchor. [Xu and Zhang \(2022\)](#) similarly found that international financial and technology news media were the primary reporters on the GBA, with Hong Kong, Macao, and Shenzhen receiving the most attention, while cultural and social dimensions were largely marginalized. [Huang and Guan \(2024\)](#), using the NOW (News on the Web) corpus, identified six major thematic foci in international coverage: development planning, economy, technological innovation, and communication and collaboration, further confirming the dominance of economic-technological framing in international discourse.

These studies collectively paint a detailed picture of the GBA's other-shaped image as one filtered through a predominantly economic and geopolitical lens. However, the self-shaped image—how Chinese media proactively construct the GBA for international audiences—has received comparatively less systematic attention.

2.3. Critical Discourse Studies and Media Representation

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides the primary methodological and theoretical foundation for this study. CDA is concerned with the relationship between discourse, power, and ideology, seeking to reveal how language use both reproduces and challenges social inequalities and power relations ([Fairclough, 1995](#); [Wodak & Meyer, 2016](#)). [Fairclough's \(1995\)](#) three-dimensional model conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously text (linguistic product), discursive practice (processes of production, distribution, and consumption), and social practice (ideological and hegemonic processes). This tripartite framework enables a comprehensive analysis that moves from micro-level linguistic description to meso-level analysis of discursive processes and macro-level social explanation, making it particularly well-suited for examining how media discourse constructs and projects particular images of regions and nations.

[van Dijk's \(1998\)](#) socio-cognitive approach to CDA offers complementary insights, particularly through his concept of the ideological square—a set of discursive strategies through which groups represent themselves positively and others negatively by emphasizing positive information about “us,” emphasizing negative information about “them,” de-emphasizing negative information about “us,” and de-emphasizing positive information about “them.” While the present study focuses on self-representation rather than direct out-group derogation, van Dijk's framework illuminates the systematic mechanisms through which positive self-representation is achieved through selective emphasis and suppression in media dis-

course.

The integration of corpus linguistic methods with CDA, often termed corpus-based or corpus-assisted CDA, has gained increasing prominence in recent years as a means of enhancing the empirical rigor and systematicity of critical discourse research (Baker et al., 2008). Corpus methods enable researchers to identify statistically significant patterns of lexical choice, collocation, and semantic prosody across large datasets, providing an empirical foundation for subsequent qualitative interpretive analysis. This methodological synergy is particularly valuable for the present study, as it allows for the systematic identification of discursive patterns across a substantial corpus of GBA-related news articles while retaining the critical interpretive depth that CDA demands.

2.4. Metaphor, Framing, and Strategic Narrative in Media Discourse

Metaphor analysis constitutes a second major theoretical pillar of this study. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), posits that metaphor is not merely a decorative rhetorical device but a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which abstract concepts are understood and experienced in terms of more concrete, embodied domains. In media and political discourse, metaphors function as powerful framing devices that shape how audiences perceive and evaluate complex issues by activating cognitive schemas while backgrounding alternatives (Charteris-Black, 2004; Musolff, 2016). Charteris-Black's (2004) critical metaphor analysis framework provides a systematic procedure for identifying, classifying, and interpreting metaphorical expressions in discourse, emphasizing the ideological and rhetorical functions that metaphors serve in constructing representations of social reality.

Framing theory, as developed by Entman (1993) and elaborated within media and communication studies, offers a complementary perspective on how media discourse constructs meaning. Entman defines framing as “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). In the context of GBA coverage, framing analysis reveals how *China Daily* selects aspects of the GBA's development—economic growth, technological innovation, regional integration—while backgrounding others, thereby promoting understandings and evaluations of the initiative.

The intersection of metaphor, framing, and narrative in media discourse has been increasingly recognized as a critical site for the construction of collective identities and strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Narratives provide temporal and causal structures that transform isolated events into meaningful stories with identifiable protagonists, conflicts, and resolutions. In the context of regional development communication, narrative strategies determine how the GBA's story is told—who the heroes are, what challenges are faced, how they are over-

come, and what the envisioned future looks like. The present study integrates these three analytical lenses—metaphor, framing, and narrative—to provide a comprehensive account of the discursive strategies through which *China Daily* constructs the GBA's international image.

2.5. Research Gap

Despite the growing body of research on the GBA's international image, several significant gaps remain. First, existing studies have overwhelmingly focused on the other-shaped image constructed by international media, with relatively few systematic analyses of the self-shaped image produced by Chinese English-language media. Second, among the studies that do examine Chinese media's GBA discourse, most focus on single analytical dimensions—such as metaphor use or multimodal representation—rather than providing an integrated analysis of how lexical, metaphorical, and narrative strategies work together to construct a coherent image. Third, existing research tends to be descriptive rather than critically engaged, often stopping at the identification of patterns without adequately theorizing their ideological functions and strategic implications within the broader context of China's international communication and soft power projection.

The present study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional corpus-based critical discourse analysis of *China Daily's* GBA coverage. By integrating Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model with Appraisal Theory, conceptual metaphor analysis, framing theory, and strategic narrative studies, the study develops a holistic analytical framework that captures the interconnections among evaluative orientations, cognitive frameworks, and narrative structures in self-representation discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives—Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis and Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory—while drawing on insights from soft power theory, nation branding, and strategic narrative studies to contextualize the broader strategic significance of the discursive practices under examination.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously text, discursive practice, and social practice. At the textual level, analysis focuses on linguistic features including vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and rhetorical structure. At the discursive practice level, attention is directed to the production, distribution, and consumption of texts, including how texts are produced within institutional contexts, how they draw upon and recontextualize existing discourses, and how they are positioned to achieve rhetorical effects. At the social practice level, analysis examines the ideological and hegemonic processes that shape and are shaped by discourse—including how discourse reproduces or challenges power relations, constructs social identities, and naturalizes worldviews. This tripartite framework enables a comprehensive analysis that moves from micro-level linguistic description to macro-level social explanation, which is essen-

tial for understanding how *China Daily's* GBA coverage functions not merely as information transmission but as a strategic practice of image construction.

