



Evaluative Language and Media Positioning in US–China Trade War Editorials: Appraisal Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how evaluative language constructs media positioning in editorials on the US–China trade war published by The New York Times (TNYT) and South China Morning Post (SCMP). It uses Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory, focusing on the Attitude system, which includes Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, and their evaluative polarity. The data consist of 20 editorials published between January and March 2025, with 10 editorials from each newspaper. The texts were manually annotated with the UAM Corpus Tool version 6.2 and analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings show that Appreciation is the dominant Attitude resource in both TNYT (70.4%) and SCMP (88.1%). Judgment is more dominant in TNYT (28.3%) than in SCMP (11.6%). Affect accounts for only 0.3% in both outlets. TNYT demonstrates a more negative tone, with negative evaluations portraying China's trade policy, economic status, and performance of trade obligations. SCMP, on the other hand, features almost equal polarity. Positive evaluations portray to China's economic robustness, responsible behaviour, and cooperation, while negative evaluations portray the USA's trade policies and their outcomes. Thus, the results show that media positioning is influenced not only by negative or positive evaluation but also by repetitive patterns in applying evaluative resources.

Keywords: Attitude Resource, Evaluative Language, Media Positioning, US–China Trade War



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1. Introduction

The trade war between the US and China has become an economic and geopolitical confrontation that extends beyond trade to broader economic policy, international politics, and global stability. This confrontation has led the two countries to adopt opposing trade policies, drawing widespread international interest and debate (Chukwuma, 2024; Ha & Willnat, 2022). Because the trade war is closely connected to the broader US-China struggle, the discussion goes beyond tariff rates and economic implications to raise issues of accountability, political considerations, and state behavior. These different aspects transform the US-China trade war into not only an economic dispute but also an object of interpretation. In this context, the conflict provides a relevant context for examining how international political and economic events are represented through media discourse.

The news media have an important role in shaping and disseminating narratives of international disputes. For example, in the U.S.–China trade conflict, media has been shown to serve as an important site where

national and political perspectives compete (Matingwina, 2020). More generally, newspapers do more than deliver information to audiences but they mediate the selection, description, and interpretation of events. As a medium of public communication, newspapers connect events to a broader audience and may shape how political matters are discussed (Singh, 2017). This is because news discourse is not separate from its socio-ideological environment. According to Fowler (1991), language in news does not just record events but actively mediates reality, and studies of newspaper discourse have shown that different newspapers develop different positions on the same political matters (Asad et al., 2021). One important linguistic means of expressing such positions is evaluative language. Through evaluative language, newspapers can deliver opinions, emotions, and judgments about people, actions, policies, and events.

One evaluative language system that provides a systematic way to analyze is the Appraisal Theory by Martin & White (2005). The Attitude System of Appraisal Theory includes three types of evaluation: Affect, relating to emotions; Judgment, evaluating the person and their behavior; and Appreciation, evaluating objects, processes, and phenomena (Martin & White, 2005; Bednarek, 2006; White, 2015). These resources identify what is being evaluated and how positive or negative values are attributed to specific persons, actions, and events. Previous studies have shown Appraisal's effectiveness in analyzing evaluative positioning in journalism, especially the role of attitudinal choices in forming points of view (White, 2025). Therefore, this study uses the Attitude system as the main tool to compare evaluation patterns in *The New York Times* (TNYT) and *South China Morning Post* (SCMP).

There has been an increasing interest in examining the relationship between evaluative language and media discourse positioning in political and international discourse studies. Previous research highlights the potential of evaluative and discourse analysis methods to help analyze media discourse about controversial political events. For instance, Zhou and Qin (2020) examined lexical choices and modality in *The New York Times* to reveal ideological framing of China during the US-China trade war. Alyahya (2023) analyzed Attitude resources of *The Washington Post* and *The Moscow Times* regarding to their media framing of the Ukraine conflict. Matingwina (2020) conducted a comparative analysis of *USA Today* and *China Daily*, revealing differences in how they framed the US-China trade war. Moreover, other researchers found that corpus-based tools can evaluate language analysis more systematically (Cavasso & Taboada, 2021; Nurlela et al., 2025). These studies show that evaluative language and media discourse analysis provide important insights into how the media constructs perspectives on international conflicts.

