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# From the Perspective of Framing Theory: An Analysis of the Essence of Stigmatization against China by Western Countries and China's Strategies for Destigmatization

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## Abstract:
*In recent years, with the rapid evolution of the global power structure and China's comprehensive strength enhancement, Western countries have constructed a framework of stigmatization against China in order to maintain their international hegemony, grasp the power of international discourse, and curb China's progress and development. The true purpose of this stigmatization framework constructed by Western countries is to plant risks and hidden dangers for China's national security, with the fundamental motivation being to attack and oppose China ideologically. The research logic of this paper is as follows: Firstly, it provides a detailed explanation of the connotation and extension of framing theory and stigmatization to clarify the concepts. Secondly, from the perspective of framing theory, it analyzes the common tactics used by Western countries to stigmatize China and exposes the underlying motives behind them, further exploring the negative impacts of this stigmatization framework on both China and the international community. Finally, it offers constructive strategies for China to effectively counter and mitigate such stigmatization, thereby breaking free from the predicament.*

## Keywords:
*stigmatization, framing theory, discourse structure, China's international image.*

In recent years, with the rapid evolution of the global power structure and China's comprehensive strength enhancement, Western countries have constructed a framework of stigmatization against China to maintain their international hegemony, grasp the power of international discourse, and curb China's progress and development. This framework, to a certain extent, tarnishes China's national image in the international community, affecting its economic development, political system, and cultural prosperity. It also interferes with the perception and judgment of other entities in the international community towards China's social landscape, disrupting normal emotional exchanges in international relations. The true purpose of this stigmatization framework constructed by Western countries is to plant risks and hidden dangers for China's national security, with the fundamental motivation being to attack and oppose China ideologically. The author believes that this issue cannot be underestimated and must be approached with vigilance and considered for countermeasures.

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# 1 Framing Theory

## *1.1 Overview of Framing Theory*

In the book "*Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*" co-authored by David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, a frame is seen as "an interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the 'external world' by selectively emphasizing and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of behavior, thereby guiding individuals to 'locate, perceive, identify, and label' various events occurring in their life space and this world"[1]. The renowned contemporary American sociologist Erving Goffman particularly emphasizes the instrumental nature of frames, stating that "what is real for an individual is their definition of the situation." This definition encompasses both "strips" and "frames." "Strips" refer to the sequence of a person's activities, while "frames" refer to the types used to delineate and organize these "strips." In his view, frames are structured subjective interpretations and thought structures that individuals use to understand events. They originate from an individual's past experiences and are often influenced by the sociocultural consciousness of their social environment. Italian scholars Gamson and Modigliani, on the other hand, believe that frames are organized ideas or storylines.

Synthesizing these three perspectives, it can be understood that a frame, through the strategic deployment and repetition of certain key information points, can effectively define problems and analyze their causes. It determines how people pay attention to, interpret, and remember an issue, as well as how they evaluate and respond to it accordingly, thereby aiding in the formulation of moral judgments and suggested remedial measures. In short, frames provide and refine ways of dealing with problems and offer a unique perspective for problem-solving. Their most direct power lies in qualifying or even distorting the relationship between individuals and the world, while their fundamental purpose and effect is meaning construction.

## *1.2 The Proposal and Development of Framing Theory*

The concept of “framing” was first introduced by the British sociologist Bateson. In the 1970s, it was brought into the field of cultural sociology by the American sociologist Erving Goffman, where it began to be widely recognized and deeply studied in the realms of sociology and psychology. Sociologists tend to focus more on the role of frames in constructing social reality, while psychologists are more inclined to examine how frames influence and alter people's psychological and behavioral decisions.

