Chapter 6

General discussion and conclusion

This dissertation presents a series of CDA analyses that investigate the representation of MIC in Chinese and US newspapers between 2006 and 2018. It includes three diachronic studies, which utilize corpus techniques to examine the changing representations of MIC over a period of 13 years. Additionally, a case study using framing theory explores the specific representation of MIC during the 2007 product scandal involving Mattel toys. In this chapter, I first recapitulate the main findings of the corpus-based studies, followed by a discussion of the relationship between the quantitative results and the detailed framing analysis of the Mattel toy recalls. Then I discuss methodological and theoretical implications for researching MIC. Finally, some avenues for further research are recommended.

6.1 A recapitulation of main findings

The first two studies (Chapters 2 and 3) combine CL and DHA. They demonstrate the topics and semantic prosodies related to MIC in Chinese and US newspapers respectively, mainly by examining the high-frequency noun lemmas and collocates. They also illustrate the discursive strategies of predication and perspectivization and the common linguistic devices. Utilizing those findings, the third study (Chapter 4) focuses on the comparison between the newspapers, which reveals the divergence in language use and the conflicting ideologies, especially in Periods 1 and 3. The fourth study (Chapter 5) is concerned with a framing analysis following
Entman’s classification. I will review the first three studies together and then the fourth study in the following sections.

6.1.1 Findings of the diverse and dynamic representations of MIC

Chapters 2-4 demonstrate the topics (i.e., Development, Economy, Geography, Politics, Production, Society, and Time) and the semantic prosodies associated with MIC+N collocations in Chinese and US newspapers. Chapters 2 and 3 also illustrate the use of discursive strategies of predication and perspectivization in topics and semantic prosodies.

Through the categorization of the high-frequency noun lemmas, the chapters show that Geography is the most common topic in Chinese newspapers, mainly focusing on the worldwide manufacturing and trading environment, while Economy is the most common topic in US newspapers with much attention to the trade with China. There are differences in the content covered under these topics. Geography highlights the models of industrial upgrading in Chinese newspapers and the major trading partners in US newspapers. In Chinese newspapers, Economy shows the development of Chinese companies and their increasing global market shares, while, US newspapers emphasize the concerns of the US companies due to the competing capacities and illegal behaviors of Chinese companies. The difference in content is also shown in other topics, and Politics is a noteworthy one. The Chinese institutions and policies are depicted contrastingly. For example, the Chinese government as the supporter vs. the controller of Chinese manufacturing, and the MIC 2025 plan as the pursuit for innovation and cooperation vs. the intention to dominate the high-technology fields. The studies also show the interdiscursivity of the topics by examining the collocates of the noun lemmas. In the Chinese corpus, the lemmas from the topic Industry often co-occur with those from the (sub-)topics of Product/Implementation/Institute, reflecting the influence of product scandals, high-tech innovation, and government support on the topics and reveals the complex relationships in these social events. In the US corpus, the cross-topic collocations concern the topics of Politics and Economy/Production, where the influence of the Chinese government and policies on economic and manufacturing development is emphasized, the (sub-)topics of Industry and Entity, deploring the technology transfer of US companies in Chinese markets, and the (sub-)topics of Time and Country and continent/Industry, describing the current situations of international relations and manufacturing industry. The trends of topics across three periods are influenced by socio-political contexts. There are two topics that share the
same trends across time in both corpora - a decreasing trend for Society and an increasing trend for Geography, while the other topics only share the same trends in certain periods. The decreasing use of the topics Society and Production from Period 1 to 2 reflects the impact of Chinese product scandals in Period 1. The media attention on the involved products and the harm to people fades as the event ends. Geography and the topics of Development, Economy, and Politics show increases in number of lemmas from Period 2 and 3. In Period 3, these topics are affected by the tensions in the US-China trade relationship. The economic confrontation between the two countries triggers discussion on various aspects.