Appraisal Theory, developed within the systemic functional linguistics tradition (Martin & White, 2005), provides detailed analytical tools for examining the linguistic resources through which speakers and writers express attitudes, make judgments, and position themselves and their audiences. The theory distinguishes three interlocking subsystems: Attitude (encompassing affect, judgment, and appreciation), Engagement (distinguishing monoglossic and heteroglossic resources through which writers align or distance themselves from propositions), and Graduation (including force and focus resources through which the intensity or precision of evaluations is calibrated). This framework is particularly valuable for analyzing how media texts evaluate and position the subjects they report on, as it enables a systematic account of the evaluative landscape of *China Daily's* GBA coverage—including how positive evaluations of the GBA are amplified, how potential criticisms are managed through engagement resources, and how graduation resources calibrate the intensity of evaluative claims.

The integration of these two frameworks is theoretically productive because Fairclough's model provides the macro-level critical architecture for understanding discourse as social practice, while Appraisal Theory provides the micro-level analytical tools for systematically describing the evaluative and interpersonal dimensions of text. Together, they enable an analysis that is both linguistically precise and critically engaged, capturing both the detailed textual mechanisms of image construction and their broader ideological and strategic functions.

4. Methodology

4.1. Corpus Construction

The study corpus comprises 3533 English-language news reports published by *China Daily* between 18 February 2019, when the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area was released, and 31 December 2025. Articles were retrieved from the newspaper's website using four search strings: "Greater Bay Area," "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao," "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area," and "GBA." En-dash variants were also searched; acronym searches were restricted to the China, Business, and Regional sections to reduce irrelevant results. Searches covered headlines, leads, and full texts within the specified period.

Records were deduplicated by canonical URL and by headline-date combination, then screened using headlines, leads, and full texts. Eligible articles were original news reports that mentioned the GBA in the headline or lead and addressed it substantively. Editorials, opinion pieces, feature articles, press releases, syndicated content, and reports containing only incidental references were excluded. Screening reliability was checked on a randomly selected 20% subsample of retrieved records, and disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Retained texts were cleaned of navigation elements, related links, advertise-

ments, photograph captions, and bylines. Each article received a stable identifier (GBA-YYYY-NNN) and was logged with its publication date, section, headline, URL, retrieval query, and token count. The final corpus contains 2,532,775 tokens, averaging approximately 717 per article (**Table 1**). Annual article counts ranged from 666 in 2021 to 313 in 2025.

Table 1. Distribution of corpus articles by year.

Year	Number of articles	Percentage	Total tokens	Average tokens per article
2019	604	17.1%	350,131	580
2020	434	12.3%	311,874	719
2021	666	18.8%	546,776	821
2022	474	13.4%	357,213	754
2023	524	14.8%	347,649	663
2024	518	14.7%	408,957	789
2025	313	8.9%	210,175	671
Total	3533	100.0%	2,532,775	717

Figure 1 situates the corpus within *China Daily*'s wider regional reporting. Across 2019-2025 the newspaper published 22,293 articles referring to the GBA, Hong Kong or Macao, of which 3533 were GBA-related; as the figure notes, these strands overlap within articles and do not sum to the total.

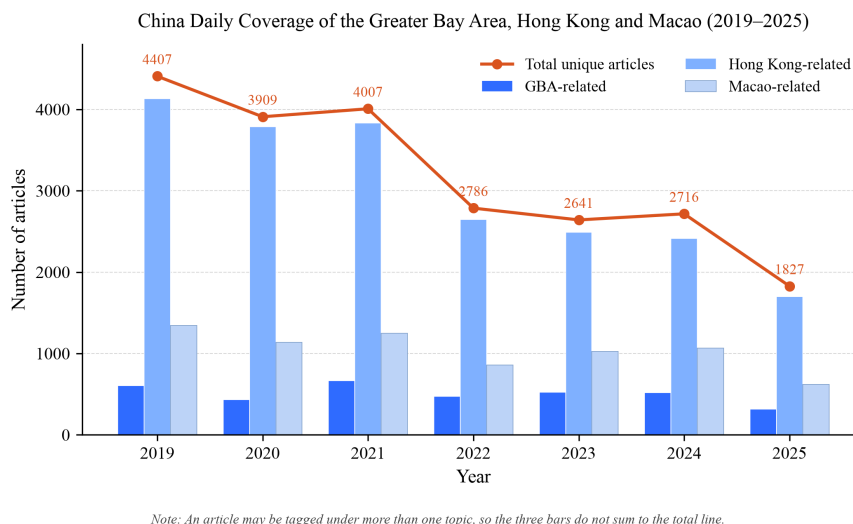


Figure 1. *China Daily*'s coverage of the greater bay area, Hong Kong and Macao (2019-2025).

4.2. Research Procedures

The analysis proceeds through four stages.

