

The Evolution of Food Safety Discourse in China's Government Work Reports (2009-2024) and Its Role in National Image Building

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Abstract

This study focuses on the food safety-related discourse in China's Government Work Reports from 2009 to 2024 and employs linguistic analysis to map its evolution. By analyzing lexical choices, syntactic structures, modal verbs and semantics in the report, this paper reveals the phased transformation of China's food safety governance concept from reactive supervision to emphasizing comprehensive, technologically empowered and internationally aligned regulatory system. At the same time, it analyzes how this discursive evolution shapes a dual national image of an accountable and effective governor domestically and a responsible global actor internationally, reflecting the state's approach to food safety governance. This analysis offers insights into the interplay between policy discourse and national image projection.

Keywords

Food safety discourse; China's Government Work Reports; Linguistic analysis; National image building.

1. Introduction

As a global issue, food safety is not only related to people's lives and health, but also closely related to national economic development, social stability and international reputation. The outbreak of a series of food safety problems such as the Melamine Incident in 2008 has brought severe challenges to China's food safety, raised many doubts about China's food quality in the international community, and impacted the national image to a certain extent [1]. In this context, the expression of food safety in the Government Work Reports (GWR), an annual official document recording the government's work achievements and putting forward future development directions and goals for the public, has become an important window to observe the trend and discourse construction of China's food safety policy. An in-depth analysis of the evolution of these discourses from a linguistic perspective, covering lexical choices, syntactic structures, modal verb usage and semantics, will help to accurately grasp the conceptual changes in China's food safety governance. It also enables an understanding of how the government reshapes its national image: both as an accountable governor domestically and a rule-abiding leader internationally, a direction underscored by existing research on official discourse and national image building [2]. The following analysis will delineate how this discourse has evolved over the 2009-2024 period not only in regulatory focus but also in syntactic complexity and modal commitment, ultimately projecting an image of a technologically sophisticated regulator domestically and a reliable global partner internationally.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have conducted in-depth studies on China's food safety discourse [3, 4, 5]. Zhang and Xue (2016) used a systematic approach to analyze 1553 media reports on food safety scandals

and concerns and found that economically motivated food fraud and adulteration was an emerging and serious food safety problem in China [6]. In terms of food authenticity and quality issue, Kendall (2018) found that Chinese consumers consider food fraud to represent a food hazard that poses a threat to the authenticity, quality and reliability of food [7]. Peng et al. (2015) indicated that media could be an effective tool to improve the food-safety status of the market by analyzing the “set-style yogurt and jelly event” scandal reported by a microblog [8]. Most studies focused on the description of China’s food safety problem and scandals, portrayed an image of China marked by short-term opportunism, information asymmetry and governmental inefficacy. Consequently, less scholarly attention has been directed toward the government’s progressive governance measures and their evolution over time. This gap underscores the need for a long-term dynamic analysis of China’s food safety discourse from 2009 to 2024, which would critically examine how the government’s shifting narratives have directly sought to shape its national image, an area that warrants further exploration.

3. Research Framework

3.1. Theoretical Foundations

This study is supported by Systemic Functional Linguistics, which emphasizes the social function of language as a semiotic system with three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. SFL is particularly suitable for analyzing national image: the ideational metafunction reveals how vocabulary and syntax depict a country’s actions and shape objective impressions; the interpersonal metafunction uncovers power relations and attitudes within discourse, illustrating how a nation positions itself globally; and the textual metafunction examines how coherent narratives construct a unified image [9]. Unlike other approaches, SFL explicitly links linguistic choices to social meanings, making it effective for tracing the dynamic construction of national image through discourse. When analyzing food safety discourse, conceptual function helps to interpret the statement of facts and the definition of problems and the description of policy measures. The interpersonal function focuses on the interactive relationship among the government, the public and the international community. The textual function ensures the organizational coherence of the discourse within the report. In addition, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a complementary perspective to reveal the hidden power relations, ideology and the constructive role of discourse in shaping social reality [10], and to help analyze how food safety discourse in GWR shapes the national image. Integrating SFL and CDA allows for a nuanced analysis as SFL reveals how meaning is constructed through language and CDA illuminates why these linguistic choices are made within socio-political contexts. This combined approach exposes the ideological assumptions and power dynamics in China’s food safety discourse, offering a comprehensive understanding of its role in national image construction.

3.2. Research Methods

This study uses text analysis and takes GWR from 2009 to 2024 as the main research corpus [11], with a qualitative-quantitative mixed-methods approach. We use the corpus software AntConc [12] to locate and collect the food safety related discourse of these years. Qualitatively, it deeply interprets the connotation and significance of discourse from the aspects of vocabulary, syntax and semantics. Quantitatively, the frequency of related words and specific sentence patterns is counted to provide data support for qualitative analysis and enhance the scientificity and persuasiveness of the research results.

