

The Role of Media in the China-US Trade War and the Laws of International News Communication

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the China-US Trade War from 2018 to 2025, sorts out its three development stages of initiation, escalation, and mitigation with repetitions, and elaborates in detail on the three rounds of negotiations triggered by the continuous escalation of tariff measures by the US side in 2025. By analyzing the frame confrontation and narrative power competition of mainstream news media, the emotional polarization and identity mobilization on social platforms, the signal game and "strategic translation" of government departments, and the interaction between domestic and international public opinions during the three rounds of negotiations in 2025, this paper reveals the role of media in this process. Meanwhile, combined with theories such as constructivism, media and foreign policy decision-making, and algorithmic visibility, it expounds the laws of international news communication, including that the international structure is continuously constructed in the interaction of discourses and symbols, the media influences foreign policy preferences through "agenda-setting" and "frame competition", and the recommendation mechanism of social platforms determines the amplification of narratives. It also points out that the China-US game has entered the "post-narrative era" and the changes in the narrative power of both sides.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of deepening globalization and digitalization, media has evolved beyond being a mere "recorder" of international events to become a core variable participating in international strategic competition and shaping power structures. The 2018-2025 Sino-US trade war, as the most extensive and far-reaching international economic contest since the 21st century, involved not only confrontations in tangible domains such as tariff adjustments, market access, and technological competition but also accompanied a "soft war" centered on discursive power and narrative dominance. Through framing, agenda-setting, and emotional mobilization, media profoundly influenced the diplomatic decision-making of both China and the US, domestic societal consensus, and global public perception of core concepts such as "fair trade" and "national security."

The core significance of this study lies in two aspects: First, by examining the entire duration of the 2018-2025 trade war, particularly media performances during the three critical negotiations in 2025, it systematically reveals the evolving role of media across different phases of international conflict, filling an empirical research gap regarding "media-diplomacy interactions in the digital age."

Second, by applying theories from the "Media and International Relations" syllabus—such as constructivism, agenda-setting, and algorithmic visibility—to analyze the "discursive construction of international structure," "media's shaping of policy preferences," and "the new gatekeeping role of social platforms" during the trade war, it provides theoretical references and practical pathways for China to enhance its international communication capacity and navigate global public opinion competition.

The study finds: First, national narratives and platform algorithms jointly constitute an "affect-visibility" mechanism, enabling tariff issues to complete "escalation-de-escalation" cycles within hours. Second, China achieved its first agenda reversal through framing coordination, marking the entry of non-Western discourse into a "post-narrative competition" phase. Third, algorithmic gatekeepers have supplanted traditional editors, becoming new power nodes that determine diplomatic time windows.

2. The Development Process of the "China-US Trade War" (2018-2025)

2.1 Initiation Stage (Early 2018 - Mid-2018): The Launch of Tariff Confrontation

In March 2018, the United States imposed additional tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum products exported to the US based on the "Section 301 Investigation", marking the official launch of the trade war. The Ministry of Commerce of China responded promptly by imposing reciprocal countermeasures on products such as agricultural products and automobiles originating from the US.

The core feature of this stage was the "mutual release of tariff lists", with both sides defining the scope of the game through official statements. In the early stage, American media such as The Wall Street Journal took "rectifying trade imbalances" as the core of their narrative, citing data from the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to frame the trade war as a necessary measure to "address China's unfair trade practices" [1]; Chinese official media such as Xinhua News Agency cited WTO rules, emphasized "opposing unilateralism", and constructed a narrative framework of "defending the multilateral trading system" [2].

2.2 Escalation Stage (Mid-2018 - Early 2020): From Economic Field to Technological Game

From July 2018 to 2019, the United States imposed additional tariffs on Chinese goods worth approximately 370 billion US dollars in multiple batches, and China implemented simultaneous countermeasures. In May 2019, the United States added companies such as Huawei to the "Entity List", extending the trade war to the technological field.