Stage 1: Keyword and collocation analysis. Using AntConc 4.2.4, log-likelihood analysis (Dunning's G^2 ; Dunning, 1993) compared the GBA corpus (2,532,775

tokens) with the reference corpus (11,236,740 tokens). Keywords met two thresholds: $LL \geq 10.83$ ($df = 1$, $p < 0.001$) and a minimum frequency of 100 occurrences in the study corpus. **Table 2** reports frequencies in the two corpora, LL values, and GBA frequencies per 10,000 words. Collocates within a ± 5 -word window were retained when co-occurrence frequency was ≥ 5 (**Table 3**). Dispersion was measured as the proportion of the 3533 articles containing each keyword, a coverage-based measure of the distribution of a lexical item across documents rather than within them (Gries, 2008).

Stage 2: Semantic Prosody Analysis. Concordance contexts were examined for positive, negative, neutral, and mixed evaluations. Attitude resources were additionally classified following Martin and White (2005), linking recurrent lexical patterns to evaluative positioning. Coding units and reliability procedures are specified in Section 4.3.

Stage 3: Metaphorical framing analysis. Following Charteris-Black (2004), metaphor analysis involved identification, interpretation of source-target mappings, and explanation of their rhetorical and ideological functions. Identified expression types were grouped by source domain to establish the distribution of metaphorical frames.

Stage 4: Narrative Strategy Analysis. Drawing on van Dijk (1998), the analysis examined narrative structures, participant roles, source attribution, and temporal framing, focusing on how these features organize GBA-related events and authorize interpretations.

4.3. Coding Protocol and Inter-Coder Reliability

Interpretive coding covered the full study corpus. A large language model (DeepSeek V4.1 Flash) generated provisional labels and justifications from the codebook without access to the research questions or expected findings; all proposals were reviewed by a human coder. A second coder independently coded a random 20% subsample within each analytical layer, except metaphor source-domain assignment, for which all expression types were independently double-coded. Reliability was assessed before adjudication using Cohen's κ , except for the Appreciation-subtype decision, for which nominal Krippendorff's α was used (Krippendorff, 2004); 0.80 was the benchmark for acceptable agreement, and agreement for the layers assessed with κ ranged from 0.80 to 0.84. The absolute number of coded instances for each layer is recorded in the coding log. Disagreements were resolved through discussion with an adjudicator.

Semantic prosody. Eligible node-collocate pairs met the Stage 1 selection criteria. Polarity was assessed from concordance contexts rather than isolated collocates, accounting for negation and contrast (Hunston, 2007). Positive, negative, neutral, and mixed categories were distinguished; neutral contexts lacked an evaluative orientation, whereas mixed contexts combined positive and negative evaluations.

Appraisal. Each attitudinal lexical item within a finite clause constituted one

Attitude token, classified as Affect, Judgment, or Appreciation (Martin & White, 2005). Appreciation tokens were further classified as valuation, composition, or reaction. Multiple tokens within a clause were counted separately; clauses without attitudinal lexis contributed no tokens. Ambiguous tokens received one primary category according to the evaluated target, with alternatives recorded separately but not double-counted. Attitude percentages therefore use all Attitude tokens as their denominator, whereas Appreciation-subtype percentages use Appreciation tokens only.

Metaphor. Identification adapted Steen et al. (2010) by requiring both a contrast between contextual and more basic meanings and contextual activation of the source domain. Under this study-specific restriction, conventionalized expressions such as “hub” and “corridor” were included only when the surrounding text activated the relevant imagery. Counts represent distinct lemma-mapping types, not occurrences: repetitions were recorded separately. The 412 types were assigned to 12 source-domain categories. A repeat-coding check on a 20% subsample after a three-day interval confirmed the stability of the scheme.

Participants, sources, and narrative devices. Named human-interest participants were classified as entrepreneurs/businesspeople, professionals/skilled workers, researchers/academics, or ordinary residents. Attributed sources were counted once per article at first mention and classified as official, expert, business, or ordinary citizen, yielding 1847 source-article records. The presence of a challenge-response-achievement arc and of forward-looking temporal markers was coded separately as present or absent in each of the 3533 articles.

5. Findings

5.1. RQ 1 Lexical Selection and Semantic Prosody

Keyword analysis revealed a distinctive lexical profile in *China Daily*'s GBA coverage. Table 2 presents the 20 most salient keywords, together with their frequencies in the two corpora, their log-likelihood values, their normalized frequencies per 10,000 words, and their semantic categories. All exceed the significance threshold of $LL \geq 10.83$ ($p < 0.001$). Their dispersion ranged from 2.6% to 77.9% of the 3533 articles, with a median of 20.0%, indicating that the identified lexical patterns were not restricted to a small number of texts.

Two features of this distribution deserve comment. First, the absolute frequencies are moderate in relation to corpus size—the most frequent keyword, development, accounts for only 0.48% of the corpus (48.2 occurrences per 10,000 words)—so that the distinctive lexical profile of GBA coverage is a matter of relative lexical density rather than of the dominance of any single item. Second, the profile is not an artefact of a small number of atypical articles: dispersion is moderate to high across the list, which indicates that these lexical patterns characterize GBA coverage. The same conclusion holds for the semantic-prosody and collocational patterns discussed below, which were extracted from concordance lines drawn from across the corpus.

Table 2. Top 20 keywords in *China Daily*'s GBA coverage (Ranked by Log-Likelihood).

