

The Construction of PLA Image in China's Official Discourse From the Perspective of Positive Discourse Analysis——Based on Government Work Reports Over the Last 15 Years

YAN Rui

National University of Defense Technology, Changsha, China

Government Work Report is essential for domestic and international understanding of China's national conditions. This paper selects the national defense section in Government Work Reports released by the State Council of the People's Republic of China over the last fifteen years from 2009 to 2023 as an example of China's official discourse. From the perspective of positive discourse analysis, the theory of three meta-functions of language proposed by M. A. K. Halliday in Systemic Functional Linguistics is used in this article in terms of transitivity, appraisal, mood, modality, and theme to explore the constructing of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) image. This study finds that, by using the goals and circumstances with optimistic meaning in material processes, adopting more appreciation in attitude, applying more declaratives in mood, utilizing modal operators with high modulation, and implicit objective modal adjuncts, and employing government-focused themes, China's official discourse objectively and authentically conveys a positive image of the brave and just PLA both at home and abroad which advocates itself to peace-keeping, and mission-fulfilling.

Keywords: Government Work Report, official discourse, PLA image, systemic functional linguistics

Introduction

The Government Work Report is an official document published by the Chinese government. It summarizes the government's work in the previous year and outlines its plans for the next year. With China's development, the report has become increasingly influential. It is essential for understanding China's conditions domestically and internationally (Wang, 2015). Linguistically, the report is a highly programmatic text that reflects social changes in a given historical period through fixed topics, formats, style, syntax, and vocabulary. Over time, the reports have constituted a unique discourse genre (Swales, 2003) that balances stability and change (You & Chen, 2009). They demonstrate the government's efforts to construct China's national image through discourse.

China's rapid and peaceful rise has significantly impacted the global balance of power. Some Western countries have often exaggerated China's military development. They have expressed concern about it in official documents and used media to spread the "China military threat", affecting international community's recognition on global security. Facing Western propaganda, China's official documents have been crucial in presenting the People's Liberation Army's official image globally by showcasing China's perspective and responding to

Western claims. The national defense section of the Government Work Report, an essential part of national policy, focuses on China's military and defense construction ideas and needs. It provides an official text for understanding China's military and defense policy.

From the perspective of positive discourse analysis, this paper will apply M. A. K. Halliday's three meta-functions of language in Systemic Functional Linguistics. It will analyze the national defense section of Government Work Reports (2009-2023) in terms of transitivity, appraisal, mood, modality, and theme to explore how China's official discourse constructs the image of the PLA.

The Image of PLA in China's Official Discourse

Xi Jinping, chairman of the Central Military Commission, has stressed improving China's ability to engage in international communication to present a truthful, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China. As an important part of China's national image and military capability, as well as an embodiment of its soft power, the military's image has received much attention globally. Facing Western propaganda, recognition of the PLA's image across countries and cultures urgently needs to be promoted internationally (Wu & Cai-Chen, 2017). Research on the PLA image can be categorized as follows: in terms of different historical periods, there are researches on its image during wartime and peacetime; in terms of image constructors, there are researches on its image shaped by others, such as Western media, and by China itself, such as official discourse. Most studies focus on enhancing PLA image through media and the Internet under new conditions and in the new era. Fewer studies have looked at PLA image in official discourse. They have focused on official papers from the Ministry of National Defense, such as Defense White Papers (e.g., Dou, Du, & Su, 2012), while neglecting the Government Work Report—a more influential comprehensive official document that includes military and defense construction.

Perspective of Positive Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis has received attention from scholars in linguistics, sociology, psychology, semiotics, and other fields since the early 1950s. As a significant branch, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has developed rapidly over the past 30 years. From a critical perspective, scholars at home and abroad have exposed negative aspects of society, such as inequality and discrimination between classes. Although scholars try to interpret criticism as neutral concepts like commentary or evaluation and ideology as a general worldview without negative connotations, their attitude toward social contradictions is deconstructive. The discourse analysis they conduct is also negative.