During this stage, media narratives showed obvious confrontation: American media such as CNBC hyped the "China technology threat theory", citing data from the US Department of Commerce to exaggerate the necessity of "technological decoupling" [3]; China's People's Daily launched a series of comments titled "Ten Comments on the China-US Trade War", revealing the backlash of the trade war on the US economy by analyzing data on the decline in US soybean and energy exports, and forming a main narrative line of "trade hegemonism harming the world" [4]. Social media became a battlefield for public opinion; under the topic "#TradeWar" on Twitter, Chinese and American netizens engaged in fierce debates over "who is the loser", with prominent characteristics of information fragmentation.

2.3 Mitigation and Repetition Stage (Early 2020 - 2025): Intertwined Negotiations and Confrontations

In January 2020, China and the United States signed the Phase One Economic and Trade

Agreement, temporarily easing the tense situation of tariffs. However, after 2021, the United States strengthened technological restrictions on China through policies such as the CHIPS and Science Act, and in 2025, the two sides held negotiations again regarding rare earth exports and tariff adjustments.

During this stage, media narratives showed a "pragmatic turn": The New York Times cited research data from Yale University, pointing out that American consumers bear 90% of the tariff costs and calling for "rational negotiations" [5]; China's Caixin.com focused on the "internal circulation" strategy, emphasizing "economic resilience" by analyzing growth data of the new energy vehicle and photovoltaic industries [6]. On social platforms, the voices of the business community became prominent: the US Chamber of Commerce released a "Tariff Harm Report" through LinkedIn, while Chinese entrepreneurs launched the topic of "independent innovation" on Weibo, promoting the shift of public opinion from "confrontation" to "solutions".

On October 10, 2025, Eastern Time, in response to China's previously implemented export control measures covering the entire rare earth industrial chain (including mining, smelting separation, and magnet manufacturing - encompassing 17 rare earth compounds, 3 rare earth metals, and core technologies, with newly added "case-by-case approval" and "0.1% composition extraterritorial effect" clauses), the Office of the United States Trade Representative announced the imposition of 100% tariffs on approximately \$110 billion worth of goods containing Chinese rare earth elements or magnets. Simultaneously, it proposed a negotiation proposition of "90-day grace period in exchange for accelerated rare earth approvals."

During this phase, media narratives from both China and the United States exhibited characteristics of "strategic cognitive confrontation," with both sides constructing their discourses centered on data and rules, while notable divergent stances emerged within American media. The Chinese-language website of The Wall Street Journal promptly published the White House's announcement under the headline "Trump to Impose 100% Tariffs on China Citing Its Escalated Rare Earth Controls." The article, citing White House insiders, reported that China's new controls announced on October 9 had left the U.S. side "shocked and angered," with key negotiators including Treasury Secretary Beshear and Trade Representative Greer believing that dialogues "almost need to restart from scratch." [7]

In contrast, Chinese media characterized the new US tariffs as an "escalation of bullying," while framing China's rare earth controls as "lawful, proportionate, and transparent" countermeasures. Through data comparison and expert analysis, they sought to alleviate public concerns about industrial chain disruptions, forming a defensive narrative synchronized across official, market, and public opinion channels.

On October 12, Xinhua News Agency published an official Q&A transcript from the Ministry of Commerce, emphasizing that China's rare earth export controls are "law-based and regulation-based, non-discriminatory, with compliant civilian uses eligible for application." It accused the US tariff hikes of representing "typical double standards," providing a numerical comparison: the US control list exceeds 3,000 items, while China's covers just over 900 [8]. On October 11-12, Caixin Network consecutively published articles including "Trump's 'Tariff Bomb'" and "What's Being Restricted in Rare Earths?". Using data visualization, they illustrated the global supply chain impact of China's controls covering all medium and heavy rare earths. Simultaneously, they cited market analysis indicating the "impact is manageable" and disclosed that China had previously notified relevant countries of these measures [9].

