

# Analysis of the Evolving Perception of China's National Image Among Visiting Foreign Officials from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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## Abstract:

This study draws on Martin's Appraisal Theory, focusing on the subsystems of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, to conduct a comparative analysis of written questionnaires from 30 visiting foreign officials before and after their training program in China. It aims to examine how their perceptions of China's national image evolve over time. The findings indicate that personal experience, changes in information sources, and cultural differences are key factors shaping perceptual change. Participants shift from relying on secondhand media representations to forming more positive evaluations based on firsthand experience. More specifically, Attitude system evolves from ambivalent skepticism to positive appreciation, Engagement system from monoglossic acceptance to heteroglossic positioning, and Graduation system from low-intensity tentativeness to high-intensity assertion. These findings underscore the significance of evaluative language and demonstrate how evaluative resources contribute to the construction and reconstruction of China's national image in cross-cultural communication.

*Keywords* — Appraisal Theory, Visiting Foreign Officials, China's national image

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As globalization deepens, interactions between countries in the economic, cultural, and educational spheres have become increasingly frequent, with cross-border communication becoming more frequent and personnel mobility more extensive.[1] Against this global backdrop, China's sustained development, proactive diplomatic initiatives, and opening-up policies has enhanced its international standing and strengthened its ties with other nations worldwide. These factors have in turn driven the rapid expansion of international training programs in China, attracting a growing number of foreign officials to participate in various training and exchange activities.

These visiting foreign officials come from diverse cultural backgrounds, bringing with them distinct values, perceptual approaches, and initial perceptions of China's national image. [2] During their stay in China, their observations, experiences, and interactions can reshape these perceptions. Such changes are subsequently communicated back to their home countries and shared through social networks, in turn influencing international perceptions of China on a broader scale. Specifically, this process of perceptual reshaping and communication serves as a crucial channel for cross-cultural understanding and mutual trust, laying a solid foundation for effective cross-cultural communication and the construction of a positive national image.

From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly Martin's Appraisal Theory, this process of perception change is analytically relevant. By conducting a comparative analysis of the written questionnaires provided by visiting foreign officials before and after their training in China, this study seeks to identify shifts in their evaluative language and perceptual patterns.[3] This approach not only illustrates how cross-cultural differences in perception are linguistically manifested but also offers theoretical support for cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, identifying the patterns of these perceptual changes can facilitate the development of more targeted international communication strategies, thereby improving the global communication of China's national image.

## II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Within the framework of Appraisal Theory, as developed by J. R. Martin, Attitude system, Engagement system, and Graduation system jointly provide a systematic account of how evaluative meanings are constructed and negotiated in discourse. Together, they offer a multidimensional framework for examining the transformation of visiting foreign officials' representations of China's national image.[4]

Attitude system is concerned with the expression of evaluative meanings, encompassing affect, judgment, and appreciation. In the present study, particular attention is paid to shifts from initial evaluations, largely shaped by mediated representations, to more experience-based forms of appreciation grounded in direct engagement.[5] Such shifts reflect changes in how affective responses, ethical assessments, and aesthetic valuations are discursively realized.

Engagement system addresses the dialogic organization of discourse, particularly the ways in which speakers and writers position their voices in relation to alternative perspectives.[6] Prior to their visit to China, visiting foreign officials tend to rely on relatively limited information sources, such as international media narratives.[7] Following their arrival, their discourse becomes more dialogically expansive, as prior understandings are brought into

interaction with firsthand experiences. This process contributes to a reconfiguration of their perceptual frameworks through the negotiation of multiple voices.

Graduation system accounts for the scaling of evaluative meanings in terms of intensity and prototypicality.[8] It operates through linguistic resources that adjust the strength of evaluation (e.g., stronger vs. weaker expressions) and the degree to which category boundaries are sharpened or softened. The findings suggest a shift from more tentative to more assertive evaluations, indicating increased commitment to their representations.[9]

These theoretical distinctions provide the analytical basis for the subsequent examination of evaluative patterns in the data.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Questions

(1) What specific changes occur in Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation systems before and after visiting China?

(2) How do these subsystems reflect the process of Perception Change?

(3) What are the key factors influencing the evolution of perceptions of China's national image?

### A. Research Methods

This study adopts a text-analysis framework grounded in Appraisal Theory to conduct a multi-dimensional, systematic investigation of the evaluative language used by foreign officials visiting China. Following the three subsystems of Appraisal Theory, a dedicated coding scheme is developed to identify, classify, and quantify instances of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation resources in the textual data. This procedure enables identification of discursive patterns in evaluative language and clarifies how such patterns correspond to perceptual change.