Martin (2004) points out that many CDA studies seem satisfied with exposing and criticizing problems rather than solving them. However, CDA's ultimate goal is to make a constructive contribution to social harmony. Scholars, therefore, need to focus more on positive discourse to inspire and encourage people. Martin introduced the concept of positive discourse analysis (PDA) in 1999. He argues that PDA does not reject CDA. CDA and PDA complement each other theoretically, like yin and yang. At the same time, PDA does not praise the discourse of the ruling class. It focuses on harmonizing the relationship between speaker and listener. As PDA has become more refined and developed, some scholars have begun combining it with Halliday's systemic functional linguistics to better reveal attitudes, positions, and perspectives in discourse (e.g., Yuan, 2009; Qian & Law, 2016, etc.).

Three Meta-Functions of Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is a theory developed by M. A. K. Halliday (1978) that focuses on the “semiotics” or “meaning potential” of language in social and cultural contexts. Halliday (1970) proposes three meta-functions of language: ideational, textual, and interpersonal.

Ideational function refers to how language represents people's experiences in the real and psychological worlds. Transitivity, one of the means to realize this function, is the process types through which the speaker, the participants, and the circumstances construct the speaker's perception of the external or internal world, includes six types of processes: material, mental, behavioral, relational, verbal, and existential processes (Halliday, 2014).

Interpersonal function refers to the speaker's “meaning potential” as an interlocutor and the participatory nature of language. Through this function, the speaker involves themselves in a communicative situation, expresses attitudes and inferences, and influences others. There are two key tasks in language: giving and demanding. “Giving” means seeking acceptance or acknowledgement while “demanding” means expecting actions or information (Hu, Zhu, Zhang, & Li, 2017). They are represented in grammar and vocabulary, specifically in the Mood. The Mood analysis reveals interpersonal relations between speakers and listeners (Halliday, 2014). The declarative Mood provides information and indicates attitudes. Modality, expressed through modal verbs, refers to the speaker's judgment of probability and obligation in their speech.

Textual function refers to how speakers construct messages to fit the ongoing language event (which may be a conversation or text), or how the present part of their message fits in with other parts (Thompson, 2014). It is mainly represented in the theme system (Zhang, 2011). The theme system includes the Theme, the starting point of a clause and the focus of a message, and the Rheme, which is said about the Theme. Analyzing the Theme and Rheme helps identify the core content and main thrust of a discourse.

Based on the above theories, this paper analyzes the English version of Government Work Report particularly from 2009 to 2023, specifically sections on national defense. Using SFL, the analysis examines ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions constructed through transitivity, appraisal, Mood, modality, and Theme, and explores how these linguistic features collectively build the image of PLA.

Analysis of PLA Image in China's Official Discourse

Overview of the Data

This paper analyzes the national defense section of China's Government Work Reports from 2009 to 2023, which review the previous year's military and defense achievements and next year's work requirements. The sections total 3,865 words. Excluding common words, the 10 most frequent words are: military, defense, armed, forces, national, development, new, army, people, strengthen. The distribution of these words shows that over 15 years, the reports have focused on military and defense construction, emphasizing development and innovation.

Analysis of Ideational Meta-Function from Transitivity

According to Halliday (2014), human experience can be categorized into six types through the transitivity system: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential process. Material processes denote actions and events, typically expressed through action verbs, with actors and goals. Mental processes refer to mental activities like perception, affection, cognition, and desideration. Relational processes signify being or having, either attributing or identifying. Behavioral processes refer to physiological acts like breathing, crying, and

laughing. Verbal processes exchange information through speech, often using say or talk. Existential processes refer to existence, often expressed through “there be”.

The national defense sections of the Government Work Reports discuss past achievements and future plans. Therefore, they do not involve behavioral, verbal, mental, or existential processes, only material and relational processes. Table 1 shows the distribution of these two key types of processes in the reports.

