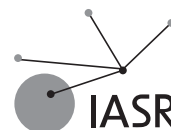




International Area Studies Review
2026, Vol. 29(3) 331–351
© Center for International Area Studies 2026
<https://doi.org/10.69473/iasr.2026.29.3.331>



Article

What Makes “Korea”? A Multidimensional Comparison of South Korea’s National Image in U.S., Chinese, and Japanese News, 2023–2025

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Abstract

Foreign news coverage is the primary channel through which most overseas publics encounter a country, yet national image research has typically relied on single favorability or sentiment scores and on single-country, single-event designs. This study constructed a balanced panel of Korea-related coverage from eighteen leading news outlets in the United States, China, and Japan between July 2023 and June 2025, and compared 33,409 articles along three dimensions: coverage domain, image valence, and referent of evaluation. Classification used a large language model pipeline validated through dual human coding, cross-model checks, and design-weighted measurement error correction. First, cross-national differences in domain composition were large overall ($V = .252$), with similar cross-national differentiation across periods. Second, evaluation diverged within the same domain: only Chinese coverage over-represented security negativity, cultural positivity dominant in the U.S. and Japanese press was suppressed in China, and economic evaluation ran in opposite directions in Japan and China. Third, during the martial law crisis coverage in all three country panels shifted toward politics while evaluative trajectories remained country-specific, distinguishing shared issue attention from evaluative refraction. The study operationalizes the news-mediated national image as a compositional structure and offers a validated template for cross-national large language model classification.

Keywords

National image, International news, Comparative media systems, Framing, Large language models, Public diplomacy

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Introduction

A country's international standing depends partly on its capacity to shape foreign publics' preferences through culture, values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2008). Because most publics encounter other countries through mediated representations, foreign news helps shape the visibility and evaluation of these soft-power resources. South Korea presents an instructive case. Its rise to international influence reflects sustained diplomacy as well as economic growth (Patterson & Choi, 2018), and Hallyu exemplifies non-Western cultural attraction (Jin, 2021). Yet Korea also faces North Korean security threats and U.S.–China competition. During the observation period, its first martial law declaration since democratization in 1987 and the ensuing presidential impeachment attracted intensive international coverage. The coexistence of cultural attraction, security tension, economic dynamism, and political conflict makes Korea's image a potentially multidimensional composition.

Among the external gazes that constitute Korea's image, the news media of the United States, China, and Japan carry particular weight. These three countries are not only the states most deeply entangled in Korea's security and economy; they also embody sharply different media systems, namely a liberal commercial press, media under a party-state, and a press in which the *kisha club* system coexists with partisan differentiation between conservative and progressive outlets (Buchmeier, 2024; Hallin & Mancini, 2017; Stockmann, 2011). They thus form a theoretically meaningful set of contrasts for observing how the same Korea is represented as it passes through different institutional lenses. At a moment when the regional order of Northeast Asia is being reshaped by the U.S.–Korea alliance, U.S.–China competition, and the vicissitudes of Korea's bilateral relations with China and Japan, a systematic comparison of how the three countries' media represent Korea offers a window not only for media research but for reading Korea's position within the regional order.

Existing research leaves three gaps. First, aggregate favorability and sentiment measures cannot distinguish the domain and target of evaluation; opposing elements can cancel out, obscuring Korea's simultaneous attraction and tension. Second, studies of foreign coverage of Korea often examine one country's press or a single issue such as THAAD (e.g., Jiang et al., 2021). Large-scale, longitudinal comparisons using a common classification scheme across countries remain uncommon. Third, although large language models can reduce the cost of multilingual content analysis (Gilardi et al., 2023), cross-national applications rarely combine human validation with correction for measurement error that may vary by language and country.

This study addresses these gaps with a balanced panel of Korea-related coverage from six leading outlets in each of the United States, China, and Japan. It analyzes 33,409 articles published between July 2023 and June 2025, using large language model classification and human validation to measure coverage domain, image valence, and evaluative referent. The analysis compares national panels' domain compositions, evaluative directions and targets within domains, and changes across the twenty-four-month window. Temporal comparisons describe persistence and variation rather than identify causal event effects; the martial law declaration serves as a reference point for interpretation.

The contributions of this study can be discussed on three levels. Theoretically, by operationalizing the news-mediated national image not as a single favorability score but as a combination of domain, evaluative direction, and evaluative target, and by implementing this conceptualization empirically at scale, the study builds a bridge between national image research, the agenda-setting and framing traditions in international news research (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and the comparative media systems perspective. Methodologically, it presents a large language model classification pipeline equipped with a full validation sequence,

from codebook development through dual independent coding and a consensus gold set to cross-model validation and design-weighted measurement error correction, demonstrating a reproducible path by which multilingual comparative news research can scale. Practically, it provides systematic evidence on which domains of Korea each country's press represents in which evaluative direction, and can thereby inform the design of public diplomacy and national image strategies differentiated by country.

Theoretical Background

News-Mediated National Image: From a Single Aggregate to a Multidimensional Composition

The central concept of this study, national image, refers to the totality of cognitive and evaluative representations that foreign publics and elites hold of a country; as Boulding (1959) observed early on, actors in international relations respond not to the country itself but to their image of it, which gives the image a political reality of its own. Among the many channels through which national images form, foreign news coverage is the primary raw material, because for most publics other countries are objects mediated by news rather than direct experience. International communication research has refined this mediation process within the extensions of agenda-setting theory: beyond the first-level proposition that the amount of coverage determines an object's salience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the attribute agenda-setting proposition, that which attributes of an object are conveyed in which evaluative tone shapes the content of public perception, has been applied to national images, yielding empirical evidence that the volume and tone of foreign news are systematically associated with public perceptions of the country concerned (Wanta et al., 2004). A two-decade analysis of U.S. coverage of China found a qualified relationship: the association between economic-threat salience and perceptions of China as a threat was marginally significant overall but significant among Democrats (Zheng et al., 2025).

Multidimensionality is established in perception research, including the functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional components of Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) four-dimensional model. What remains less developed is compositional measurement in news coverage at scale. Aggregate sentiment scores and single-item favorability measures facilitate comparison but obscure internal differences: a country's culture can appear attractive, its politics unstable, and its economy dynamic simultaneously. Offsetting these elements can assign similar scores to fundamentally different image structures. Korea's combination of Hallyu and geopolitical tension makes this limitation particularly consequential.