4. Discourse Evolution Analysis in China

4.1. Ideational Function: Lexical Choices and the Construction of a Governance Reality

4.1.1. Core Lexicon

From 2009 to 2012, food safety-related words in the GWR focused on problems and basic solutions. For example, nouns such as “incidents,” “loss,” and “lesson” (2009) established a context of crisis, while verbs like “improve” and “enforce” (2009) signaled foundational corrective actions, collectively projecting an image of the state as a responsive actor addressing acknowledged failures. Between 2013 and 2017, words like “mechanism” (2013), “system” (2016), and “regulations” (2014) appeared more often, indicating the government's emphasis on structure building. One noticeable thing is that the word “strict oversight” became “the strictest, possible oversight” in 2014, showing a tougher approach. In the final stage from 2018 to 2024, the food safety discourse focused on technology (see Section 4.1.2). Besides, “tighten” repeated across reports (2020-2024), conveying relentless pressure from the government. The governed entities also lexically expanded from “food” to “food, drugs, and vaccines” (2021) and “special equipment” (2024).

These word changes construct a state that has evolved from a reactive responder to a methodical institution-builder, and finally to a technologically sophisticated regulator with an expansive protective mandate.

4.1.2. Emerging Terminology

With the advancement of food safety work, new terms and conceptual frameworks have been strategically introduced into the GWR, reflecting and shaping the evolution of governance models. The term “traceability”, first appeared in 2009, emphasizing “product traceability and recall systems.” Initially a regulatory concept, its meaning and technological underpinnings expanded significantly over time. The 2018 GWR proposed to “develop new ways and use the internet and big data to increase the effectiveness of this oversight”, aiming to make the entire process “tracked” and “traceable.” The semantic of “traceability” points to the information tracking of the whole chain of food production, circulation and sales [13]. This evolution signals a deepening of China's food safety supervision from reactive, terminal governance towards proactive, whole-process control. From a CDA perspective, this lexical shift constructs an image of a state leveraging cutting-edge technology to achieve precise and efficient governance, thereby enhancing its legitimacy as a modern and capable regulator. While the exact term “co-governance” does not appear directly in the reports, its discursive foundation is clearly laid through related phrasing and concepts. The call for the “participation of community bodies” (2014) and the conceptualization of “every line of defense” (2016) signify an early rhetoric shift from a state-centric regulatory model toward a framework of shared responsibility and multi-actor involvement. These phrasings imply that food safety governance is no longer an exclusive task of the state, but a collaborative effort involving social organizations and the public, laying the explicit discursive groundwork for the concept of co-governance. This constructs a national image of an inclusive and orchestrating state that mobilizes all societal resources to ensure public safety.

4.2. Textual Function: Syntactic Structuring and the Construction of an Authoritative Policy Narrative

4.2.1. Structural Refinement

The syntactic evolution of food safety discourse in GWR reveals a clear trajectory toward greater complexity and precision, reflecting the government's increasingly sophisticated approach to governance. Early GWR (2009-2012) on food safety mostly used simple statements,

such as “strengthen food safety oversight capabilities” and “enhance our food safety oversight capability and raise the level of food safety”, utilizing straightforward syntactic patterns that emphasized clear, actionable goals without elaborate modification. After the revision of the Food Safety Law in 2015, a large number of long and difficult sentences containing multiple modification components and logical relations appeared, such as “develop new ways of conducting food and drug oversight, and use the internet and big data to increase the effectiveness of this oversight” in the 2018 GWR. This sentence demonstrates several advanced syntactic features - coordination of multiple verb phrases, incorporation of technical terminology, and explicit statement of methodology and purpose - all indicating a more professionalized and specialized approach to policy communication.

4.2.2. From Directive to Incentive

A clear evolution in sentence function, from issuing commands to facilitating action, textually constructs the state’s shifting identity within China’s food safety discourse. Early reports from 2009 to 2012 relied on directive statements that positioned the government as an authoritative actor using strong, transitive verbs. The 2012 GWR exemplifies this: “We gave high priority to cracking down on the use of illegal additives,” where the verbal phrase “cracking down on” functions as a top-down command to suppress violations. Since 2013, the number of incentive-based sentences has gradually increased. The 2014 GWR proposes to “apply the strictest possible oversight... to ensure that every bite of food we eat is safe”, reflecting a reorientation toward service through shifts from pure enforcement to applying a framework aimed at public assurance. Recent reports (2018-2024) have employed instructive and facilitative statements. The 2018 GWR states: “We will develop new ways of conducting oversight, and use the internet and big data to increase the effectiveness.” This positioned the government as an innovator and enabler, focusing on systemic optimization rather than mere enforcement.

