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Beyond binary categorization: discursive construction of multiple identities and common ground in Hong Kong media's coverage of international conflict

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Beyond Binary Categorization: Discursive Construction of Multiple Identities and Common Ground in Hong Kong Media's Coverage of International Conflict

Abstract

This study integrates social-psychological perspectives on intergroup relations with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to conduct a corpus-assisted discourse study of media representations of international conflict. Focusing on the South China Morning Post's (SCMP) reporting of the Sino-U.S. trade dispute, the analysis employs keyword, collocation, and concordance techniques to examine how media discourse constructs and negotiates multiple identities amid shifting global dynamics. Findings reveal that SCMP frames the conflict within a broader international context, representing diverse actors with complex identities and group affiliations. While the inherent nature of conflict reinforces in-group/out-group categorization, the newspaper employs discursive recategorization strategies to construct a superordinate global identity that underscores Sino-US interconnectedness and offers nuanced portrayals of China beyond simplistic binary frames. These findings illuminate how media discourse can foster intergroup cooperation while acknowledging the complex interplay of competing national interests. The study provides practical implications for journalistic practices and international communication strategies, particularly in an era of deepening economic interdependence and geopolitical complexity.

Keywords: social psychology, critical discourse analysis, South China Morning Post, international conflict, categorization, identity construction

1. Introduction

International media coverage of the Sino-U.S. trade dispute has frequently adhered to a binary narrative that pits national interests and ideological positions against each other. However, within an increasingly interconnected global economy, media representations possess the potential to transcend such polarized framing by constructing more complex and multilayered identities. This paper investigates the nuanced discursive space navigated by the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post (SCMP) in its reporting on the trade dispute. Specifically, it examines how the newspaper moves beyond simplistic in-group/out-group categorizations to reflect overlapping economic, geopolitical, and regional identities, a complexity shaped by Hong Kong's distinctive institutional and historical context.

The theoretical study of identity has evolved substantially across disciplines, such as sociology (Stryker and Burke, 2000), cultural psychology (Hammack, 2008), linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), and anthropology (Sökefeld, 1999). This evolution reflects a significant shift from early conceptions of identity as an essential or psychic phenomenon (Freud, 1927) toward contemporary understandings of identity as socially constructed and performed (Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel and Turner, 2004). Within this theoretical landscape, social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) offers a foundational framework by situating identity formation within social interactions and group

memberships, through which individuals derive their self-concepts. Social categorization, the process by which individuals classify themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups based on attributes such as race, ethnicity, status, and ideology, typically leads to positive evaluation of the in-group and negative attribution toward the out-group (Mansson, 2008; Van Dijk, 1995). This group-based categorization fundamentally shapes intergroup attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (Brown, 2000; Hogg and Terry, 2000), with empirical research documenting its manifestations in prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict across varied contexts (Bodenhausen and Peery, 2009; Krueger and DiDonato, 2008; O'Doherty and LeCouteur, 2007).

To examine how these psychological processes of categorization are reflected and constructed discursively, this study adopts the socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015b). This approach is further enriched by integrating insights from the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005) and social identity complexity theory (Roccas and Brewer, 2002), which provide psychological frameworks for understanding the construction and maintenance of multiple, overlapping identities. A systematic analysis of discursive strategies can thus reveal how these psychological processes are enacted and negotiated within media coverage of international conflicts.

Media discourse serves as a vital site for analyzing these dynamics, particularly during international conflicts where identity construction becomes explicitly contested (O'Doherty and LeCouteur, 2007). Recent studies illustrate how news coverage often employs discursive strategies to categorize social actors into polarized "Self" and "Other" groups, typically featuring positive self-representation and negative other-representation (Van Dijk, 2015a). However, such binary frameworks fail to capture how media discourse can construct identities more complex than simple oppositions, especially when multiple and intersecting group memberships must be negotiated.

This study employs the Sino-U.S. trade dispute as a case through which to analyze such complex identity construction, where competing narratives intersect with geopolitical and economic interests. Hong Kong's dual status as a major international financial hub and a Special Administrative Region of China makes the negotiation of complex identities particularly salient in its media discourse. In this context, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) must navigate multiple group affiliations while upholding journalistic standards, thereby offering a valuable case for examining media discourse that moves beyond binary categorization. The study is guided by three research questions: (1) Which countries and regions are salient in SCMP's reporting of the trade dispute? (2) How does SCMP discursively categorize and recategorize China, the US and other social actors? (3) What institutional and contextual factors contribute to the discursive construction of identity complexity in SCMP's reporting?

This research contributes to the existing literature by addressing a gap in studies of media discourse within hybrid geopolitical spaces. First, it moves beyond analyses of clearly national media outlets by focusing on the SCMP, a publication situated in Hong Kong's unique "third space" (Bhabha, 2012), where competing identities and loyalties are continually being negotiated. Second, it integrates social-psychological perspectives on intergroup relations (e.g., common ingroup identity and social identity complexity) with critical discourse analysis, offering a theoretical framework for understanding how binary categorizations may be complicated and transcended in such contexts. Third, it provides empirical evidence of how local contexts and institutional factors shape a distinct discursive approach to international conflict. Ultimately, this study seeks to

understand not only how SCMP constructs nuanced identities in its trade war coverage, but also what institutional and contextual drivers enable and shape this distinctive discursive practice.

2. Contextualization of the study: Sino-US trade dispute

The Sino-U.S. trade dispute originated from an investigation by the United States into China's economic practices under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974. The Trump administration escalated tensions on March 1, 2018, by imposing tariffs of 25% on steel and 10% on aluminum imports from China and other countries, followed by a comprehensive memorandum targeting China's economic policies. The dispute subsequently evolved beyond economic measures into competing narratives between the two nations over the nature and implications of the conflict.

The dispute arose from a combination of long-standing structural tensions and more immediate policy concerns. A persistent bilateral trade imbalance, which reached US\$375.6 billion in China's favor by 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), formed a key backdrop. More fundamentally, U.S. objections centered on China's approach to technology acquisition and market access. American companies operating in China were subject to mandatory joint-venture requirements in strategic sectors, leading to technology transfers to local partners. Although these practices complied technically with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, the United States regarded them as systematic efforts to obtain advanced technology at below-market cost. Furthermore, while China's developing-country status within the WTO allowed certain protective measures, including market-access restrictions and state support for domestic firms, the U.S. argued that China's economic scale and technological advancement had outgrown this classification, creating asymmetries that disadvantaged foreign enterprises (Swenson and Woo, 2019). These concerns were amplified by perceived delays in implementing market-opening commitments made by China in 1999, especially in strategically sensitive sectors.

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative framed the dispute within a wider context of strategic competition, particularly in emerging technologies. Its analysis portrayed China's state-led initiatives, most notably the "Made in China 2025" plan, as a systematic drive toward technological dominance in key industries (Wang and Zeng, 2020). Scholarly interpretations, however, reveal greater complexity. Kim (2019) and Sun (2019), for instance, contend that the trade measures reflected broader geopolitical calculations extending beyond purely economic factors. The Trump administration's stress on national sovereignty and economic security marked a departure from traditional U.S. support for multilateral trade frameworks. This shift, exemplified by the invocation of national security justifications for trade restrictions, called into question established post-war economic arrangements (Bergsten, 2018) and arguably accelerated trends toward economic regionalization and selective supply-chain decoupling (Kapustina et al., 2020).