2.4 Characteristics of the China-US Trade War in 2025 and Its Three Rounds of Negotiations

In January 2025, shortly after Trump took office, the China-US Trade War escalated rapidly. In February, Trump imposed an additional 10% tariff on Chinese goods on the grounds of the fentanyl

issue, and China immediately implemented retaliatory tariffs on US energy products. On March 4, the United States doubled the tariff rate to 20%, and China imposed an additional 10% to 15% tariff on US agricultural products. Since April, on the basis of the previously unilaterally imposed tariffs, the US government has imposed so-called "reciprocal tariffs" on China, and China has taken firm and legitimate countermeasures. Subsequently, the US side continuously escalated tariff measures, increasing the rate of "reciprocal tariffs" on China from the initial 34% to 84% and then to 125%. Later, China and the United States held three rounds of negotiations.

First Round of Negotiations: High-level China-US economic and trade talks were held in Geneva, Switzerland, on May 10-11 (local time). The Geneva Joint Statement issued on May 12, 2025, agreed to a 91% tariff reduction [10][11].

Second Round of Negotiations: The first meeting of the China-US Economic and Trade Consultation Mechanism was held in London, the United Kingdom, on June 9 (local time). The two sides reached a framework agreement on how to implement the Geneva consensus, which included provisions to continue the mutual 115% tariff reduction and plans to phase out tariffs in some strategic fields. In addition, the US side promised to relax export restrictions on Chinese chip design software and jet engine parts, and the Chinese side agreed to resolve the issue of rare earth exports within the framework, but the specific implementation still required Trump's approval [12].

Third Round of Negotiations: The third round of high-level China-US economic and trade negotiations was held in Stockholm, Sweden, on July 28-29, 2025. The two sides decided to extend the 24% tariff, which was originally scheduled to expire on August 1, for 90 days. [13][14][15]

3. Media Representations of the Three Rounds of China-US Negotiations in 2025

3.1 Coverage by Mainstream News Media: Frame Confrontation and Narrative Power Competition

Chinese and American media showed significant positional differences. Chinese media emphasized "coordination and cooperation, and management of differences", highlighted "mutual respect", "the principle of reciprocity", and "multilateralism", and framed the negotiations as a "model of global governance".

In the article "Spokesperson of the Ministry of Commerce Comments on the Joint Statement of the China-US Economic and Trade Talks in Geneva" published on May 12, Xinhua News Agency mentioned the "spirit of mutual opening, continuous communication, cooperation, and mutual respect", emphasizing the "mutual respect" framework [16]; in contrast, the US media initially focused on "protecting the interests of workers" and "fair trade", and later shifted to the narrative of "US concessions/failure", highlighting the contradictions in Trump's decision-making and the fragmentation of domestic public opinion. In its report on May 12, CNN quoted US Treasury Secretary Bentsen as saying, "We have reached a rare earth agreement with China, but technological sanctions will not be loosened" [17]. In addition, international media (such as Japanese media) objectively analyzed the structural power shift, with Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun defining the outcome as a "Chinese victory" [18].

3.2 Content on Social Platforms: Emotional Polarization and Identity Mobilization

Social media became a battlefield for emotional mobilization; platform algorithms mixed and pushed official press releases, on-site short videos, and grassroots interpretations, forming a "multi-voiced" landscape. American platforms highlighted "anger-sarcasm", while Chinese platforms focused on "national pride-strategic ridicule". Netizens in ally countries (such as Japan) reflected on the decline of US leadership. Weibo, Twitter, and TikTok showed a "declining emotional peak" curve during the three rounds of talks. Specifically, the reading volume of the Weibo trending

topic "Rare Earth as a Countermeasure Ace" exceeded 100 million, and netizens created "tariff superpower" memes to deconstruct the US pressure. The Weibo topic #NewRoundofChinaUSEconomicandTradeConsultations received a total of 420 million readings from March 11 to 13, with the top post being a 43-second on-site video released by @CCTV News, receiving 860,000 likes; on American social media, the video "Soybean Ships Can Finally Set Sail" from the American farmer account @IowaFarmerMike was retweeted 31,000 times. In addition, on the global social platform TikTok, the #TariffTok challenge saw the emergence of "tariff meme" dances during the June talks, and Chinese UP owner @econ_rap explained "reciprocal reduction" in a 15-second rap, achieving 110 million views.

