

The International Academic Construction of “Made in China”: A Discourse-Historical Approach

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This article explores the academic discourse on “Made in China” from the perspective of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), aiming to understand how this discourse is constructed, evaluated, and transformed in the international academic landscape. Drawing on a corpus of highly cited English academic papers, the study examines the discursive strategies used to shape the evolving image of “Made in China”. The findings indicate a clear shift in academic perception—from a label associated with cheap labor and low-end production to one increasingly linked to technological innovation, environmental responsibility, and global cooperation. Through keyword analysis, intertextual mapping, and discursive strategy identification, this article offers insights into how language reflects and reproduces broader geopolitical and ideological shifts.

Keywords: Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), “Made in China”, academic discourse, high-frequency key words, intertextuality, discursive strategies

Introduction

In the era of globalization, the term “Made in China” has taken on multiple layers of meaning. Initially synonymous with low-cost, mass-produced consumer goods, it has increasingly come to symbolize China’s growing industrial power and technological sophistication. This transformation is not only visible in economic indicators and industrial upgrades but also deeply embedded in academic and media discourses.

From “the world’s factory” to a key player in high-end manufacturing and innovation, China’s evolving role has drawn attention in international academic literature. Yet, stereotypes linger—particularly in discussions on safety, quality, and environmental standards. Understanding how these perceptions are constructed, disseminated, and contested requires a systematic discourse analysis approach.

Existing research has explored “Made in China” from multiple dimensions, which can be categorized into six key areas:

1. Discourse construction and dissemination:

Domestic scholars have examined how Chinese media employ nationalist and economic confidence narratives to shape the global image of “Made in China” (e.g., Ma, 2024).

2. Power and ideology:

Scholars have also analyzed how “Made in China” discourse reflects and reinforces power dynamics and ideologies, particularly in the context of global competition and economic hegemony. Li (2021) further explored how external misperceptions shape China’s global image.

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3. Identity and recognition:

Research has investigated how “Made in China” discourse constructs identities for nations, corporations, and consumers, influencing social behavior. Yu (2007) argued Chinese firms must enhance core competitiveness through independent innovation (p. 3). Huang (2021) found international students’ willingness to promote “Made in China” correlates with their home country’s economic status and duration in China (p. 1). Yao (2020) noted students from developed nations held more critical views than those from developing countries (p. 34).

4. Negative perceptions and crisis management:

Studies have addressed challenges like low-quality stereotypes and counterstrategies. Yan (2010) dissected Sino-U.S. media clashes during the 2007 product safety crisis, revealing systemic misalignments (p. 111). Coombs (2007) evaluated crisis response tactics (e.g., denial, rebuilding) in Western contexts.

5. Cross-cultural comparisons:

Scholars have highlighted cultural biases in discourse. Ma (2007) critiqued Western media’s binary “good vs. evil” framing (p. 141). Wang and Han (2010) stressed the interplay between product and national image. Wu (2010) advocated cultural fusion strategies to mitigate misunderstandings (p. 42). Deng (2011) used corpus analysis to expose British media’s negative portrayal (p. 3). Xie and Qin (2020) noted French media’s ideological bias against “China Manufacturing 2025” (p. 1). Liu and Pan (2021) revealed how U.S. media externalized product failures as systemic flaws (p. 65).

6. Research gaps:

Despite these contributions, most studies prioritize economic or managerial analyses, neglecting systematic discourse-level investigations, particularly sociohistorical contexts. Few address the discourse’s historical evolution or multidimensional manifestations across contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

Proposed by Wodak and the Vienna School, Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) was initially used to study identity construction in political discourse. This method reveals how discourse shapes social reality by analyzing its functions within social, political, and historical contexts. Wodak (2001) studied the discourse on immigration policies of Austria’s Freedom Party, while Reisigl and Wodak (2009) analyzed academic discourse on global climate change. These studies reveal how discourse functions in political issues. This study applies DHA to analyze the academic discourse on “Made in China”, exploring how academia constructs multiple meanings of “Made in China” through language and how it assigns different discursive functions across disciplines, research contexts, and policy discussions.

1. Textual level: Analyzing the linguistic features of a discourse, including lexical choices, syntactic structures, semantic fields, and rhetorical devices.

2. Interdiscursive and intertextual level: Tracing the relationships between texts, genres, and discourses. This includes identifying references to prior discourses, official policy language, or academic traditions.

3. Contextual and institutional level: Situating the discourse within its broader socio-political, historical, and ideological frameworks. This includes understanding who is speaking, under what institutional authority, and in what communicative setting.

In the context of analyzing “Made in China”, DHA allows us to explore not only how the phrase is used linguistically but also how it reflects broader ideological formations, geopolitical competition, and shifting economic paradigms. The approach is especially effective in detecting subtle shifts in tone, the use of evaluative

language, and the construction of legitimacy or critique through citation and intertextuality.

Additionally, DHA’s emphasis on discursive strategies is crucial. These include:

- Nomination: How actors and entities are named or categorized (e.g., “Chinese manufacturers”, “global innovators”, “state-led enterprises”);
- Predication: How those actors are described or evaluated (e.g., “innovative”, “polluting”, “strategic”);
- Argumentation: The topoi or warrants used to justify claims (e.g., “China is becoming a leader in green innovation because...”);
- Perspectivation: The stance or positioning of the speaker (e.g., use of epistemic markers like “arguably”, “evidently”);
- Intensification/mitigation: Linguistic devices that strengthen or weaken claims.

By applying DHA, this study does not simply catalog what is said about “Made in China” but interrogates how it is said, by whom, and to what rhetorical effect, uncovering the underlying values, ideologies, and power structures in academic representations.