Within Chinese academic and policy circles, the trade dispute has been interpreted through three distinct lenses. The first, rooted in power-transition theory, regards the conflict as an inevitable expression of great-power rivalry between an established hegemon and a rising challenger (Wei, 2019). A second approach highlights institutional differences, especially concerning the role of the state in economic development, which helps explain why critiques of Chinese economic practices have found resonance not only in the United States but also in Europe and Japan despite their own trade tensions with Washington. A third perspective, emerging from Chinese policy discourse, advocates leveraging external pressure as a catalyst for domestic reform. This viewpoint informed

Beijing's official preference throughout 2018 for the term "trade frictions" over "trade war", a rhetorical choice that preserved space for negotiation. Proponents of this school suggest that selectively accommodating U.S. concerns, particularly those aligned with China's own reform agenda, could facilitate a transition toward higher-quality economic development.

Hong Kong occupies a distinctive position in this conflict. Its status as a free port, its separate legal system, and its autonomy under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework have long made it a critical intermediary for economic flows between China and the West. That role has grown more complicated following political developments in Hong Kong, notably the 2019 protests and the subsequent enactment of the National Security Law. The U.S. reassessment of Hong Kong's special status under the 1992 U.S.-Hong Kong Policy Act has further transformed the territory into a nexus where trade disputes intersect with broader governance and geopolitical tensions.

In sum, the Sino-U.S. trade dispute transcends mere differences over trade balances and tariff levels. It reflects deeper contestations over the management of great-power relations in an interconnected world, competing visions of global leadership, and fundamental tensions between differing models of economic development and governance.

3. Media Representation of Conflict

Media discourse plays a pivotal role in international conflicts, shaping public opinion, informing policy decisions, and influencing conflict resolution (Savrum and Miller, 2015). Beyond mere event reporting, media outlets actively interpret and frame narratives, thereby contributing to the construction of national identities and the mediation of intergroup relations. This influence becomes particularly pronounced during international conflicts, as media portrayals may either reinforce existing power structures or open alternative pathways for mutual understanding.

Scholarship on conflict reporting has identified recurrent patterns, among which binary opposition, commonly framed as the "Self versus Other" paradigm, remains a dominant feature (Arcimavičienė and Bağlama, 2018). Research on the Sino-U.S. trade dispute illustrates how media on both sides employ discursive strategies to advance national narratives (Chen and Wang, 2022; Li, 2021; Zeng and Sparks, 2020; Zhu, 2022). For instance, Chen and Wang (2022) reveal through corpus-assisted discourse analysis that China Daily tends to adopt the softer term "conflict", reflecting a stance of pragmatic nationalism, whereas the New York Times more frequently frames the situation as a "war", aligning with a hardline perception of China as a threat to U.S. security. Similarly, Zeng and Sparks (2019) demonstrate how Chinese media reinforce state nationalism while critiquing the negative impact of the trade dispute on American citizens. Li (2021) further highlights how underlying cultural differences shape these portrayals: Chinese media often stress global economic repercussions, while U.S. media position themselves as victims seeking to rectify unfair trade practices.

However, an emphasis on polarization in much comparative research tends to obscure the interactive dimension between Self and Other. As Rasmussen (2017) argues, the reification of national categories perpetuates a dichotomous view that hinders conflict resolution. Only a limited number of studies have examined how the media may reconfigure Self and Other into a superordinate identity by emphasizing shared economic interests or geographical proximity (Chan, 2012, 2013). In his analysis of coverage concerning the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute, Chan

(2013) finds that China Daily often constructs a superordinate “Asian” identity between China and Japan, even amidst tensions that would otherwise reinforce division. Beyond antagonistic frames, scholars also note that media can articulate multiple and fluid identities. Wang and Ge (2020), for example, show how Chinese media portray China not only as a victim of the trade war and a defender of free trade, but also as an active facilitator of negotiation and cooperation, a complexity that aligns with social identity theories.

The institutional setting of media organizations significantly shapes how conflicts are reported. In Hong Kong, studies indicate that local media navigate complex identity intersections by employing distinct framing strategies for local, Chinese mainland, Asian, and international news, variations visible in their handling of authority, conflict, and attribution (Guo, 2011). This reflects a “glocalization” dynamic wherein outlets balance global/Western and local/Eastern perspectives, often adopting a supportive rather than critical tone in international coverage (Wu and Ng, 2011). Shifts in news sourcing and editorial practices, influenced by evolving political dynamics between the Hong Kong and central Chinese governments, further signal a transformation in Hong Kong’s media paradigm (Wong, Lo and Cheung, 2021). Media situated at such cultural and political intersections are especially likely to develop distinctive identity construction strategies when covering international conflicts.

Despite these insights, several research gaps persist. Although social identity theories have informed media studies, few works systematically integrate them with critical discourse analysis to examine international conflicts. The potential of combining common ingroup identity theory (Gaertner et al., 1993) and social identity complexity theory (Prati et al., 2016) with discourse analysis remains underexplored. Moreover, existing research has predominantly focused on media outlets directly involved in conflicts, especially in Sino-U.S. trade coverage, overlooking the distinctive role of third-party media operating in major international hubs. Additionally, conventional approaches often treat social actors’ identities as static, failing to capture the dynamic, negotiable nature of identity formation in international relations. To address these limitations, this study conducts a focused analysis of the South China Morning Post’s coverage of the Sino-U.S. trade conflict. Situated within Hong Kong’s unique institutional environment, SCMP provides a valuable case for examining how media can transcend binary oppositions and construct more nuanced representations of international conflict through the integration of social identity theories and critical discourse analysis.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study proposes an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes Van Dijk’s (2001) socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with two key social-psychological theories: the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2014) and Social Identity Complexity Theory (Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Moving beyond a simple juxtaposition of perspectives, we position them within a coherent “discourse-cognition-identity” triadic model. This model conceptualizes media discourse as a primary site where linguistic strategies (discourse level) activate and shape cognitive schemata of social categorization (cognitive level), which subsequently construct, negotiate, and transform social identities and intergroup relations (identity level). The integrated framework allows us to examine not only how the media categorize social actors, but how discursive practices manage complex and fluid identities by engaging with underlying social-psychological processes.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) investigates how language use constitutes, legitimizes, and challenges social power relations and structures (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Van Dijk's (2001, 2015b) socio-cognitive approach emphasizes the mediating role of cognition between discourse and society, with social categorization as a central cognitive process. From this perspective, ideology operates as a shared mental framework that organizes group attitudes and knowledge, while discourse serves as a key medium through which such categorizations are reproduced, naturalized, or contested. Adopting a discursive-psychological lens (Augoustinos, 2001; Edwards, 1997), this study treats categories not as static mental containers but as flexible constructs that are actively performed and negotiated in communication. This allows for the analysis of contradiction and variability in discourse, moving beyond deterministic "Self versus Other" dichotomies (O'Doherty and Lecouteur, 2007). Operationally, we examine categorization through three discursive strategies outlined by Reisigl and Wodak (2009): nomination strategies (e.g., naming China as "the world's factory"), predicational strategies (e.g., attributing "assertiveness" to the U.S.), and argumentation strategies (e.g., employing topoi of threat or fairness).