However, there has been limited comparative analysis of how Attitude resources are used by media outlets in different countries, especially in their coverage of the same phase of the US–China trade conflict. This gap is especially relevant to the renewed US–China trade tensions in early 2025, when both outlets responded to new tariff and trade policy changes.

The tensions provide a useful context for examining how evaluative meanings are constructed across different media contexts. This study compares Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, along with their evaluative polarity, in editorials from TNYT and SCMP published between January and March 2025. It examines how the distribution and polarity of Attitude resources shape the representation of actors, policies, and events in the trade conflict. This comparison positions evaluative language as a resource through which media outlets construct distinct stances toward the same international conflict.

1.1. Appraisal Theory

Appraisal Theory comes from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It helps us examine how language conveys evaluation, stance, and emotion in spoken or written communication (Martin & White 2005). The theory focuses on the words people choose to share their feelings, show approval or disapproval, and make value judgments. It focuses on how people position themselves in relation to others and connect with their audience. These kinds of meanings—what we feel or think about something—are shown through the words we pick. For example, certain words can show excitement, anger, support or criticism. Zein et al. (2024) conduct that these evaluative meanings show up in word choice. Martin (2017) adds that Appraisal Theory is both a tool to express evaluation and a way to study it in texts. It helps us see how people use language to judge things and build relationships through communication. The Appraisal framework has three parts: Attitude,

Engagement and Graduation (Martin & White 2005). Attitude involves showing feelings, judging how people act, and interpreting objects or events. Engagement is about how writers place their voice alongside other voices. Graduation measures how strong or weak an evaluation is. These three parts explain how people build and talk about meaning with each other.

1.2. Attitude System

Attitude is about how we show feelings, judgments and evaluations when we talk or write (Martin & White 2005). Attitude contains three parts. Affect is when we express responses. Judgment is when we evaluate actions against social norms and values. Appreciation is when we judge things, events or processes by their value or quality (Martin & White 2005). These resources give a foundation for seeing how writers show negative evaluations toward specific people, actions and events.

Attitude meanings can be shown clearly through written evaluation, where the opinion is stated directly, or indirectly through suggested evaluation, where the opinion is understood from the situation without being said outright (Tavassoli et al. 2019). Attitude also has a direction, which shows whether the opinion is positive or negative (Cavasso & Taboada 2021). These differences matter for this study because the analysis examines the kinds and directions of attitude expressions used in editorials from *The New York Times* and the *South China Morning Post*.

Identifying attitude requires attention to context, especially when evaluation doesn't appear as a clear evaluative word. For example, the phrase "fondly reminisces" shows Affect because it displays a pleasant emotional reaction. In contrast, the phrase "kings who wish to break us down so they can steal our resources" shows negative Judgment by harshly evaluating the actions and aims of the people described. Sometimes, however, polarity can be harder to spot. The sentence "There is nothing, about this piece of legislation" shows how evaluation can be made using negation and context, not just a clear positive or negative view. As Cavasso and Taboada (2021) note, interpreting meaning depends on how it is used in the larger conversation, not just on individual words.

1.3. Ideology in Media

Media discourse is not completely neutral. The language used can reveal the beliefs and values of the institutions and settings that produce news. Studies by Fowler (1991) and Jäger (2001) support this idea. Journalists bring their views into their work. These views can affect which events they cover, how they talk about the people involved, and how they describe actions. At the same time, a news organization's overall tone also affects how reporters write. Bell (1991) notes this. Van Dijk (1998). Because of these factors, the same political event can be reported differently across media. Word choice and story structure can highlight meanings and judgments. This means that media coverage is not just about facts. It also carries a point of view.

In media discourse, ideology can be traced through how language constructs actors, actions, and events. Vocabulary and evaluative choices matter because they can signal approval, criticism, and value judgments, and they help shape specific pictures of an issue (Fowler, 1991; Hall, 1997). For this study, that view provides a basis for seeing differences in patterns between *The New York Times* and the *South China Morning Post*. The Attitude resources in the editorials are seen not only as evaluative words but also as part of the broader positioning each outlet uses to discuss the US–China trade conflict.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study uses comparative discourse analysis to examine evaluative language in editorials from *The New York Times* (NYT) and the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP). The analysis applies the Attitude system of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) and uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret how recurring evaluative patterns relate to media positioning. The research integrates quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative phase identifies the distribution and polarity of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, while the qualitative phase explores how selected evaluative resources are portrayed to actors, policies, and economic conditions in the US–China trade conflict.