This study therefore approaches the news-mediated national image not as a single favorability but as a selective representation of a country's functional, normative, and affective attributes, and measures its composition in news as the combination of three dimensions. The first is the domain dimension: which area of Korea an article covers. The second is the image valence dimension: in which direction the article evaluates Korea. The third is the referent dimension: toward which Korean target, whether the nation as a whole, the government and its institutions, firms and industry, cultural content, or citizens and individuals, that evaluation is directed. The referent dimension extends the attribute agenda-setting logic one step further: if attributes reach publics in an evaluative tone, that tone attaches to identifiable targets within the country, and which target absorbs the evaluation is itself part of the image's composition. Measuring national image as the combination of these three dimensions converts the aggregate question of which country

covers Korea more favorably into the compositional question of which direction of image forms around which target in which domain, and cross-national comparison becomes a comparison of compositional structures rather than of the heights of scores.

Selection and Framing in International News: The Mechanisms of Refraction

If national images are mediated by news, the next question is by what logic that news is made. The classic achievements of international news research have shown that coverage of foreign countries is a product of systematic selection rather than a neutral reflection of reality. News value research established that factors such as cultural proximity, negativity, and relevance to elite nations determine which foreign events become news (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), a catalogue of factors since revisited for the contemporary news environment (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017), and gatekeeping research formalized this selection as a structured process operating in layers, beyond individual journalists' judgments, through organizational routines, market conditions, ideology, and state-level forces (Shoemaker et al., 2001). Framing theory adds the dimension of how selected events are narrativized: framing is the process of selecting and highlighting particular aspects of reality so as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993), and the same event becomes a story with different evaluative implications depending on which frame it passes through.

We use 'refraction' as a theory-informed analytical metaphor for the context-dependent selection and evaluation of Korea-related news. The term draws together established insights from news selection and framing research; it does not denote a separate causal theory or an independently measured mechanism.

Applied to cross-national comparison, this perspective implies that differences among countries' coverage of the same target state can arise at two levels. One is the level of selection, of what is covered: which domains of the target country enter the news agenda varies with each country's news values and its structural relationship to the target, and the domain dimension of this study captures it. The other is the level of framing, of how it is covered: the same events in the same domain are narrativized into different combinations of evaluative direction and evaluative target within each country's political and cultural context, and the combination of valence and referent captures it. Given the dynamics of mediated public diplomacy, whereby international news tends to frame other countries in directions resonant with the home country's foreign policy interests (Entman, 2008), differences at the framing level can be expected to reflect each country's structure of interests more directly than differences at the selection level.

In this study the distinction between these two levels forms the backbone of the analytic design. If cross-national differences appear mainly at the selection level, the national differences in Korea's image reduce to differences in areas of interest; if they appear at the framing level as well, a deeper differentiation exists in which evaluation diverges within the same area. Moreover, a major event may act asymmetrically on the two levels: even when the scale of an event overwhelms each country's selection logic and agendas concentrate on a common issue, the logic of framing is rooted in each country's structural conditions and may change more slowly or persist. This possibility of asymmetry is what justifies tracking selection and framing separately over time.

Comparative Media Systems and the U.S., Chinese, and Japanese Press

If each country's selection and framing are embedded in structural conditions, a framework is needed to systematize the cross-national differences in those conditions. Comparative media

systems theory classifies media systems by the relationship between the press and politics, market structure, and the development of professionalism, and examines how these configurations shape news production (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). The three countries of this study present sharp contrasts in this respect. The U.S. press is the exemplar of the liberal model combining commercial competition with professional norms, tending to produce event-driven and evaluative coverage. The Chinese media operate under a party-state in which external reporting is tuned to diplomatic interests and the logic of propaganda, and despite marketization, control operates the more finely the more politically sensitive the issue (Stockmann, 2011), with commercialized nationalist outlets such as the *Global Times* actively curating geopolitical narratives (Liu, 2022). The Japanese press is a distinctive system in which the *kisha club* system structures relations with sources while conservative and progressive partisan differentiation coexists (Buchmeier, 2024; Freeman, 2000), characterized by thick, continuous attention to neighboring countries and a cautious tone. Recognizing the limits of applying the original Western-centered typology to other settings (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), and noting recent comparative evidence that media systems remain structuring forces in the digital environment even as their configurations shift (Humprecht et al., 2022), this study characterizes the three countries not by forcing them into existing types but by the differences in their press-state relations and in the structure of their relations with Korea.

The expectation this framework yields is as follows. If media systems and the structure of bilateral relations govern the logic of news production, cross-national differences in Korea coverage should appear not as the happenstance of individual events but as persistent patterns, and those patterns should cohere with the logic of each system: in the United States, event responsiveness and normative evaluativeness driven by news values; in China, strategic modulation according to diplomatic interests and the withholding of evaluation; in Japan, continuity grounded in neighboring-country attention and differentiation by area. It should be noted, however, that the design of this study does not directly test these system-level explanatory factors; comparative media systems theory serves here not as a source of deductive hypotheses but as a theoretical frame for interpreting observed patterns.

Studies of foreign coverage of Korea commonly focus on one country's press or a particular event. Even cross-national work, such as Jiang et al.'s (2021) comparison of China, the United States, and South Korea during the THAAD episode, concentrates on a single issue and limited period. Survey-based national image research and news content analysis have developed largely separately, with few large-scale compositional analyses of coverage. Recent computational work in area studies also uses an aggregate sentiment dimension (Kim & Kim, 2024). The present study extends this literature through a twenty-four-month, eighteen-outlet panel measured across domains, valence, and referents with a common multilingual classification scheme.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are organized along the two levels distinguished in the theoretical background, selection and framing, and the axis of time.

First, at the level of selection: if the three countries' media systems and structures of relations with Korea differ, then the basic composition of which domains of Korea are covered and in which direction they are evaluated should differ across countries to begin with. This is the point of departure for comparing image composition.

RQ1. How do the domain composition and the distribution of image valence of Korea-related coverage differ across the U.S., Chinese, and Japanese press?

Next, differentiation at the framing level does not reveal itself in the comparison of basic composition alone. Even when countries cover the same area in similar proportions, if the direction and target of evaluation combine differently within it, the substantive difference in image resides inside the domain.

RQ2. Within the same coverage domain, how do image valence and referent combine differently in the press of the three countries?

Finally, structural and event-based explanations part ways on the axis of time. Because the observation period includes both ordinary times and a period of political upheaval, we can examine whether each country's image composition persists across periods, and if it changes, how differently it changes at the selection level and the framing level.

RQ3. How stably is the composition of Korea's national image maintained, or how does it change, in each country's press from July 2023 through June 2025?

As noted above, the temporal analysis is descriptive: differences before and after events are not interpreted causally, and events serve only as reference points for reading change.