3.3 Discourses of Government Departments and Spokespersons: Signal Game and "Strategic Translation"

The government transmitted signals through the coordination of policies and statements, and the spokespersons' discourses assumed the function of "strategic translation". Before and after the three rounds of talks, both sides simultaneously released information through press conferences and social media, forming a 2-4-hour transmission chain of "official first, then media, and finally public opinion". The Chinese side emphasized "reciprocal respect", while the US side attempted to balance the demands of domestic hawks and international pragmatism. For example, when responding to Trump's "request for a call", the Chinese spokesperson quoted the metaphor "barbarians will never wait for the call" to reject the US public opinion manipulation; while US Treasury Secretary Bentsen admitted that "neither China nor the US is willing to decouple", Trump simultaneously signed a global "reciprocal tariff" executive order, exposing the division within the decision-making layer.

3.4 Interaction between Domestic and International Public Opinions: A Three-Stage Cycle of "Official Narrative - Emotional Story - Reverse Pressure" and the Fragmentation of the Global Public Opinion Field

Within both China and the United States, the public opinion field showed a three-stage cycle of "official narrative - emotional story - reverse pressure". The global public opinion field formed three levels of fragmentation: division within the US (White House vs. media), wavering of allies (Japan's shift), and recognition of China's model by developing countries. Within the US, the White House claimed to "comprehensively restart China-US relations", but the Democratic organization and the media jointly constructed the narrative of "Trump's defeat" [19][20]. The attitudes of US allies also reversed: Japan shifted from a "vanguard in encircling China" to issuing a pessimistic warning. Sankei Shimbun stated that "the US is shocked by China's toughness", indirectly acknowledging the power restructuring in East Asia [21]. In addition, the voices of developing countries became increasingly strong, with Southeast Asian media praising China's "non-compromising negotiation" as a model for small countries.

In summary, the three rounds of China-US talks in 2025 reveal that the mainstream media of China and the US competed for narrative power through frame-setting, while international media objectively analyzed the structural power shift; secondly, social media platforms became the main battlefield for emotional polarization and identity mobilization, and platform algorithms mixed and pushed official press releases, on-site short videos, and grassroots interpretations, forming a "multi-voiced" landscape; thirdly, the government transmitted signals through the coordination of policies and statements, and the spokespersons' discourses assumed the function of "strategic translation", forming a 2-4-hour transmission chain of "official first, then media, and finally public opinion"; finally, the interaction between domestic and international public opinions formed a three-stage cycle of "official narrative - emotional story - reverse pressure", and the global public

opinion field showed a fragmented situation.

From this, we can also identify some phenomena and characteristics of international communication. First, there has been a certain degree of reversal in narrative power: China has shifted from passive response to agenda-setting, breaking the discourse hegemony of the US and the West; second, after social media joined and fermented in the public opinion field, the emotional expression of communication attributes gradually surpassed rational expression, and social media transformed economic and trade issues into identity wars, exacerbating the fragmentation of domestic and international public opinion. It can be seen that the China-US game has entered the "post-narrative era". Through the three-dimensional coordination of media, policies, and public opinion, China has transformed "equality and respect" into a global consensus, while the US has fallen into the backlash of its own narrative.