2.2. Data and Source of the data

The data for this research came from two sets of articles published by the TNYT and SCMP. Each set contained ten articles from The New York Times (TNYT) and the South China Morning Post (SCMP) that discussed and illustrated the US-China trade war. These editorials focused on political and economic changes, especially those in the US-China trade war, between January and March 2025. The January–March 2025 period was chosen to reflect renewed trade tensions and policy changes between the United States and China after the change in U.S. administration. The main data for this study were the editorials from TNYT (Editorials, The New York Times) and SCMP (SCMP Editorial: Latest Articles, Analysis and Profile | South China Morning Post) that were published from January to March 2025. I selected these editorials because they give insight into how the media reacted to the US-China trade war and the stories the influential online newspapers built.

2.3. Data Collection

The editorials were identified through the official editorial sections of TNYT and SCMP. The search process used the keyword “US–China trade war” and was restricted to publications dated from January to March 2025. Articles were screened based on their relevance to the trade conflict, and those directly addressing the US–China trade issue were included in the corpus. The selected texts were then compiled into individual Microsoft Word files and organized into two sub-corpora according to their source.

2.4. Corpus Analysis

The 20 editorials were divided into two sub-media, one for TNYT and one for SCMP. This research was analyzed using the UAM Corpus Tool version 6.2. Each editorial was manually annotated with the Attitude scheme following Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal framework. The annotation focused on three Attitude categories: Affect, Judgment and Appreciation, along with their polarity. The UAM Corpus Tool was then used to calculate frequency and percentage counts for each category. This allowed a comparison of how Attitude resources were distributed between the two media outlets.

2.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the annotated data were examined quantitatively to identify the frequency and percentage of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation in each sub-corpus. The distribution of positive and negative Attitude resources was then compared between TNYT and SCMP to identify similarities and differences in their evaluative patterns. Second, selected examples were examined qualitatively in their textual and contextual environments. The analysis considered how particular Attitude resources and their polarity contributed to the evaluation of actors, policies, and events associated with the US–China trade conflict. These patterns were then interpreted in relation to the broader media positioning constructed in the two sets of editorials, drawing on the CDA perspective described above. The qualitative analysis therefore connects the observed evaluative patterns to how the two outlets represented the trade conflict.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Result

3.1.1. Distribution of Attitude Resources

To portray the discourse surrounding US-China Trade War in its news coverage, TNYT and SCMP news employs evaluative language that is attitude resources, to construct the narrative. The distribution of these attitude resources, as identified in the news text, is presented in the table below:

Table 3.1 The distribution of Attitude Resources found in TNYT and SCMP

Attitude Type	TNYT n (%)	SCMP n (%)
Affect	2 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)
Judgment	166 (28.3%)	37 (11.6%)

Attitude Type	TNYT n (%)	SCMP n (%)
Appreciation	419 (70.4%)	282 (88.1%)
Total	587 (100%)	320 (100%)

The distribution of Attitude resources shows a clear preference for Appreciation in both newspapers, although the frequency of dominance differs substantially. Appreciation accounts for 70.4% of the 419 total resources identified in TNYT, compared with 88.1% of the 282 total instances in the SCMP. Judgment represents a considerably larger proportion in TNYT (28.3%) than in SCMP (11.6%), while Affect is marginal in both outlets, accounting for only 0.3% of the resources identified in each corpus.

The main difference therefore lies not in the overall preference for Appreciation, which is shared by both outlets, but in the relative prominence of Judgment. TNYT relies on Judgment more frequently than SCMP, whereas SCMP concentrates more heavily on Appreciation. This distribution suggests that the two newspapers differ in the evaluative resources they foreground when representing the trade conflict: TNYT devotes a greater proportion of its evaluation to assessing actors and their conduct, while SCMP relies more strongly on evaluations of events, policies, and broader conditions.

3.1.2. Polarity of Attitudinal Evaluation

The distribution of Attitude types provides a general overview of the evaluative resources present in the two editorial outlets; however, it does not independently indicate the direction of evaluation. Consequently, the polarity analysis investigates this by determining whether these Attitude resources express positive or negative evaluations. This comparison is important because similar evaluative resources can create different representations of the actors, policies, and economic conditions in the US–China trade conflict.