Methods

Data and Outlet Panel

The data comprise all Korea-related articles produced over the twenty-four months from July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2025 by eighteen news outlets, six per country, in the United States, China, and Japan. Outlets were purposively sampled so that the internal diversity of each country's media system would be represented. Because sampling was purposive rather than probabilistic, references to the U.S., Chinese, and Japanese press in what follows denote these sampled leading outlets rather than each country's press as a whole. For the United States, the panel comprises wire services (Reuters¹, AP), national dailies (The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times), and broadcast news (CNN); for China, the official news agency and central outlets (Xinhua, People's Daily Online, CCTV), a commercialized official outlet (Huanqiu/Global Times), and news agency and digital outlets (China News Service, The Paper); for Japan, national dailies spanning the conservative-progressive spectrum (Sankei, Asahi, Mainichi), a wire service (Jiji Press), a national newspaper network portal aggregating Kyodo News and regional dailies (47NEWS), and broadcast news (TBS). The observation period consists of twelve months of ordinary times before the political upheaval (W1: July 2023 to June 2024) and twelve months including it (W2: July 2024 to June 2025), forming a two-wave structure that permits comparison across periods. Treating 47NEWS as a single outlet is a design choice examined in the robustness checks: excluding it leaves all key indicators essentially unchanged (e.g., Japanese cultural positivity .592 to .599). Broadcast-outlet material (CNN, TBS) was collected as website text, including article text and video descriptions, rather than full broadcast transcripts.

The 73,537 raw articles collected were cleaned in sequential stages. After removing articles outside the outlet panel (22,549), filtering broadcast material by author and format criteria (1,274), and dropping invalid dates (6), we successively removed press releases and syndicated wire copy (2,279), exact URL and full-text duplicates within outlets (719), near-duplicates identified by character n-gram cosine similarity ($\geq .95$) within outlet-month blocks and removed

after case-by-case adjudication (911), and articles from wire services' syndication-only channels (860), yielding a final hard-cleaned sample of 44,939 articles. This sample constitutes a balanced panel observed without missing cells across all 432 cells of eighteen outlets by twenty-four months, and the rules and counts of every removal stage were logged at each step. We note that a small number of press release-type syndicated items passed the cleaning stages and remain in the data; the robustness checks confirmed that excluding them leaves the direction of the results unchanged.

Measurement: Domain, Valence, and Referent

The measurement instrument is a codebook (v1.3) revised three times through pilot coding of 180 articles and dual validation coding. Classification follows a hierarchical order of judgment. First, the relevance judgment classifies the standing of Korea in an article into four categories, central, substantial, peripheral, and irrelevant, with only central and substantial included in the analysis. Second, the Korea-scope judgment distinguishes whether the Korea in question is South Korea, North Korea, or both, with only South-only and both-Koreas articles included. Third, for included articles, the primary domain is classified into politics and diplomacy (D1), security and military affairs (D2), economy, industry, and technology (D3), society and institutions (D4), culture, tourism, and sports (D5), and other (D7). Fourth, image valence is coded on a three-point scale as the evaluative impression an article forms of its Korean target, negative (-1), neutral (0), or positive (+1); a codified rule treats the dry conveyance of negative facts as neutral, separating the negativity of events from the evaluativeness of narration. Fifth, the referent identifies the Korean target of evaluation as the nation and society at large (RF1), the government and political institutions (RF2), firms and industry (RF3), cultural content (RF4), citizens and individuals (RF5), or no identifiable target (RF6). A mixed flag marking articles in which positive and negative evaluations coexist occurred at a low rate and was retained only as an exploratory auxiliary record, not an analysis variable.

Human Validation Coding and Reliability

The gold set that anchors measurement was constructed as follows. From the hard-cleaned sample we drew 600 articles stratified for even coverage of outlets and periods (540 articles at fifteen per outlet per wave, plus 60 from the review pool) with a fixed random seed, and two coders coded them independently, blind to each other, in sheets arranged in different random orders. Inter-coder reliability was computed with Krippendorff's α (Table 1): primary domain .924, Korea scope .753, referent .746, and the binary include-exclude relevance judgment .729, so the core axes of the scheme met the .70 benchmark. Valence reached .692 with ordinal weighting, above the conventional floor for drawing tentative conclusions (.667; Krippendorff, 2004) but short of .70; the majority of disagreements were traced to uneven application of the rule on dry conveyance of negative facts, and the rule was reinforced in the codebook accordingly. The remaining ambiguity on this axis persists in the consensus gold standard itself; the measurement error correction described in the next subsection addresses classifier error against that standard, not disagreement between human coders. The four-category relevance α (.444) reflects disagreement concentrated on the boundary between the two excluded categories, peripheral and irrelevant, and is to be distinguished from the reliability of the binary include-exclude judgment that governs analysis membership; both figures are reported side by side. The 220 articles on which the two coders agreed completely were confirmed as they stood, and all disagreements were resolved in full consensus sessions, finalizing the 600-article gold set.

Table 1. Measurement quality: Intercode reliability and LLM classification performance

Variable	n	Intercode α	LLM accuracy	Inter-model α
Relevance, 4 categories	600	.444	—	—
Relevance, binary include/exclude	600	.729	.922	—
Korea scope	383	.753	.905	.915
Primary domain	349	.924	.928	.892
Valence, 3-point	349	.692	.809	.701
Referent	349	.746	.804	.731

Note. n refers to the subset coded by both coders; LLM accuracy is computed on the hierarchical evaluation subsets of the gold set (relevance 600; Korea scope 409; domain, valence, and referent 387). Inter-model α uses 379 paired records for each reported variable. Valence α values are ordinaly weighted. Primary model gemini-3.7-flash; cross-model gpt-5.6-luna.

Large Language Model Classification and Validation

Classification of the full sample employed a large language model within a procedure combining performance evaluation, cross-validation, and measurement error correction (cf. Gilardi et al., 2023; on annotation risks, Lin & Zhang, 2026). The primary model, gemini-3.7-flash, classified each article from its original-language text without translation, at temperature 0, with structured JSON output and reasoning disabled, using a fixed prompt containing the full codebook; the prompt’s hash value was logged for each run, and the served model identifier was recorded for each article. Performance against the 600-article gold set was accuracy .922 for the binary include-exclude judgment, .928 for primary domain, .905 for Korea scope, .809 for valence, and .804 for referent, meeting all pre-specified benchmarks (.90 for inclusion and domain, .75 for valence) (Table 1). To probe the circularity concern arising from the fact that codebook-based suggestions were consulted during consensus, performance was computed separately on the subset of 220 articles where the human coders had independently agreed in full; accuracy there was higher, not lower (.974 for domain, .851 for valence), providing additional reassurance that performance was not inflated by circularity, though fully agreed articles are plausibly easier cases, so this check is suggestive rather than conclusive.

To check that the classification scheme is not an artifact of one model, the gold set was re-classified with a cross-model from a different family (gpt-5.6-luna) and inter-model agreement computed: α .915 for Korea scope, .892 for primary domain, .731 for referent, and .701 (ordinal) for valence, a level of agreement broadly comparable to human intercode reliability, higher for Korea scope and valence and slightly lower for domain and referent. Because independently trained models can nonetheless share errors, this serves as an auxiliary robustness check rather than an independent validation. The primary model then classified the entire hard-cleaned sample of 44,939 articles; seven articles blocked by the API’s safety filter were coded manually by the researchers against the codebook and flagged as such in the data, leaving zero articles unclassified.