While socio-cognitive CDA effectively reveals the mechanisms of discursive categorization, its explanatory power is enhanced when explicitly linked to social-psychological theories that account for the functions and potential consequences of such categorization for intergroup relations. To address the limitations of binary framing, we integrate two such theories. First, Social Identity Complexity Theory (Roccas and Brewer, 2002) posits that individuals can perceive their multiple group memberships in complex, non-overlapping ways, directly challenging simplistic in-group/out-group models. Incorporated into our framework, it provides a social-psychological rationale for analyzing how media discourse can construct and sustain concurrent, non-exclusive identities for social actors. For instance, this framework informs our analysis of how the SCMP may concurrently depict the European Union as China's trade partner, a normative ally of the United States, and a defender of multilateralism, which are three distinct yet coexisting identities. The linguistic management of this complexity, particularly how contradictions are avoided or negotiated, becomes a key analytical focus. Second, the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2014) offers a psychological account of how intergroup bias can be reduced by recategorizing distinct groups into a single, superordinate in-group (e.g., we are all members of the WTO). When integrated with CDA, this model allows us to interpret discursive strategies that emphasize shared goals (e.g., global economic stability), overarching institutional memberships, or common threats as attempts at discursive recategorization. It helps identify linguistic strategies, such as the adoption of inclusive metaphors (e.g., partners in the global economy) or the emphasis on mutual interdependence, that aim to shift cognitive boundaries from "Us versus Them" toward a more inclusive "we".

Together, these theories form a cohesive analytical lens. The socio-cognitive approach to CDA supplies the foundational toolkit for deconstructing the linguistic "how" of categorization. Social Identity Complexity Theory explains the psychological plausibility and discursive management of multi-layered identities in media texts. The Common Ingroup Identity Model elucidates the potential social-psychological purpose behind discursive strategies that build superordinate connections. Collectively, this integrated analytical framework enables us to theorize that the discourse of the SCMP negotiates the tension between the cognitive pull of binary conflict framing and the socio-psychological impetus, one shaped by institutional imperatives, to construct more complex, inclusive identity configurations. Finally, the framework explicitly integrates macro-level contextual factors, which include Hong Kong's unique institutional position, its economic

interdependencies, and the prevailing geopolitical pressures, as conditions that both constrain and enable the SCMP's deployment of the discursive and socio-psychological strategies examined in this study.

5. Data and Methodology

5.1 Data Collection

This study analyzes coverage of the Sino-U.S. trade dispute in the South China Morning Post (SCMP), Hong Kong's foremost English-language newspaper, founded in 1903. As a newspaper of record in Hong Kong (Flowerdew et al., 2002), the SCMP addresses an elite readership and operates within a distinctive institutional setting. Historically recognized for its independent editorial stance, its positioning has evolved since Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Bhatia, 2016), placing it at a complex intersection of Chinese governance, global finance, and international journalism, a "third space" (Bhabha, 2012) where competing identities and geopolitical pressures converge.

The corpus was compiled from LexisNexis using the search terms "Sino-US trade conflict," "Sino-US trade dispute," and "Sino-US trade war." These terms were chosen for their established usage in academic and policy discourse to refer specifically to the tariff measures and negotiations initiated in 2018. Although this sampling strategy may exclude articles adopting a less confrontational framing, it ensures that the corpus is centered on coverage that explicitly engages with the conflict, an analytical focus that aligns closely with the study's core objective of investigating identity construction amid contested international events. The period under analysis extends from March 22, 2018, when the United States announced tariff investigations, to December 1, 2019, one month before the Phase One agreement was reached. The final corpus comprises 486 news reports and editorial pieces, totaling 396,570 tokens.

This focused, single-outlet research design adopts an in-depth case study logic that aligns closely with the theoretical objectives of this study. Whereas comparative studies across multiple media outlets can reveal broad patterns of national bias, an in-depth examination of a strategically positioned newspaper such as the SCMP enables us to trace consistent, nuanced, and embedded discursive mechanisms, including recategorization and the negotiation of identity complexity, that might otherwise be obscured in broader cross-outlet comparisons. The SCMP operates under sustained and specific contextual pressures, including economic interdependence, geopolitical sensitivity, and the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. Analyzing its discourse over this defined critical period enables us to investigate not only whether but also how such complex strategies are deployed systematically to navigate its institutional "third space." Consequently, the SCMP is treated not as a statistically representative sample of a media category, but as an analytically rich and theoretically informative case that vividly illuminates the very processes our integrated framework seeks to explain: the discursive negotiation and transcendence of binary categorization in international conflict reporting.

5.2 Research Methodology

To empirically ground the integrated theoretical framework outlined above, this study employs Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) (Baker et al., 2008; Partington, 2004). CADS effectively addresses criticisms regarding the subjectivity of traditional CDA by combining

systematic corpus analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. This approach enables the identification of both quantitative linguistic patterns (e.g., frequencies, collocations) and qualitative discursive features, thereby offering a robust means to examine how the discursive strategies of categorization and recategorization are realized in media texts. While CADS has been widely applied in studies of media representation, including refugees (Baker et al., 2008; Dyvik Cardona, 2022; Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008; Salahshour, 2016; Serafis et al., 2021; Wright and Brookes, 2019), minorities (Baker et al., 2013; Bray, 2022), environmental issues (Liu and Li, 2017; Wang et al., 2022), and protests (Liu and Ma, 2022; Wang, 2022), its focused application to discursive recategorization and identity negotiation in international conflict reporting remains limited, a gap the present study aims to address. The analysis proceeds through two main stages:

Keyword Analysis: Keyword analysis is conducted by comparing the corpus under analysis in comparison with another corpus, either a generalized reference corpus or a comparable specialized corpus and the keyness is defined as “the statistically significantly higher frequency of particular words or clusters in the corpus” (Baker et al., 2008, p. 278). Keyword analysis identifies statistically significant lexical items by comparing the SCMP corpus against the British National Corpus (BNC) as a reference corpus, a common practice in CADS to reveal lexical specificity against general English usage (Baker et al., 2008). Statistical significance was determined using log-likelihood tests with a threshold of $p < 0.001$. Using AntConc software, we extracted the top 300 keywords, focusing particularly on terms referring to countries and regions to examine the salience of social actors in the conflict reporting. Different lexical forms referring to the same country were grouped into a single category (e.g., “China,” “Chinese,” “Beijing,” and “Xi” were all classified under China). Owing to Hong Kong’s independent membership in the World Trade Organization, it was treated as a distinct category separate from Chinese mainland.

Collocational and Concordance Analysis: Collocates refer to words that frequently appear together within a pre-determined span, usually five words left and right to the node word. Collocates help reveal semantic and evaluative patterns around key terms (Baker et al., 2008). For each country/region-related node, the top 100 collocates were selected for detailed concordance analysis. This stage integrates the examination of discursive strategies, including nomination, predication, and argumentation (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009), to elucidate how these strategies contribute to the (re)categorization of social actors and the construction of intergroup relations in the reporting. Together, this methodological framework enables a systematic analysis of both quantitative patterns and qualitative discursive features in the SCMP’s coverage, revealing how the newspaper discursively constructs and negotiates identities and relationships in its reporting of the Sino-U.S. trade dispute.

6. Results

6.1 Salience of Social Actors

This section examines the salience of social actors and the discursive construction of their identities and relationships in the SCMP’s coverage through linguistic choices and discursive strategies. The analysis reveals a complex, multilayered representation that moves beyond simple binary oppositions to capture the dynamics of global political and economic relationships. As shown in Table 1, analysis of the top 300 keywords identifies six major countries and regions as primary actors in the trade dispute. China (11,339 occurrences) and the United States (10,092

occurrences) emerge as the dominant actors, but the SCMP also incorporates substantial representation of other stakeholders: Hong Kong (584 occurrences), Japan (298), Asia (245), and the European Union (151). This suggests the newspaper's effort to contextualize the conflict within a broader global framework, even while focusing primarily on the bilateral confrontation.