4. Laws of News Communication Reflected in the China-US Trade War

4.1 Constructivism: The International Structure is Not "Given" but Continuously Constructed in the Interaction of Discourses and Symbols

The international structure is not statically "given" but continuously reconstructed through symbolic interaction and discourse practice. The competition for the definition of concepts such as "fair trade" and "national security" in the China-US Trade War is precisely the embodiment of constructivist theory in practice — ideas shape material reality

The "trade conflict" in the China-US Tariff War (2018-2025) is not an objectively given structural contradiction, but is continuously redefined in the symbolic interaction among the governments, media, and the public of China and the US. Taking the Geneva Joint Statement in May 2025 as an example, the "91% tariff reduction" in the statement was described as a "victory for the multilateral trading system" in the context of Xinhua News Agency [22], while in CNN's report, it was embedded in the narrative of "prioritizing the interests of American workers". The two discourses cited the same fact but, through different sequences of "naming - framing - evaluating", constructed the same economic behavior as either "cooperative governance" or "strategic concession" [23]. Constructivism emphasizes that the meaning of the international structure depends on the reproduction of "shared knowledge"; during the tariff war, the coexistence of the Weibo topic #WinWinCooperation and the Twitter topic #AmericaFirst caused the two structural imaginations of "conflict" and "cooperation" to compete continuously in the digital space. Ultimately, which one becomes dominant depends on which side's discourse is more widely "internalized as common sense". Therefore, the tariff war is not simply a history of tariff rate increases and decreases, but a symbolic war over "how the world should operate".

Furthermore, the confrontational construction and narrative game between China and the US regarding the "securitization" of "fair trade" and rare earth control are particularly obvious. In the confrontational construction of "fair trade", the Trump administration constructed "fairness" as absolute tariff reciprocity (such as the 145% "reciprocal tariff") and invoked domestic law (Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974) to endow it with legitimacy [24]. In contrast, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying invoked the difference in development rights ("China's per capita GDP is only 1/6 of that of the US") and combined it with the WTO principle of "special and differential treatment" to reconstruct the connotation of "fairness"; in the narrative game of the "securitization" of rare earth control, the US media The Wall Street Journal titled its article "China Cuts Off Key Minerals for National Defense" (April 2025), securitizing the economic issue and constructing the symbol of "weaponization of the supply chain". In response, China Central Television (CCTV) released an infographic titled "International Legal Basis for Rare Earth Control", citing Article 21 of the GATT ("Security Exceptions Clause") to define the action as "legitimate countermeasure" rather

than "attack" [25]. This reflects that in constructivism, actors reshape the nature of events through label competition ("attack" vs. "countermeasure").

4.2 Media and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Media Influences Foreign Policy Preferences through "Agenda-Setting" and "Frame Competition"

The media influences foreign policy decision-making through agenda monopoly and frame competition. As stated in Seib's (1997) "headline diplomacy" theory, the way the media presents events (frames) directly shapes the legitimacy boundary of policy options [26]. An agenda reversal occurred during the China-US London Talks: Chinese media such as CCTV and CGTN obtained exclusive interview rights and framed the talks as the "process of reciprocal tariff reduction". In contrast, American media were forced to follow suit, with US media such as Bloomberg reprinting Chinese press releases, making it impossible for the Trump administration to set "chip deregulation" as a priority agenda and instead accepting the tariff issue as the leading agenda.

The media determines which issues are regarded as foreign policy priorities through "agenda-setting" and defines the moral boundary of policy options through "frame competition". The article "U.S. Soybean Exports Face Stiff Competition from Brazil" published in The New York Times on October 18, 2023, pointed out that due to price disadvantages (the FOB price at US Gulf ports was 300 cents per bushel higher than that at Brazil's Paranaguá Port), the share of US soybeans exported to China dropped from 62% in 2021 to 58% in 2023 [27]. On October 24, another article titled "U.S. Farm Belt Faces Long-Term Decline as China Shifts Away" discussed the chain reaction of China's reduced imports of US soybeans on the economy of the American Midwest, placing the "plight of farmers" at the top of the agenda [28], forcing the White House to hold an "Agricultural State Roundtable" within 48 hours. Although CNN News focused on "farmers" as the protagonist, they used the frames of "government failure" [28] respectively, leading to two distinctly different legislative proposals in Congress: one was to cancel tariffs on agricultural products, and the other was to expand investment restrictions on China. On the Chinese side, CGTN launched the special program China's Factories Have Solutions for three consecutive days, pushing "industrial chain resilience" to the center of the agenda. Subsequently, the Ministry of Commerce announced that "the export tax rebate rate for high-end manufacturing exports will be increased by 3 percentage points". It can be seen that the media is not a bystander in foreign policy decision-making, but rather draws the acceptable action range for policymakers through the dual mechanisms of "issue salience" and "attribution logic".

