

An Analysis of the Image of Germany in People's Daily Online

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Abstract: *As a key national news website, People's Daily Online plays an important role in shaping and spreading the image of foreign countries. As a country with which China has established an all-round strategic partnership, Germany frequently appears in the reports of People's Daily Online. This paper uses content analysis and case study to analyse the reports on Germany's politics and economy in the second half of 2021 on People's Daily Online, summarize the political and economic images reflected, and analyse the characteristics of the images and the reasons for their formation.*

Keywords: *People's Daily Online, Germany, politics, economy, image.*

1. Introduction

The image of a country is the perception and evaluation of the political, economic, social, cultural and geographical situation of the country by both the internal and external public of the country. It is fundamentally dependent on the country's overall national strength, but it cannot simply be equated with the actual state of the country; it can be shaped to some extent.^[1] The image of Germany portrayed by the People's Daily Online is an image of a foreign country from Chinese media. We can use it to understand the situation in Germany and to analyse the reasons for this image. This helps us to develop an international perspective and improve our intercultural communication skills.

2. The subject of the study

In the second half of 2021, there were 28 reports about Germany on People's Daily. Of these, 14 were political reports and 6 were economic reports. This article takes 20 political and economic reports as the object of study and analyses the image of Germany they portray.

The reason for choosing the subject of study is twofold. On the one hand, political and economic categories are high-frequency topics. They account for over 70% of all coverage and play an important role in capturing the overall image of Germany. On the other hand, the content of People's Daily's reports is relatively authentic, objective and credible. People's Daily is a large online information platform built by People's Daily, and is the leading national key news website. It adheres to the concept of "authority, strength and origin from the people" and aims to be "authoritative, popular and credible", conveying the ideas of the Party and popularizing policies on domestic and foreign affairs. In addition, People's Daily Online is one of the world's largest comprehensive online media, with the goal of "multilingualism, all-media, globalization and full coverage", reporting on the world and spreading China. Therefore, the articles on People's Daily Online are selected for this study.

3. Research methodology

This article uses case studies and content analysis to examine 20 selected stories on political economy, and analyses them from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The quantitative analysis focuses on the number and proportion of each item. The qualitative analysis focuses on the content of the reports, the tendency of the reports (positive, negative or neutral) and the political and economic image in the reports.

4. The political image of Germany in People's Daily Online

There are 14 reports in this area, which portray Germany in three main ways: firstly, coordination between the parties, secondly, cooperation with China, and thirdly, self-reflection. The overall image is positive.

1) The German elections

There are six reports in this area, which are centred on the German elections and the parties running for office, and can be divided into two categories. One is mainly an objective overview of the elections, the other is an assessment of the parties and the formation of the government in Germany, and the new government that was subsequently formed.

As a window for the nation to understand and evaluate events abroad, People's Daily Online introduces the role of the German Bundestag elections, which determine the seats of the political parties in the Bundestag and the party or coalition of parties that obtains a majority of seats will form a new government. In addition, People's Daily Online describes the process and results of the German elections in chronological order. From the start of the voting and the negotiations on the formation of a cabinet in September, to the announcement of the official results of the elections in October, to the election of Scholz as the new German Chancellor in December.

After the election results were announced, People's Daily reported on the stalemate between the SPD and the coalition parties with close vote shares, predicted the feasible ways of forming a government and the possibilities of each, and presented and evaluated the political views of each party.^[2] Following the formation of a new government by the SPD, the Greens and the FDP, People's Daily reported on the new government's approach, both on the domestic front (environmental protection, debt reduction, pensions and social welfare on multiple fronts) and on the foreign front (basically continuing Merkel's foreign policy and exerting influence through the EU platform).^[3]

Taken together, People's Daily Online portrays a post-Merkel era in which the German parties are trying to bridge their differences and face challenges together. Merkel's departure from the political scene means the loss of a strong leader with credibility and cohesion in the political arena, and the possibility of a "political void" for the coalition parties, Germany and the EU in a short period of time. In addition, the three parties forming the new government are at odds over policies on climate, taxation and finance, as well as over the distribution of cabinet posts. The new government will have a long way to go in coordinating the political forces, effectively bridging differences and resolving challenges to achieve the intended internal and external policies.

2) Exchanges between Chinese and German leaders

Five reports in this area covered the telephone and video meetings between the Chinese leaders (Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang) and the German leaders (Merkel and Scholz), creating an image of a Germany that attaches great importance to Sino-German relations and emphasises practical cooperation and friendly contacts with China.

The content of the talks between the Chinese and German leaders related mainly to the following aspects.