Research Method and Corpus Construction

To analyze the academic construction of “Made in China”, a specialized corpus was compiled using 13 highly cited international academic articles drawn from journals in economics, supply chain management, environmental studies, and international business. The corpus—ACMIC (Academic Corpus of Made in China)—was divided into two sub-corpora:

- ACMIC abroad: Foreign-authored articles from outside China.
- ACMIC international: Globally circulated articles including Chinese scholars.

LancsBox and CiteSpace were used for keyword extraction, collocation analysis, and intertextual network construction. DHA’s five discursive strategies—nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation, and intensification/mitigation—were systematically applied.

Results and Analysis

Keyword Analysis: Innovation and Responsibility

The keyword analysis reveals a shift in the semantic field surrounding “Made in China”. Previously associated with terms like “cheap”, “counterfeit”, or “low-cost”, the new dominant collocates include “innovation”, “sustainability”, “green supply chain”, “digitalization”, and “value-added production”. These reflect a transition in discourse that mirrors China’s strategic policy orientation—especially after the release of the “Made in China 2025” initiative.

Notably, verbs such as “transform”, “upgrade”, “lead”, and “accelerate” frequently appear in close proximity to “Made in China”, indicating a temporal and dynamic framing of Chinese manufacturing as a process of ongoing improvement rather than a fixed category. In contrast, older discourses tended to freeze “Made in China” as a static, stigmatized label.

Across the ACMIC corpus, foreign-authored articles tend to foreground China’s environmental obligations, often using terms such as “ecological impact”, “emission intensity”, and “climate responsibility”. In contrast, Chinese-authored texts emphasize regulatory compliance, state innovation policies, and digital infrastructure. This difference suggests that while the core narrative is shared (i.e., China’s transformation), the evaluative foci differ by cultural and institutional perspective.

Intertextuality: Global Policy and Strategic Narratives

The intertextual layer reveals how academic texts embed references to external documents such as:

- Government policies: “Made in China 2025”, “Dual Circulation Strategy”, “Belt and Road Initiative”.
- Global standards: ISO certifications, WTO guidelines, OECD indicators.
- Prior scholarship: Citations from leading journals in supply chain studies, business ethics, and innovation systems.

This intertextual layering serves to lend epistemic legitimacy to the authors’ positions while also aligning their arguments with authoritative knowledge regimes. For example, references to the *World Economic Forum* or *McKinsey Global Institute* function as intertextual “anchors” that naturalize the narrative of China’s rise in manufacturing quality and environmental responsiveness.

There is also evidence of recontextualization: Academic authors often cite policy goals or statistical data but interpret them through differing ideological lenses. For instance, one article might cite China’s goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2060 as a sign of progress, while another may interpret the same goal as overly ambitious or strategically self-serving.

Discursive Strategies: In-depth Application

Nomination strategy. Entities such as “Chinese producers”, “global competitors”, “state-owned enterprises”, and “technological frontrunners” are used to build a network of actors. The use of collective nouns (e.g., “China’s manufacturing sector”) reinforces the image of a unified, state-coordinated system. Meanwhile, in international articles, terms like “emerging market actor” or “challenger to Western norms” subtly frame China as an outsider striving to reshape global rules.

Predication strategy. The evaluative vocabulary attached to “Made in China” has become more diversified and context-specific. In sustainability-related articles, it is described as “carbon-intensive” yet “rapidly greening”; in technology-focused texts, it is portrayed as “fast-evolving”, “digitally ambitious”, and “IP-sensitive”. This duality reflects the complexity of China’s image—progressive yet problem-laden.

Argumentation strategy. Typical topoi include:

- Topos of progress: “China has rapidly upgraded its manufacturing due to investment in R&D”.
- Topos of threat: “Western dependency on Chinese goods could pose strategic risks”.
- Topos of responsibility: “As the world’s largest emitter, China must take a leading role in green manufacturing”.

These argumentative patterns not only inform the reader but also shape ideologies by framing China as either an innovator, a rival, or a moral agent.

Perspectivation strategy. Foreign authors often hedge claims through phrases like “this may indicate”, “arguably”, or “could be seen as”, which suggests analytical distance. In contrast, Chinese authors are more assertive, using phrases such as “our findings confirm” or “this demonstrates that...”. This divergence in authorial stance reflects academic cultural norms and differing levels of geopolitical sensitivity.

Intensification and mitigation strategy. Amplifiers such as “entirely transformed”, “substantially improved”, and “fully integrated” reinforce the narrative of change. Conversely, mitigators like “still developing”, “partially addressed”, or “incrementally improved” function to maintain critical nuance. The co-existence of amplification and mitigation contributes to a more balanced and academically credible tone.

Conclusion

This study reveals that international academic discourse on “Made in China” is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by shifts in China’s industrial practices, global positioning, and the wider geopolitical climate. Through the lens of DHA, we observe a move from simplistic or negative portrayals toward more multifaceted narratives—centered on innovation, responsibility, and strategic growth.

The academic community plays a key role in shaping this evolving image, using language not only to reflect reality but to participate in its construction. Discursive strategies—particularly nomination, predication, and argumentation—demonstrate how scholars frame Chinese manufacturing within global debates on sustainability, competitiveness, and modernization.

Further research can build on this by:

- Exploring social media discourse (e.g., Twitter, Weibo) for public interpretations;
- Investigating non-Western academic views (e.g., Global South perspectives);
- Tracking the discourse around AI and smart manufacturing under “Made in China 2025”.

Such inquiry would deepen our understanding of how China’s industrial narrative is negotiated not only in boardrooms and policy circles but also in the public and academic imagination.

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