The sentence mood evolution discursively constructs a state that transforms from a commander into a service-oriented, sophisticated orchestrator of governance, enhancing its legitimacy through modern and collaborative language [14].

4.3. Interpersonal Function: Modality and Semantic Expansion in the Projection of a Committed National Identity

4.3.1. Modal Verb Dynamics

The diachronic analysis of modal verbs in food safety discourse in the GWR from 2009 to 2024 (as shown in Table 1) reveals a clear evolution that reflects the deepening logic of governance. While “will” remains consistently used throughout this period, changes in other modal verb preferences mark distinct developmental stages. The initial Reactive and Mandatory phase (2009-2012) was characterized by a high frequency of the commissive “will,” as seen in pledges to “make intensive efforts to improve food and drug safety,” projecting an image of a resolute authority focused on post-crisis trust-building through firm, top-down commitments. A significant discursive shift marked the Systematic Institution-Building phase (2013-2016). These modal choices indicated a shift toward establishing systematic governance and defining responsibilities, exemplified by the normative “should” which emerged to define procedures and allocate responsibility, as in the instruction to “require enterprises to assume primary responsibility.” This push for a systemic framework was further reinforced by the obligatory “must” in the assertion that “we must take stronger measures,” a tone that aligned with the pivotal revision of the Food Safety Law in 2015. The subsequent Consolidation and Technocratic Management phase (2017-2020) saw a refined use of language; the persistent “will” was now directed toward maintaining and optimizing established systems, vowing to “use the internet and big data to increase the effectiveness,” reflecting a more technocratic approach. Finally, the Confident Leadership and Modernization phase (2021-2024) is defined by a streamlined and assertive return to “will,” now deployed in concise commitments to

advanced objectives like tightening “supervision over quality and safety across the entire food chain,” projecting an image of a capable government that is confidently managing a modernized governance system. The evolution of modal verbs has become a microcosm reflecting the maturation of China’s food safety governance approach and its concomitant image projection.

Table 1: Phasal Evolution of Modal Verbs in Food Safety Discourse of GWR (2009-2024)

Phrase	Year	Dominant Modal Verbs & Frequency	Governance Logic & Image Projected
Reactive & Mandatory	2009-2012	Will (5)	Authoritative Promisor: Focused on post-crisis trust-building through firm, government-led pledges to intensify efforts and enhance oversight.
Systematization & Legalization	2013-2016	Should (4), Will (4), Must (1)	Rational Institution-Builder: A pivotal shift from making promises to defining responsibilities and outlining systemic, legal reform, emphasizing obligation and procedural norms.
Consolidation & Platformization	2017-2020	Will (3)	Consolidating & Technocratic: Emphasis shifted to strengthening implemented systems and leveraging new technological platforms for more efficient governance.
Modernization & Confident Leadership	2021-2024	Will (3)	Confident & Pragmatic: Characterized by succinct, assertive commitments to sophisticated, modern goals like intelligent whole-chain supervision, projecting assured capability.

4.3.2. Governance Scope Extension

From 2009 to 2024, the food safety discourse in GWR demonstrates a clear trend of governance scope extension. Initially, regulatory focus was primarily on “food” itself, as seen in the 2009 GWR, which emphasized efforts to “improve food and drug safety” and implement “product traceability and recall systems.” Over time, the scope of supervision expanded significantly to include pharmaceuticals, vaccines, and related equipment. For instance, the 2021 GWR explicitly mentioned tightening “supervision of food, drugs, and vaccines,” while the 2022 GWR further extended the focus to “the entire food chain.” By 2024, the scope had broadened to include “special equipment” alongside food and drugs, as stated in: “Oversight over the safety of food, drugs, and special equipment will be tightened.”

This lexical and conceptual expansion reflects not only the widening of regulatory targets but also the deepening of the state’s governance logic, from addressing isolated food safety issues to implementing comprehensive, full-chain and multi-domain oversight. From a CDA perspective, this discursive strategy constructs an image of an all-encompassing, rigorous, and meticulous regulatory state, suggesting that the government is continuously expanding its governance boundaries to address public concerns across various sectors. Such a portrayal enhances the state’s legitimacy as a responsible and authoritative actor committed to ensuring public safety in an increasingly complex risk environment.