To further analyze the evaluative stance of TNYT and SCMP in their editorial coverage of the U.S.–China trade war, the following table shows the distribution of Attitude resources across analytical dimensions, focusing on Polarity. Polarity is key to understanding whether each evaluative expression conveys a positive or negative Tone. The table details the distribution of Attitude resources by polarity:

Table 3.2 Polarity in TNYT and SCMP

Polarity	TNYT		SCMP	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	230	39.2%	161	50.3%
Negative	357	60.8%	159	49.7%

The polarity distribution demonstrates a clear distinction between the two outlets. In TNYT, negative Attitude accounts for 356 instances (60.6%), while positive Attitude accounts for 230 instances (39.2%). This pattern suggests a stronger negative evaluative orientation in TNYT's editorial coverage. In contrast, SCMP exhibits a more balanced distribution, with 161 positive instances (50.3%) and 159 negative instances (49.7%). Therefore, SCMP cannot be classified as predominantly positive based on its overall polarity; its evaluative pattern is nearly evenly divided, with only a slight predominance of positive evaluation.

The difference becomes more meaningful when polarity is considered with the targets of evaluation. In TNYT, negative evaluation portrays to China's economic practices, trade position, and compliance with trade commitments. In SCMP, positive evaluation portrays to China's economic resilience, strategic preparedness, responsibility, and cooperation. While negative evaluation is also indicated to U.S. trade policies and their consequences. The contrast concerns not only the amount of positive and negative evaluation but also the entities, policies, and conditions these evaluations target.

Extract:

“Beijing will be unwilling to alter its state-led economic model, which relies on subsidies, state-owned enterprises and robust industrial policies — the basis for many U.S. complaints.”
(TNYT, Text 3)

The polarity pattern is evident in instances where negative evaluation is established through contextual cues rather than explicit negative language. For example, the phrase “robust industrial policies” typically conveys strength and effectiveness. However, when situated among references to subsidies, state-owned enterprises, and “U.S. complaints,” the term assumes a negative evaluative connotation. In this context, the evaluation frames China’s economic model as problematic, particularly regarding perceived trade imbalances and unfair competition. This example demonstrates that polarity within the corpus cannot be determined exclusively by individual lexical items. Instead, it is shaped by the construction of evaluative meanings in their specific textual context.

SCMP shows a negative evaluative orientation in its portrayal of the potential consequences of unilateral U.S. trade actions. The following extract illustrates how negative Attitude is constructed through the anticipated economic consequences of trade policies and the emotional responses they may generate.

Extract:

“His plan may prove counterproductive and unilaterally starting trade wars could stir resentment towards Washington, especially as prices rise, both in America and globally.” (SCMP, Text 3)

The term “counterproductive” conveys a negative assessment of the anticipated outcomes of the proposed trade policy, while the phrase “stir resentment towards Washington” introduces a distinctly negative emotional response through Affect. This evaluation extends beyond the immediate U.S.–China relationship by referencing rising prices “in America and globally,” thus positioning unilateral trade action as a policy with far-reaching economic and social implications. Consequently, the extract frames U.S. trade action as potentially detrimental not only to the directly involved in the onflict but also to broader economic and international relations.

This example demonstrates that negative polarity in SCMP is not limited to evaluations of China. While SCMP includes positive portrays of China’s economic and international roles, negative commentary is also directed toward U.S. policies and their outcomes. This distribution contributes to the overall balance of polarity in SCMP, rather than a strongly positive orientation.

3.1.2. *Evaluative Representation of Actors, Policies, and Economic Conditions*

The distribution and polarity of Attitude resources establish a quantitative framework for comparing the two outlets but do not fully explain how the evaluative patterns shape the representation of the trade conflict. Consequently, the qualitative analysis investigates the entities and phenomena linked to the identified evaluations. The analysis focuses on three recurring targets: social actors, trade and economic policies, and broader economic or geopolitical conditions.

This distinction is significant because Attitude does not evaluate all elements of discourse in the same way. Judgment primarily concerns the evaluation of social actors and their conduct, while Appreciation evaluates entities, policies, processes, and states of affairs (Martin & White, 2005). Analysis of the present corpus indicates that both newspapers rely predominantly on Appreciation; however, the evaluations associated with actors, policies, and economic conditions vary between the two outlets. The following examples demonstrate these differences.

The evaluative pattern in TNYT is especially evident in its portrayal of China’s economic status and trade practices. The following extract exemplifies this by depicting China’s economic conditions, trade practices, and adherence to a prior trade agreement.