The studies further reveal the semantic prosodies associated with the MIC+N c-collocations based on the Sinclairian model. I focused on the MIC+N c-collocations because “Made in China” is commonly used as a past participle, such as “XXX is made in China”. Thus, I wondered how newspapers use MIC as a pre-nominal modifier. Through the corpus technique of collocate, I found that MIC represents the abstract reputation (e.g., brand or label), and also the concrete objects indicating the items to be sold in markets [e.g., label (the paper attached to the item), goods, or product]. In Chinese newspapers, it occurs before brand, label, goods, or product, but in US newspapers only before label or product. By examining the collocates and concordances of the MIC+N c-collocations, I found that the overall attitude associated with the c-collocations is more negative in US newspapers – there are more types of negative prosodies (e.g., Scorn, Worry, Grudge, and Hostility) and they are in higher proportions than positive and neutral prosodies across all periods. Chinese newspapers show a change of the dominant semantic prosodies in 2013, from a majority of negative prosodies in Period 1 to a majority of positive prosodies in the following two periods, represented by Confidence. The same event can give rise to different semantic prosodies in the newspapers. For example, the popularity of MIC in global markets is attributed with the positive prosody Pride in Chinese newspapers, but with the negative prosody Grudge in US newspapers. It is also noteworthy that the c-collocations that refer to the abstract reputation of MIC [i.e., MIC brand(s)/label(s)] are associated with more negative prosodies than those indicating the concrete objects [i.e., MIC goods/product(s)] in Chinese newspapers. Conversely, in US newspapers MIC product(s) takes on more negativity than MIC label(s). According to Keller (2008), consumers’ perceptions of brand image regarding strength, favorability, and uniqueness can significantly influence their purchase intentions. The higher negativity associated with MIC brand(s)/label(s) in the Chinese corpus reflects that the Chinese newspapers were more worried about the image of MIC that may influence consumers’ trust of all Chinese products. In the US corpus, though there is a constant dominance of negative
prosodies associated with two c-collocations, the fact that more negativity is associated with from *MIC product(s)* than *MIC label(s)* indicates that US newspapers were more antagonistic to particular Chinese products regarding feature, value, and culture, such as the problematic toys and milk in Period 1 and the high-technology products in Period 3.

6.1.2 Findings of the representation of MIC in the Mattel toy recalls

Chapter 5 presents a qualitative framing analysis on the representation of MIC regarding the 2007 Mattel toy recalls in Chinese and US newspapers, complementing the broader quantitative corpus-based CDA of the representation of MIC between 2006 and 2018 reported in the earlier chapters.

The CDA analysis had shown that news about MIC in Period 1 is influenced by a series of Chinese product scandals. The Chinese and US newspapers mainly focus on the ones that had the most influences on their respective societies, and emphasize different aspects of the events. Chinese newspapers pay more attention to the 2008 toxic milk scandal, marked by the noun lemmas relevant to the product (e.g., *MILK_n*), while US newspapers focus more on the 2007 Mattel toy recalls, concentrating on the manufacturing problem (e.g., *LEAD_n*). The findings of semantic prosodies show that all newspapers associate much negativity with MIC during this period. Chinese newspapers report on the product accidents in a tone of *Frustration*, reflecting the difficulty of restoring the damaged reputation of MIC; and US newspapers prefer to apply the semantic prosody *Worry* on MIC to alert the consumers. To have a closer look at the differences in media focus and attitude in product scandals, I explored the representation of MIC regarding a specific event, the 2007 Mattel toy recalls.

Following Entman’s classification of frames, I determined the storyline of the toy recalls and identified the frames employed by different newspapers. The frame of problem definition reveals the type of crisis of this event through the frequent use of “recall”, that is “human-error product harm”. This type of crisis belongs to the preventable cluster of product-harm crisis, which is attributed with most responsibility. Accordingly, the involved agents, Mattel and Chinese manufacturers, were regarded as being supposed to take most responsibilities and blame. In addition to “recall”, Chinese and US newspapers use the terms “problem” and “crisis” respectively to weaken/strengthen the severity of the event. Regarding the frame of causal interpretation, US newspapers adopt it frequently to reflect the company’s intention to reduce the responsibility and relieve the criticism by highlighting the lead problem of Chinese
manufacturers, and often quote Mattel’s officials to support their interpretation. This finding is consistent with the idea of “negative other-presentation” and “positive self-presentation”. The focus has turned to the Mattel’s design flaw since the second stage, but there are still claims in the US newspapers trying to excuse Mattel’s fault. Chinese newspapers prefer to frame Mattel’s apology to China in terms of moral evaluation/consequences. CD evaluated Mattel positively for its integrity of acknowledging the design fault, while SCMP warned the Chinese manufacturing industry to acknowledge the quality problem and not to feel relieved that most recalls were due to Mattel’s design problem. Nevertheless, both of them wish for a thriving Chinese manufacturing. Regarding the frame of treatment/recommendation, newspapers present the reactions of the involved agents in the initial stage and give some recommendations to their future development in the last stage. Chinese newspapers use more concrete terms throughout their reporting, which reflects a clearer plan for recovering the damaged image of MIC; and US newspapers adopt many quotations from Mattel and institutes to add authenticity to the statements.