Building upon the research in both sociology and psychology, American scientist Marvin Minsky creatively proposed "framing theory," which gained significant attention when introduced into mass communication studies in the 1980s. In the context of mass communication, framing is defined as the applicable effect produced during the information processing. Taking the production and dissemination of news as an example, media can utilize frames to create meaningful news, constructing meaning from the fundamental motivation of ideology; audiences can use frames to effectively understand social issues, with their mental schemas being triggered and shaped; governments can employ frames to construct social issues and policies, seeking public support, a process that may lead the public to view certain issues in a one-sided or biased manner.

It can be seen that framing theory possesses interdisciplinary, multi-orientational, and integrative characteristics. Although different disciplines have varying emphases on the concept of frames, the essence of these

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definitions is highly consistent. Overall, research on frames across these disciplines generally covers the production, content, and effects of information, providing a theoretical foundation for the subsequent examination of the three levels of framing.

### *1.3 The Three Levels of Framing Theory*

American scholar Gamson pointed out that "a mature framing analysis should include three parts: focusing on the production process, examining the text, and focusing on the interactive process between the audience and the text in meaning negotiation"[2]. This classification is largely adopted in this paper to examine the three levels of "framing theory."

The first level is the production of the text. The entire process from producing to interpreting the text involves two main entities: text producers and text consumers. Text producers are the source of the text, responsible for conveying their viewpoints and disseminating the information they wish to transmit, potentially embedding their own stances and characteristics in the process. Text consumers are the end-users who read and interpret the text. At the same time, the text influences the cognition and behavior of text consumers to a certain extent. News, as a primary channel for ideological propaganda, has dual attributes: one is its general attribute of news dissemination, and the other is its special attribute of ideology. However, Western news media tend to emphasize the former while attempting to conceal the latter. When publishing a political news story, Western mainstream media, while presenting the news content, focus on excavating and reinforcing the mainstream ideology behind the news.

The second level is the structure of the text. The structure of the text mainly refers to the way in which the content of the text is processed, with text producers still being the main entity. It is influenced by structural factors such as external requirements, internal qualities, text value, and audience interest. External requirements include national policies, political environment, industry norms, and the editorial style of the organization, among others. Journalism, as a typical industry for text structuring, is particularly influenced by external factors. For a qualified journalist, maintaining the correct political stance is the most fundamental requirement to follow throughout text production and structuring. The social significance of their work must be aligned with politics. No news can exist independently of politics; news and politics have a dialectical relationship. On the one hand, news is a tool for disseminating politics; on the other hand, politics protects news. The two complement each other and are internally unified.

The third is the impact of text. In the book *"Media Studies: Texts, Institutions and Audiences",* Lisa Taylor, a British communication scholar, introduces the findings of the Nationwide audience survey conducted by Morley et al. and states that meaning never solely exists within the text; rather, it emerges from the interpretation formed through the interaction between the text and the audience. This emphasizes the autonomous selectivity and agency in the process of receiving media influence. Research on the impact on the audience side is also a key focus of "framing theory" analysis. On the one hand, from the perspective of text framing, text, based on its production and structuring, can exert certain changes on the audience's cognition and behavior, influencing either the structure of their existing frames or the construction of entirely new frames. On the other hand, from the perspective of audience framing, the audience possesses subjective agency and critical thinking, analyzing and interpreting texts based on their personal frames. This collective response, construct-

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ed from individual reactions, forms an opinion attitude under the influence of the text, further influencing the direction of the entire society. This can be seen as the result of the interaction between audience framing and text framing.

# 2 The Connotation and Characteristics of Stigmatization

## *2.1 The Connotation of Stigmatization*

"Stigma" is a concept borrowed from abroad. "In ancient Greece, it referred to the tattoos or brands marked on specific groups such as slaves, criminals, and traitors to indicate their social status and identity, implying the unusual and disgraceful moral status of such individuals, with derogatory connotations." [3]Stigmatization is an ancient phenomenon, and this concept was first proposed by social psychology to "analyze the situation of individuals who are not accepted by society"[4]. The sociologist Erving Goffman is a master of stigma research, and he proposed that stigma is a socially constructed label of "deviance," which has had a profound impact on subsequent research.