To assess whether classification error distorts cross-national comparison, we applied an approximate correction drawing on design-based supervised learning (Egami et al., 2023). Within each country-by-sampling-stratum cell, bias was the difference between human and model category shares, each calculated among articles meeting the respective label source’s relevance and scope criteria. These differences were weighted to the analysis sample’s stratum composition and added to the outlet-equal-weighted estimates. This is a stratified approximation, not the

original influence-function estimator. We used 10,000 joint bootstrap replicates (seed 20260919), independently resampling six outlets with replacement within country and paired human–model gold records within country-by-stratum cells at their original sizes (180 core and 20 review records per country), with analysis-stratum weights held fixed. Where either eligible denominator was zero, weights were renormalized over available strata; the U.S. correction therefore relies on its core stratum because no eligible gold records occurred in its review stratum. Japan’s review stratum had only one eligible gold record per label source. Table 3 reports percentile 95% intervals, conditional on the observed gold labels and outlet panels; they do not capture residual human-coding ambiguity or unidentified error in empty strata.

Analysis Sample and Analytic Strategy

Applying the relevance criterion (central or substantial) and the Korea-scope criterion (South-only or both Koreas) to the full classification yielded a final analysis sample of 33,409 articles, 74.3% of the hard-cleaned sample. By country the sample comprises 16,042 Chinese, 12,982 Japanese, and 4,385 U.S. articles; the relatively low U.S. inclusion rate stems from the characteristics of broadcast-based collection, which sweeps in world-news items that mention Korea only peripherally. Although the exclusion rules are based on Korea’s relevance rather than directly on topic or tone, they may still affect the composition of retained articles. Equal outlet weighting limits the influence of unequal outlet volumes but does not eliminate possible selection effects within outlets. One of the 432 outlet-month cells of the analysis sample (the Los Angeles Times in July 2023) contains no qualifying articles; U.S. aggregates for that month average the remaining five outlets.

The basic design of the analysis is as follows. The main analysis of cross-national comparison weights outlets equally: within each country we compute compositional shares for each of the six outlets and average them with equal weights, so that the volume of wire services and large outlets does not dominate the country value, and confidence intervals for country-level estimates are based on between-outlet variance. Article-weighted results are reported in parallel as auxiliary analyses. The magnitude of cross-national compositional differences is assessed with chi-square tests and Cramér’s V, and the structure of country-by-valence combinations within domains with adjusted standardized residuals; given the large sample, interpretation centers on effect sizes and actual differences in proportions rather than statistical significance. Because articles are clustered within outlets and article-level test statistics ignore this dependence, we additionally report outlet-cluster percentile intervals for the headline effect sizes (10,000 replicates) and treat adjusted standardized residuals as descriptive devices for locating over- and under-represented cells rather than as formal tests. The temporal analysis averages outlet-by-month compositional shares with equal outlet weights within country and aggregates them into eight quarterly points, and differences before and after specific events are not interpreted causally. Finally, the stability of the results was examined under six robustness conditions, excluding short articles, excluding low-confidence classifications, splitting the two waves, resampling to equal sample sizes across countries, leave-one-out deletion of each outlet, and comparison of weighting schemes, together with the measurement error correction described above. For qualitative interpretation, 32 illustrative articles were purposively drawn from the country-by-domain-by-valence cells central to the quantitative findings; they serve illustrative purposes only.

Results

The analysis sample comprises 33,409 articles (74.3%) that met the relevance and Korea-scope criteria out of the hard-cleaned balanced panel of 44,939, with 16,042 Chinese, 12,982 Japanese, and 4,385 U.S. articles, and 17,224 in W1 and 16,185 in W2. So that differences in sample size across countries do not drive the results, all main analyses weight outlets equally, computing each of the six outlets’ compositional shares within a country and averaging them with equal weights; article-weighted results and measurement error corrections are reported with the robustness checks. Given the large sample, interpretation centers on effect sizes (Cramér’s V) and actual differences in proportions rather than statistical significance.

Basic Composition by Country: Domains Diverge Widely, Evaluation Moderately (RQ1)

Looking first at which areas of Korea the three countries’ presses cover, cross-national differences in domain composition were substantial ($\chi^2 = 4,257.98$, $df = 10$, $V = .252$, outlet-cluster bootstrap 95% CI [.20, .33]). As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, Japanese coverage exhibits a dual structure concentrated in politics and diplomacy (.464) and culture, tourism, and sports (.249) while economy, industry, and technology is the lowest of the three countries at .059; Chinese coverage combines politics and diplomacy (.383) with the highest share of society and institutions among the three (.234), marking a distinctive representation of Korea centered on incidents, accidents, and social problems; and U.S. coverage is the most evenly distributed, with no domain exceeding .26. Cross-national differentiation was similar in magnitude in W1 and W2 ($V = .269$ and $V = .248$). This indicates persistent differences between the country panels, not an absence of change in each country’s domain composition.

Table 2. Domain composition by country (equal outlet weights)

Domain	United States	China	Japan
Politics & diplomacy	0.252	0.383	0.464
Security & military	0.148	0.054	0.127
Economy, industry & technology	0.213	0.157	0.059
Society & institutions	0.177	0.234	0.100
Culture, tourism & sports	0.211	0.172	0.249

Note: $\chi^2(10) = 4,257.98$, $V = .252$, $N = 33,409$; D7 ($\leq .001$) omitted. 95% CIs are shown in Figure 1.

Turning to the direction of evaluation, cross-national differences in the distribution of image valence were smaller than for domains but distinct ($\chi^2 = 975.57$, $V = .121$, outlet-cluster 95% CI [.05, .21]; Table 3). The U.S. press is relatively high in both negativity (.183) and positivity (.237), giving it the largest share of evaluative coverage; the Chinese press reaches .732 neutral, the strongest de-evaluativization; and the Japanese press has the lowest negativity of the three (.096) with positivity (.195) at twice its negativity. Articles flagged as mixed amounted to 1.7% of the sample and were used only as an exploratory auxiliary indicator.