The first is the cooperation between Germany and China in key areas, including tackling climate change, maintaining free trade and jointly combating the new crown epidemic, which is of common concern to all mankind. This reflects Germany's deepened trust in China, promoting complementary strengths and joint efforts to tackle challenges.^[4]

The second is Sino-German and Sino-European relations, i.e. China and Germany respect each other, seek common ground while reserving differences, and expand their common interests on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. At the same time, Germany pledged to China that it would promote the EU's adherence to a correct policy towards China and the sustainable and healthy development of Sino-European relations. This reflects the importance Germany attaches to Sino-German and Sino-European relations, the proper handling of differences and the efforts to keep Sino-German cooperation steadily at the forefront of Sino-European cooperation.^[5]

Finally, there is global governance, i.e. China and Germany jointly advocate multilateralism, emphasise the coexistence and mutual appreciation of different civilisations and oppose hegemonism, unilateralism and interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This reflects the two countries' common pursuit of a multi-polar world order and their joint efforts to make a positive contribution to the

maintenance of world peace and stability.^[6]

Taken together, the report creates an image of a Germany that advocates Sino-German and Sino-European understanding and cooperation in order to achieve mutual benefits. The common position of insisting on working together and avoiding a zero-sum game binds China and Germany together.

3) Senior Nazi criminal on trial

There are three stories in this area, which portray a Germany that is mindful of its history, reflective and self-reflective.

The German judicial system continues to pursue Nazi criminals judicially, as mentioned in the report. For example, a former Nazi member, now 100 years old, is about to go on trial for allegedly massacring thousands of inmates of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.^[7] In addition, a 96-year-old woman, aged 100, is about to go on trial for her alleged involvement in the massacre of more than 11,000 people at the Stutthof concentration camp. This is the first judicial trial of a Nazi concentration camp secretary in Germany and means that the German prosecution is bringing more Holocaust perpetrators to justice.^[8] Justice is late but not absent, and the guilty, despite their advanced age, have not escaped the charges. This undoubtedly reflects deep reflection and sincere self-reflection on the part of the Germans.

The report also refers to previous German initiatives to take responsibility for war crimes, including monetary reparations, related education and legislation, and bronze 'stumbling stones' in honour of Jews. This shows that the Germans have a long history of taking historical guilt seriously, and it is still going on. Active national reflection, based on a positive view of history, has been key to shaping Germany's national image since the Second World War.^[9]

While acknowledging Germany's approach, the report also compared Germany with Japan and condemned Japan's denial, distortion and even glorification of the history of aggression.^[10] On balance, Germany's return to global influence is inextricably linked to its ability to deal with the issue of history correctly, and Japan should learn from Germany.

5. The economic image of Germany in People's Daily Online

There are six reports in this area, which portray two main aspects of Germany: Firstly, the image of Germany as a traditional industrial power in Europe, which can serve as an example for China to follow. The second is the image of Germany as a country that is partly economically dependent on China and actively seeks to cooperate with China in the economic sphere. All are positive images.

1) The report on the "Dialogue 2021 - Germany-Shandong Industrial Cooperation and Exchange Conference" portrays Germany as an industrial powerhouse in three ways.

Firstly, German SMEs are well developed, especially the "hidden champions", and there is a close division of labour between large and small enterprises. Secondly, German companies are transforming their industries through technological innovation, eliminating outdated production capacity and carrying out ecological management (transformation of the Ruhr industrial area). Finally, Germany has implemented the "dual system", i.e. school-enterprise cooperation, and vocational education under the leadership of enterprises to train vocational skills.^[11]

Taken together, the German industrial system is well diversified and structured, and the various branches of industry are flourishing. This reflects the image of Germany as an industrial powerhouse. In contrast, China's, and in particular Shandong's, industry has progressed rapidly but still has a gap in strength compared to Germany's.

2) The rest of the reports portray Germany as a country whose economy is interdependent with China's and committed to economic development together with China.

Sino-German economic cooperation has a long history of remarkable results. Since the establishment of an all-round strategic partnership between China and Germany in 2014, the two countries have launched extensive and far-reaching cooperation in the fields of automotive, environmental protection, agriculture, science and technology, medicine and information technology. For a long time, Sino-German economic and trade relations have been developing smoothly. As of 2020, Germany has maintained its position as China's largest trading partner in Europe for 46 consecutive years, and China has been Germany's largest global trading partner for five consecutive years.^[12]

In recent years, Sino-German cooperation has been hampered to a certain extent by the epidemic,

which has had a serious negative impact on the German economy. On the one hand, the epidemic has led to a drop in demand in China and a reduction in orders from German exporters, which in turn has affected related industries such as the transport and service sectors. On the other hand, the work stoppage in China has led to a disruption in the supply chain for German companies and a lack of supplies for domestic sales and production in Germany. For example, the lack of spare parts as a result of the work stoppage in China has brought production in the automotive and electronics industries to a halt. Both of these reflect the fact that the German economy is quite dependent on China and that there is much to be gained from cooperation between the two sides.