In recent years, stigmatization has once again attracted widespread attention from academic researchers. Social psychology, history, and anthropology have all provided single-dimensional explanations based on their respective disciplines. Upon careful scrutiny, it is not difficult to find a basic consensus in their research, as summarized by Chinese scholar Wang Cuimei: "Stigmatization is the negative construction of the image of a specific individual or group by the stigmatizer for specific purposes under the shadow of social opinion."[5]

## *2.2 Stigmatization from the Perspective of Framing Theory*

The reason for examining stigmatization through the lens of framing theory is that framing theory has unparalleled explanatory power in understanding the genesis, impact, and response to stigmatization. The framework constructed by the text producer, or the stigmatizer, is fundamental to understanding the process of stigmatization. The stigmatizer does not present stigmatizing information without selection but carefully chooses it, "selecting certain aspects of cognitive facts to make them prominent"[6], with a clear intention to "frame" and thereby define the scope of "representation." Of course, this "representation" does not objectively and truthfully reflect social reality but selectively distorts, ignores, and focuses on pre-existing things. In the international political community, stigmatization generally targets a country's international image to launch attacks. This dynamic process also follows the three-level logic of text generation, framing, and impact in "framing theory." In the process of text generation, text producers primarily include sovereign states, international organizations, various media, opinion leaders, and other stigmatizers. In the process of text framing, these actors frame and construct various negative statements against the stigmatized country, shaping the "other" image of the stigmatized country to exclude and oppose it. In the process of text impact, the purpose of stigmatization is to incite more actors in the international community to form a common opinion and reach a so-called "consensus" to suppress the stigmatized country. The main manifestation of stigmatization is to create a framework for "stigmatizing a specific country," causing significant damage to the national image and interests of the stigmatized country.

The resonance generated by the text consumers, or the audience, is a reference indicator for assessing the

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effectiveness of stigmatization. After a certain framework is basically formed, how to effectively disseminate it on this basis so that the audience forms an identification with the perspectives in the framework in terms of factual and value judgments is the starting point and end goal of framework construction. Whether the audience can resonate is constrained by two factors. On the one hand, the audience's acceptance of the framework depends on whether their positions and interests are consistent or similar to those of the framework. Entman believes that the key factors influencing how the audience interprets the event framework lie in selection and salience. In other words, the audience will find the part they identify with within the framework and, when evaluating a framework, will make cognitive and behavioral feedback with subjective coloration. On the other hand, the audience's perception of the framework will also be influenced by their degree of identification with the framework initiator, or the text producer. Therefore, the framework initiator must establish and maintain a good image, use its influence to win the support and identification of the audience, and form an aggregation effect to evoke emotional resonance and win the audience's action. It can be seen that the audience's assessment of the degree of negative impact that stigmatization has on the stigmatized determines to what extent the stigmatizer can mobilize and influence the audience to jointly suppress the stigmatized, and this has become an important reference indicator for assessing the effectiveness of stigmatization.

# 3 Stigmatization from the Perspective of Framing Theory: The Conventional Approach of Western Countries in Constructing Confrontation

## *3.1 Main Ways in Which Western Countries Stigmatize China*

With China's rapid improvement in comprehensive national strength and international influence, some people internationally are concerned that China will follow the path of "a strong nation is bound to seek hegemony," leading to the emergence of the so-called "China Threat Theory." This theory can be traced back to the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, representing the Western, particularly American, mindset towards China and essentially continuing the Cold War mentality. Western countries, led by the United States, attempt to distort China's image and suppress its development through this public opinion tool. Its widespread dissemination profoundly reflects and influences the foreign policies and strategies of Western countries towards China. Since the reform and opening up, as China's comprehensive national strength has grown, especially with the sustained and rapid growth of its economic power, China's development model and the advantages of its socialist system have been recognized by the international community and emulated by some countries. As a result, this rhetoric has permeated the discourse systems of Western countries.