Extract:

It has the largest trade surplus in goods of all U.S. trading partners, it employs a series of unfair trade practices to gain a competitive advantage, and it has failed to live up to the terms of the trade agreement that it signed with President Trump in his first term.
(TNYT, Text 3)

The evaluative pattern in TNYT is especially evident in its portrayal of China’s economic practices and trade position. The extract “It has the largest trade surplus in goods ... [and] unfair trade practices ...” integrates evaluations of China’s economic status with assessments of its conduct. The reference to the “largest trade surplus” frames China’s trade position as economically significant, whereas the phrase “unfair trade practices” assigns a negative value to the means by which this advantage is achieved. Furthermore, the reference to China having “failed to live up to” the terms of a trade agreement evaluate its compliance with previous commitments.

The extract illustrates a recurring pattern in TNYT. China is evaluated not only by the economic characteristics of its trade position but also by the perceived fairness and reliability of its practices. Evaluation operates across both appreciation of economic conditions and judgment of conduct.

In media positioning, this evaluative approach presents China's economic role mainly through a critical lens. While acknowledging economic strength, it also highlights concerns about unfair practices and unfulfilled commitments. This positioning results from the relationship between the subject and the evaluative meanings, rather than from a single ideological statement.

A different evaluative approach appears in SCMP's portrayal of China's international role. Instead of focusing predominantly on problematic trade practices, the editorial assesses China in terms of responsibility, global order, and cooperation. The following extract exemplifies this evaluative approach.

Extract:

“Foreign minister makes it clear China is a responsible power, champion of the global order and willing to cooperate against risks.” (SCMP, Text 6)

The terms “responsible power,” “champion of the global order,” and “willing to cooperate against risks” collectively construct a favorable representation of China's international role. This evaluation extends beyond China's immediate economic interests and positions the country as an active participant in maintaining international stability and cooperation. Consequently, the evaluative focus emphasizes the value and significance of China's role within the broader international system.

This pattern reflects the strong dominance of Appreciation in SCMP, accounting for 88.1% of its Attitude resources. In contrast, the lower proportion of Judgment (11.6%) suggests SCMP relies less on direct evaluation of actors' conduct than TNYT.

The extract portrays China as a responsible and cooperative international actor. This contrasts with the TNYT pattern, where China's economic strength is connected to concerns about trade practices, imbalance, and compliance. This contrast reflects not just a difference in tone, but in the evaluative meanings assigned to China's role in the conflict.

3.1.3. *Contrasting Evaluative Patterns and Media Positioning*

Based on the data in 4.3, the findings from the distribution, polarity, and evaluative representation analyses reveal different configurations of Attitude across the two newspapers. Although both outlets rely predominantly on Appreciation, the resources are oriented toward different evaluative patterns and are accompanied by different polarity distributions. These differences provide the basis for interpreting the contrasting media positioning constructed in the editorials.

TNYT combines a high proportion of Appreciation (70.4%) with a comparatively substantial use of Judgment (28.3%). Its polarity is predominantly negative, with negative evaluations accounting for 60.6% of the identified resources. At the textual level, these evaluations frequently concern China's economic practices, trade position, compliance with agreements, and the consequences of trade policies. This evaluative pattern frames the trade conflict through sustained evaluation of the problems associated with China's economic model and trade practices, while also allowing U.S. policies and leadership to be evaluated in relation to their effectiveness and consequences.

In contrast, SCMP demonstrates a higher dominant of Appreciation (88.1%) and a considerably lower amount of Judgment (11.6%). Its polarity is fairly balanced, with positive evaluation being only very slightly greater than negative evaluation (50.3% compared with 49.7%). The qualitative analysis indicates that positive evaluations are generally linked to China's economic resilience, its strategic preparedness, its sense of responsibility and its willingness to cooperate, whereas negative evaluations primarily target U.S. trade policies and their broader implications.

The comparison between TNYT and SCMP is based not only on the presence of positive or negative evaluations, but also on how and toward whom these evaluations are directed. TNYT demonstrates substantial Appreciation, incorporates more instances of Judgment, and predominantly negative polarity, especially its portrayal of China's economic practices and trade behaviour. In contrast, SCMP relies more on Appreciation and maintains a nearly balanced polarity. Its positive evaluations portray China's economic resilience, responsibility, and cooperation, while negative evaluations are mainly directed at U.S. trade policies and their effects.