In this regard, the report describes the "Dialogue Germany" event to be held at the Sino-German Innovation Industrial Park in the second half of 2021. At this event, Ambassador Wu Poh emphasized that "in these times of change and uncertainty, especially against the backdrop of the new crown pneumonia epidemic that has inconvenienced cross-border travel, dialogue exchange and cooperation are increasingly important and valuable." In the post-epidemic era, Germany is actively seeking economic cooperation with China, which can be considered as part of Germany's economic image.^[13]

As mentioned at the 2021 Sino-German Economic Cooperation Forum, German companies are determined to continue investing in China and the total bilateral trade volume remains at a record high. Despite the impact of the epidemic, trade between the two countries will still grow by 3% in 2020, and German politicians and business people are looking forward to continued pragmatic cooperation in trade and commerce between Germany and China.^[14] This reflects the fact that cooperation has not been stalled by the epidemic, but has shown creativity and resilience. This bodes well for the future of Sino-German economic cooperation in the post-epidemic era, which will be enhanced by the joint efforts of both countries.

6. Characteristics of and reasons for the German image in People's Daily Online

This section lists 3 characteristics of the image of Germany in People's Daily Online and analyses the reasons behind them.

1) The main focus: A positive political and economic image

The image of a country is the public's overall impression of a country, which stems directly from the agenda setting of the mass media. Once the media is inserted, the impressions people form are no longer a real reaction to the objective environment, but a reaction to the mimetic environment provided by the media, which incorporates the subjective will and judgement criteria of the media subject.^[15] As the government's mouthpiece, the People's Daily Online intentionally creates a more positive image of Germany and leads its audience to accept this positive mimetic environment, which is in line with the government's intentions. This is because a good image of Germany promotes a positive public perception of the country and facilitates deeper cooperation between the two countries in the political and economic spheres. Furthermore, Germany is considered to be the leading force in the EU. Deeper contact with Germany also facilitates exchanges between China and the EU. Both of these are in line with China's foreign development strategy and therefore positive images prevail in the coverage.

2) The combination of shaping Germany and reviewing itself.

The People's Daily report not only portrays Germany, but also looks back at itself and points out what China should do. For example, while portraying Germany as an industrial powerhouse, the report also mentions measures that Shandong can take to learn from the German experience, strengthen the integration of industry, academia and research, and promote industrial transformation and upgrading, so as to achieve the transformation from a "manufacturing province" to a "manufacturing powerhouse". Obviously, by shaping the image of other countries and providing examples or templates, we are also doing our own country a favour.^[16]

In addition, People's Daily Online is good at quoting German comments in its reports, using the mouth of other countries to indirectly shape China's image. In the reports about the phone call and video meeting between the Chinese and German leaders, "Merkel said" "Scholz praised" and other phrases are commonplace, which indicates two things. On the one hand, the fact that the German side expresses its own views, which are in line with those of the Chinese side, indicates that the two sides have reached a consensus. On the other hand, the quotation of the German leader's praise of China is both a reflection of the friendly relations between China and Germany and a positive image of China in the form of "foreign comments".

3) The image of Germany: A reflection of the innermost aspirations of the nation

"The image of the foreign is produced by the description of the 'other' by 'observers' belonging to different nationalities, and is essentially a subjective and socio-psychological perception of one nationality of another (society, culture, institutions) It is thus largely a reflection of the social and psychological state of the observer and the describer." [17] For Chinese people, the image of Germany is an exotic one. The positive image of Germany portrayed by the People's Daily embodies the attitude of the People's Daily and reflects the expectations of the Party and the people behind the People's Daily. The three reports on the trial of senior Nazi criminals are good examples of this. The profound reflection and sincere self-reflection portrayed by the Germans is actually a projection of the national psyche, i.e. the hope that Japan will adopt the same attitude and face up to the guilt of the war against China.

7. Conclusion

Taken together, the reports on Germany in the People's Daily Online portray a positive image of Germany. On the political side, all parties coordinate, cooperate with China and reflect on themselves; on the economic side, industry is strong and mutually complementary with Chinese industry. While constructing an image of Germany, People's Daily Online also reviews the actual situation in China and expresses the expectations and demands of the Chinese people.

As German majors, we should actively use official channels such as the People's Daily Online to learn about Germany, broaden our horizons, cultivate an open mind and abandon stereotypes. At the same time, we should also enhance our national self-confidence, tell the story of China and spread a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive image of China to the world.

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