Entering the 21st century, particularly in the new era, China has consistently strived to promote the concept of win-win cooperation and facilitate world peace and development, becoming the world's largest trading nation and second-largest economy. While China's rise and achievements have been widely praised by the international community, the rhetoric of "a strong nation is bound to seek hegemony" has persisted. Some Western scholars believe that China will inevitably follow this historical logic. In fact, the origin of this rhetoric is rooted in the unchanged historical patterns of the Western world over the past 500 years, viewed as a universal law of historical rise and fall within Western values. However, the conclusions and judgments of

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Western countries are based on their own history and cannot be used to frame China's great practice, nor can they be applied to China's future development. Throughout China's historical facts, China has never had an aggressive gene. "Strong but not hegemonic" is China's rebuttal and transcendence of the logic of hegemony. "China does not agree with the theory that 'a strong nation is bound to seek hegemony.' There is no gene for seeking dominance or warmongering in the blood of the Chinese people. China will unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development, which is beneficial to China, Asia, and the world. No force can shake China's belief in peaceful development."[7]

Whether it is the "China Threat Theory," the "strong nation is bound to seek hegemony" theory, or any similar rhetoric that may be proposed in the future, they will eventually be eliminated by China's development philosophy and practical actions. The narrow mindset of zero-sum games will ultimately be rejected by the times, and peace and development are the trends of the era.

### *3.2 The Fundamental Purpose of Stigmatization by Western Countries*

Western countries have consistently viewed China as a "cultural and political other," and since the end of the Cold War, they have increasingly tended to frame China as a "threat" to their dominated international order, constructing various negative narratives involving China to incite the international community to jointly suppress China. To uncover the fundamental purpose of this stigmatization by Western countries, it is necessary to deconstruct the "stigmatize China" framework from the following two dimensions.

Firstly, the use of binary opposition discourse to frame China's "other" image. Based on their inherent perspective as the "self," Western countries view the East as the "other." Therefore, Western descriptions of the East are shaped by their own historical logic of development, interpreting and reinterpreting Eastern social phenomena according to different characteristics. "In their imagination of modernity, the West considers itself the embodiment of progress, freedom, and civilization, while the East becomes synonymous with stagnation, authoritarianism, and barbarism."[8] This framework of binary opposition, which is a common paradigm in the Western discourse system, permeates exchanges and dialogues between Chinese and Western civilizations. As one of the birthplaces of world civilization, China is a typical Eastern country, differing from the West in governance, political systems, and cultural ideals. Therefore, China has attracted considerable attention and research from scholars of other countries. In the historical logic of Westerners, the "Thucydides Trap" always poses a threat. This seems to be seen as an "iron law" of international relations, but it contradicts China's development philosophy. During his visit to the United States in 2015, President Xi Jinping stated at a welcoming dinner that there is no inherent "Thucydides Trap" in the world, but repeated strategic misjudgments between great powers can create one for themselves. Historically, China has long been a leading power in the world, but in the long span of five thousand years, it has never left a trace of colonization or aggression. The Chinese nation loves peace, and concepts such as "peace is precious," "good neighborliness," and "the great harmony of all under heaven" have been passed down from generation to generation and deeply rooted in people's minds.

Secondly, constructing negative narratives involving China to incite international sentiment. One of the most important factors affecting the extent and degree of impact on the stigmatized country within the framework of stigmatizing China is the resonance it can generate in the international community. The "stigmatize

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China" framework constructed by Western countries has a distinct instrumental attribute, often compared with the common values or interests of the international community to demonstrate their superiority and sense of justice, occupying the commanding heights of international public opinion. Firstly, it aims to attract potential followers to expand its ranks, and secondly, it seeks to wield "structural power" to uniformly suppress China. Sociologists Bruce Link and Jo Phelan believe that power factors occupy a special dominant position in the process of stigma diffusion. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States became the world's sole superpower, leading the world in economics, culture, industry, and other fields. It is because of this dominant power that the United States has been able to stir up waves of challenges to the international order. A responsible great power should not be a disturber of the international order or a destroyer of world peace. On the contrary, it should influence the world by changing itself, benefit the world, and become a core force in maintaining world peace and stability.

