

Exploring Image Work in Chinese Communication

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Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
Contributors.....	x
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
<i>Xinren Chen</i>	
Part I. Conceptual Foundations	
Chapter Two.....	18
Defining Image and Image Work	
<i>Yingzhe Jin, Xinren Chen</i>	
Chapter Three.....	48
Exploring the Mechanism of Image Work	
<i>Yingzhe Jin, Xinren Chen</i>	
Part II. Self-image Work in Face-to-Face Chinese Communication	
Chapter Four.....	92
Celebrities' Self-image Foregrounding as a Disclaimer at Chinese Interview Settings	
<i>Yingzhe Jin, Xinren Chen</i>	
Chapter Five.....	134
Constructing Approachable Self-images by Chinese Primary-Level Officials in their Initial Interactions with Villagers	
<i>Hao Liu</i>	

Chapter Six	171
Chinese Police Officers' Motivated Self-Image Construction in Civil-Conflict Mediation Discourse	
<i>Wenjing Feng</i>	
Part III. Self-image Work in Online Chinese Communication	
Chapter Seven.....	210
Image Construction in Online Female Product Advertising Discourse	
<i>Junfang Mu</i>	
Chapter Eight.....	238
“Bushì wò kuā nǐ” (I’m not complimenting you): Image Adjustment on Chinese Social Media	
<i>Xiaohong Liu</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	268
Knowledge-Based E-commerce Livestream Hosts’ Image Construction in Chinese New Media Platforms	
<i>Mengxin Li, He He</i>	
Chapter Ten	301
Self-image Management in Digital Travel Discourse: A Case of Travel Uploaders	
<i>Hongqiang Zhu, Xinyu Liu, Jingwen Xu</i>	
Chapter Eleven	340
Constructing Caring Images by Chinese Obstetricians in Clinical Settings	
<i>Xueyu Wang</i>	
Chapter Twelve	371
Chinese Netizens’ Humor: Commenting with an Invented Image	
<i>Yushu Luo, Yadong Guo</i>	
Subject Index	404
Author Index.....	410

LIST OF TABLES

- Table 4-1 The distribution of image types in different contexts (N=148)
- Table 5-1 Core components of recorded initial interactions
- Table 5-2 Discursive practices of image work (adapted from Chen and Jin 2022, 7-10)
- Table 5-3 Frequency of dimensions in officials' construction of an approachable image
- Table 6-1 Discursive practices of image construction
- Table 6-2 Information about the example interactions
- Table 7-1 Taxonomy of female images in online advertising discourse
- Table 7-2 Pragmatic strategies in female image construction
- Table 8-1 Distribution of topics involved in the disclaimer-modified compliment
- Table 8-2 Distribution of the gender of complimenters
- Table 8-3 Distribution of compliment receivers
- Table 9-1 Types of image construction in livestreaming
- Table 9-2 Strategies for terms of address and reference
- Table 11-1 Discursive strategies across six domains for image construction

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3-1 A general framework of doing image work

Figure 3-2 Contextual correlates of image work

Figure 9-1 Dong's explanation of the common understanding of admirable qualities across cultures

Figure 9-2 Dong's interaction with the audience through self-deprecation

Figure 10-1 The analytical framework for tour guide bloggers' image management

Figure 10-2 Fan comments in the comment section

Figures 10-3-6 Screenshots of the Putuo Mountain Xiao-shuai' s videos

Figure 12-1 Invented identities strategies among Chinese netizens in constructing images

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

XINREN CHEN

Image matters! It is increasingly understood that image, be it that of an individual (speaker, hearer or a third party alike) or even that of an institution, is often neither pre-given nor stable, but rather often discursively (de)constructed or negotiated purposefully in dynamic communication, which may yield an impact on communicative outcomes. This volume attempts to theorize the issue and provide a bunch of empirical studies to testify the understanding, by focusing on how and why communicators perform various types of image work to (de)construct/negotiate their own image or that of others in order to satisfy certain transactional and/or interpersonal needs. Admittedly, our attempt is by no means new in the sheer sense of image construction or management, but it is the first initiative that fairly systematically explores how and why Chinese communicators from different walks of life resort to discursive means to deploy image as a communicative resource and enact image rhetoric to facilitate diverse goals of communication. To the best of our knowledge, no similar accounts have been proposed in English-medium publications to explain the operation of image work in communication, Chinese or non-Chinese.