These differing evaluative approaches contribute to distinct media perspectives on the US–China trade conflict. TNYT frames the conflict more strongly through critical evaluation of China's economic and trade

practices, whereas SCMP frames China's stability, preparedness, and cooperative role while critically evaluating U.S. trade actions.

3.1.4. *Explicit and Implicit Realization of Attitude*

The distinction between inscribed and invoked evaluation provides an additional, supporting dimension to the analysis. While previous sections establish the dominant Attitude types, polarity patterns, and evaluation targets, this distinction clarifies how evaluations are realized in discourse. Specifically, it addresses whether evaluations are expressed directly through overtly evaluative language or constructed indirectly through contextual meaning. Consequently, this distinction is considered a supporting finding rather than a central dimension of the comparison.

The realization of Attitude further differentiates the construction of evaluative meanings in the two editorial corpora. Inscribed evaluation conveys attitudinal meaning directly through explicit evaluative language, while invoked evaluation depends primarily on contextual interpretation. Analysing this distinction provides further evidence regarding how the two newspapers construct evaluative meanings beyond their overall distribution and polarity. The table details Explicit and Implicit Realization of Attitude:

Table 3.3 Explicit and Implicit Realization of Attitude

Polarity	TNYT		SMP	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Inscribed	258	44%	104	32.5%
Invoked	329	56%)	216	67.5%

The data show that invoked evaluation is more frequent than inscribed evaluation in both corpora. In TNYT, 329 instances (56%) are invoked and 258 (44%) are inscribed. In SCMP, the figures are 216 (67.5%) and 104 (32.5%). These numbers suggest both outlets often construct evaluative meanings through contextual interpretation instead of relying only on explicit evaluative expressions.

An instance of invoked evaluation in TNYT is evident in the discussion of China's industrial policies. This example is significant because the evaluative meaning arises not only from explicit negative language but also from the broader contextual framework.

Extract:

Beijing will be unwilling to alter its state-led economic model, which relies on subsidies, state-owned enterprises and robust industrial policies — the basis for many U.S. complaints. (The New York Times editorial, Text 3)

The phrase “robust industrial policies” is not inherently negative; “robust” typically implies strength or effectiveness. However, in this context, references to subsidies, state-owned enterprises, and U.S. complaints shape its evaluative meaning. As a result, the phrase implies a negative view of China's economic model through context. This example demonstrates that evaluative meaning can arise from the interaction of word choice and broader discourse, not just from explicitly negative adjectives.

This pattern supports the quantitative finding that invoked evaluation occurs slightly more often than inscribed evaluation in TNYT. It also demonstrates that polarity cannot always be determined from individual lexical items, as the ideological significance of an evaluation depends on both the entity being evaluated and its context within the discourse.

A similar pattern of contextual evaluation appears in SCMP, especially in its representation of China's economic performance. The following extract shows how positive evaluation can be constructed by presenting an economic outcome as evidence of adaptation, stability, and progress.

Extract:

“The economy has adapted with key segments transformed over the past five years ... to maintain a stable and progressive upwards trend.” (SCMP, Text 1)

The phrase “stable and progressive upwards trend” presents China's economic performance positively by linking it to stability, adaptation, and ongoing progress. While this evaluation relies on positive terms like “stable” and “progressive,” its impact is strengthened by describing China's economy as resilient to external pressures while maintaining growth. Thus, the evaluation is shaped by both the language used and the economic results described.

This example aligns with the high proportion of invoked evaluation found in SCMP. It also demonstrates how contextual evaluation can highlight China's economic resilience without explicitly stating its success or superiority.

3.2. Discussion

The findings indicate that both The New York Times (TNYT) and the South China Morning Post (SCMP) primarily use Appreciation in their editorials on the US-China trade dispute. For TNYT, Appreciation accounts for 70.4% of Attitudes, with Judgment at 28.3%. SCMP uses Appreciation in 88.1% of Attitude resources and Judgment in 11.6%. Affect is rare in both newspapers, comprising only 0.3% of Attitudes. The predominance of Appreciation suggests that evaluations focus on economic policies, trade practices, institutions, and outcomes rather than direct emotional expression. This aligns with previous research, which finds that Appreciation is frequently used in editorials to assess events, policies, and social conditions (Daniarsa & Kartika-Ningsih, 2023; Komarawan et al., 2025). In this corpus, Appreciation is the primary resource for evaluating economic and trade issues.