Keyword	GBA freq.	Ref. freq.	LL (G ²)	Per 10,000 words	Category
Development	12,209	18,237	7772.6	48.20	Economic progress
Innovation	3651	3437	3943.7	14.42	Technology
Technology	4294	6762	2520.9	16.95	Technology
Opportunities	2319	3161	1671.7	9.16	Economic progress
Integration	1193	906	1538.0	4.71	Regional cooperation
Talent	1454	1409	1528.6	5.74	Human capital
Hub	1425	1366	1513.3	5.63	Spatial economy
High-quality	1256	1425	1126.8	4.96	Positive evaluation
Cluster	567	219	1079.1	2.24	Spatial economy
Opening-up	1089	1457	804.0	4.30	Policy
Reform	1399	2326	752.4	5.52	Policy
Cross-border	1037	1454	719.7	4.09	Regional cooperation
World-class	485	310	705.2	1.91	Positive evaluation
Investment	2706	6338	703.4	10.68	Economic progress
Cooperation	3322	8681	618.5	13.12	Regional cooperation
Growth	2881	7321	588.1	11.37	Economic progress
Connectivity	510	734	341.4	2.01	Infrastructure
Sustainable	767	2076	126.1	3.03	Positive evaluation
Synergy	100	138	70.9	0.39	Regional cooperation
Partnership	372	1346	11.6	1.47	Regional cooperation

Note. GBA = study corpus (2,532,775 tokens); Ref. = reference corpus, i.e. the non-GBA articles from the same collection (11,236,740 tokens); LL = log-likelihood (Dunning's G², df = 1).

The keyword list reveals several notable patterns. First, the predominance of “development,” “innovation,” “technology,” and “growth” indicates that *China Daily* constructs the GBA primarily through an economic and technological lens—a pattern that parallels international media's thematic focus identified in previous research (Du & Hou, 2020; Xu & Zhang, 2022). This convergence suggests that economic and technological achievements constitute a relatively uncontested discursive terrain where Chinese and international narratives, while not identical, are at least mutually intelligible.

However, the presence of “cooperation,” “connectivity,” “partnership,” “cross-border,” and “synergy” suggests a distinctive emphasis on collaborative and mutually beneficial dimensions that is less prominent in international media coverage. Where international media tend to frame the GBA through a geopolitical lens

that emphasizes competition and strategic rivalry (Huang & Guan, 2024), *China Daily's* lexical choices foreground cooperation, integration, and synergy—constructing the GBA as a project of mutual benefit rather than zero-sum competition. This lexical distinction represents a key site of divergence between self-shaping and other-shaping discourses.

Semantic prosody analysis of key lexical items revealed consistently positive evaluative patterns across the corpus. For “development,” the most frequent collocates included “rapid” ($f = 87$), “high-quality” ($f = 76$), “sustainable” ($f = 54$), “comprehensive” ($f = 43$), and “coordinated” ($f = 38$). For “opportunities,” salient collocates included “new” ($f = 112$), “immense” ($f = 67$), “unprecedented” ($f = 54$), “valuable” ($f = 43$), and “historic” ($f = 29$). For “integration,” the most frequent collocates were “regional” ($f = 123$), “economic” ($f = 98$), “deepened” ($f = 76$), “accelerated” ($f = 54$), and “seamless” ($f = 43$); these collocates are reported with their co-occurrence frequencies in Table 3, and all meet the selection threshold specified in Section 4.2. This consistent positive semantic prosody constructs the GBA not merely as developing, but as developing in ways that are rapid, high-quality, and sustainable—and not merely as offering opportunities, but as offering new, immense, unprecedented opportunities.

This lexical patterning constructs integration not as a threat to local distinctiveness, a source of tension, or a process fraught with difficulties, but as a natural, positive, and increasingly seamless process. This construction of integration as natural and unproblematic represents a key discursive strategy for preempting potential criticisms concerning the social and political dimensions of regional integration, particularly in the context of “one country, two systems.”

Table 3. Frequent collocates of three key nodes within a ± 5 -word window.

Node	Collocate	Co-occurrence frequency
Development	Rapid	87
	High-quality	76
	Sustainable	54
	Comprehensive	43
	Coordinated	38
Opportunities	New	112
	Immense	67
	Unprecedented	54
	Valuable	43
	Historic	29

Continued

Integration	Regional	123
	Economic	98
	Deepened	76
	Accelerated	54
	Seamless	43

Note. Co-occurrence frequency is the number of occurrences of each collocate within a ± 5 -word window of the node; collocates were retained at a co-occurrence frequency of ≥ 5 . $N = 2,532,775$ tokens (GBA corpus).

The Appraisal Theory analysis further illuminates the evaluative landscape of the corpus. Appreciation resources—evaluations of phenomena rather than of people or behaviour—constitute the largest category (62.4%), followed by Judgment resources (24.7%) and Affect resources (12.9%); the three-way Attitude decision was reliable (agreement = 0.80). The dominance of appreciation resources is consistent with the corpus’s focus on evaluating the GBA as a project, initiative, and region rather than on evaluating individual actors. Within appreciation resources, the sub-category of “valuation” (social significance, importance) is most frequent (41.3%), followed by “composition” (balance, complexity, coherence) at 32.8% and “reaction” (impact, attractiveness) at 25.9%. This distribution indicates that *China Daily*’s evaluation of the GBA emphasizes its significance and importance, its balanced and coherent development, and its positive impact and attractiveness—three dimensions that collectively construct the GBA as a valuable, well-ordered, and appealing regional initiative.

5.2. RQ 2 Metaphorical Framing

Systematic identification and classification of metaphorical expressions following Charteris-Black’s (2004) critical metaphor analysis procedure revealed 412 metaphorical expression types across the corpus, which were classified into 12 conceptual categories based on their source domains. Assignment of the 412 types to the 12 categories was independently double-coded (agreement = 0.83), and the scheme proved stable when the procedure was repeated on the 20% subsample after a two-week interval. Three dominant metaphorical frameworks accounted for 82.7% of all identified types, while the remaining categories each accounted for less than 5%. Figure 2 presents the frequency distribution of the major metaphorical categories.