### B. Data Collection

The data for this study consist of written questionnaires collected from 30 visiting foreign officials who participated in a foreign aid training program at North China Electric Power University in 2024. The participants come from diverse

regions, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and represent different professional and cultural backgrounds.

The data were collected at two stages: before and after the training program. The use of open-ended questionnaires allows participants to freely express their views on China, thereby providing rich linguistic data for analysis.

### **C. Data Analysis**

This study follows a three-stage analytical pathway: data coding, systematic quantitative analysis, and correlation verification, to ensure methodological consistency.

First, all written questionnaires digitized, standardized, and uniformly formatted to eliminate inconsistencies in structure, wording, and expression. A complete coding framework is then established according to the three subsystems of Appraisal Theory, and all appraisal resources in the corpus are accurately classified and coded. Within Attitude system, emotional, normative, and aesthetic evaluation resources are systematically identified and labeled; monoglossic and heteroglossic expressions are distinguished under Engagement system to reflect dialogic positioning; and linguistic items indicating force intensity and referential focus are marked under Graduation system to capture variations in evaluative strength and descriptive precision.

Second, a quantitative analysis is conducted on the distribution and frequency of appraisal resources to compare evaluative patterns before and after the training program. This stage focuses on measurable shifts in attitudinal polarity, dialogic features, and evaluative intensity. Typical evolutionary trends include the shift from negative attitudes to positive appreciations, from monoglossic assertions to heteroglossic dialogic interactions, and from vague generalizations to precise and intensified evaluative statements, providing solid empirical support for identifying the overall direction of perceptual change.

Finally, this study uses interpretative analysis to explore the synergistic effects among the three subsystems. It examines how heteroglossic engagement strengthens positive attitude

construction and how Graduation resources enhance the certainty and persuasiveness of evaluations. Key influencing factors are cross-verified with changes in appraisal resource use, revealing the discursive mechanism through which perceptions of China's national image are constructed and articulated.

## **IV. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis suggests that there are observable changes across the three subsystems of Appraisal Theory in the discourse of visiting foreign officials before and after their training in China. These changes can be identified not only in the frequency of evaluative resources but also, to some extent, in their functional distribution and discursive roles.

### **A. Changes in Appraisal Systems**

Attitude System exhibits the most substantial transformation. Before arriving in China, visiting foreign officials' attitudes were primarily shaped by secondhand information, international media reports, and hearsay. Evaluations tended to be general, neutral, or ambivalent, with occasional skepticism or stereotyped judgments.[10] Typical expressions included vague descriptions such as: "China is a big country with a long history," "China may be developed," and "Chinese products are cheap but I am not sure about quality." Attitudinal resources were relatively weak, unfocused, and lacking emotional warmth. Based on the Affect system in Attitude system, there was a significant increase in positive attitudes after training and firsthand experience. Visiting foreign officials frequently used positive emotional lexis such as friendly, kind, peaceful, warm, welcoming, and satisfied. They highly praised the responsibility, integrity, diligence, politeness, and reliability of the Chinese government and people. Concrete positive evaluations focused on rapid economic growth, advanced technology, high-speed rail, mobile payment, excellent infrastructure, ecological progress, and rich culture. Representative examples include the comments from a visiting foreign official: "Peaceful, highly developed, technologically advanced, innovative, and people-oriented"; another visiting foreign official: "China's

development is undoubtedly a miracle. People are kind and the country is safe”; and another visiting foreign official: “Chinese people are friendly; infrastructure and technology are modern.” Attitude System therefore shifted from ambivalence and generalization to clear positivity and contextualized specificity.

TABLE I  
 CHANGES IN ATTITUDE SYSTEM

Dimension	Pre-Training	Post-Training	Change Trend
Positive Attitude	58.7%	92.4%	Significant Increase
Negative/ Judgmental Attitude	41.3%	7.6%	Significant Decrease

Engagement System reveals the dialogic transformation of visiting foreign officials’ cognitive frameworks. Before coming to China, visiting foreign officials’ discourse was dominated by Monoglossia based on limited information. There was little contrast, self-correction, or negotiation of viewpoints, and perceptions were relatively closed. After experiencing China, Heteroglossia expanded significantly. Visiting foreign officials frequently used contrastive, concessive, and reformulative structures such as: “Before coming, I thought... but now I realize...,” “My view has changed because I have seen the real China,” and “Many stereotypes I had were not correct.” Typical examples include a visiting foreign official who noted: “Before I came, I imagined China as only ancient; now I find it extremely modern and innovative,” and another visiting foreign official who stated: “I used to hear rumors; after coming, I know they are untrue.” Engagement System thus shifted from passive, single-view acceptance to active, reflective, multi-perspective cognition.