This distribution, however, is partly revised after measurement error correction. As detailed in the robustness section, correcting the classifier’s over-assignment of neutrality raises China’s negative share to a level comparable to that of the United States, with the bootstrap interval for

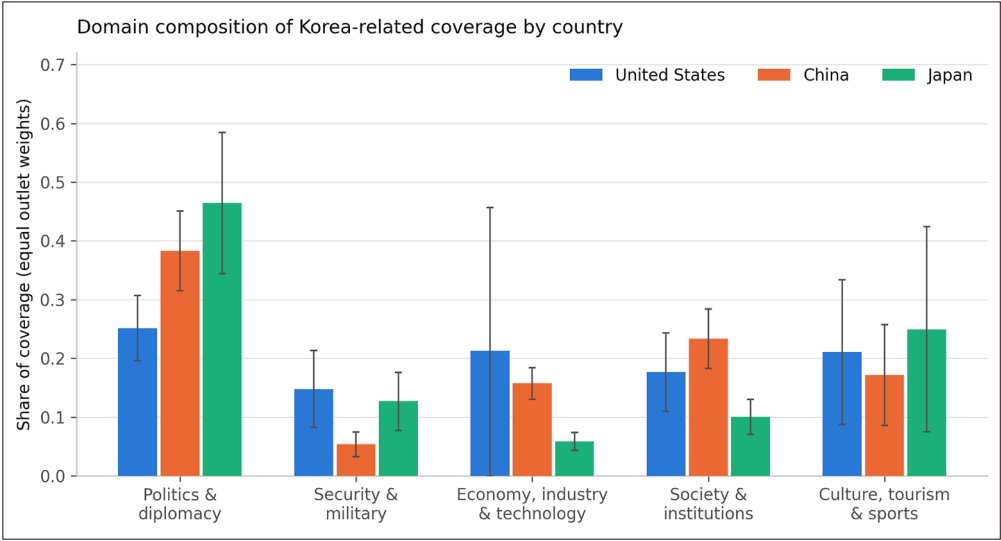


Figure 1. Domain composition by country with 95% confidence intervals

Table 3. Image valence composition by country (equal outlet weights; corrected values with 95% intervals in parentheses)

Country	Negative	Neutral	Positive
United States	0.183 (0.196 [.11, .29])	0.580 (0.573 [.43, .71])	0.237 (0.231 [.15, .31])
China	0.128 (0.216 [.15, .29])	0.732 (0.614 [.52, .71])	0.141 (0.170 [.09, .25])
Japan	0.096 (0.095 [.05, .15])	0.708 (0.624 [.52, .73])	0.195 (0.281 [.19, .38])

Note: $\chi^2(4) = 975.57, V = .121$. Corrected values add human–LLM bias differences stratified by country and sampling stratum, design-weighted to the analysis sample and added to the outlet-equal-weighted estimates; brackets are percentile 95% intervals from 10,000 joint outlet and gold-set bootstrap replicates. See Methods for sparse-stratum handling.

the difference covering zero, so it would be unwarranted to assert that the U.S. press carries the highest negativity; the descriptive patterns that remain are the two-directional evaluativeness of the U.S. press, the continued majority share of neutral coverage in the Chinese panel, and the low negativity and positivity advantage of the Japanese press. China’s corrected neutral share is not the highest among the three panels. The observation that China’s de-evaluativization manifests as the neutralization of evaluation rather than an absence of negativity is taken up again in the within-domain analysis and the discussion.

Refraction Within the Same Domain: Same Area, Different Evaluation (RQ2)

The crux of RQ2 is whether the direction and target of evaluation combine differently even when the three countries cover the same area. Country-by-valence cross-tabulations within each domain, evaluated with adjusted standardized residuals on article-weighted counts (Table 4), confirmed cross-national differences in every domain, with a distinct pattern in each. Because articles are clustered within outlets, we additionally recomputed all within-domain shares with

equal outlet weights: every headline cell reported below is reproduced under that design, with outlet-cluster bootstrap intervals of .136 [.097, .183] for Chinese security negativity, .387 [.293, .470] for Chinese cultural positivity against .691 [.553, .808] in the U.S. and .540 [.424, .624] in Japan, .304 [.246, .381] for Japanese economic positivity, and .161 [.087, .230] for Chinese economic negativity. The article-weighted table thus serves as a descriptive map whose key contrasts survive design-based weighting.

Table 4. Country × Valence composition within domains (article weights; adjusted standardized residuals in parentheses)

Domain	Country	n	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Politics & diplomacy	United States	1,148	0.237 (+8.6)	0.706 (-9.6)	0.057 (+3.5)
Politics & diplomacy	China	6,661	0.141 (-3.1)	0.840 (+8.2)	0.020 (-10.8)
Politics & diplomacy	Japan	5,684	0.144 (-1.7)	0.800 (-2.9)	0.055 (+9.0)
Security & military	United States	683	0.026 (-3.2)	0.947 (+2.4)	0.026 (+0.4)
Security & military	China	819	0.140 (+14.0)	0.833 (-11.9)	0.027 (+0.6)
Security & military	Japan	1,543	0.012 (-9.8)	0.966 (+8.6)	0.022 (-0.8)
Economy, industry & technology	United States	1,174	0.081 (-7.2)	0.716 (+5.7)	0.204 (-0.4)
Economy, industry & technology	China	2,467	0.188 (+9.3)	0.630 (-2.8)	0.182 (-4.7)
Economy, industry & technology	Japan	721	0.098 (-3.8)	0.599 (-3.0)	0.302 (+6.8)
Society & institutions	United States	651	0.292 (+8.1)	0.682 (-5.9)	0.026 (-2.9)
Society & institutions	China	4,117	0.152 (-7.6)	0.800 (+7.2)	0.048 (-0.5)
Society & institutions	Japan	1,238	0.202 (+2.5)	0.734 (-3.7)	0.064 (+2.7)
Culture, tourism & sports	United States	729	0.047 (+1.5)	0.322 (-6.5)	0.631 (+5.9)
Culture, tourism & sports	China	1,974	0.059 (+6.3)	0.573 (+14.9)	0.367 (-17.1)
Culture, tourism & sports	Japan	3,795	0.023 (-6.8)	0.385 (-9.7)	0.592 (+12.2)

Note: Adjusted standardized residuals ($|z| \geq 2$ marking over- (+) or under- (–) representation) are computed at the article level and do not account for clustering within outlets; they serve as descriptive locators, not formal tests. Domain-level V values are reported in the text.

The sharpest contrast appears in the security and military domain ($V = .181$). Negative evaluation is over-represented only in Chinese coverage (negative share 14.0%, $z = +14.0$), more than five times the U.S. (2.6%) and Japanese (1.2%) levels. The illustrative cases locate negative evaluation in regional military arrangements and particular South Korean defense policies, rather than in an undifferentiated judgment of Korea as a nation. A Global Times report carried by Huanqiu (2023b) on July 12 discussed possible deployment of a U.S. mid-range missile system with U.S. Forces Korea, emphasized its reach to Beijing, and characterized Korean media advocacy as hype. People’s Daily Online (2024), reproducing China National Defense News, described funding omissions and delays in Korea’s light aircraft carrier program as signs of uncertain prospects. These examples frame Korea’s strategic position and defense-policy performance through threat, tension, and setback.