5.2.1. Construction Metaphors

Construction metaphors constitute the most frequent metaphorical frame, accounting for 34.2% of the identified expression types. These include references to “building,” “foundations,” “pillars,” “frameworks,” and “infrastructure,” drawing on the source domain of architecture and building construction to conceptualize the GBA’s development as a deliberate, designed process.

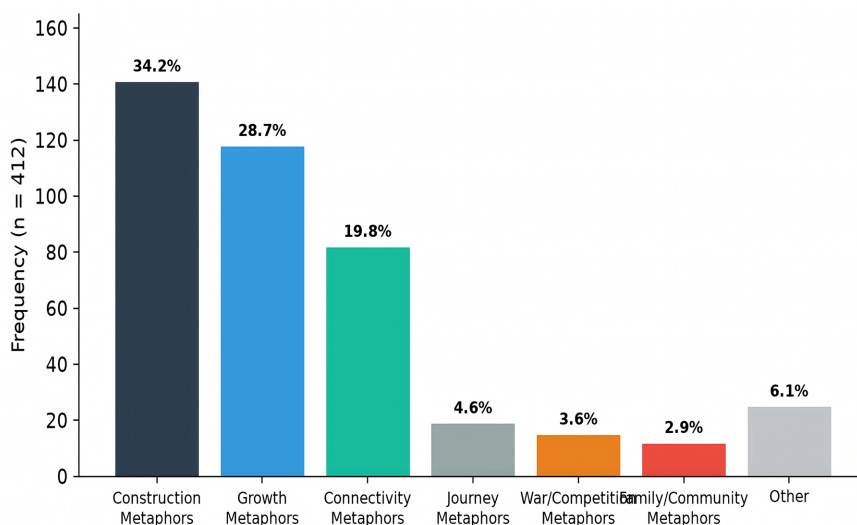


Figure 2. Distribution of metaphorical frameworks in *China Daily*'s GBA coverage.

- (1) "The GBA is building a world-class innovation corridor."—*China Daily*, 2021-05-12
- (2) "Hong Kong's financial sector serves as a pillar of the GBA's development."—*China Daily*, 2022-08-23
- (3) "The foundations for regional integration are being steadily laid."—*China Daily*, 2020-11-07

These construction metaphors activate a conceptual mapping in which the GBA is understood as a building under active, deliberate construction—an endeavor requiring planning, effort, and time, but proceeding according to a coherent design. The source domain of architecture carries several entailments that are strategically valuable for self-shaping discourse. First, buildings are designed by architects—implying that the GBA's development is guided by intelligent, purposeful planning rather than random or chaotic processes. Second, buildings have foundations—implying that the GBA's development is built on solid, reliable ground and is therefore stable and durable. Third, buildings have pillars and frameworks—implying that the GBA's development has a clear, rational structure with identifiable supporting elements. Fourth, construction is a progressive process—implying that the GBA is moving steadily toward completion, with each stage building on the previous one.

This framing positions the GBA's development as intentional and orderly rather than chaotic or unpredictable, and as rational and well-planned rather than ad hoc or politically motivated. The construction metaphor thus serves to legitimize the GBA as a carefully designed, technically sound project that deserves international confidence and participation. By conceptualizing the GBA through the lens of architecture—a domain universally associated with expertise, precision, and permanence—*China Daily*'s discourse seeks to transfer these positive associations to the GBA itself.

5.2.2. Growth Metaphors

Growth metaphors, accounting for 28.7% of the identified expression types, draw on the conceptual domain of organic growth, such as plants, gardens, and ecosystems, to conceptualize the GBA's development as a natural, vital process. Key expressions include "grow," "flourish," "blossom," "seed," "cultivate," and "fertile ground."

(4) "The GBA is growing into a global innovation powerhouse."—*China Daily*, 2023-03-15

(5) "Cross-border cooperation is flourishing across the region."—*China Daily*, 2022-11-04

(6) "The GBA has cultivated a fertile ground for startups."—*China Daily*, 2024-06-19

Growth metaphors carry different implications from construction metaphors, and the two frameworks function complementarily. While construction metaphors emphasize design, intentionality, and rational planning, growth metaphors emphasize naturalness, vitality, and organic development. The GBA is not merely being built according to a plan; it is growing organically, suggesting that its development is natural, sustainable, and life-giving. The source domain of organic growth carries entailments that are strategically valuable in different ways: growth is natural (implying that the GBA's development follows inherent tendencies rather than being artificially imposed), growth is self-sustaining (implying that the GBA has internal vitality that does not depend on constant external intervention), and growth is life-giving (implying that the GBA generates prosperity, opportunity, and well-being for those within it).

The metaphor of "cultivating a fertile ground" is particularly revealing, as it combines construction and growth imagery: cultivation is a deliberate human activity (like construction), but it works with natural processes rather than imposing artificial designs (like growth). This hybrid metaphor constructs the GBA's development as a process in which wise human stewardship creates the conditions for natural vitality to flourish, a framing that avoids the potential coldness of pure construction imagery while retaining the implication of purposeful human agency. The growth metaphor thus serves to soften and naturalize the GBA's development, presenting it not as a top-down political project but as an organic, bottom-up process of vitality and prosperity.

5.2.3. Connectivity Metaphors

Connectivity metaphors, accounting for 19.8% of the identified expression types, draw on the conceptual domain of networks, flows, and transportation to conceptualize the GBA as a space defined by connections rather than boundaries. Key expressions include "bridge," "link," "connect," "gateway," "corridor," and "flow."