Table 1. Frequency of references to key countries/regions

Country/Region	Total Frequency	Frequency per 1,000 words
China	11,339	31.80
US	10,092	28.30
Hong Kong	584	1.64
Japan	298	0.84
Asia	245	0.69
EU	151	0.42

While frequency analysis indicates the relative prominence of different actors, collocation and concordance analysis reveal how these actors are positioned and characterized in relation to one another (see Table 2). The SCMP constructs a complex relationship between China and the EU, casting the latter in a dual role as both a collaborative multilateral actor and a vocal advocate for reciprocity. Collocation analysis shows a strong association between the EU and China (70 occurrences), alongside terms such as *commerce* (8), *companies* (8), *working* (6), and *exports* (5), indicating an emphasis on economic cooperation. Yet this partnership is balanced against political and ideological distinctions, evident in predicational strategies that highlight the EU's role as a proponent of market reciprocity and fair competition. By framing the EU as a mediator committed to multilateral solutions and the United States as a challenger of established trade norms, the SCMP captures shifting power dynamics in global trade while underscoring the EU's struggle to reconcile its values with strategic interests in an increasingly multipolar world.

Table 2. Collocates of EU, Japan and Hong Kong in SCMP

Actor	Collocates
EU/European Union	<i>China</i> (70), <i>Japan</i> (19), <i>commerce</i> (8), <i>companies</i> (8), <i>working</i> (6), <i>exports</i> (5), <i>agreement</i> (5), <i>Canada</i> (5), <i>ties</i> (4), <i>shared</i> (4)
Japan	<i>South Korea</i> (38), <i>Australia</i> (13), <i>Germany</i> (10), <i>Osaka</i> (9), <i>European Union</i> (9), <i>Britain</i> (9), <i>EU</i> (9), <i>Taiwan</i> (8), <i>France</i> (6)
Hong Kong	<i>US</i> (51), <i>China</i> (51), <i>mainland</i> (22), <i>university</i> (21), <i>protests</i> (20), <i>stock</i> (14), <i>council</i> (12), <i>economist</i> (11), <i>Australia</i> (9), <i>status</i> (9), <i>Hang Seng</i> (9)

Example 1. China, EU plan working group to revamp WTO and counter US unilateralism. (SCMP, 2018/06/25)

Example 2. Jahier said the EU-China relationship was important because the bloc is China's second biggest trade partner. But he also argued that the EU still faces myriad difficulties in accessing the Chinese market and called for Beijing to do more to ensure fair competition. (SCMP, 2018/07/16)

Examples 1 and 2 illustrate how discursive strategies shape these triangular dynamics. In Example 1, the SCMP employs nomination strategies, using cooperative terms such as *working group* to construct a collaborative relationship between China and the EU in opposition to U.S. unilateralism. Example 2 combines positive nomination (*partner*) with negative predication (*faces myriad difficulties, ensure fair competition*), portraying the EU as both an economic partner and a critic of Chinese market practices. Through argumentation strategies that invoke the topos of fairness and reciprocity, the newspaper highlights underlying tensions while framing the EU's dual identity, a representation consistent with social identity complexity theory, which accounts for the coexistence of multiple, sometimes contradictory, group affiliations.

Japan's representation exhibits similar identity complexity, though with distinct regional and global dimensions. Collocation patterns reveal Japan's dual positioning as a key participant in Asian economic integration and a member of the Western security alliance: strong ties with *South Korea* (38) appear alongside links to Western nations such as *Australia* (13), *Germany* (10), *Britain* (9), and *the European Union* (9). The SCMP uses predication strategies to articulate this duality. Example 3 presents Japan as a partner in regional economic cooperation, while Example 4 underscores Japan's alignment with Western strategic positions. This dual framing illustrates how the newspaper avoids reducing Japan to a single categorical role, instead capturing its multiple, context-dependent identities.

Example 3. Beijing sees a trade pact with Japan and South Korea as an important part of its effort to push forward regional economic integration and diversify its markets in the face of a growing sentiment against free trade led by US President Donald Trump's more aggressive trade policy. (SCMP, 2019/07/27)

Example 4. But the United States was not alone in accusing China of staging a sustained and wide-ranging hacking campaign to steal trade secrets and technologies, with Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Britain all echoing the allegations. (SCMP, 2018/12/21)

Hong Kong's identity is constructed across several overlapping dimensions: as an independent economic actor, a global financial center, a participant in great power dynamics, and a part of China. Collocation analysis shows equal co-occurrence with *US* (51) and *China* (51), linguistically placing Hong Kong between the two major powers. Examples 5 and 6 highlight this positioning: Hong Kong is nominated as a "world city" and the "world's freest economy," and predicated as an "independent economic entity" with "rule of law" and "good business ties." These choices portray Hong Kong as a neutral, autonomous intermediary while distinguishing it from the Chinese mainland. The local dimension of Hong Kong's identity surfaces in collocations such as *university* (21), *protests* (20), *stock* (14), *economist* (11), and *Hang Seng* (9), where the SCMP employs topos of authority to emphasize the trade dispute's impact on Hong Kong's economy and financial

market. Furthermore, Hong Kong is depicted as a site of geopolitical contestation where local issues intersect with international tensions. Example 7 uses topos of danger and division to frame Hong Kong as both a local polity and a symbolic battleground in Sino-U.S. relations, elevating it from a local entity to a significant global player. At the regional level, while Hong Kong's relationship with China is referenced through the phrase *part of China* (5 occurrences), contextual analysis indicates that the SCMP often presents this status as a bargaining chip in U.S.-China trade negotiations (see Figure 1), thereby portraying Hong Kong as simultaneously integral to China and vulnerable to external pressures.

Example 5. Caught between Washington and Beijing, Hong Kong finds itself in a difficult position, with its reputation as the world's freest economy challenged by the dispute. (SCMP, 2018/07/23)

Example 6. But being in charge of a “world city” that takes pride in its rule of law, the local government also hopes Washington will bear in mind that Hong Kong is an “independent economic entity” with long-time and good business ties with the US. (SCMP, 2018/07/23)

Example 7. The fact is that Hong Kong's protests, its internal divisions, and its relationship with Beijing are at least indirectly related to international affairs. In particular, Hong Kong is increasingly playing a role in the relationship between China and the United States. (SCMP, 2019/09/27)

	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1	Canada kowtowing to Trump. Beijing on Saturday said US attempts to use	Hong Kong as a	bargaining chip would fail, after President Donald Trump claimed China's
2	care about whether Hong Kong is in chaos or in good shape. He just uses	Hong Kong as a	bargaining chip to put pressure on China in the trade negotiations. It add
3	economic and trade issues should not be politicised and attempts to use	Hong Kong as a	bargaining chip would be in vain. On Friday, Trump confirmed that new U
4	China's state broadcaster CCTV warned Trump against using the unrest in	Hong Kong as a	bargaining chip in the trade talks. The report came after the US president
5	care about whether Hong Kong is in chaos or in good shape. He just uses	Hong Kong as a	bargaining chip to put pressure on China in the trade negotiations." It adc
6	economic and trade issues should not be politicised and attempts to use	Hong Kong as a	bargaining chip would be in vain. On Friday, Trump confirmed that new U
7	exceeded its purchases from the city. Analysts noted the historical role of	Hong Kong as a	gateway for Chinese exporters, but acknowledged that could be jeopardis
8	ic agendas. Last week, I spoke at a symposium in Los Angeles promoting	Hong Kong as a	gateway to Asia and giving members of our business community a chance
9	profitability eroded, or pass them on to consumers through higher prices. "	Hong Kong, as a	free economy, is more exposed to trade disputes than many other econor
10	997. So the tariffs the US slaps on China do not apply to Hong Kong. But "	Hong Kong as a	middleman will definitely be affected by the trade war, which is a matter c
11	ying from Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, and the recent interest in	Hong Kong as a	news story. But, again, it is very much about the trade conflict. Some prot
12	US to review its US-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992 – a law that recognises	Hong Kong as a	trade and economic entity separate from the mainland following 1997. Th
13	d referendums," he said. Beijing yesterday said American attempts to use	Hong Kong as a	"bargaining chip" would fail, after US President Donald Trump claimed Chi