1.1 Orientation of the book

Image is becoming a popular topic in the field of pragmatics. While diverse in meaning (for details, refer to Chapter 2), it has two major interpretations in the field. One refers to something physical, such as photos, graphs, gifs,

emojis, or emoticons. The other points to something abstract, such as a person's persona or self-presentation or the reputation-related aspect of an institution. This volume focuses on the latter.

Pragmatic approaches to the former notion are interdisciplinary, combining linguistics, semiotics, visual studies, and communication theory. Scholars analyze how images convey meaning in context, considering factors like audience, cultural background, and situational context. Related research is interdisciplinary, bordering on pragmatics and visual communication. Key concepts include visual implicature, visual presupposition, and the cooperative principle applied to images. Studies focus on how images interact with text and other modalities to create meaning. This includes the pragmatics of advertisements, comics, and multimedia narratives. From the perspective of multimodality, researchers examine how visual elements contribute to pragmatic functions like persuasion, humor, or irony. For example, Messaris (1997) explores the pragmatic and persuasive functions of images in advertising. Forceville (1996) addresses how visual metaphors function in advertising. Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009) investigate how metaphors are constructed and interpreted in multimodal contexts including images. Machin (2007) provides an overview of multimodal analysis, including the pragmatic functions of images in communication.

Pragmatic approaches to the latter notion are relatively more recent. For example, on the theoretical plane, Chen and Jin (2022) examine the connotations, types, and discourse practices of image construction, and propose an operational analytical framework for the pragmatic exploration of image construction. Empirically, Li (2021) discovers that online shoppers employ different types of discursive operations on identity to establish or negotiate appropriate images in order to manage relationships with (potential) consumers. Jin and Chen (2022) analyze the types of image management and discourse practices exhibited by government officials in

the process of responding to hotline inquiries using hotline political programs as the data source. They find that government officials have both acquisitive management that constructs positive images such as affinity and responsibility, as well as protective management that deconstructs negative images. The discourse practices adopted mainly include discourse markers for speech acts, specific genre choices, and strengthening audience participation, reflecting the positive efforts of government officials in responding to public expectations in the new era.

Underlying the latter pragmatic approach to image are constructionist conceptualizations of the concept, as opposed to essentialist views. Specifically, essentialist approaches to image deem it as pre-existing, stable and static attributes of a person, an institution, or a nation. In contrast, constructionist approaches view image as emergent, fluid and fragmented properties. They are influenced by the paradigmatic shift in the field of pragmatics characterized as a discursive turn or postmodern turn, parallel to what happens to the research on identity (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Chen 2013, 2018, 2022).

A distinction needs to be drawn between discourse-analytic approaches and pragmatic approaches to image. Although both are constructionist in nature, their goals and views are different. For the former, discourse analysts direct their attention to what images are constructed, by what discursive means, and for what reasons. By and large, they are image-oriented and take the whole discourse as the unit of analysis. In contrast, pragmaticians care primarily about the underlying purposes of image construction at specific points of interaction. In other words, they are goal-oriented and take the here-and-now point of discourse or conversation as the focus of attention. To characterize this kind of image, we might venture to term it “pragmatic image”, as it is pragmatically sensitive. By proposing this term, I purport to highlight the type of dynamic image that the speaker/writer constructs at the

junction of producing the current utterance(s) or the whole discourse in the communicative context concerned. It is communication-bound, discourse-bound and, more specifically, utterance-bound. Most importantly, underlying (the hearer's response to) the speaker's choice of pragmatic image, we can recognize, generalize and rationalize various types of image work (to be elaborated in Chapter 2). Consider the following extract (1) (Chen 2018, 78):

Extract (1)

莫非这枚邮票有文章？我真有点丈二和尚摸不着头脑之感。这位先生问我：“陈老头，不，陈老先生，你这邮票可以交换吗？”
“不！”“可以卖给我吗？”

Is there anything mysterious about this stamp? I really feel a bit confused. The gentleman asked me, “Old fogey, no, Mr. Chen, can you exchange this stamp?” - “No!” - “Can you sell it to me?”