(7) "The Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge links three cities and countless opportunities."—*China Daily*, 2019-10-24

(8) “The GBA serves as a gateway for international investors.” — *China Daily*, 2021-09-08

(9) “Innovation flows freely across the corridor of GBA cities.” — *China Daily*, 2023-07-22

Connectivity metaphors construct the GBA as a space defined not by boundaries but by connections—a region where flows of capital, talent, and ideas move freely and productively. The source domain of networks and flows carries entailments that are strategically significant: connectivity implies openness (the GBA is not closed or insular but connected to broader networks), connectivity implies mobility (people, goods, and ideas can move freely within and through the GBA), and connectivity implies synergy (connections create value that is greater than the sum of individual parts). The metaphor of the “gateway” is particularly important, as it positions the GBA not merely as a destination but as a point of entry and exit—a conduit through which international capital, talent, and ideas flow into and out of China. This framing constructs the GBA as an open, accessible, and globally connected region, countering potential international perceptions of China as closed or inaccessible.

The three metaphorical frameworks are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing, operating together to construct a multi-dimensional image of the GBA. Construction metaphors establish the GBA as a project of national significance—purposeful, well-designed, and rationally structured. Growth metaphors establish it as a vital, organic entity—natural, self-sustaining, and life-giving. Connectivity metaphors establish it as an open, integrated space—globally connected, internally seamless, and productive of synergy. Together, they construct a coherent image of the GBA as a purposefully designed, naturally vital, and globally connected region—an image that addresses different potential concerns and appeals to different aspects of international audiences’ understandings of regional development.

5.3. RQ 3 Narrative Strategies

Analysis of narrative structuring revealed three principal strategies through which *China Daily* constructs the GBA’s image: the progress narrative, human-interest framing, and strategic source selection. These strategies work together to transform isolated facts and events into a coherent, compelling, and authoritative story about the GBA’s development.

5.3.1. Progress Narrative

The dominant narrative structure is the progress narrative, which organizes GBA-related events into a story of continuous improvement and forward movement. This narrative typically follows a “challenge-response-achievement” structure: challenges are acknowledged but presented as being effectively addressed through policy measures, leading to demonstrable achievements. The narrative arc is consistently upward, with each stage building on the previous one to create a sense of

momentum and inevitability.

- (10) “Despite global economic headwinds, the GBA has maintained steady growth, with GDP reaching 13 trillion RMB in 2022.”—*China Daily*, 2023-02-18

Example (10) exemplifies the progress narrative structure in compact form. The “challenge” (global economic headwinds) is acknowledged, demonstrating that the narrative is not oblivious to difficulties. The “response” (the GBA’s resilience and policy measures) is implied rather than explicitly stated, but the contrast between “despite” and “has maintained” makes the response clear. The “achievement” (steady growth, GDP reaching 13 trillion RMB) is presented as the tangible outcome of the response. This structure serves several discursive functions. First, by acknowledging challenges, the narrative avoids the appearance of uncritical boosterism and thereby enhances its credibility. Second, by framing challenges as being successfully overcome, it constructs the GBA as resilient, adaptable, and capable, a region that not only survives challenges but thrives despite them. Third, the upward trajectory implied by the progress narrative creates an expectation of continued success, positioning the GBA as a safe and attractive destination for international investment and participation.

The progress narrative is further reinforced through the consistent use of forward-looking temporal markers—“will,” “aims to,” “is poised to,” “on track”—that project an optimistic future trajectory. These markers appear in 68.4% of articles in the corpus, indicating that the progress narrative is not merely a retrospective account of past achievements but a prospective construction of future potential. By consistently linking past achievements to future aspirations, the narrative constructs the GBA as a region on an upward trajectory with no foreseeable endpoint—a story of continuous progress that invites international audiences to participate in and benefit from the GBA’s ongoing development.

5.3.2. Human-Interest Framing

A second significant narrative strategy involves the incorporation of human-interest elements that personalize and humanize the GBA’s development. Rather than presenting abstract statistics and policy measures, articles frequently feature individual stories of entrepreneurs, workers, and residents whose lives have been transformed by GBA initiatives. These human-interest elements appear in 42.5% of articles in the corpus, typically in the form of brief anecdotes or case studies that illustrate the broader development process through individual experience. In total, 163 named individuals were coded across these articles, and this figure rather than the article count is the basis of the distribution reported below.

- (11) “For Chen Wei, a young entrepreneur from Shenzhen, the GBA’s integrated transportation network has turned his cross-border business from a logistical nightmare into a daily commute.”—*China Daily*, 2022-05-20.

This strategy serves multiple discursive functions. First, it makes abstract de-

velopment processes tangible and relatable for international audiences who may have little direct knowledge of the GBA. By grounding macro-level development in micro-level human experience, the narrative enables audiences to understand the GBA's impact through concrete, imaginable stories rather than abstract statistics. Second, it constructs the GBA not merely as an economic project but as a human project—one that improves real lives, creates opportunities, and enhances well-being. This humanization of the GBA counters potential international perceptions of the initiative as a cold, top-down political project lacking human dimension. Third, human-interest framing generates emotional resonance that purely statistical reporting cannot achieve, thereby enhancing the persuasive power of the narrative by engaging audiences at an affective as well as cognitive level.

The specific types of individuals featured in human-interest stories are also strategically significant. Entrepreneurs and businesspeople constitute the largest category (38.7% of 163 coded individuals), followed by professionals and skilled workers (27.4%), researchers and academics (18.3%), and ordinary residents (15.6%). This distribution indicates that human-interest framing is primarily used to illustrate the GBA's economic and technological dimensions through the experiences of those who benefit from its business environment, infrastructure, and innovation ecosystem. The relative underrepresentation of ordinary residents, particularly those who might experience the GBA's development more ambivalently, suggests that human-interest framing, while adding a human dimension, is carefully curated to present a consistently positive picture of the GBA's impact.

