



Agenda-Setting in ABC Australia's *China Tonight*: A Content Analysis of China-related Coverage

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Abstract: This study investigates how Australia’s national broadcaster ABC set the media agenda for China-related issues through its program *China Tonight* from 2021 to 2023. Drawing on first-level agenda-setting theory, the research employs content analysis to examine 23 episodes, identifying issue salience and thematic evolution. The findings reveal that the program predominantly focused on social and political topics—such as China’s population policies, education reforms, human rights, and diplomatic tensions—while also gradually incorporating cultural and everyday life issues over time. The thematic shifts across the three years reflect both geopolitical developments and changing audience expectations. The study demonstrates a dual logic in ABC’s reporting, balancing “hard” topics with socially resonant “soft” topics to construct a multidimensional image of China. By highlighting the agenda-setting mechanisms at play, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of intercultural media narratives and offers insights into the dynamics of China–Australia media relations. Limitations and directions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Agenda-setting theory, China Tonight, ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), China–Australia media relations, Media framing, Content analysis.

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1. Introduction

As China’s global influence continues to grow, international media have increasingly focused their attention on the country. Against this backdrop, foreign media coverage of China has become a widely explored topic among scholars, with a wealth of research on American and British outlets. However, compared to the in-depth studies of US and UK media, academic discussions on Australian media coverage of China remain relatively limited and tend to concentrate on specific topics. For example, Zhu and Cao (2015) examined Australian media coverage of China’s anti-corruption campaign; Sun and Jiang (2017), as well as Yang and Wang (2016), analyzed coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative; He and Ma (2019) explored reporting of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China; Gao and Ren (2020) investigated COVID-19-related reporting; Mu (2023) focused on the discourse surrounding “common prosperity”; L.X. Zhang and J. Zhang (2020) analyzed representations of Chinese higher education in Australian media.

Most of these studies are concentrated on reporting prior to 2020, leaving a gap in understanding how Australian media have portrayed China in the post-2020 era—particularly in terms of topic evolution, shifts in news framing, and changes in communication strategies. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analyzing Chinese-related coverage in Australian mainstream media from 2021 to 2023, identifying its characteristics and emerging trends.

This study employs content analysis to systematically examine *China Tonight*, a program aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) between 2021 and 2023, focusing on its agenda-setting patterns in Chinese-related reporting. As one of the most influential national public broadcasters in Australia, ABC plays a significant agenda-setting role in the country’s media landscape (Golan, 2006; Protess & McCombs, 1991). *China Tonight* is among the few Australian television programs centered on China, covering political, economic, social, and cultural topics, and is thus highly representative and of substantial research value. By conducting an in-depth analysis of this program, the study not

only enhances our understanding of how Australian mainstream media set the agenda for China-related issues but also reveals the communication logic and potential social impacts behind its reporting strategies, offering useful insights into China-Australia media interactions and transnational communication.

2. Theoretical Perspective

Walter Lippmann first introduced the concept of the “pseudo-environment” in his book *Public Opinion* (1922), arguing that the reality presented by the media is not a direct reflection of the objective world, but rather a constructed, selective, and processed version. Through selective reporting, the media shape the public’s perceived “reality,” thus influencing cognitive structures and worldviews. Lippmann’s idea laid the intellectual foundation for the later development of Agenda-Setting Theory.

Agenda-setting theory, a core model in communication studies, was initially proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their study of media coverage during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. By comparing media content with voter survey data, they discovered a strong correlation between the issues emphasized in the media and those considered important by voters. This led to the conclusion that media do not tell people “what to think,” but rather “what to think about,” by highlighting certain topics. As McCombs (2004) pointed out, the selection and presentation of content significantly influence how the public ranks the importance of issues, thereby shaping their understanding of social realities.

Over time, agenda-setting theory has evolved into a comprehensive three-tier analytical framework. The first level, known as object agenda-setting, examines how the media influence the public’s awareness and perceived importance of various issues. This level emphasizes factors such as the placement, frequency, and timing of news reports (McCombs et al., 1997; Jin Junli, 2007). The second level, referred to as attribute agenda-setting, delves into how the media shape not only which issues are considered important but also how these issues are perceived. This includes both substantive attributes, such as positive or negative framing, and affective attributes, such as the emotional tone conveyed. The third level, network agenda-setting, focuses on the way media construct associative networks among different issues, allowing audiences to form systematic rather than fragmented understandings of events.

This study concentrates on the first-level agenda-setting theory, exploring how ABC’s *China Tonight* program highlights the salience of certain China-related topics, thereby shaping perceptions of China. The second and third levels are noted as future directions for a more comprehensive analysis of discursive mechanisms in Australian media coverage of China.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

This study adopts the first-level agenda-setting framework to examine how Australia’s mainstream media—specifically ABC’s *China Tonight*—construct an image of China through topic selection. Focusing on the 2021–2023 period, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What types of issues concerning China did *China Tonight* primarily cover from 2021 to 2023, and what were their relative proportions?
2. Did the themes of China-related coverage exhibit structural

changes or phased evolution across the three years?

3. Which issues appeared most frequently, reflecting the agenda-setting mechanism of increased salience?
4. What political, socio-cultural, or geopolitical factors may have influenced the agenda-setting choices?