The culture, tourism, and sports domain shows refraction in the opposite direction ($V =$

.156). Positive evaluation dominates in the United States and Japan (63.1% and 59.2%; $z = +5.9$ and $+12.2$), whereas in China positivity is suppressed to 36.7% ($z = -17.1$). The qualitative contrast is equally clear. *Asahi Shimbun* (2024) interviewed novelist Han Kang about her literary work, while *Sankei Shimbun* (2025) carried an ORICON entertainment report celebrating ENHYPEN's awards performance and translating acceptance speeches. These examples show cultural appreciation circulating through outlets with different political profiles, without establishing a shared editorial stance. Chinese cases instead covered handball results (Xinhua, 2023), a Go tournament rules dispute (China News Service, 2025), and celebrity controversy (Huanqiu, 2025); none of the purposively selected Chinese cultural cases foregrounded Hallyu's attractiveness. The referent combination also differentiates most strongly in culture ($V = .200$): Japan overwhelmingly centers cultural content itself (RF4, .711), whereas China's largest share goes to citizens and individuals (RF5, .567; content .412), cohering with coverage of athletes and entertainers rather than the appeal of works.

The economy, industry, and technology domain shows evaluative direction split by country ($V = .120$). Positivity is over-represented in Japan (30.2%, $z = +6.8$) and negativity in China (18.8%, $z = +9.3$). *Sankei Shimbun* (2023) described opportunities for Korean defense exports and quoted President Yoon's account of a transition from aid and import dependence to advanced fighter production and exports. Other Japanese cases covered the Korea-UAE economic partnership agreement in a Kyodo report (*Sankei Shimbun*, 2024b), expanding Korea-bound air routes (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 2025), and Korean cosmetics in an ORICON feature (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 2024). These include syndicated accounts of achievement and consumption, not solely newspaper-authored endorsements. Chinese cases emphasized steel-sector pressures including U.S. tariffs (*People's Daily Online*, 2025) and Korea's departure from the global GDP top ten, contrasting its economy with China's much larger scale (Huanqiu, 2023a). Both conveyed negative assessments through Korean media attribution, supplemented in the steel-sector report by explicitly evaluative narration.

The politics and diplomacy domain has the smallest effect size ($V = .086$), but differentiation is consistent: the U.S. press over-represents negativity (23.7%, $z = +8.6$) and under-represents neutrality; the Chinese press over-represents neutrality (84.0%) and under-represents positivity ($z = -10.8$); the Japanese press over-represents positivity ($z = +9.0$). The illustrative U.S. cases are consistent with a democratic watchdog orientation, an interpretation rather than a demonstrated causal explanation. They reported demands for presidential indictment (*Associated Press*, 2025) and the legislature's reversal of martial law in a CNN video description (CNN, 2024). Before the crisis, *The New York Times* (2023) called Korea "Asia's most vibrant democracy" in an account of protest culture. Japanese political positivity appears at junctures congruent with Japan's interests, including Korea-Cuba normalization as a constraint on North Korea's diplomatic space (*Sankei Shimbun*, 2024a) and the evacuation of 51 Japanese nationals by a Korean military aircraft (TBS News DIG, 2023). In society and institutions ($V = .088$), U.S. negativity is over-represented (29.2%, $z = +8.1$). Cases connect specific events to safety, gender, and labor concerns: the Itaewon evidence-destruction verdicts (*The New York Times*, 2024), deepfake sexual exploitation (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2024), and migrant workers' vulnerability in an *Associated Press* factory-fire report carried by the *Los Angeles Times* (2024).

Considering the distribution of evaluative targets together, cross-national differences in referent combination are largest in culture ($V = .200$), followed by economy ($V = .180$) and society ($V = .156$), and small in politics and security (V around .09); in particular, political evaluation concentrates on the government and political institutions (RF2) in all three countries, confirming that in that domain the difference between countries centers on the direction of evaluation rather than its target. The detailed exposition in the text therefore focused on the cultural domain, where

the differentiation of target combination is most pronounced. In sum, the answer to RQ2 is that the differentiation of national image is not the aggregate question of which country covers Korea more negatively but the compositional question of which direction of evaluation combines with which target in which domain.

Temporal Stability and Change: Shared Political Attention, Country-Specific Evaluative Paths (RQ3)

Examining compositional change across eight quarterly points for RQ3, the agenda dimension and the evaluation dimension traced different trajectories over time. In domain composition, the share of politics and diplomacy surged in all three countries from the martial law quarter of 2024Q4 (U.S. .12→.33, China .20→.43, Japan .34→.49), reaching .34, .61, and .67 respectively by 2025Q2 (Figure 2a). Yet even as levels rose together, the ordering of political coverage shares, Japan, China, and the United States, held across the entire observation window, and the W1-to-W2 change in composition (article-weighted total variation distance) was China .277, Japan .203, and the U.S. .185. The three panels thus shared a shift toward political coverage, which remained elevated through the end of observation, while retaining distinct domain distributions.

The temporal path of evaluation, by contrast, diverged by country (Figure 2b). Tracking the net valence score, the positive share minus the negative share, by quarter: the United States alone crossed into negative territory (2024Q4 $-.08$, 2025Q1 $-.11$) before rebounding to $+.15$ in 2025Q2, the quarter of the new administration, a sharp fall and sharp recovery; China fluctuated in a narrow band around zero ($-.07$ to $+.07$) across the whole window and, unlike the United States, did not turn negative during the crisis quarters; and Japan fell from $+.22$ in 2024Q3 to $+.04$ in 2025Q2, with a small rebound in the final quarter. These paths, an event-responsive American type, a low-variance Chinese net-valence pattern, and lower post-crisis Japanese scores, stand in contrast to the shared increase in attention to politics.

Robustness and Measurement Error Correction

To check whether these results depend on analytic choices, we conducted six robustness checks and a measurement error correction. Across exclusion of short articles (under 80 characters of body text), exclusion of low-confidence classifications, separate analysis of W1 and W2, resampling to equal sample sizes across countries ($B = 200$), leave-one-out deletion of each of the eighteen outlets, and the comparison of article versus outlet weighting, the central domain-specific contrasts remained broadly consistent, although aggregate negativity rankings varied between periods. Excluding short articles increases Chinese security negativity ($.140 \rightarrow .161$) and cultural positivity ($.367 \rightarrow .423$); the latter narrows the cultural positivity gap with Japan. Further sensitivities were identified: the U.S. share of economy, industry, and technology moves from $.213$ to $.138$ depending on the inclusion of The Wall Street Journal (Note 1)², and the U.S. neutral share differs by about $.10$ across weighting schemes owing to wire service volume; the latter reconfirms the rationale for adopting equal outlet weighting as the main analysis.