Table 1

Distribution of Material and Relational Processes in the Text From 2009 to 2023

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Material processes	14	17	14	18	9	19	15	17
Relational process	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	0
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Material processes	16	11	19	13	13	16	19	230
Relational process	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	6

Because the reports do not involve the other four types of processes, and material processes dominate each year's text, this paper will not analyze changes in transitivity processes. Instead, it will focus on material and relational processes.

Material processes indicate actions, and the text includes nine types of material clauses, such as:

[1] We will *run* the armed forces with strict discipline and in accordance with the law.

[2] Governments at all levels must always *take* an active interest in and *support* the strengthening of our national defense and armed forces, and *remain* committed to consolidating and increasing the unity between the government and the armed forces and between the people and the armed forces.

There are 230 clauses where the actor is the Chinese government (including “we” and “governments at all levels”), accounting for 87%. Most of these clauses have goal components. Some goals vary over time, e.g. from “ideological and political standards” to “the Party's absolute leadership over the people's armed forces” and “the system of ultimate responsibility resting with the chairman of the Central Military Commission.” Most refer to military strategies with Chinese characteristics, showing the PLA's independence, self-reliance, and strength in promoting army modernization. Some goals are constant over 15 years, e.g. “reform”, “modernization”, “logistics and equipment support”, “defense-related research”, “combating terrorism and maintaining stability”, and “unity”. These show China's orderly defense construction according to its economic development. PLA firmly follows the path of peaceful development, and carries the policy that is in nature defensive, which faithfully presents an image of a peace-loving and steadily advancing PLA, unlike the “China military threat” theory. Relatively general goals like “achievement”, “development”, and “progress” summarize previous defense and military construction, conveying an advancing and developing PLA. In some years, big events like “the National Day military parade” and “epidemic control” show an PLA obeying the Party's command, able to fight and win, and with excellent conduct.

The circumstances fall into three categories: (1) indicating the operation's objective, e.g. “for safeguarding China's sovereignty, security, and development interests”; (2) indicating the operation's specific context, e.g. “under information-age conditions”; and (3) indicating how the operation is accomplished, e.g. “with strict discipline and by the law”. The circumstances more specifically show the PLA safeguarding national interests and peace, being just and brave, and strict with itself.

As China's economy grows and international status rises, Western countries like the U.S. promote a "zero-sum" mentality. They try to block China's development, interfere in internal affairs, and illegally enter airspace and seas. Facing security threats, China's military reforms and develops to maintain security, promote Asia-Pacific peace and stability, participate in peacekeeping, and contribute to world peace. Facing the information age, China improves its military and cultivates discipline to avoid being left behind. It has constantly improved its military strength in light of the new era, and cultivated the people's army with strict discipline and fine conduct.

Analyzing the actor, goal, and circumstance in the material processes shows the national defense sections refer only to China, never naming other countries as actor, recipient, or circumstance. China does not and will not threaten any country. The extensive use of material process clauses focuses closely on the Chinese military's development achievements, mode, goals, and requirements. In other words, they tell the world what the Chinese military has done and will do, presenting a good PLA image at home and abroad.

Relational processes show how things are related to each other. There are only six relational clauses, half of which define "building and strengthening the military and national defense". For example:

[3] Building a solid national defense and strong armed forces is fundamental to safeguarding China's sovereignty, security, and developmental interests.

[2] Strengthening national defense and building a powerful people's army are important guarantees for safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests and building a moderately prosperous society in all respects.

Using relational clauses, the Government Work Reports express and define China's official national defense values to the international community, constructing the PLA image through these values (Jiang, 2017). Combining the material processes showing China's national security situation, Chinese official discourse has objectively demonstrated to the world good PLA image in resolutely safeguarding China's interests and promoting regional peace and stability.

Analysis of Interpersonal Meta-Function

Analyzing appraisal lexical choices, Mood, and modality embodying interpersonal function allows for the exploration of the strategies and features constructing the PLA image and status.