Figure 1. Sample concordance lines of *Hong Kong as a*

Collectively, these analyses demonstrate how contextual factors, particularly economic interdependence and security concerns, shape complex identity constructions in the SCMP's reporting. The newspaper's portrayal reflects the delicate balance that actors such as the EU and Japan must strike between economic engagement with China and alignment with Western strategic interests. This sophisticated representation aligns with both social-identity complexity theory, which emphasizes multiple group memberships, and common-ingroup identity theory, which focuses on shared superordinate categories; indeed, both the EU and Japan are frequently situated within broader frameworks of global governance and economic cooperation. Thus, while the Sino-U.S. trade dispute is primarily framed as a bilateral conflict, the SCMP constructs a more intricate narrative that highlights the dispute's wider implications for global economic stability. By incorporating multiple social actors with complex, overlapping identities, the newspaper underscores the interconnected nature of global trade while acknowledging the underlying tensions

and competing interests that define contemporary international relations. The following sections will examine how the SCMP discursively categorizes and recategorizes the two primary conflicting parties, *China* and *the United States*, within this multifaceted global framework.

6.2 Discursive Categorization of China and the US

This section examines how the SCMP constructs and maintains distinct discursive categorizations of China and the US in its trade war coverage. Through systematic analysis of lexical collocations and discursive strategies, we show that the newspaper establishes a binary opposition in which China is portrayed both as a victim and as a defender of legitimate rights within the multilateral trading system, while the United States is characterized as a unilateral actor that undermines international norms.

The SCMP recurrently constructs the United States, particularly the Trump administration, as the primary initiator of aggressive trade measures. This construction is achieved not through overtly emotional language, but through specific linguistic choices that systematically assign agency and threat to US actions. Quantitative analysis reveals a pattern of frequent collocations of *US* or *Trump* with action-oriented, transactional terms such as *billion* (865), *tariffs* (518), *products* (305), *goods* (286), and verbs like *impose* (56) and *raise* (41). This pattern of transactive instrumentalization, evident in recurring phrases such as *imposed tariffs on Chinese products* or *raised tariffs on Chinese goods*, presents U.S. policy as a series of concrete, impactful, and unilateral economic assaults.

Notably, the construction of the United States as an aggressor relies more on this cumulative, fact-based emphasis on its actions and consequences than on abundant explicit negative epithets. Although the SCMP does employ critical predicates (e.g., framing tariffs as *punitive* or policies as *unpredictable*), it largely avoids sustained, overtly inflammatory language (e.g., consistently labeling them as reckless or hostile). This relative lexical neutrality in direct predication allows the newspaper to maintain a veneer of factual reporting, while the dominant narrative of U.S.-initiated transactional aggression, constructed through the collocational patterns outlined above, becomes the primary means of framing the United States as a source of threat and disruption within the multilateral trading system.

The legitimacy of U.S. trade actions is systematically challenged through references to international institutions and norms. The newspaper frequently invokes the World Trade Organization (WTO) framework to evaluate U.S. policies. As Examples 8 and 9 illustrate, Washington's tariffs are characterized as *disturbing* and as *neither equal nor conforming with* WTO principles, thereby questioning U.S. policies on grounds of both fairness and compliance. These predication strategies collectively portray the United States as an actor that disregards established international trade norms. This construction is reinforced through the use of the topos of justice and conformity, and by referencing specific WTO principles, the SCMP establishes an objective criterion for evaluation while simultaneously highlighting U.S. non-compliance with international rules. The frequent invocation of institutions such as the WTO also signals the newspaper's commitment to multilateralism and helps construct a superordinate global identity for all social actors, a rhetorical move that aligns closely with established theories of international institutional governance.

Example 8. The US maintaining tariffs as an enforcement mechanism is neither equal nor conforms with the WTO's most favored nation principle [under which treatment of one WTO member must apply to all other WTO members]." (SCMP, 2019/04/05)

Example 9. Washington's punitive tariffs on China were "disturbing" and not consistent with WTO norms (SCMP, 2019/01/01)

The newspaper's critical stance extends to its coverage of the U.S. designation of China as a currency manipulator. Explicitly deprecatory predication strategies appear in concordance lines where *U.S.* collocates with *label* and *manipulator*, characterizing the decision as *toothless*, *meaningless*, *ignoring reality*, *applying double standards*, and *politically motivated*. Through these predications and appeals to authority, the SCMP constructs the designation as politically driven rather than economically justified. Example 10 demonstrates how the newspaper employs the topos of authority, drawing on individual expertise (Lawrence Summers) and institutional credibility (the IMF's Article IV Consultation) to counter the U.S. administration's claims, thereby enhancing the credibility of its counter-argument.

Example 10. Former US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers is among those in the US who have criticized the administration's decision to label China a currency manipulator. Furthermore, the latest China report for the IMF's Article IV Consultation, released on August 9, concludes that the renminbi exchange rate is in line with China's economic fundamentals without any apparent overvaluation or undervaluation. (SCMP, 2019/01/01)

Beyond immediate trade issues, SCMP frames US actions within a broader geopolitical narrative of containment. This is evidenced by significant collocations including *development* (53), *contain* (28), and *rise* (16). Concordance analysis reveals a pattern of negative verbs such as *contain*, *control*, *curb*, and *stop* characterizing US motivations (see Figure 2). This framing suggests that US trade policies are driven by a desire to maintain hegemony rather than by legitimate economic concerns.

	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1	... but rather about containment and decoupling to contain China's	rise,	said Zhang Baohui, a professor of political science from Lingnan Un
2	's 'national destiny' and believe the trade war could contain China's	rise	over the coming decades." These pessimistic arguments were "grou
3	t China was part of a broad Washington strategy to contain China's	rise	and prevent any challenge to US hegemony. The China-US trade wa
4	he said. "For the US, the most important thing is containing China's	rise."	Mark Haefele, UBS's chief investment officer for global wealth mana
5	strategic competition with China, with the goal of containing China's	rise.	China may increasingly think about its North Korea policy through t
6	vision much of a future if it is stuck in the past, and accept China's	rise	not as an option but as a fact of life: like it or not, let's work with it,
7	thrown up by the mounting international pushback against China's	rise.	Among these challenges are the trade war with the US, the unrest ir
8	ar, fanning fears in Beijing that Trump is seeking to control China's	rise.	Huawei had been targeted by the US government for some time, thr
9	, with bipartisan consensus in the US over the need to curb China's	rise,	he said. "I am not at all optimistic about the prospects for the trade
10	was unwilling to relinquish some of its global dominance. "China's	rise	is a nightmare for the US," Xie said. "It's a nightmare not because CI
11	was unwilling to relinquish some of its global dominance. "China's	rise	is a nightmare for the US," Xie said. "It's a nightmare not because CI
12	now in uncharted territory with open animosity defining it. China's	rise	has taken an ominous turn in the new era of Xi Jinping , contributin
13	on China to prepare for the worst as the US sought to stop China's	rise."	The same sort of strategic resolve that China had in the Korean war
14	a were all part of Washington's broad strategy of thwarting China's	rise.	Li's view represents a conservative but influential strain of thought i

Figure 2. Sample concordance lines of *China's rise*

In contrast, China is often portrayed within a dual discursive construction: as a victim of external pressure and as a defender of its legitimate rights within the multilateral trading system. The primary collocate *China's* frequently co-occurs with economic terms such as *economic* (78),

economy (57), and *growth* (54). Significantly, most of these concordance lines carry negative predicates (e.g., *hurt*, *negative impact*, *slowing*), constructing a victim narrative that expresses concern over China's economic growth. This victim construction is reinforced through the topos of authority, evident in noun collocates including *economist* (56), *expert* (23), and the first name *Julian* (8), which refers to economist Julian Evans-Pritchard. As Example 11 illustrates, the SCMP employs temporal comparison and expert authority to contextualize China's economic challenges, establishing a clear causal link between U.S. actions and Chinese economic deceleration.