### *3.3 Negative Impacts of the " Stigmatization of China" Framework*

The "stigmatization of China" framework is an exclusive discourse construction that will lead to unfair treatment of China as the stigmatized entity, disrupting normal diplomatic relations and cooperation between China and other actors in the international community, and exerting a series of negative impacts on a stable international order.

#### *3.3.1 Negative Impacts on China*

The stigmatization framework in international relations poses profound and enduring harm to the stigmatized country. "The West continuously constructs negative narratives about China through processes such as frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation, thereby casting a shadow of 'stigmatization of China' in the international community." [9] In terms of frame bridging, Western countries seek narrative frameworks that align with the interests of their target audiences, aiming for precise communication to fabricate negative social opinions specifically targeting China. In frame amplification, the stigmatizers go to great lengths to provide subjective interpretations and inspire audiences on specific issues and events, primarily by amplifying their own values, beliefs, and ideologies, with the main goal of suppressing and excluding China's social system and ideology. In frame extension, Western countries attempt to blur the frame boundaries to encompass the interests or concerns of potential followers, thereby inciting shared indignation and collective action. In frame transformation, Western countries continuously organize and update frame content based on changes in the international situation, hot topics, and their own national interests, reconstructing frame content according to spatio-temporal changes and injecting and conveying new ideas and viewpoints. From their own national interests, these unfounded accusations and defamations weaken China's international voice to a certain extent, tarnish China's national image, and hinder China's steady and rapid development. Within Chinese society, this stigmatization framework harbors social risks, with its extreme viewpoints easily provoking public anger, thereby affecting social stability and progress.

#### *3.3.2 Negative Impacts on the International Order*

The stability of a country's political order first necessitates ensuring the normal operation of its national government and the undisturbed functioning of its political system. The actions of Western countries, how-

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ever, run counter to this principle, disrupting the international social environment that guarantees the functioning of a sovereign state's government and the stability of its political system. The true purpose behind the various negative remarks about China made by Western countries is far from simple defamation; rather, it is driven by political goals and national interests, aimed at inciting the international community to form a "consensus" to maintain the "structural power" led by the United States and the Western-dominated international order of behavior.

As an active participant in the reform and development of the global governance system, China has always been committed to promoting a more just and reasonable direction for global governance. Nevertheless, Western countries harbor biases, target, and defame those who uphold and build the international order. This is the erroneous approach of "fostering camp-based and exclusive cliques targeting specific countries" [10], which undermines the international order based on international law and the international system centered on the United Nations.

"The way of the great is vast and all-embracing; the world belongs to all." The Chinese vision for a "community with a shared future for mankind," known as the new world order, is a new vision for the international order built on the principles of reciprocity, openness, respect, and development. It is believed that through seeking commonalities while reserving differences and working together for progress among all countries, the prosperous world eagerly anticipated by China will surely arrive soon.

## 4 Destigmatization from the Perspective of Framing Theory: A Clear Path for China to Overcome Challenges

In today's world, amidst unprecedented changes of the past century, China, under the core leadership of the Communist Party of China, is approaching the center of the world stage with unprecedented vigor, confidence, and strength, drawing closer to the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the second centenary goal. In this context, the international community's attention and recognition towards China are unlike before, with every word and action of China being judged, analyzed, observed, and scrutinized. Merely criticizing the "stigmatization of China" framework is futile and may even lead to "falling into the trap of passive explanation, pursuing emotional resonance, and making utilitarian realistic choices"[11]. Therefore, China must prepare for a long-term struggle against stigmatization and systematically study the path to destigmatization.