5.3.3. Source Selection and Voice

Analysis of source attribution revealed a strategic pattern in the selection and positioning of voices within GBA coverage. Sources were coded at the level of the attributed source, defined as a speaking or cited entity with an identifiable institutional affiliation and counted once per article at first mention; on this basis, a total of 1847 attributed sources were identified across the corpus, an average of 7.5 per article, with source category assigned reliably (agreement = 0.82). As revealed in **Figure 3**, official sources (government officials, policy-makers, and official spokespersons) constitute the largest category at 47.3%, followed by expert sources (academics, analysts, and think-tank researchers) at 28.6%, business sources (corporate executives, entrepreneurs, and industry representatives) at 18.4%, and ordinary citizens at 5.7%.

This source distribution pattern reveals both continuity with and departure from patterns identified in international media coverage. Like international media, *China Daily* relies heavily on elite sources (official, expert, and business sources together account for 94.3% of all attributed sources), reflecting a shared journalistic norm of privileging authoritative and knowledgeable voices. However, the composition of elite sources differs significantly. International media favor financial analysts and business leaders, who together constitute approximately 55% of

elite sources in GBA coverage (Du & Hou, 2020), while *China Daily* gives greater weight to government officials and policy experts, who together constitute approximately 76% of elite sources in the present corpus. This difference reflects the distinct institutional roles and editorial priorities of the two media systems: where international media frame the GBA primarily as a market and investment story, *China Daily* frames it as a policy and governance story in which government leadership and expert validation play central roles.

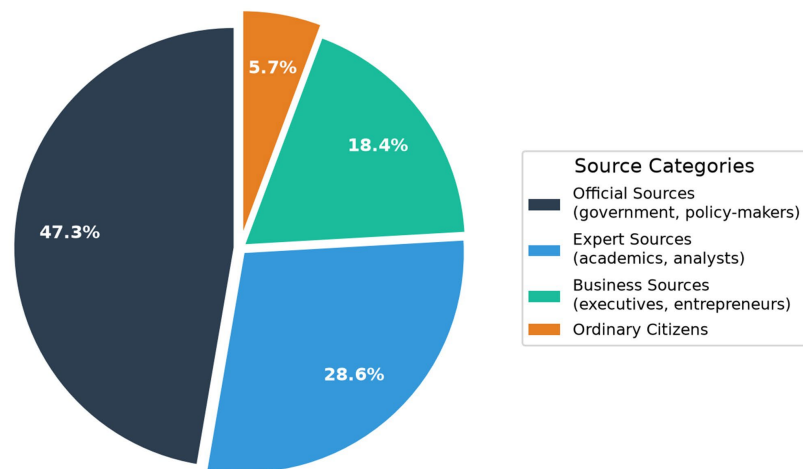


Figure 3. Distribution of attributed sources in *China Daily*'s GBA coverage (n = 1847).

The strategic function of this source distribution is to construct a narrative that is simultaneously authoritative and credible. Official sources provide the authoritative framework, defining the GBA's goals, reporting its progress, and articulating its significance. Expert sources provide independent validation, lending academic or analytical credibility to the official narrative by confirming its logic and interpreting its implications. Business sources provide practical evidence—demonstrating that the GBA's policies produce tangible benefits for those who operate within it. Ordinary citizens provide human dimension—personalizing the abstract development process and generating emotional resonance. The careful calibration of these four source types ensures that the narrative is authorized by official power, validated by expert knowledge, evidenced by business experience, and humanized by individual story—creating a multi-layered structure of credibility.

6. Discussion

6.1. Self-Shaping as Strategic Narrative Construction

The findings demonstrate that *China Daily*'s construction of the GBA image is an active, strategic process of narrative construction. The systematic patterns identified across lexical selection, metaphorical framing, and narrative strategies reveal a coherent discursive project aimed at establishing the GBA as a legitimate, desirable, and successful regional initiative. This finding is consistent with strategic

narrative theory (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014), which posits that political actors construct and disseminate narratives to shape the preferences and behaviors of international audiences. In the case of the GBA, *China Daily's* narrative seeks to construct the region as a compelling story of successful regional integration—one that international audiences should understand positively, participate in actively, and support politically.

This strategic self-shaping serves multiple interlocking functions. First, it seeks to establish narrative authority by providing a comprehensive, internally consistent account of the GBA that can compete with alternative framings circulating in international media. By offering a detailed, evidence-rich, and multi-dimensional narrative, *China Daily* positions itself as a credible source of information about the GBA, potentially influencing how international audiences understand the region even when they do not accept the narrative in its entirety. Second, it aims to preempt critical framings by addressing potential concerns—such as integration challenges, geopolitical tensions, or social dislocations—within a framework that frames them as temporary difficulties being successfully overcome rather than structural problems inherent to the GBA model. The progress narrative's "challenge-response-achievement" structure is particularly effective in this regard, as it acknowledges difficulties while simultaneously constructing them as evidence of the GBA's resilience and capacity. Third, it works to project a favorable image that can attract international investment, talent, and cooperation, translating discursive construction into material benefits for the GBA's development.