Example 11. “According to official data, China's economy grew 6.6 percent in 2018, the slowest pace since 1990. Economists say much of the slowdown in growth was attributable to the trade war, with this trend likely to continue.” (SCMP, 2019/05/12)

Simultaneously, China is portrayed as a constructive and rational actor committed to multilateral solutions. This is evidenced by positive collocations such as *willing* (28) and *wants* (24). As shown in Figure 3, phrases like *willing to increase imports* and *willing to open its market* position China as a responsible stakeholder seeking mutual benefit. This discursive strategy aligns with China's broader diplomatic narrative of peaceful development while reinforcing its resilience in the face of external pressure.

Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1 siness and Economics in Beijing.Ministry of Commerce spokesman says China	willing	to increase imports from the United States as long as both countries agree to meet halfwa
2 iting an analysis by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. China is	willing	to increase imports from the US, the report said, calling on Washington to relax the restric
3 h note. Beijing Normal University finance professor Zhong Wei said China was	willing	to increase imports to settle the trade disputes, offering some deals on energy and farm p
4 round of trade talks were pending final confirmation by both sides. "China is	willing	to increase its imports from the US on the presumption that both countries meet halfway,"
5 Buenos Aires seven months earlier. In Argentina, Xi told Trump that China is	willing	to open its market and to boost imports according to China's new round of reform proces
6 Buenos Aires seven months earlier. In Argentina, Xi told Trump that China "is	willing	to open its market and to boost imports according to China's new round of reform proces
7 r, former chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in China "China is	willing	to open up its market and expand imports according to the progress of its new round of r
8 ased on the consensus reached between the two countries' leaders. "China is	willing	to open up its market and expand imports according to the progress of its new round of r
9 ion to help exports and economic growth amid the trade war .China won't be	willing	to accept an appreciation in its currency under the current environment unless [the US] rol
10 1980s and the following lost decades of economic stagnation. China won't be	willing	to accept an appreciation in its currency under the current environment unless [the US] rol
11 ng a mild depreciation to help exports and economic growth. "China won't be	willing	to accept an appreciation in its currency under the current environment unless [the US] rol
12 -based think tank the Centre for China and Globalisation, said China was now	willing	to go the extra mile to meet US demands after it honoured earlier pledges to buy more US
13 -based think tank the Centre for China and Globalisation, said China was now	willing	to go the extra mile to meet US demands after it honoured earlier pledges to buy more An
14 t and forced technology transfers. Experts are sceptical as to how far China is	willing	to go with any proposal that would have it fall in line with global standards. "China appear
15 billion worth of Chinese products will be lifted." Xie said that while China was	willing	to make concessions on trade - because of its huge trade surplus - it would be less flexib

Figure 3. Sample concordance lines of *willing*

The binary categorization outlined above represents the dominant, surface-level conflict frame within SCMP's coverage, establishing a foundational “Us versus Them” schema that mirrors the explicit antagonism of the trade dispute. However, this apparent binary does not constitute the entirety of the newspaper's discursive approach. As the following section demonstrates, SCMP's discourse simultaneously and strategically works to complicate, transcend, and recategorize this very binary through the construction of superordinate and complex identities. This dialectical process, whereby a binary framing is simultaneously presented and subverted, is characteristic of discourse produced within hybrid geopolitical contexts such as Hong Kong.

6.3 Discursive Recategorization of China and the US

Building upon this dialectical foundation, this section analyzes the specific strategies through which SCMP recategorizes China and the US within a broader global context. Drawing on the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), we examine how the newspaper

constructs a higher-order global identity that emphasizes the interconnectedness of both nations as integral parts of the world economy. This recategorization process aims to shift the cognitive representation from “Us versus Them” toward a more inclusive “we”, with the potential to reduce intergroup bias and promote perceptions conducive to cooperation. Simultaneously, we investigate counter-stereotypical portrayals that complicate the initial victim-aggressor narrative, further transcending a simplistic “Self versus Other” dichotomy.

First, the SCMP attempts to recategorize China and the United States as a common ingroup by positioning both nations as equally accountable actors whose actions endanger the global economy. This discursive approach eschews unilateral blame attribution, instead constructing the two nations as an outgroup relative to the broader global community. Recurrent two-group classifications such as *China-US* (432), *between China and the US* (113), *between the two countries* (68), *Sino-US* (43), and *between Beijing and Washington* (34) are frequently used to describe this recategorized out-group. These expressions commonly collocate with terms such as trade war, trade dispute, and relations (see Figure 4). This linguistic framing extends beyond bilateral rivalry to emphasize global economic implications, particularly for third-party economies, including *Hong Kong* (line 25), *Japan* (line 32), *EU* (line 35), and *the broader world economy* (line 36). For instance, phrases like *the China-US trade deal can be disruptive for the world economy* (line 36) employ inclusive terms (*the world economy*) to construct a shared vulnerability among nations not directly involved in the dispute. These choices also suggest that the SCMP tends to frame the conflict in terms of economic interests rather than moral judgments. By focusing on consequences rather than causes (such as U.S. accusations of unfair trade practices or China’s resistance to U.S. hegemony), the newspaper positions itself as a neutral mediator while advancing a narrative that privileges dialogue over confrontation. This way of construction aligns with Hong Kong’s status as an international financial center and with the SCMP’s readership among global investors and multinational corporations.