TABLE II  
 CHANGES IN ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM

Dimension	Pre-Training	Post-Training	Change Trend
Monoglossia	82.1%	27.3%	Significant Decrease

Heteroglossia	17.9%	72.7%	Significant Increase
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Graduation System illustrates changes in evaluative intensity and precision. Before training, evaluations were marked by weak force and vague focus. Visiting foreign officials commonly used hedging devices including maybe, somewhat, seems, and generally, and descriptions lacked concrete details. After training, evaluative expressions became stronger in force and more precise in focus. High-intensity markers such as definitely, extremely, undoubtedly, miraculously, and perfectly became dominant, and visiting foreign officials referred to specific domains including high-speed rail, digital payment, urban governance, environmental protection, technological innovation, and cultural heritage. Typical examples include: “China’s technological development is definitely amazing,” “High-speed rail and digital life are truly convenient,” and “The government is undoubtedly responsible and clean.” Graduation System therefore shifted from tentativeness and vagueness to confidence and accuracy.

TABLE III  
 CHANGES IN GRADUATION SYSTEM

Dimension	Pre-Training	Post-Training	Change Trend
Weak Force	69.4%	18.6%	Significant Decrease
Strong Force	30.6%	81.4%	Significant Increase
Vague Focus	85.2%	24.1%	Significant Decrease
Precise Focus	14.8%	75.9%	Significant Increase

**B. The Process of Perception Change**

Three subsystems worked interactively to promote a holistic reconstruction of China’s national image. Attitude System provided the directional change, moving from neutral or ambivalent positions toward strongly positive judgments. [11] Engagement System supplied the cognitive mechanism, expanding from a single,

unreflective perspective to multiple, comparative viewpoints that allowed visiting foreign officials to revise earlier biases. Graduation System reinforced these shifts linguistically, raising the intensity of evaluation and sharpening the precision of description.

In the early stage, visiting foreign officials relied heavily on external information and held relatively vague or biased views. For instance, one visiting foreign official mentioned before coming to China, "I only knew China from social media and news, which gave me a limited and unclear impression." Similarly, another visiting foreign official stated, "I used to picture China as only traditional and ancient, without knowing its modern achievements." As they began field visits, daily interactions, and training activities, their attitudes gradually shifted. One visiting foreign official clearly stated, "After living here and talking with local people, my impression has completely changed; I can see the real China."

With increased dialogic reflection, visiting foreign officials began to consciously compare prior beliefs with real experiences. One visiting foreign official wrote, "I used to believe China was closed, but now I find it open, inclusive, and fast-developing." Such comparisons reflect the joint function of Engagement System and Attitude System. Meanwhile, Graduation System strengthened these revised perceptions with firmer and more specific language. For example, a visiting foreign official commented, "China's development speed is extremely fast, and its technology is undoubtedly world-class," showing stronger evaluative force and clearer focus.

This process was gradual, experience-based, and dialogic. Visiting foreign officials no longer relied on external narratives but constructed their understanding based on personal observation, daily interaction, and immersive experience. The consistency of changes across visiting foreign officials suggests that firsthand contact effectively reduces stereotypes, enhances perceptual authenticity, and consolidates positive impressions of China's national image.

### ***C. Key Influencing Factors***

Three interrelated factors drove the Perception Change observed in this study.

Firsthand personal experience acted as the core driving force. Direct exposure to Chinese society, infrastructure, technology, and interpersonal communication allowed visiting foreign officials to compare prior expectations with real conditions. Nearly all respondents emphasized that their views changed fundamentally because they experienced China in person. One visiting foreign official noted, "Only after I came here, took high-speed rail, walked in modern cities, and talked with local people, did I truly understand China's development." Another visiting foreign official similarly stated, "Seeing is believing. Everything I experienced in China was different from what I heard before, and that changed my mind completely."

The shift in information channels also played a vital role. Before coming to China, visiting foreign officials relied mainly on local media, social platforms, and hearsay, which provided limited and often partial representations. After arriving, they accessed authentic, diverse, and comprehensive information through training activities, institutional visits, daily life, and face-to-face communication. One visiting foreign official explained, "Before, I got information only from TV and local news; after coming, I can see, ask, and experience by myself, so my understanding is much more real and comprehensive."