In this example, there is an immediate repair in the way ‘the gentleman’ addresses ‘me’ -- from ‘Old fogey’ to ‘Mr. Chen’. It can be seen that his choice of identity for ‘me’ has undergone an immediate change (Chen 2018). However, here, the change not only reflects the immediate adjustment of identity choices made by communicators for others, but also reflects his change of image construction for himself. There has been a shift from an impolite and disrespectful image to a polite and respectful image. Consider Extract (2) (Jin 2021, 86):

Extract (2)

好的，谢谢大家，我想我讲的呃大概就这样，啊请大家多多指正，啊我乱说了，啊也就是说没有系统，没有这个科学研究性啊，这个随谈，free talk, thank you.

Okay, thank you all. I think that's about what I have to say. Please correct me. I may have made mistakes, which means there is no system or scientific research involved. It's just free talk. Thank you.

In this example, the lecturer not only thanked the audience after finishing his lecture, but also referred to his lecture as 'nonsense', 'unsystematic', 'lacking scientific research', and just a 'free talk', thus requiring the audience's 'correction'. In Chinese culture, the above utterances may help to construct a scholarly image of the speaker as humble and cautious, and bring closer the emotional distance between the lecturer and the audience.

As in the case of identity research (Chen 2022), this book adopts a dual view of image that it is both preexisting and emergent. On the one hand, before an entity (a person, an institution, or a nation) is brought into the current domain of discourse, it must have acquired certain image(s); on the other, the pre-existing image(s) will be subject to adjustment or modification. Very likely, brand new image(s) may be built or constructed for the entity by the speaker for certain purposes. Our focus is definitely on the latter situations, in which image evolves or emerges as both an interactional process and an interactional outcome. In other words, we will examine how language users can, for good or bad, use language (together with other semiotic resources) to construct an image that does not necessarily (pre)exist for oneself or some other person concerned. While acknowledging the fact that language use sometimes does reflect image, image construction can be "a conscious motivated social or interactional practice" (Chen 2022, 2). In other words, communicators do not always use language just to demonstrate a certain image; rather, they may use words of image to do things. That is, this book upholds the view that image can be a participant resource, much in the same way as identity is (e.g., Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Chen 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2022; Ho 2010; Yuan 2012; Wang 2013; Widdicombe 1998). Furthermore, this book will indicate

that image is non-unidirectional, in the sense that it can be jointly constructed by the co-participants of communication.

These aforementioned conceptions distinguish the current enterprise from most, if not all, of the existing discourse-analytic approaches to image. Instead of examining the images per se that communicators intend to construct and convey, this volume will seek to further explore why they construct these images. As in the case of identity research (Chen 2013, 2018, 2022), to portray the shift of attention on image as “a pragmatic turn”, we will coin the term “pragmatic image” to refer specifically to the type of image explored in the theoretical and empirical studies reported in this volume. This turn, which is by and large in line with a rhetorical approach to identity (Chen 2022; Tracy 2002; Tracy and Robles 2013), provides the foundation for the proposal of “image rhetoric”, something similar to “identity rhetoric” (Yuan 2020), realized by the adoption of various pragmatic strategies of image (de)construction (exemplified in the later chapters).

1.2 Aims of the book

This edited book aims to provide a reasonably systematic picture of how Chinese people engage in various types of image work via discursive means in diverse communicative contexts. To supplement sporadic and infrequent studies on the topic, this book compiles a collection of empirical studies concerning image, and its construction and functions in Chinese society (e.g., teachers/professors, doctors, celebrities, advertisers, medical consultants, officials). Naturally-occurring data online or offline, employing qualitative analyses with or without quantitative analyses, are utilized to depict the mechanism of image work and their functions in attaining transactional and/or interactional goals. Specifically, the aims of this volume are three-fold.