PLA: A model of self-discipline, fairness, and objectivity. Appraisal Theory divides into attitude, engagement, and gradation. Discriminating appraisal meanings in lexical forms infers the author's position. Attitude divides into affect, judgment, and appreciation. Affect expresses how we feel about things; judgment evaluates people or behavior in social esteem and sanction; appreciation focuses on physical objects or propositions, either reaction or composition. Table 2 shows the distribution of attitude types.

Table 2

Distribution of Attitude Subsystems

Subsystems	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation	Total (Attitude)
Distribution	1 (1.3%)	8 (10.1%)	70 (88.6%)	79

Over 15 years, the national defense sections show the distribution of attitude decreasing in appreciation, judgment, and affect. Affect is under 5% while appreciation nears 90%. Affect conveys subjective personal feelings. Appreciation describes physical objects' characteristics, a relatively objective and standardized attitude (Li & Han, 2021). Using appraisal resources shapes an image of the impartial, objective, strict PLA.

PLA: A defender of China's national security and interests. Declarative mood often provides information, indicates attitudes, or makes claims. In the text, the mood of 19 sentences that deal with safeguarding national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and development interests are all declarative, of which 11 involve the Chinese military as the issuer of the action. For example:

[5] The People's Liberation Army played an important role in safeguarding China's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity, supporting its modernization drive, and completing urgent, difficult, dangerous, and daunting tasks.

[6] Our people's forces, with complete competence and fine conduct, safeguarded China's national security and participated in epidemic control.

The text clearly shows the PLA's role as a contributor through many statements, reflecting China's official, objective, truthful attitude and echoing the PLA's new era mission and tasks. Most sentences use the PLA as actor, emphasizing its achievements in safeguarding national security and interests. Therefore, the official discourse shows the PLA continuously contributes to safeguarding national security and interests, and conscientiously fulfills the mission and tasks entrusted by the Party and people, consistent with the "Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy" and coherently conveying an upbeat, positive PLA image.

PLA: A staunch supporter of the cause of the party and nation. Describing the Party and nation's overall development, the text clarifies the PLA's past efforts and future support for the Party and nation's cause. Discussing this, the text frequently uses auxiliary verbs with relatively high modal values, e.g. "must", "will", "need." This shows the Chinese government's affirmation of the PLA's past adherence to the Party and nation's overall work and confidence the PLA will continue supporting the cause. The confidence comes from the long-standing strong support from PLA and the solid unity between the military and the people and government thus conveying an image of a loyal, reliable PLA.

PLA: A pioneer of innovation and revolution. While discussing reform and innovation over 15 years, in addition to modal verbs, reports use many objective and implicit modal adverbs, e.g. "will actively and steadily carry out reform of the army" and "will vigorously enhance our capacity for making innovations." Using both modal verbs and adverbs conveys the image of the PLA as a pioneer in innovation, reform, and enterprise more convincingly.

Analysis of Textual Meta-Function

Ideational and interpersonal meta-functions are ultimately expressed through language and are necessarily governed by certain features of the language itself; therefore, the analysis of textual meta-functions is essential. Themes divide into simple, multiple, and clausal based on complexity. Multiple themes divide into experiential, interpersonal, and textual based on semantic function (Thompson, 2014, p. 164).

Among 156 themes of the text, 134 are simple, in which 109 related to the Chinese government; 22 are multiple themes, in which 17 experiential themes also refer to the Chinese government. Experiential themes state facts objectively, formally, and authoritatively, corresponding to strong persuasion (Jiang, 2017). As experiential themes dominate, the authoritative, objective discourse strengthens addressees' recognition and acceptance of content, conforming to official documents. Using more experiential themes in the national defense sections is more convincing, making audiences more likely to accept and identify with the PLA image the discourse constructs.

Of the 17 experiential themes, those referring to the Chinese government have the highest frequency at 77.3%. Those referring to the Chinese military and the PLA's great successes each account for 9.1% (Table 3).

As the text is the section on defense in the Government Work Report, in the sentences with the experiential theme of the Chinese government, rhemes are mainly the policies related to governing the military and building a national defense, which is the core of the text.