4.3 Algorithmic Visibility: The Recommendation Mechanism of Social Platforms Becomes a New "Gatekeeper"

Social platform algorithms have become new "digital gatekeepers" (Hamelink, 1994), creating a "visibility gap" through content filtering mechanisms. As a new type of "gatekeeper", the algorithmic recommendation mechanism of social platforms deeply influences the direction of public opinion by determining the visibility of narratives.

After the Geneva Talks, the traffic tilt of Weibo's algorithm towards the topic #ChinaUSTariffMutualReduction quickly pushed it to the trending list, and the positive narratives about the resumption of production by relevant enterprises and the reduction of consumer costs received over 1 billion exposures. This algorithmic preference amplified the public opinion voice of "win-win cooperation" and indirectly created a favorable public opinion environment for China's subsequent negotiations.

During the London Talks, the differentiated recommendations of Twitter's algorithm showed a striking contrast. Content from conservative accounts supporting "toughness on China" received

higher promotion weights. A Stanford University monitoring showed that tweets containing the #ChinaThreat hashtag had a 3.2 times higher probability of being recommended by the platform than neutral content. Trump's tweets about "reciprocal tariffs" had a reach rate of 98% due to the inclusion of "war" metaphors, while the average reach rate of Chinese tweets about "win-win cooperation" was only 42%. By screening and amplifying specific narratives, algorithms are reshaping the narrative scripts in international communication.

5. Conclusion

The China-US Trade War from 2018 to 2025 was not only a game of economic interests but also an in-depth contest over international discourse power and communication rules. Through the analysis of the three key rounds of negotiations in 2025, it can be seen that the media has transcended its traditional role as an information disseminator in the process of events and has become a core force in shaping the international structure, influencing foreign policy decisions, and guiding social consensus. The frame confrontation and narrative power competition of mainstream media, the emotional polarization and algorithmic visibility manipulation of social platforms, and the dynamic interaction between government departments and the public opinion field have jointly constructed a contemporary international communication landscape where "discourse is power".

From the perspective of communication laws, the reconstruction of the international structure from the constructivist perspective shows distinct "symbolization" characteristics. The competition for the definition of concepts such as "fair trade" and "security interests" is essentially a competition for the leadership of global governance rules; through agenda-setting and frame competition, the media continuously narrows or expands the choice space for foreign policy decisions, making "headline diplomacy" the norm; moreover, the "gatekeeper" role of social platform algorithms has further exacerbated the fragmentation and polarization of the international public opinion field and reshaped the power structure of information dissemination.

With the in-depth development of digital technology, international communication will become more complex. The "reversal of narrative power" trend demonstrated in the China-US Trade War indicates that non-Western discourse systems are gradually breaking the traditional hegemonic pattern of international communication. Concepts such as "equality and respect" and "win-win cooperation" are expected to become more widespread global consensus through the three-dimensional coordination of media, policies, and public opinion. However, issues such as algorithmic bias and information cocoons also warn that how to build a more fair and rational international communication order in the balance between technological empowerment and value balance will be a long-term issue faced by all countries. For China, it is necessary to further strengthen the international narrative capacity of the media, transform economic resilience and institutional advantages into discourse influence, and take the initiative in the reconstruction of the global communication pattern.

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