First, this book purports to establish an operable analytic framework for investigating image work in communication. For that purpose, we seek to explain communicators' image choices via their discursive choices by recourse to their interactional needs and contexts on the other. It is our presumption that to satisfy certain communicative needs in a given context, communicators can deliberately (de)construct a certain image of theirs, or that of others, by making appropriate discursive choices, as in the case of identity construction (Chen 2013, 2018). Thus conceived, their image (de)construction at a particular interactional moment in the interactional space is arguably a means to an end. However, to date, few studies on image (de)construction published in international English-medium journals have been conducted under the guidance of this assumption. Thus, this volume may serve to fill in this theoretical gap by presenting a working framework for conducting pragmatic research on image work.

Second, this volume aims to generalize an array of pragmatic strategies Chinese communicators may deploy to do image work. Based on real-life Chinese data, the various empirical studies reported in the volume may exhibit how Chinese communicators employ various discursive means in strategic ways in order to advance their communicative goals. We refrain from claiming that the various forms and strategies of image work are unique to Chinese communicators. Nevertheless, we do assume that they are commonly seen among them.

Third, this volume aims to discuss why Chinese communicators (de)construct a certain image or even shift from one image to another in dynamic interaction. A brief survey of related literature indicates that the majority of researchers concentrate on what (type of) image or images have been constructed, or on what discursive choices are made in the process. Admittedly, such lines of research are useful and significant, but we need to

further tackle the underlying motivations and influencing factors of image construction.

By showcasing how communicators conduct image work discursively to accomplish communicative goals in the context of contemporary Chinese society, the book is going to be of some significance in the following directions. First, the book contributes to understanding how contemporary Chinese people build and manage their images in verbal communication. Second, it empirically demonstrates how image conduces to attaining illocutionary or interpersonal effects. Third, it distinguishes itself from previous books on Chinese communication by regarding image as both an interpersonal target and a communicative resource. Hopefully, the book may serve to draw readers' attention to the diverse image work performed by Chinese people in communication. By highlighting the goals, strategies and discursive practices that underlie their image work, it intends to drive home the idea that like identity, image is often (de)constructed and negotiated purposefully and has an impact on communicative outcomes.

1.3 Structure of the book

The book is composed of three main parts, apart from this introductory part. The first part serves to lay the theoretical foundation for the studies presented in the next two parts, including the definitions of image and image work, and the mechanism of image work. Part II, including Chapters 4-6, addresses self-image work in face-to-face Chinese communication. The third part, including Chapters 7-12, explores self-image work in online Chinese communication. The chapters are detailed below.

This introductory chapter presents the orientation of the volume, setting the scene for the exploration of image work in the context of Chinese communication. It elucidates the aims of the book, which distinguish the

present endeavour from previous research on image or related topics. The chapter ends by supplying a synopsis of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two provides the initial theoretical foundation for empirical research on image work in Chinese communication. It kicks off by defining a couple of key terms such as image and image work that are crucial to the development and understanding of subsequent chapters. Clarifications are provided to appreciate the differences between some related terms. Most crucially, image work needs to be viewed as the deliberate discursive effort as well as the process of deploying an image as a resource in the situated communicative event. As demonstrated, it may exhibit a variety of orientations and can be performed via an array of strategies.

Chapter Three, which lays further theoretical foundation for the upcoming empirical studies, explores the mechanism of image work in Chinese communication. Specifically, it reveals how communicators are motivated by certain communicative needs to perform various types of image work, with respect to its locus, processes and status. It illustrates the discursive choices of image across various domains. It also distinguishes between two types of image adjustment, notably in-time adjustment and phased adjustment. With regard to the salience of image work, it elaborates on three layers of metapragmatic awareness, including that of values, social expectations and communicative events.