In general, the qualitative analysis on the representation of MIC in the 2007 Mattel toy recalls adds more details to the findings in Period 1 in the previous chapters. The study shows how frames emphasize different aspects of a crisis and how framing changes over time, ultimately contributing to a dynamic representation of MIC as transitioning from being dangerous and low-quality to being tainted and stigmatized in this product scandal. The turning point is in the second stage when the design flaw of Mattel was revealed. Moreover, the study sheds light on the connection between framing and CDA – ideology, which illustrates how Chinese and US newspapers differ in framing the same event and points to the ideological roots of those differences.

6.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation offers a comprehensive exploration of the representation of “Made in China” (MIC) in Chinese and US newspapers between 2006 and 2018, using CDA, CL, and framing theory as its framework. The findings reveal the evolving trends of media coverage of MIC, and also highlight the significant impact of socio-political contexts on media coverage, that is particularly evident in the product scandals and the US-China trade conflict.

The dissertation has both methodological and theoretical implications. Methodologically, it illustrates the usefulness of combining corpus techniques and framing theory with CDA to
uncover divergent ideologies present in different media systems. However, there are also limitations that warrant consideration. First, the selection of the newspapers can be expanded, which will provide a broader perspective. The current corpus only focuses on the newspapers in China and the US, the countries that have long been trade partners. The analysis sheds light on the dynamics of this bilateral relationship, helping identify how product safety concerns, trade disputes, or political tensions are reflected in the newspapers. Examining the newspapers from other countries could provide a global view on the representation of MIC beyond the Chinese and American borders. Moreover, other types of media can also be considered. Social media are driven by user-generated content. They reflect the voices of the general public, regardless of gender, age, or occupation, thus offering a diverse range of perspectives. These platforms provide real-time insights into influential streams of public discourse and sentiment, and can serve for a triangulation with other data sources. Examining how MIC is discussed on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Weibo, would allow researchers to capture immediate reactions and emerging issues. This could be invaluable for crisis management and trend analysis. Additionally, social media transcend borders and have a global reach. They can provide a cross-cultural view of how people from various countries perceive and discuss Chinese products, which would enable Chinese manufacturers to better cater to the needs of the international consumers.

A second point of concern is the potential for subjectivity or researcher bias. Though corpus-based studies can contribute rather objective results due to the data-driven approach, replicability, and quantitative analysis, the subjective factors cannot be completely eliminated, such as, the selection of the corpus and the choice of particular collocations or concordances for qualitative analysis. Therefore, the analysis of topics and semantic prosodies on MIC cannot be guaranteed to be purely objective. The same holds for the framing analysis of the Mattel toy recalls. It is based on Entman’s classification and Matthes and Kohring’s suggestion on identifying the variables within the frames, in an effort to make the results as objective and transparent as possible. These results were checked repeatedly by myself, but it would have been better if I could have measured intercoder reliability.

Regarding the theoretical contribution, this dissertation enriches the DHA to CDA and framing theory by revealing how news reporting adapts to economic and socio-political contexts and to different media systems. Through investigating the ideologically motivated discursive strategies and linguistic devices, it emphasizes that the media representation of MIC is not static but shaped by evolving ideological forces. To broaden our insights into MIC through linguistic research, we should explore with more case studies. For instance, we can
examine leading Chinese companies such as ZTE, Huawei, and TikTok and their products, which have garnered worldwide attention and undergone various pressures. Alternatively, we could investigate recent developments of MIC in the light of political changes in the US and trading challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another avenue for exploration is to compare MIC with other labels such as “Made in the USA” or “Made in Germany/Japan”. This comparative analysis can provide insights into how media discourse contributes to the construction of national identities and perceptions in global trade. Additionally, we can delve into the analysis of social media discourse to gauge public impressions and reactions toward MIC. This can be achieved through metadata information and post analysis.

In terms of the practical relevance, media professionals can gain valuable insights from this dissertation. Media practitioners should be aware that media representations are influenced by ideological framing, such as dominant ideologies in their respective countries, operating ideologies of their media institutions, and their own individual ideologies. Understanding this can help them critically assess their own reporting and its potential ideological biases. They can strive for more balanced or nuanced reporting by considering alternative perspectives and avoiding to reinforce stereotypes. Recognizing the impact of economic and socio-political contexts on media representations is also crucial. Media professionals usually adapt their reporting to reflect the dynamic nature of these contexts. When framing stories related to MIC, they can be more context-aware particularly in response to evolving trade relations and political changes. Last, there are ethical implications of media representations, particularly regarding stereotypes, nationalism, and xenophobia. Media professionals should be mindful of the potential consequences of their reporting on public opinion and societal attitudes, and can avoid contributing to the stigmatization of products based on their country of origin and promote a more inclusive and fair portrayal.