The concept of soft power (Nye, 2004) provides a useful lens for understanding the broader strategic significance of these discursive practices. *China Daily's* GBA coverage can be understood as an exercise in soft power projection, where the construction of a favorable international image aims to generate attraction and voluntary alignment among international stakeholders. However, the findings also suggest that soft power projection through media discourse is more complex than simply projecting positive images. The effectiveness of self-shaping discourse depends not only on the positivity of the image constructed but also on its credibility, coherence, and resonance with international audiences' existing understandings and values. The multi-layered source structure, the acknowledgment of challenges within the progress narrative, and the use of internationally familiar metaphorical frameworks (construction, growth, connectivity) all represent efforts to enhance the credibility and resonance of the GBA narrative beyond a purely domestic audience.

6.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings carry several theoretical implications for the study of international communication and media discourse. The evaluative, cognitive, and narrative resources identified above do not operate independently but reinforce one another, so that positive evaluation of the GBA is sustained by the metaphors through which it is conceptualized and by the narratives through which it is presented. Theoretically, the study demonstrates the value of analyzing self-representation

discourse through an integrated framework that combines evaluation, cognition, and narration—dimensions that are often studied separately. By demonstrating how these three dimensions operate as a mutually reinforcing system, the study suggests that effective self-shaping discourse requires coherence across all three levels, and that analysis focusing on only one dimension, whether lexical choice, metaphor use, or narrative structure, provides an incomplete account of how self-representation works. This integrated approach has potential applicability beyond the GBA case, to the analysis of self-representation discourse in other national and regional contexts, and could be further developed through comparative studies that examine how different media systems construct self-images through different configurations of evaluative, cognitive, and narrative resources.

The study also contributes to the growing body of research on corpus-based CDA by demonstrating the value of integrating quantitative corpus methods with qualitative critical interpretation. The keyword, collocation, and semantic prosody analyses provided systematic, empirically grounded identification of discursive patterns that might have been missed through purely qualitative analysis, while the subsequent metaphor and narrative analyses provided the critical interpretive depth that quantitative methods alone cannot achieve. Consistent with the approach advocated by [Baker et al. \(2008\)](#), this methodological synergy demonstrates that corpus-based CDA is particularly well-suited for the study of media discourse, where the identification of systematic patterns across large datasets is essential for making credible critical claims.

Practically, the findings contribute directly to the strategic task of strengthening international communication capacity and telling China's story well. First, continued diversification of source strategies can further consolidate credibility. The existing architecture—official (47.3%), expert (28.6%), and business (18.4%) sources—already supplies the narrative with authority and analytical depth consistent with presenting a credible, appealing, and respectable image of China. Broadening the space for ordinary voices (currently 5.7%), especially international residents, workers, and students, would advance a more people-centred model of international communication in which the GBA story is told with those who live it.

Second, further metaphorical innovation can strengthen distinctiveness and memorability, enriching China's discourse repertoire. The construction (34.2%), growth (28.7%), and connectivity (19.8%) frameworks—82.7% of identified expressions—form a coherent and demonstrably effective cognitive system. Extending it with culturally grounded imagery drawn from the GBA's maritime trading heritage, its "one country, two systems" arrangement, and its bridging role between China and the world would help a narrative rooted in China's own experience circulate with greater appeal.

Third, a fuller narrative pluralism can further enhance credibility and appeal, advancing the construction of a Chinese discourse and narrative system. The progress narrative, reinforced by forward-looking markers in 68.4% of articles and

human-interest framing in 42.5%, has proven highly effective at conveying momentum. Complementing it with comparative strands that position the GBA alongside other global bay areas, and with fuller accounts of challenges and their resolution, would signal the self-awareness of a mature international communicator and confirm China's growing capacity to shape international discourse on its own terms.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the discursive strategies through which *China Daily* constructs the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area's international image, based on a corpus-based critical discourse analysis of 3533 articles published between 2019 and 2025. Through an integrated analytical framework combining Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, conceptual metaphor analysis, and narrative theory, the study identified three principal dimensions of self-shaping discourse: lexical and semantic strategies that embed positive values in the GBA's representation through consistent positive semantic prosody and evaluative resources; metaphorical frameworks that provide cognitive schemas for understanding the region through construction, growth, and connectivity mappings; and narrative strategies that organize GBA-related events into compelling, progress-oriented stories through the progress narrative, human-interest framing, and strategic source selection.

The study contributes to the growing body of research on China's international communication by providing a systematic, empirically grounded analysis of how Chinese English-language media engage in strategic self-representation. It also offers practical implications for enhancing the international communication efficacy of regional development initiatives, including recommendations for diversified source strategies, strategic metaphorical innovation, and narrative pluralism. As China continues to pursue its goal of building "a discourse system and narrative system that matches its comprehensive national strength and international status," understanding the discursive strategies of self-shaping—their mechanisms, their effectiveness, and their limitations—becomes increasingly important, both for academic inquiry and for practical communication strategy.

Two limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the corpus is limited to *China Daily*, one among several Chinese English-language media outlets, and the findings may not generalize to other outlets such as CGTN, Global Times, or Xinhua English, which may employ different discursive strategies reflecting their distinct editorial orientations and target audiences. Future research could extend the analysis to include multiple Chinese English-language outlets, enabling a comparative analysis of how different media construct the GBA's image and potentially identifying a broader Chinese media discourse ecosystem. Second, the study focuses on textual analysis and does not examine how international audiences receive and interpret these discourses. The effectiveness of self-shaping discourse ultimately depends on audience reception, and reception studies—includ-

ing surveys, interviews, or focus groups with international readers—would provide valuable complementary insights into how the constructed image is perceived and whether it achieves its intended effects. Addressing these limitations would further strengthen the empirical base of research on self-shaping discourse and deepen understanding of how media discourse shapes the international image of emerging regions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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