Despite this similarity, the polarity patterns indicate a distinct difference in evaluative orientation. TNYT features 60.6% negative and 39.2% positive Attitude, while SCMP presents a nearly balanced distribution of 50.3% positive and 49.7% negative evaluation. Qualitative analysis further clarifies this distinction. TNYT frequently portray China's trade practices and economic position negatively, as demonstrated by references to China employing “unfair trade practices” and having “failed to live up to” the terms of a trade agreement. These expressions combine Appreciation of China's economic practices with Judgment of its conduct, resulting in a critical portrayal of China's role in the trade conflict. Conversely, SCMP also includes negative evaluations, particularly regarding U.S. trade policies and their consequences. For instance, the assertion that unilateral trade wars could be “counterproductive” and “stir resentment towards Washington” reflects a negative evaluation of the potential outcomes of U.S. actions. Therefore, the primary difference between the two outlets lies not only in the proportion of positive or negative language, but also in the specific actors, policies, and consequences to which these evaluations are directed.

This distinction is especially clear in how China is represented. TNYT portrays China to trade imbalances, unfair practices, and challenges in meeting agreements. In contrast, SCMP provides positive tone, portraying China as responsible, cooperative, and a stabilizing global force. The statement that China is “a responsible power, champion of the global order and willing to cooperate against risks” shows this favorable view. However, SCMP's coverage is not uniformly positive, as shown by its nearly balanced polarity. Its negative evaluations typically target U.S. trade measures and their broader economic impact. This pattern indicates that media positioning arises from repeated associations between evaluative meanings and specific actors, policies, and events, rather than from isolated evaluative terms. Similar differences in the representation of actors across media outlets have also been observed in studies of international conflicts. Matingwina (2020), identified differences in the framing of the US–China trade war in U.S. and Chinese newspapers, while Alyahya (2023) found differences in Attitude resources between The Washington Post and The Moscow Times in their coverage of the Ukraine conflict. In the present study, these differences are reflected in the recurring association between particular evaluative resources and particular actors. TNYT more frequently associates negative evaluation with China's trade practices and economic conduct, whereas SCMP more often associates positive evaluation with China's economic resilience and cooperative role and negative evaluation with U.S. trade policies.

The distinction between on inscribed and invoked attitudes support this interpretation. TNYT contains 44% inscribed and 56% invoked evaluations. SCMP contains 32.5% inscribed and 67.5% invoked evaluations.

The high proportion of invoked evaluations shows that evaluative meanings are often constructed through context rather than explicit evaluative vocabulary. In TNYT, for example, “robust industrial policies” gains a negative meaning from its association with subsidies, state-owned enterprises, and U.S. complaints about China's trade practices. Similarly, SCMP's expression “the economy has adapted” is interpreted positively because its context links to maintaining economic stability and progress. This finding aligns with Daniarsa and Kartika-Ningsih (2023), who found that editorial positions may be constructed through explicit or implicit evaluative patterns.

Overall, the findings show that TNYT and SCMP express their ideological positions through distinct uses of evaluative language. Both newspapers rely extensively on Appreciation; however, TNYT combines this with more Judgment and a stronger negative tone, especially when discussing China's trade practices and economic status. In contrast, SCMP employs Appreciation even more and maintains a nearly balanced tone; its positive evaluations portray China to responsibility, adaptability, cooperation, and global stability, while its negative evaluations typically portray U.S. trade policies and their effects. This pattern aligns with previous research indicating that Appreciation is central in editorial discourse and can be portray to actors, policies, and events to shape editorial perspectives (Komarawan et al., 2025). The main conclusion is that the newspapers establish different media positions not only through positive or negative language, but through systematic patterns in how evaluative resources are assigned to representations of the US–China trade war.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research proves that TNYT and SCMP have different media positions in the U.S.-China trade dispute because of their differences in the use of evaluative language. Even though both newspapers use Appreciation as the main type of Attitude, there is an unequal use of Judgement and polarity in the evaluations of TNYT, while SCMP uses mainly positive language and has nearly equal polarity. In SCMP, positive evaluations highlight the economy of China, its responsibility, and its collaboration, while negative ones focus on the policies of the U.S. and their effects. As seen from the results, media positioning is influenced not only by positive or negative language use but also by the association between language, polarity, and actors/policies/circumstances.

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