24	hens amid the current international situation, [we] must properly handle the	China-US	trade dispute, enhance policy communication and coordination, it said. We s
25	Yau Tang-wah said Hong Kong would be “the first to bear the brunt” of the	China-US	trade dispute, which would not only eat into companies’ profitability but cast
26	ms of maintaining the regime.” Speaking in March at a forum to discuss the	China-US	trade dispute, former finance minister Lou Jiwei dismissed those who believe
27	standards.” It is the first time China’s central bank has disclosed details of the	China-US	trade negotiations involving the yuan exchange rate, following a series of m
28	l of narrowing the trade gap by US\$200 billion in three years. “Details of the	China-US	trade negotiations still await final confirmation of both parties,” Gao said. Ne
29	oreign investment at a time when the US is retreating. Moreover, progress in	China-US	trade negotiations could prompt Beijing to seek a more effective strategy for
30	cted.” Sun said a tariff was not the end of the game but a bargaining chip in	China-US	trade relations, and the threat of a trade war might diminish in coming week
31	e of growth. In recent months, and surely not helped by the deterioration in	China-US	trade relations, Beijing has felt the need to unveil targeted measures to stimi
32	rket awareness that Japan is pretty exposed economically to deterioration in	China-US	trade relations, at the same time as the yield differential between US Treasur
33	bi exchange rate has been constantly under pressure due to the heightened	China-US	trade conflict. By accusing China of currency manipulation, the US is ignorin
34	bi exchange rate has been constantly under pressure due to the heightened	China-US	trade conflict. By accusing China of currency manipulation, the US is ignorin
35	t from Renmin University, said: “The EU is especially worried that a potential	China-US	trade deal would harm its interests. So Li wants to reassure them that China
36	adjust to a possible Sino-US trade deal. In this regard, the implications of a	China-US	trade deal can be very disruptive for the world economy and global financial
37	are second or third. The manufacturing sector cannot fall behind, even with	China-US	trade disputes. We need to make innovation our core policy,” he said.China f
38	are second or third. “The manufacturing sector cannot fall behind, even with	China-US	trade disputes. We need to make innovation our core policy.”Observers say e
39	ty, as well as possible central government intervention in the economy. “The	China-US	trade frictions have caused certain impacts to the operations of Chinese com

Figure 4. Sample concordance lines of *China-US*

Further attempts to recategorize China and the United States involve emphasizing egalitarian values and shared responsibilities in conflict resolution. This is evidenced by frequent expressions such as *trade talks* (320), *trade deals* (223), and *trade negotiations* (147), which frame the relationship as one of equal partnership in which resolution depends on mutual concessions and understanding. This cognitive representation of trade talks can amplify peace- and

reconciliation-oriented narratives, aligning with García-Perdomo et al.'s (2024) argument that peace-oriented discourse can transform public perception of conflicting parties.

This egalitarian framing is reinforced through the multicultural presentation of both nations' positions, efforts, and responsibilities, and even their competing claims and countermeasures. For instance, the SCMP incorporates China's demand for a *balanced dispute resolution mechanism*, contrasting it with the US's concerns over the *enforcement of trade agreements* and China's historical compliance issues. Examples 12 and 13 illustrate this dual perspective, presenting China's insistence on fairness and the US's skepticism about implementation. Such a balanced portrayal encourages readers to view the conflict as a negotiable dispute rather than an intractable rivalry, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for its resolution.

Example 12. Chang Jian, the chief China economist at Barclays, said the agreed dispute resolution mechanism should be more balanced than what the US demanded in April. (SCMP, 2019/10/16)

Example 13. We did trust that China was there in good faith, but at the same time, we had been fooled before and we were gonna make sure that there was a way to verify that they would follow through. (SCMP, 2019/10/16)

The topos of authority, invoking economists, officials, and other experts, is often employed to emphasize that resolving the trade conflict requires concessions from both sides. Experts cited in the SCMP often highlight the structural challenges underlying the dispute, such as differences in enforcement mechanisms, industrial policies, and economic models. A notable example is found in the article titled *Capitalism with US and Chinese Characteristics Can Peacefully Coexist-If We Give Up on 'Hyper-Globalism'* (SCMP, 2019/04/12). The article's discussions about China's state-led economy and the US's market-driven system underscore the fundamental incompatibilities that complicate negotiations. It argues that peaceful economic coexistence is achievable if both nations allow each other greater policy space. This framing not only acknowledges ideological and geopolitical tensions between the two nations but also proposes a pragmatic pathway to reconciliation based on mutual respect and accommodation. This aligns with Nolan et al.'s (2011, p. 670) observation that conflict resolution becomes a collective endeavor where parties negotiate "what a broader 'we' value in common."

A third recategorization strategy employs counter-stereotype categorization, complicating simplistic victim-aggressor narratives through the incorporation of diverse perspectives. Analysis reveals instances where China is recategorized as a source of international discontent and concern, particularly regarding its trade practices. This is evidenced by collocations such as *China's trade practices* (38), *policy* (21), and *strategy* (14). Verbs and nouns like *affected*, *criticize*, *accuse*, *change*, *concerns*, *discontent*, and *unfair* frequently appear in the co-text (see Figure 5), situating China within a discourse of economic opportunism.

Left Context	Hit	Right Context
s, said American businesses negatively affected by China's trade	practices	were often the least flexible part of the US economy, and US polic
panies shared the US government's concerns about China's trade	practices,	they tended to disagree that tariffs were the solution to problems
ts Democrat who is a notable Trump foe, criticised China's trade	practices	and treatment of human rights during a visit she made to Beijing
is seeking re-election on Tuesday, last week called China's trade	practices "	the biggest concern to us", before saying that the tariffs also infli
panies shared the US government's concerns about China's trade	practices,	they tended to disagree that tariffs solved problems such as unev
l the US wants permission to conduct "checks" into China's trade	practices	at any time as part of the proposal, a demand that Beijing has cal
he said. "Discontent among developed countries at China's trade	practices	has been building for years," Shi said. "China hasn't reduced its t
come a day after he delivered a stinging attack on China's trade	practices	at the UN General Assembly * High-level bilateral talks are expec
s, said American businesses negatively affected by China's trade	practices	were often the least flexible part of the US economy, and US polic
'trade Representative Section 301 investigation into China's trade	practices,	which provided the rationale for the launch of Trump's trade acti
he said. "Discontent among developed countries at China's trade	practices	has been building for years," Shi said. "China hasn't reduced its ti
contain it, while the US has accused China of using unfair trade	practices	for its benefit. Shi Yinhong, professor of international relations w
the US. This time the US has accused China of using unfair trade	practices	and industrial policies to hurt the US economy, such as forced tea
that Trump was firm on his demands that China change its trade	practices. "	The president believes we're in a very strong position, we could p
never agreed", it crisply notes. Likewise, China's IPR policies and	practices,	too, cannot be chained to any additional rights or obligations bey

Figure 5. Sample concordance lines of *trade practices*

Overall, the SCMP's discursive recategorization reflects the complex dynamics of modern geopolitics, where competition and cooperation coexist within the framework of globalization. While maintaining distinct subgroup identities, China and the United States are portrayed as co-dependent stakeholders in a shared global system. This superordinate identity construction emphasizes their status as necessary partners that must balance strategic competition with coordination for global economic stability. The newspaper's recategorization strategies demonstrate how media discourse can foster a more nuanced understanding of international relations, moving beyond simple binary oppositions.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Proceeding from the premise that national identity is dynamic and multiple with fluid intergroup boundaries, this study investigates how media discourse constructs and negotiates multiple identities in international conflict coverage through an analysis of the South China Morning Post's reporting on the Sino-U.S. trade dispute. By integrating social-psychological perspectives on intergroup relations, including common ingroup identity and social identity complexity, with the socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis, the findings reveal patterns of identity construction that move beyond traditional binary categorizations.

The SCMP's coverage presents a narrative that diverges from the polarized reporting typical of Chinese mainland and U.S. media. In terms of social-actor representation, the newspaper constructs a multilayered account that extends beyond bilateral confrontation. Although China and the United States emerge as the primary actors, the significant presence of other stakeholders, including Hong Kong, the European Union, Japan, and Asia, reflects the SCMP's effort to situate the conflict within a broader global context. This aligns with social identity complexity theory, which emphasizes multiple, overlapping group memberships, and illustrates how international actors maintain varied identities and relationships amid shifting global dynamics. The analysis shows how social actors navigate these multiple identities by incorporating diverse discourses that facilitate democratic debate and creative approaches to conflict resolution (Roy, 2012). For instance, the European Union and Japan are framed alternately as China's economic partners in

preserving multilateralism and as U.S. political allies within the democratic world. Similarly, Hong Kong is portrayed both as an autonomous economic entity navigating great-power competition and as an integral part of China.