The results of the measurement error correction are as follows. Applying bias differences stratified by country and sampling stratum, weighted to the analysis sample's composition (Table 3), domain composition remains essentially unchanged, with corrections within $.03$ for the Chinese and Japanese panels and within $.06$ for the U.S. panel, whereas for valence the classifier shows a systematic over-assignment of neutrality (neutral correction $-.118$ for China, $-.085$ for Japan). After correction, China's negative share rises from $.128$ to $.216$, comparable to that of the United States ($.196$): the bootstrap interval for the corrected China–U.S. difference ($+.02$, 95%

CI $[-.09, .14]$) covers zero. Japan's positive share increases from .195 to .281, providing grounds for the adjusted valence description given earlier. Cell-level correction of domain-by-valence combinations was not performed because the gold set contains only 8 to 41 articles per key cell; the direction of the key refraction cells, however, is reproduced in the human coding itself: within the gold set, human-coded positivity in Chinese culture articles is .24 against .71 for Japan, human-coded negativity reaches .18 in Chinese security and .21 in Chinese economy articles, and Japanese economic positivity reaches .38, though cell sizes are small ($n = 8\text{--}41$); the human-coded subset provides additional support for these contrasts, although the small cells preclude definitive cell-level validation.

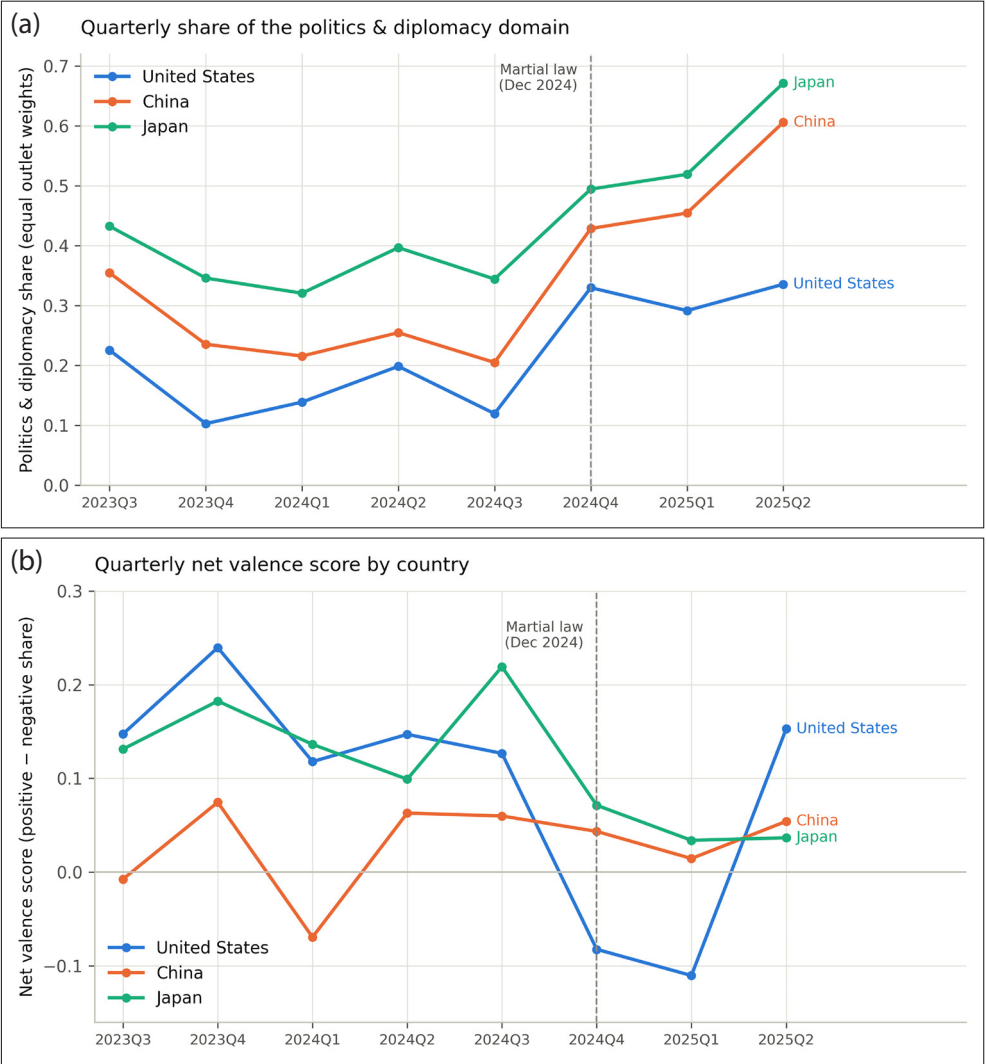


Figure 2. Quarterly trends: (a) the politics & diplomacy share; (b) the net valence score

Discussion

Shared Political Attention and Evaluative Refraction

This study analyzed 33,409 Korea-related articles produced over twenty-four months by eighteen leading outlets in the United States, China, and Japan as combinations of domain, evaluative direction, and evaluative target, in order to compare how Korea's news-based national image is constructed differently in the three countries. The results distinguish convergence in issue attention from country-specific evaluation. Here, convergence denotes a shared increase in political coverage, not uniformity in the full domain distributions. Even as all three countries sharply expanded political and diplomatic coverage during the martial law crisis, the ordering of political coverage shares remained Japan, China, and the United States across the entire window; the principal within-domain evaluative contrasts were also observed in both periods; and even the evaluative response to the crisis split into an American path of sharp fall and rebound, a Chinese path of limited net-valence variation, and a Japanese path of lower post-crisis scores. Shared political attention, in short, coexisted with evaluative refraction.

This result offers an empirical counterexample to the practice of approaching national image as a single favorability score. Had the three countries' evaluations been summarized in one aggregate indicator, the finding that the corrected negative shares of the United States and China are numerically similar would have led to the conclusion that the two countries hold similar images of Korea. The within-domain results, however, distinguish these panels: negative evaluation is overrepresented in U.S. political and social coverage and in Chinese security and economic coverage relative to the other panels (Table 4). These uncorrected contrasts concern evaluative propensities within domains, not the distribution of all negative articles across domains. The illustrative readings further suggest different evaluative contexts, involving democratic and safety norms in the U.S. cases and geopolitical tension and competition in the Chinese cases. That negativity of the same magnitude can carry different implications for national image depending on its composition is precisely the reason for a multidimensional approach.