To address these questions, the study conducts a content analysis of 23 episodes of *China Tonight* aired between 2021 and 2023. Using Chinese-related topics as the unit of analysis, the study classifies and tallies the frequency and categories of issues, examining their distribution over time and identifying emerging trends. Content analysis is a widely used method in agenda-setting research, capable of revealing the emphasis and evolution of specific topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By comparing topic frequencies across years and contextualizing them within geopolitical and bilateral developments, the study aims to outline the image of China constructed by the program and identify underlying factors that drive media agenda-setting. The goal is to provide empirical support for understanding Australia’s media landscape and facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding between Chinese and Australian media.

4. Research Findings

Findings are presented across three dimensions: topic distribution, annual changes, and focus tendencies.

4.1 Dominance of Social and Political Issues in Topic Distribution

Overall, the program covered a wide range of areas including politics, economy, society, culture, environment, and technology. Social and political issues were most dominant, accounting for over 60% of total topics. Key issues included population policies (e.g., three-child policy, declining birth rate), education reforms (such as the “Double Reduction” policy), women’s rights (e.g., MeToo, trafficking), COVID-19 control measures, youth unemployment, and gender and family norms. Politically, the program focused on China’s political system, human rights, China–Australia relations, the Taiwan issue, and strategic competition with the U.S. Cultural topics such as festivals, internet culture, Chinese cuisine, TV dramas, sports, and comedy shows were also featured, though less frequently. These topics played a role in shaping a more nuanced image of Chinese society and culture.

4.2 Reflection of Political Context in Temporal Changes

Over the three-year period, the program’s thematic focus evolved in response to the shifting dynamics of China–Australia relations and broader global developments. In 2021, the coverage emphasized political and security-related issues, highlighting strained bilateral ties, human rights concerns, developments in Xinjiang, the phenomenon of “wolf warrior” diplomacy, and electoral law reforms in Hong Kong—collectively reflecting a trend toward securitization. In 2022, the focus shifted inward to domestic Chinese affairs, addressing topics such as lockdown policies, educational pressures, gender inequality, major accidents like the Changsha building collapse, and generational tensions. By 2023, the program turned its attention more toward cultural consumption and the everyday lives of Chinese youth, featuring stories on phenomena such as “white people food,” livestreaming culture, regulation of short video platforms, and changing attitudes toward marriage. This progression illustrates the program’s

increasing interest in portraying the lived realities and evolving social fabric of contemporary China. These shifts illustrate the program's responsiveness to real-world political environments and its flexible agenda-setting.

4.3 Reflection of Agenda-Setting Logic in Focused Coverage

Certain topics were significantly more prominent, demonstrating the salience-building mechanism of first-level agenda-setting. For instance, the pandemic was a multi-year focus, covering lockdowns, vaccination, public responses, and media narratives. Youth and generational issues appeared frequently, covering education stress, employment, dating, and digital culture—highlighting interest in China's "next generation." Geopolitical concerns like the Taiwan issue, cooperation with the Solomon Islands, and the spy balloon incident reflected strategic concerns over China's international role.

5. Discussion

Using first-level agenda-setting theory, this study reveals the strategies employed by Australian mainstream media in selecting topics for China-related coverage. *China Tonight* exhibits a dual logic and phased approach in its construction of salience and issue diversity.

5.1 Dual Adjustment between Media Focus and Audience Expectations

The program adopts a hybrid structure of "hard" and "soft" issues. Topics like education reform, gender equality, and youth struggles, while not overtly political, resonate emotionally and attract audience interest, aligning with McCombs's (2004) notion that "salience depends on audience concerns." Simultaneously, the program maintains attention to "hard" issues such as diplomacy, human rights, and Taiwan, addressing national security and strategic anxieties. This dual-track structure balances content diversity and constructs a multi-dimensional image of China.

5.2 Strategic and Temporal Salience Construction

Agenda-setting does not occur naturally but results from media decisions under specific political contexts (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Although Australian media claim independence, their agendas often align with government priorities. In *China Tonight*, coverage evolved significantly across years: in 2021, geopolitical tensions and institutional rivalry dominated; in 2022, social and cultural themes emerged; by 2023, everyday life and livelihood issues became more prominent. This evolution reflects the media's ability to guide public attention and affirms McCombs & Shaw's opinion that "media construct maps of public cognition."

6. Conclusion and Significance

From 2021 to 2023, *China Tonight* presented a multi-layered issue structure with phase-based thematic focuses, showcasing the Australian media's capacity to modulate its agenda-setting practices. The program responded to national interests and political security while also emphasizing social and cultural topics, integrating both political attention and societal observation.

This study expands the application of agenda-setting theory in intercultural communication and offers new empirical insights

into how Australian media shape perceptions of China, potentially influencing public cognition.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides a systematic analysis of *China Tonight*, it has several limitations: the sample is limited to one program, excluding broader Australian media; the focus is mainly on topic frequency, without deeper analysis of tone, framing, or audience response; and the lack of audience-level data limits assessment of communication effects.

Future research can expand in three key areas. First, the sample can be diversified by including additional media outlets such as *SBS (Special Broadcasting Service)* and *The Australian*, allowing for cross-platform comparisons. Second, incorporating framing and emotion analysis—particularly through the lens of second-level agenda-setting—can provide deeper insights into how specific attributes and sentiments are constructed in media narratives. Third, integrating audience perspectives through surveys or interviews can help trace how Australians form their perceptions of China, thereby completing the communication cycle and enriching the understanding of media effects.

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