Chapter Four focuses on an explicit form of image management, notably image foregrounding, in Chinese talk show interviewing settings. The study shows that celebrities in the televised context might highlight their positive, neutral and negative self-images, depending on the orientation of speech acts being performed: self-face-enhancing orientation (including acts such as disclosing self-enhancing facts/behaviors, explaining the facts/behaviors doubted by others), self-face-challenging orientation (including exposing unfavorable facts/behaviors about self), rapport-challenging orientation

(including opposing views from others or public values, presenting challenging or negative comments to others), and rapport-enhancing orientation (including praising others, promising others). It is found that the celebrities foreground their self-images more often in the first two orientations than in the latter ones. This means that they pay more attention to themselves when disclosing self-related facts. It is argued that their preemptive use of self-image foregrounding in the contexts mainly functions as disclaimers, as they strive to mitigate potential discredit or rapport threat.

Chapter Five explores how unacquainted individuals present themselves in relation to others during getting-acquainted interactions, especially in institutional settings. Specifically, it examines how Chinese primary-level village officials construct approachable self-images during their first encounters with villagers. Analysing 52 episodes of naturally-occurring initial interactions, the study reveals that the officials employ various strategies across social, emotional and cognitive dimensions to present themselves as approachable. The constructed images then foster familiarity and solidarity, transforming the traditional top-down power dynamics into a more egalitarian “serving-served” official-public relationship. The study suggests that these image-building efforts are shaped by both the immediate interactional context and broader institutional and socio-cultural factors unique to Chinese rural communities. The study could contribute to the existing literature on initial interactions by offering insights into institutional first encounters through the lens of image construction, while also providing practical guidance for street-level bureaucrats seeking to build rapport and improve government-public relations.

Chapter Six probes into the image work of police officers in the context of civil-conflict mediation, taking the discourse of police officers’ civil-conflict mediation as an example. The study covers the image types and

their discourse representation, dynamic distribution, and relation management orientations. Based on data collected from an ethnographic study, involving 19 Chinese police officers in a police station, and 59 citizens of one city in Anhui Province, China, it is observed that the police officers' mediation work involved the construction of images such as responsible administrator, just mediator, kindhearted public servant, close, considerate family and friends, either to enhance or protect their image. At times, they might construct multiple images at the same time or shift their images from one type to another. Their image work may serve various purposes, including appeasing emotion, addressing customers' interest, and responding to disputants' face need. The corresponding dynamics and complexity of image work in this setting can help researchers understand more about the interrelationship among identity work, image work and relationship management.

Chapter Seven delves into female image construction in online female product advertising discourse. Drawing on 50 Taobao advertisements across five product categories, it adopts a grounded theory approach with NVivo 14 for analysis. The study identifies five female image types (e.g., beauty-conscious, life-delicate, health-focused) and four pragmatic strategies (emotional appeal, identity recognition, interest appeal, cultural identification). These constructions are driven by two goals: prompting purchases (action goals) and building brand-consumer bonds (interpersonal goals). It is suggested that advertisers move beyond traditional stereotypes and create more inclusive and empowering representations of women in advertising, which can enhance brand appeal and contribute to a more equitable and diverse advertising landscape.

Chapter Eight, based on the data from Weibo and complemented with a perception survey, investigates an unexplored pragmatic phenomenon: the disclaimer-modified compliment on Chinese social media, from the

perspective of image management. The study suggests that the disclaimer-modified compliment occurs when evaluating someone in general or someone's specific aspects, like appearance, ability, virtue, and (ways of) doing something. The selection of these topics is related to the gender of complimenters and the type of complimentees. The disclaimer-modified compliment indicates the complimenters' effort on self-image construction: being sociable, humble and friendly. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of both disclaimers and compliments.