Three Koreas: National Grammars of Representation

The three grammars summarize recurring patterns among the six sampled leading outlets in each country during July 2023–June 2025. They characterize these outlet panels, not entire national media systems or uniform practices across outlets, and remain interpretive hypotheses rather than demonstrated mechanisms. In the sampled U.S. outlets, Korea is above all an object of evaluation: within a reporting practice that expands individual events into structural problems, Korean politics and society are audited against democratic norms and safety standards, and even negative coverage proceeds from a watchdog's gaze that presupposes Korea as a member of the normative community. In the sampled Chinese outlets, Korea approaches a neutralized stage of events: explicit evaluation is often limited, while indirect tone-setting through quotation and syndication of Korean media, downward comparisons affirming China's advantage, and the selective exclusion of attraction narratives in the cultural domain may convey an evaluative orientation beneath apparent neutrality. In the sampled Japanese outlets, Korea wears different faces by area: politics is affirmed cautiously at junctures congruent with Japan's interests, while culture is consumed warmly across ideological lines, a dual structure sustained on the depth of neighboring-country attention.

These patterns in the sampled outlets cohere with the institutional logics of each media system: the observation matches the expectations that the liberal American model combining

commercial competition and professional norms yields event-responsive yet evaluative coverage, that Chinese media under a party-state yield de-evaluativized coverage modulated by strategic interests, and that the Japanese press, where the kisha club system coexists with conservative-progressive differentiation, yields continuous and domain-differentiated coverage. In particular, the suppression of cultural positivity in the Chinese press meshes with the policy context of bilateral relations since the restrictions on Korean cultural imports, and the dominance of cultural positivity in the Japanese press with the reception context of Hallyu's everyday normalization, suggesting that the construction of national images in international news is deeply embedded in the structure of bilateral relations rather than in any universal logic of news values. It bears repeating, however, that this study's design does not directly test these institutional explanations, which serve here as an interpretive frame; follow-up verification incorporating outlet-level variables is needed.

Measurement Implications: Indirect Negativity and Rereading Neutrality

One methodological finding of this study connects to its theoretical findings. Despite generally high performance against the gold set, the large language model classifier systematically over-assigned neutrality, and the bias was largest for Chinese articles. The qualitative readings suggest one possible explanation: selective quotation, syndication, and the arrangement of reported facts can convey an evaluative orientation without explicit editorial endorsement. The classifier may miss such indirect cues, but neither neutral coding nor classifier error alone establishes intentional withholding of evaluation. Two implications follow. First, in sentiment and tone analysis of international news, apparently neutral language may still carry indirect evaluative cues, so cross-national comparisons of neutral shares should be accompanied by measurement error correction and qualitative verification. Second, comparative research using large language model annotation should presuppose heterogeneity of bias across languages and countries and compute correction terms from a gold set stratified by country. The procedure adopted here, human validation, cross-model agreement, and design-weighted stratified correction, can serve as one workable standard for these requirements.

Practical Implications

For public diplomacy practitioners, the framework supports monitoring that distinguishes criticism of governments or security policies from evaluations of society and cultural content. This distinction can guide the choice between explaining institutional accountability, clarifying a policy, and supporting cultural exchange. Toward the United States, what matters is responding to norm-referenced evaluation rather than managing aggregate favorability: credible information about institutional accountability and democratic recovery may be especially relevant. Toward China, the structural blockage of cultural attraction resources must be faced squarely: where the appeal of Hallyu content is excluded from coverage frames, increases in content exports do not necessarily translate into image improvement, so materials deliverable within Chinese media frames, such as industrial and technological cooperation or people-to-people exchange, need to be cultivated. Toward Japan, the separation of spheres suggests examining whether cultural goodwill can buffer political conflict. The analysis of the martial law period also suggests the relevance of monitoring political coverage across countries during a crisis, although the data do not establish how long an effective response window lasts. These are applications suggested by the observed coverage patterns; their effectiveness requires separate evaluation.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study are as follows. First, the analysis rests on a balanced panel of eighteen outlets and does not represent the entirety of each country's media ecosystem; the wider digital-news environment is not comprehensively represented, and social media content is excluded. Including the transnational Reuters agency in the U.S. panel also limits attribution of that panel's patterns to a single national media system. Second, although measurement error was mitigated by design-weighted stratified correction, the correction is an approximation rather than the full influence-function estimator, and cell-level correction of domain-by-valence combinations could not be performed given the size of the gold set; moreover, the correction addresses classifier error against the consensus gold standard rather than residual ambiguity between human coders on the valence axis, and a fully independent revalidation of valence, for example through a hold-out sample coded without access to model output, remains a task for follow-up work. Third, content analysis of coverage alone cannot establish changes in actual public perception in each country; connecting coverage and perception is the task of follow-up survey research. Fourth, the observation window includes an exceptional period of political upheaval, so extending the temporal patterns found here to ordinary times calls for caution. Fifth, a small number of press release-type syndicated articles from one outlet survived the cleaning procedure; excluding them leaves the direction of the results unchanged, but we record it as a limitation of the collection and cleaning pipeline. For future research we propose multilevel analysis incorporating outlet-level variables (ownership, partisanship, international desk capacity), extension to target countries beyond Korea to test the generality of the representational grammars, and application of the same framework to social media.

Conclusion

By comparing 33,409 Korea-related articles from eighteen leading U.S., Chinese, and Japanese outlets between July 2023 and June 2025 along the three dimensions of domain, evaluative direction, and evaluative target, this study has shown that Korea's news-based national image is a matter not of the height of a single favorability score but of country-specific composition. The three panels shared increased attention to politics during the crisis period, but this did not erase cross-national differences in domain composition or evaluation. Within the sampled outlet panels, the Korea of U.S. news is an object of evaluation audited against democratic norms, the Korea of Chinese news is a stage of events often presented through restrained evaluative language, and the Korea of Japanese news is a neighbor with two faces, treated cautiously in politics and warmly in culture. This structure, in which one Korea is represented as three, is consistent with each country's media system and bilateral relationship rather than with events alone; the study accordingly suggests that national image strategy, too, must consist not of a single message but of plural strategies matched to each country's grammar of representation. In this sense, how these outlets refract Korea is also a record of where each places Korea within the shifting regional order of Northeast Asia, and reading that placement is where comparative media research and area studies meet.

AI Acknowledgment

The authors used Gemini for article classification, GPT for cross-model validation, and Fable for figure generation. The authors reviewed the outputs and assume full responsibility for the published work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in this research.

Funding

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2022S1A5C2A03093660) and supported by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2025.

Notes

1. Reuters is a British-origin transnational agency whose parent is headquartered in Toronto and whose news operations include New York (Thomson Reuters, 2025, p. 15). It was included in the U.S. panel for its U.S. news-market presence, North American corporate ties, and extensive Korea-related coverage. This sampling decision does not imply U.S. ownership or an exclusively American editorial orientation. The leave-one-out analysis assesses sensitivity to this inclusion.
2. The description of the U.S. press as evenly distributed across domains holds in every leave-one-out condition, but the point estimate of its economy-industry-technology share is sensitive to The Wall Street Journal's profile as an economic daily and should be interpreted with care.

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