In constructing the identities of China and the United States, the SCMP employs nomination and predication strategies that establish fluid, context-dependent identities. Through specific linguistic expressions and argumentation strategies, the newspaper depicts the two nations not only as opponents in a trade dispute but also as partners who share common interests and joint responsibilities within the global economic framework. This dynamic recategorization demonstrates media discourse's capacity to transcend rigid binary oppositions and capture the complexity of international relations. The newspaper maintains a stance of objectivity through well-calibrated language and balanced reporting, presenting the concerns, negotiations, and challenges of both sides without overt moral judgment. As Sherman, Brookfield, and Ortosky (2017) suggest, emphasizing common ground can reduce bias and foster hope for conflict resolution. In this light, the SCMP's emphasis on a superordinate global identity and shared interests can be understood as constructing a discursive framework that, based on the Common Ingroup Identity Model, could theoretically promote more cooperative public perceptions of the conflict. However, this potential effect remains a theoretical proposition that requires empirical verification through audience research. Conversely, polarized "Self-versus-Other" frameworks have been shown to exacerbate intergroup disputes and strengthen in-group favoritism (Jost et al., 2022).

The SCMP's distinctive approach is consistent with its position within a "hybridized discourse space" (Wu et al., 2015), where its institutional context necessitates navigating cross-cutting pressures and serving multiple audiences, thereby shaping a unique mode of conflict coverage. This hybridity stems directly from Hong Kong's dual identity as Asia's leading financial center operating under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. Economically, Hong Kong's viability depends on global capital flows and stable relations with both China and the West, which encourages the SCMP to balance political narratives against real-world economic consequences and market stability. This vulnerability to great-power competition appears to foster a professional practice that emphasizes global interdependence, multilateral solutions, and the common interests of conflicting parties, often evidenced by the newspaper's frequent citation of international organizations such as the WTO and IMF. The newspaper's complex positionality was further nuanced after its acquisition by the Alibaba Group in 2016, a factor noted in analyses of its evolving cultural and editorial co-orientation (Wiebrecht, 2018). Institutionally, Hong Kong's setting affords the SCMP a degree of editorial independence distinct from Chinese mainland media outlets, enabling a professional practice that merges Anglo-American journalistic standards with local and corporate sensibilities. The resulting coverage is characterized by factual reporting, the inclusion of diverse expert viewpoints, and a pursuit of pragmatic solutions. In practice, this manifests in the SCMP's declared mission to "lead the global conversation about China" (Wu, 2023) by performing a crucial interpretive function: explaining Chinese policies to international audiences while contextualizing global perspectives for Chinese readers. The newspaper leverages cross-cultural expertise to address contentious issues, such as market access and technology transfer, in a manner that acknowledges the concerns of diverse stakeholders.

Thus, the SCMP case study offers insights that extend beyond the Sino-U.S. trade dispute. It empirically illustrates the discursive dynamics of "hybridized discourse spaces" and demonstrates

how an analytical framework integrating common ingroup identity and social identity complexity theories can decode them. The observed discursive patterns, which include strategic multi-stakeholder referencing, the construction of superordinate identities, and the negotiation of competing allegiances, provide a conceptual template for understanding media discourse in other interstitial contexts, including global financial hubs, international organizations, and diaspora media outlets. By moving beyond binary national-media paradigms, this study enriches the broader literature on international media discourse and conflict communication. It also provides empirical support for the proposition that social-psychological perspectives on intergroup relations can enhance our understanding of how relationships and identities are constructed in news discourse. Whereas traditional analyses of international conflict coverage often neglect the dynamic nature of group categorizations (Vraga and Tully, 2016), our findings reveal how the media can construct superordinate, multiple, and overlapping identities while acknowledging underlying tensions and competing interests. This bridge between social psychology and discourse analysis opens new pathways for examining media's role in resolving international conflicts, particularly in understanding how discursive strategies might foster intergroup cooperation while accounting for complex power relations.

Practically, the findings of this study carry significant implications for international communication strategies, particularly amid an era marked by growing global economic interdependence and increasingly intricate international relations. This study posits that discursive strategies emphasizing shared global interests and obligations, such as those identified in the SCMP's coverage, can help foster a rhetorical environment more conducive to de-escalating tensions and envisioning cooperative solutions. The SCMP's resolution-oriented coverage, which underscores economic interdependence and multilateral approaches, offers valuable insights for media outlets striving to facilitate constructive dialogue amid international conflicts. For journalism practice, this analysis illustrates how media operating in complex geopolitical contexts can construct narratives that acknowledge diverse perspectives and shared responsibilities. Discursive strategies, including recategorization within superordinate identities and the presentation of counter-stereotypical information, further provide practical frameworks for reporting on international disputes, with the aim of mitigating intergroup bias and cultivating a more nuanced public understanding of such issues.

Several limitations of this study suggest directions for future research and help contextualize the scope of the findings. First, as a focused case study of a single outlet, the South China Morning Post, our analysis provides depth but limits direct generalizability. The discursive patterns identified are closely tied to the SCMP's unique position within Hong Kong's "hybridized" geopolitical and economic space. Future comparative research is needed to determine whether these strategies are unique to the SCMP or characteristic of media operating in similar "third spaces." Specifically, studies could contrast the SCMP's framing with that of Chinese mainland state media (e.g., China Daily), U.S. prestige press (e.g., The New York Times), and other intermediary outlets (e.g., Singapore's The Straits Times) covering the same conflict. Second, the study is confined to a specific temporal window (March 2018-December 2019), covering the escalation and initial phase of the Sino-U.S. trade dispute. Because the discursive construction of identities is dynamic, later developments likely prompted shifts in media framing. Future diachronic corpus studies could track how narratives and identity constructions evolved over the entire arc of the conflict and beyond. Third, our methodological design is text-centered. Although we rigorously analyze the discursive strategies employed by the SCMP, we do not examine their

reception or effects. As Vraga and Tully (2016) emphasize, audience characteristics and social context mediate how discourse shapes opinion. The potential of recategorization strategies to foster cooperative perceptions, as suggested by the Common Ingroup Identity Model, remains a theoretical proposition derived from textual analysis. Future research should therefore employ complementary methods, such as surveys, experiments, or interview-based reception studies, to empirically test how different discursive frames (binary vs. recategorized) influence audience cognition, affect, and attitudes toward international conflicts. Finally, while our corpus-assisted approach using keyword, collocation, and concordance analysis effectively revealed core patterns, advanced computational techniques could uncover further nuance. For instance, semantic prosody analysis could systematically map evaluative consistency, and collocational network analysis could visualize the evolving relational structure between social actors over time.

To conclude, intergroup relations are significantly shaped by media discourse (Seate, 2017; Stewart et al., 2011). Inclusive reporting that recognizes diversity and seeks common ground is often theorized to promote intergroup reconciliation, whereas reductive narratives that prioritize violence and portray disputes through a “Self versus Other” lens are frequently criticized for widening social divides. This dynamic is especially salient in contexts of intergroup polarization, as media discourse holds the power either to exacerbate or to mitigate tensions. Moving forward, discourse analysts and media practitioners should consider three key elements when analyzing and producing conflict-related media content: the complex and fluid nature of social identities; the processes of discursive categorization and recategorization of these identities in media representations; and the broader impact of such representational choices on public perception and intergroup relations.

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Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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