Chapter Nine investigates how knowledge-based hosts construct images through multimodal resources in live-streaming interaction. It examines the communicative goals, negotiation practices, and adaptive processes through which image work is constructed in real time, focusing on how hosts manage stance and alignment, organize participation, and attend to face and rapport. Findings show that hosts' image work displays recurring orientations, including image enhancement, image maintenance, image neglect, image challenge, and image damage. Within these orientations, hosts construct multiple image types, including cultural, approachable, professional, responsible, and controversial images, through discursive choices such as address terms, speech-act sequences, topic management, stylistic shifts, and embodied and paralinguistic resources. These image types overlap and shift across communicative contexts, fostering viewer participation and supporting audience community building through sustained affiliation and interaction. The study offers implications for strengthening cultural communication on new media platforms.

In Chapter Ten, the authors focus on the image management of a Chinese tour guide blogger on digital platforms. On short-video platforms, the tour guide blogger dynamically constructs a tri-layered image of "tour guide", "internet celebrity", and "self" through verbal and non-verbal resources from professional, public, and individual perspectives. Drawing on the

theory of pragmatic identity and rapport management, the study analyzes the discursive practices of Xiao-shuai's image management across the dimensions of stylistic, illocutionary, and non-verbal domains, collectively constructing a warm, sincere, socially responsible, and professionally competent image of a We-media tour guide blogger. The research not only enriches the range of research data and methods but also provides a new perspective for studying image management within the context of interpersonal pragmatics. Additionally, it contributes to our understanding of the adaptation and evolution of traditional professions in the new media environment.

Chapter Eleven adopts a discourse-analytic approach to examine how Chinese obstetricians employ various discursive strategies to construct caring images. An analysis of 30 recorded interactions between obstetricians and patients in a local Chinese hospital reveals that these obstetricians frequently construct caring images such as being approachable, reassuring, authoritative yet concerned, and instructive. These images are made salient through discursive practices across six domains, including the addressing, illocutionary, discourse, participation, stylistic, and non-verbal domains. By elucidating the discursive strategies employed by Chinese female obstetricians, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of patient-centered care, particularly in the Chinese medical and sociocultural context where the balance between medical authority and humanised care is carefully negotiated.

Chapter Twelve explores how Chinese netizens on Douyin (Chinese TikTok) creatively adopt invented identities—both human and non-human, such as brands, pets, and fictional figures—to construct humorous images. Drawing on theories of pragmatic identity and multimodal discourse, the study identifies key strategies employed in this practice, including upgrading or downgrading identities, backgrounding or foregrounding identities,

emphasizing interplay between identities, and modifying identities through translanguaging. These strategies enable netizens to generate humor, enhance engagement, and navigate complex social interactions. The findings reveal that invented identities serve multiple pragmatic functions, such as presenting “positive-self”, maintaining cyber harmony and reinforcing virtual community bonds, mitigating face-threatening acts, and promoting social critique. The study contributes to the understanding of group image construction in online communication and highlights the role of humorous language use in shaping online interactions within Chinese social media.

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PART I.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER TWO

DEFINING IMAGE AND IMAGE WORK

YINGZHE JIN, XINREN CHEN

*Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask,
and he will tell you the truth. – Oscar Wilde*

As a cross concept between the notions of “identity” and “face”, image is the necessary attribute that each individual claims for themselves in social interaction after defining the interactional context. Under the influence of social constructionism, image is believed to be strategically constructed and presented to achieve interpersonal and interactional goals. This chapter will build the theoretical basis for the present book by defining the key notions.

2.1 Image

If we look up the word *image* in the *Oxford Dictionary* or *Merriam-Webster*, we will find it is fairly polysemic. Williams (1976 [2015]) dates the origin of the term back to the Latin word ‘*imago*’, evolving from “physical figure”, through “mental conception” and literary figure, to “perceived reputation”:

The earliest meaning of image in English was, from C13, a physical figure or likeness. [...] This was also the earliest meaning of the rw *imago*. [...] There is a deep tension between ideas of ‘copying’ and ideas of **imagination** and the **imaginary**. Each of these has [...] referred to mental conception. [...] from C17 there was an important specialized use in the discussion of literature, to indicate a ‘figure’ of writing or speech. [...] But it sometimes seems that all these uses have been overtaken by a use of image in terms of