4.3.3. Global Perspective Integration

Although the GWR is primarily addressed to a domestic audience, the discourse on food safety implicitly incorporates a global perspective, particularly in the areas of risk governance and standard setting. For example, the 2010 GWR noted that “food safety is vital to people's health and lives and has drawn widespread attention from deputies to the NPC and all sectors of society.” While not explicitly referencing the international community, the phrase “widespread attention” subtly acknowledges both domestic and global concerns regarding food safety. Furthermore, the 2016 GWR emphasized the development of “unified and authoritative safety monitoring systems,” with the terms “unified” and “authoritative” resonating with internationally recognized principles of food safety governance, such as consistency and accountability. In addition, the 2014 GWR's commitment to “apply the strictest, possible oversight, punishment and accountability” signals an alignment with global best practices, emphasizing rigor and transparency. The 2023 GWR mentioned practices like “random selection of inspectors and inspection targets” and “prompt release of results,” which reflect a broader international trend toward scientific, transparent, and evidence-based regulation.

Though terms like “international” or “global” are rarely used explicitly, the semantic choices reflect an underlying alignment with global governance norms. Through the lens of SFL's interpersonal function, this discourse serves to build trust among both domestic and international audiences, conveying the message that China is advancing its food safety governance in a manner that is consistent with internationally recognized standards and practices.

5. National Image Implications

5.1. Domestic Governance Image

The evolution of food safety discourse in GWR reflects a deliberate and strategic construction of the state's domestic governance image. Through specific linguistic and rhetorical choices, the state signals its role and commitment to its citizens.

5.1.1. Accountability Signaling

A cornerstone of the state's projected domestic image is that of an accountable government that proactively assumes responsibility. This is linguistically realized through the strategic expansion of regulatory scope, as detailed in the lexical analysis (Section 4.1). The evolution from overseeing “food” alone to encompassing “food, drugs, and vaccines” (2021) and ultimately “the entire food chain” (2022) and “special equipment” (2024) is not merely a technical adjustment but a powerful discursive signal. It constructs a government that is continuously expanding its purview to identify and own public risks, thereby signaling to the domestic audience that no safety concern falls outside its commitment. This expanding scope, coupled with commissive modals like “will” (e.g., 2009, 2014), reinforces a narrative of unwavering governmental responsibility and a relentless pursuit of comprehensive public safety.

5.1.2. Efficacy Demonstration

Beyond promising action, the discourse projects an image of an effective and capable state. This is primarily demonstrated through the adoption of a more technically sophisticated and systematic lexicon over time. The introduction of terms like “traceability” (2009), “big data” (2018), and “random selection of inspectors... and prompt release of results” (2023) signifies a transition from simplistic, directive governance to a complex, evidence-based, and technologically enabled model. The syntax evolves in parallel, from simple directives to longer, more complex sentences outlining multi-faceted policies. This linguistic sophistication is not merely descriptive, but instead performs the function of demonstrating state capacity. By

detailing methods, technologies and systems, the government uses language to build a narrative of competence, precision and modern efficacy, assuring the public of its ability to deliver on its promises.

5.2. Global Leadership Image

The implicit integration of a global perspective within the food safety discourse functions to cultivate an image of a responsible and modern global actor. The linguistic alignment with internationally recognized norms, such as the emphasis on “unified and authoritative” systems (2016) and “the strictest, possible oversight” (2014), is not merely a regulatory stance but a strategic signal. This rhetoric constructs a national image of a government that is operating within a global framework of risk governance, moving beyond addressing parochial “incidents” (2009) to implementing transparent and science-based processes that resonate with global best practices. Consequently, the discourse projects confidence and competence to an international audience, positioning China not as an isolated regulator but as a serious, reliable partner capable of managing complex safety challenges in a manner that meets—and even aspires to set—global standards. This subtle yet consistent linguistic positioning lays the groundwork for the country’s claim to a role in global leadership on health and safety governance.

6. Conclusion

This study has employed SFL and CDA to conduct a diachronic analysis of food safety discourse in China’s GWR from 2009 to 2024. The analysis reveals that the evolution in lexical choices, syntactic complexity and modal verb usage is far from arbitrary, on the contrary, it is a deliberate discursive strategy for national image building.

The findings illustrate a clear trajectory that the state’s narrative progressed from that of a reactive authority addressing crises to a systematic institution-builder, and finally to a technologically sophisticated and confident regulator. This linguistic evolution has simultaneously constructed a dual image for domestic and international audiences. Domestically, the discourse projects an image of an accountable and efficacious government by signaling expanding responsibility and demonstrating technical capability. Internationally, it cultivates an image of a modern global leader by implicitly aligning its governance rhetoric with prevailing international norms and standards of transparency and scientific rigor.

In conclusion, GWR serves as a crucial platform for narrative construction. The analysis of food safety discourse demonstrates how language is strategically deployed not only to report policy but also to performatively shape perceptions of state legitimacy, capacity and identity. This study underscores the power of official discourse in bridging policy action and perceived image, highlighting how China has linguistically navigated a major governance challenge to rebuild trust at home and reposition itself on the global stage. Future research could productively extend this analysis by comparing this official discourse with media representations or international perceptions to gauge its reception and effectiveness.

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