Table 3

Distribution of Different Types of Experiential Themes

Different types of experiential themes	Number	Distribution
Chinese government (all levels of government)	17	77.3%
Chinese People's Liberation Army/People's Armed Police Force	2	9.1%
Great changes and achievements related to military construction	2	9.1%
Time or period	1	4.5%

Moreover, in information structure, known information generally precedes new information (Hu et al., 2017). The theme is usually known information while the rheme is new information. As the simple theme or experiential theme of multiple theme, the Chinese government occupies the position of known information, consistent with the certainty, reliability, and authority of the Government Work Report. At the same time, as a government beloved by the people, positioning the Chinese government as known information at the front of sentences draws the public's attention to military content in the rhemes, better presenting the PLA image.

Conclusion

From the perspective of positive discourse analysis, this paper applies Halliday's three meta-functions to analyze transitivity, appraisal, Mood, modality, and Theme of the national defense section of Government Work Reports (2009-2023). It explores how these functions construct the PLA image in China's official discourse. It is found that by means of adopting the goal and circumstance components with a positive meaning in material processes, using a lot of declarative clauses, many modal auxiliary verbs of relatively high values, lots of objective and implicit modal adverbs, and a large proportion government-focused themes, the official discourse objectively, authentically conveys a positive image of the PLA as brave, just, peacekeeping, and mission-fulfilling at home and abroad. This enriches the relevant studies on the PLA image in China's official discourse. However, due to the defense sections' strong consistency and coherence, diachronic content changes are not obvious.

References

- Berkenkotter, C., & Huckin, T. N. (1995). *Genre knowledge in disciplinary communication: Cognition/culture/power*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Dou, W. L., Du, H. Z., & Su, D. (2012). A comparative study of Chinese and American national identity reflected in their white papers on national defense. *Journal of East China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 44(3), 83-94+154.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1970). Functional diversity in language as seen from a consideration of modality and mood in English. *Foundations of Language*, 6(3), 322-361.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1973). Linguistic function and literary style: an inquiry into the language of William Golding's *The Inheritors*. In M. A. K. Halliday (Ed.), *Explorations in the functions of language* (p. 134). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as a social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th. Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Hu, Z. L., Zhu, Y. S., Zhang, D. L., & Li, Z. Z. (2017). *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (3rd ed.). Beijing: Peking University Press.

- Jiang, X. X. (2017). The three meta-functions of language and the construction of national image: A case study of Sri Lankan President's speech at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly. *Foreign Languages Research*, 34(1), 11-15.
- Li, M. X., & Han, Z. J. (2021). A comparative study on the use of evaluative words in Chinese and foreign scholars' journal papers. *Foreign Language Education*, 43, 29-34.
- Liu, Y. (2010). Positive discourse analysis of news on drunk-driving. *Journal of Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 13(6), 97-100+105.
- Martin, J. R. (2004). Positive discourse analysis: Solidarity and change. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 49, 179-200.
- Qian, J. W., & Law, R. (2016). Positive discourse analysis based on appraisal theory engagement system: A case study of critical news reports about Chinese tourists. *Social Sciences in Guangxi*, 32(6), 167-171.
- Swales, J. (2003). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Thomson, G. (2014). *Introducing functional grammar*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Van Dijk, T. (2008). *Discourse and power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wang, M. H. (2015). A study on the Chinese-English translation of the Government Work Report from the perspective of Skopos Theory (M.Sc. thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2015).
- Wu, F. M., & Cai-Chen, M. B. (2017). Strategy for building the image of PLA in the new era. *Military Correspondent*, 55(12), 24-25.
- You, Z. S., & Chen, J. P. (2009). Orders of discourse and the discursive construction of foreign policy: A diachronic analysis of lexical variations in the AWR. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, 20(2), 44-49.
- Yuan, H. (2009). America's new attitude towards Iran—Positive discourse analysis of the Iran nuclear issue. *Journal of East China Jiaotong University*, 26(1), 130-133.
- Zhang, D. L. (2011). Systemic Functional Linguistics. *Foreign Languages in China*, 8(3), 1+65.