Cross-cultural contact and adaptation further supported positive perceptual change. Initial cultural distance gradually evolved into genuine understanding and appreciation.[12] Visiting foreign officials came to recognize and value Chinese food, festivals, etiquette, history, and traditional values, which in turn strengthened and stabilized their positive attitudes. One visiting foreign official mentioned, "I love Chinese culture, especially food, festivals, and the friendly way people treat each other; this makes me respect China more." Another visiting foreign official also commented, "Chinese culture is profound and attractive, and the people's kindness and hospitality left a deep impression on me."

Together, these three factors created the conditions for visiting foreign officials to move

from passive, externally shaped perceptions to active, empirically grounded understandings of China.

#### **D. Discussion**

The present findings demonstrate clear and consistent changes in evaluative language styles among visiting foreign officials before and after their stay in China, and these changes can be systematically interpreted through Attitude System, Engagement System, and Graduation System in Appraisal Theory.

Changes in Attitude System indicate that initial perceptions were largely media-shaped and superficial, while real-life experience significantly enhanced positive recognition. The sharp decline in negative or skeptical attitudes shows that in-person interaction effectively corrects stereotypes and reduces bias. This finding supports existing literature that direct cross-cultural contact is more effective than indirect information in shaping national image perceptions.

Changes in Engagement System reflect a fundamental cognitive shift from one-sided acceptance to reflective and dialogic thinking. Increased heteroglossia shows that visiting foreign officials began to integrate multiple perspectives and revise previous cognition, indicating deeper and more rational understanding. This suggests that dialogic expansion is a key linguistic marker of successful perceptual reconstruction.

Changes in Graduation System reveal that firsthand experience significantly improves evaluative confidence and descriptive accuracy. The reduction of vague expressions and the rise of precise, intense language demonstrate that perceptions have moved from tentative imagination to grounded cognition. Such linguistic changes reflect the internalization of authentic national image.

The three-stage transformation model identified in this study illustrates a complete path from external impression, comparative reflection, to stable cognition. This process is jointly driven by attitude change, cognitive openness, and linguistic reinforcement. Among all factors, firsthand experience is the most decisive, followed by

information channel optimization and cross-cultural adaptation.

Theoretically, this study verifies that Appraisal Theory provides a valid and systematic framework for analyzing national image perception through discourse. It extends the application of Appraisal Theory to cross-cultural communication research and offers empirical evidence for perception change mechanisms.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate the importance of in-person exchange and direct interaction in shaping more informed perceptions. Providing authentic, diverse, and detailed information also helps reduce misunderstandings and enhance the appeal of national image.

#### **V. CONCLUSIONS**

This study examined the transformation in perceptions of China among 30 visiting foreign officials before and after their training in China, with J. R. Martin's Appraisal Theory adopted as the analytical framework.

The findings show that systematic changes occur across Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation systems. In Attitude system, initial evaluations characterized by ambivalence or cautious skepticism shift toward more positive appreciation. In Engagement system, discourse moves from reliance on single-voice acceptance to the incorporation of multiple perspectives. In Graduation system, evaluative expressions develop from relatively low-intensity and tentative forms to more confident and clearly articulated assessments. Taken together, these changes reflect a progressive reconstruction of visiting foreign officials' perceptual representations of China, with evaluative meanings becoming increasingly specific, experience-based, and context-dependent.

The analysis further identifies personal experience, changes in information channels, and cultural differences as key factors shaping this transformation. Direct engagement with China's social environment, infrastructure, and interpersonal interactions enables visiting officials to compare prior expectations with firsthand observations, thereby facilitating perceptual

adjustment. The shift from indirect information sources to firsthand experience provides a more diversified basis for evaluation, while exposure to cultural differences encourages the reassessment and refinement of prior assumptions. These factors jointly contribute to the reconstruction of perception and highlight the role of experiential and informational conditions in shaping evaluative representations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the applicability of Appraisal Theory in analyzing Perception Change in cross-cultural contexts. It demonstrates that evaluative resources provide an effective means of capturing how attitudes, dialogic positioning, and evaluative intensity evolve through experience and exposure to multiple perspectives. While the present study is limited to a specific group of participants, it offers a basis for further investigation into similar processes in other intercultural settings.

From a practical perspective, the findings show that perceptual changes in cross-cultural contexts are closely related to firsthand experience, access to information, and exposure to cultural differences. These results provide a basis for understanding how perceptions are formed and adjusted through interaction and experience, highlighting the role of discourse in the construction and negotiation of meanings across cultural contexts.

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