### *4.1 "Turning Defense into Offense": Refuting and Exposing the Hypocrisy of Western Narratives*

The most direct counterattack for China to destigmatize itself is to speak with facts, reason with truth, and let the details shine. "No matter how hard those with ulterior motives try to defame, white remains white and will not turn black due to wanton hype." In international communication, China as portrayed by Western media is merely a "pseudo-environment" rather than an objective reality. Domestic media practitioners should uphold a correct political stance, actively refute stigmatizing remarks about China, and in the rapidly developing era of converged media, flexibly utilize various forms of content creation and dissemination such as

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videos, text, images, and data to document and disseminate a true, three-dimensional, and vivid portrayal of China in its entirety. This will strengthen China's ability to generate discourse in international public opinion struggles and communicate the truth to the world.

### *4.2 "Taking the Initiative": Enhancing the International Communication Power of the Chinese-Style Subjective Framework*

When presiding over a study session on strengthening China's international communication capacity, President Xi Jinping emphasized, "Telling China's story well, spreading China's voice well, and presenting a true, three-dimensional, and comprehensive China are important tasks for strengthening our international communication capacity... We must make great efforts to strengthen our international communication capacity and form an international voice that matches China's comprehensive national strength and international status." Currently, the international communication landscape is undergoing a significant transition with the "rise of the East and descent of the West." It is imperative for China to carry out "disruptive innovation" in building its international communication capacity, actively explore and construct a subjective framework, and clearly explain and effectively communicate China's development philosophy, socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and path to modernization to the world, so that they can be referenced and practiced in a favorable public opinion environment. The Chinese-style subjective framework differs from the "stigmatization of China" framework constructed by Western countries. China has never imposed its values on other countries, but firmly upholds its own. Its starting and ending points are to provide the world with a development paradigm for national construction and reform, aiming to enable other actors in the international community to learn from each other's experiences in an equal, inclusive, and open atmosphere, thereby promoting progress and prosperity for all countries.

### *4.3 "Addressing the Root Cause": Fundamentally Enhancing the Country's Hard and Soft Power*

The fundamental way to enhance international status is to strengthen the country's comprehensive national strength, which mainly includes hard and soft power. On the one hand, hard power requires the Chinese people to unite as one and work tirelessly under the core leadership of the Communist Party of China, adhering to and developing the advantages of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, so that other countries can be inspired and influenced through observation and experience. On the other hand, China needs to actively take up the "microphone," promote its mainstream culture and unique traditional Chinese culture with a positive attitude and open mindset, and influence others through culture, so that foreigners can be ignited and impressed, thereby fostering admiration and curiosity towards the Chinese nation. In today's international society, which is undergoing unprecedented changes, China's rise to the forefront of the world is fundamentally attributed to the correct leadership of the Communist Party of China, as well as China's actions, willingness, and strength to fundamentally enhance its hard and soft power. It is also worth noting that China's development is not isolated; rather, it maintains a win-win mindset of open cooperation, leads global governance by advocating ideas such as a community with a shared future for mankind, and improves quality and efficiency by learning from and borrowing from the experiences of other countries. At the same time, China carefully summarizes its development experiences and lessons, providing the international community with "Chinese

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experience," and this international action of China caring for the world has earned widespread respect from the international community.

## 5 Conclusion

Currently, we are in a historic period where the unprecedented changes in the world and the strategic landscape of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation converge. With the rapid enhancement of China's comprehensive strength, the stigmatizing framework constructed by Western countries against China will not disappear immediately and may even become more entrenched. The situation of exacerbating competition, confrontation, and tension against the "other" will also persist for a long time. Therefore, China needs to continue to maintain strategic composure, approach the issue with sobriety and calm, steadily advance research on anti-stigmatization both theoretically and practically, promote the steady progress of building a community with a shared future for mankind, and wholeheartedly devote itself to the great practice of comprehensively building a modern socialist country and fully advancing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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