RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Construction and Challenges of China's National Image: An Analysis of Western Mainstream Media Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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| *ARTICLE INFO* | ABSTRACT |
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| | In the context of intensifying global competition for communicative power, the Western mainstream media's narrative construction of China's national image during the COVID-19 pandemic epitomizes the struggle for discursive dominance. This research integrates Framing Theory with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), employing qualitative research methodologies to systematically analyze relevant coverage from The New York Times, The Washington Post, BBC, and other media outlets between 2020 and 2022, focusing on controversies surrounding virus origin, vaccine diplomacy, and pandemic response performance. The findings reveal that Western media, through "attribution of responsibility" and "threat" frames, utilized symbolic manipulation via keywords, metaphors, and grammatical structures to reduce the global public health crisis to "Chinese responsibility" while reinforcing China's "otherness" to maintain Western moral superiority and leadership in the international order. Simultaneously, these narratives undermined China's discursive power through selective information citation and agenda-setting, reflecting the West's structural anxiety about China's rise. Based on these findings, this research recommends that China establish a multi-layered international communication system, strengthen localized narratives and credible sources; cultivate an image of a "responsible major power" through the provision of global public goods; and develop inclusive narratives while de-emphasizing confrontational expressions to highlight common interests. This research enriches theoretical studies on international communication power dynamics and national image construction while providing practical guidance for enhancing China's international discourse power. |

## INTRODUCTION

National image construction and dissemination constitute a vital component of national development strategy and represent a significant focus in international relations and global communication research. From Joseph Nye's "soft power" theory to Simon Anholt's "Nation Brands Index," scholars widely acknowledge that national image not only reflects a country's comprehensive strength externally but also serves as a crucial instrument in the competition for international discourse power. Within the context of globalization, media outlets, functioning as "symbol producers," directly influence the construction logic of national images through reporting frameworks and discourse strategies (Spicer & Sewell, 2010).

Global crises often mark pivotal moments in national image formation, with the COVID-19 pandemic emerging as one of the most globally impactful events in recent years. In pandemic-related

narratives, China has been portrayed both as an exemplar of epidemic control and, by certain Western mainstream media, as the bearer of responsibility or even a source of threat. However, national image construction is neither a unidirectional process nor a mere presentation of facts; rather, it results from the intricate interweaving of ideology, power structures, and discourse strategies (Gamson et al., 1992). What image of China have Western mainstream media projected during the pandemic? How has media coverage shaped the "China narrative" in the international public opinion sphere through processes of construction and deconstruction?

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019, China, as the country where the virus was first identified, has actively cultivated an image of a "responsible major power" through stringent public health policies, rapid vaccine development, and global pandemic assistance (Liu et al., 2020). Simultaneously, it has faced intense scrutiny from Western mainstream media regarding virus origin tracing, information transparency, and human rights issues. This coexistence of "construction" and "deconstruction" exemplifies a paradox in international communication: while China endeavors to project a positive national image through proactive communication and diplomatic actions, Western media, as dominant forces in the international public opinion sphere, employ their reporting frameworks and ideological inclinations to engage in "discursive encapsulation" of China's image, attempting to confine it within certain negative narrative frameworks.

Previous studies indicate that Western mainstream media frequently employ "responsibility framing" and "threat framing" when reporting on China. Entman's (1993) framing theory demonstrates how media shape audience cognition and emotional responses by emphasizing specific event attributes and causal relationships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these frames manifested in the "othering" of China, portraying it as the pandemic's "origin," the "responsible party" for the global crisis, or even a "challenger to international order" (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020). Furthermore, media discourse and national image construction during COVID-19 revealed deep-seated inequalities in global information flows (Xu et al., 2020). Western mainstream media's dominance in international public opinion enables them to assign specific meanings to events and disseminate them globally through selective reporting and discourse construction (Cascini et al., 2022). The structural inequalities in the global news system have historically marginalized Global South nations in international discourse (Thussu, 2018). China, as a prominent representative of the Global South, often finds its national image simplified into either a threat or an instrumental entity within Western media narrative frameworks, with this "symbolization" process further widening the cognitive gap between East and West (Yang & Chen, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this research aims to unveil the construction logic and challenges of China's national image in Western mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically addressing the following research questions:

(1) How do Western mainstream media construct China's national image through framing and discourse strategies in pandemic coverage?

(2) What ideological inclinations and power structures are reflected in the construction and deconstruction of China's national image in Western media coverage?

(3) How do Western mainstream media employ narrative strategies such as "responsibility attribution frames" and "threat frames" to "other" China in pandemic reporting?

In addressing these questions, this study seeks not only to reveal Western mainstream media's reporting logic regarding China's national image but also to explore the complexities of national image construction and communication from the perspective of international communication and global discourse power. The study's innovation is twofold: first, it examines the bidirectional process of national image construction and deconstruction from a dynamic perspective within the context of global crisis communication; second, it reveals the deep-seated logic of ideology and power structures in pandemic narratives through multi-level, multi-dimensional media discourse analysis.

## 2.LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations and Communication Mechanisms of National Image Construction

National image represents the international community's overall perception and evaluation of a country, encompassing political, economic, and cultural dimensions (Roth, 2009). The political dimension of national image incorporates governance capability, international responsibility, and foreign policy; the economic dimension includes national economic strength, technological innovation capacity, and international trade status; while the cultural dimension involves the global reach and attractiveness of national culture (Gilboa, 2008). Nye's "soft power" theory posits that soft power represents the ability to achieve objectives through attraction rather than coercion, with national image being a crucial component of soft power. A positive national image can enhance a country's attractiveness and international discourse power, increasing its influence in international affairs (Nye, 2004). According to Nation Brands Index theory, national image is conceived as a brand, gaining recognition and evaluation in the international community through symbolic communication. National branding serves not only as a tool for international image transmission but also as a vital means of showcasing national identity (Anholt, 2011). For instance, through cultural exportation, tourism promotion, and international public relations activities, nations can reinforce their symbolic significance within the global communication sphere. The success of national branding depends not only on communication strategies but also closely relates to the international community's receptiveness to its symbols (Fetscherin, 2010).

Media serves as a crucial vehicle for national image communication, functioning as "symbol producers" in modern society, influencing public perception of national images through reporting frames and discourse strategies (Entman, 1993). Mainstream media, in selecting content and setting agendas, not only transmit information but also influence the international public opinion sphere through symbolization and framing (Scheufele, 1999). During national crises, for instance, media reporting tendencies often determine how the international community views a country's responsibilities and performance. From a constructivist perspective, national image is not merely a presentation of facts but rather a product of social construction (Fosnot, 2013).

The establishment of national image is subject to multiple influences from discourse, symbols, and ideology. According to Critical Discourse Analysis theory, media are not neutral in constructing national images but shape specific social cognitions through symbol production and power interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For example, China's dual image as both "threat" and "opportunity" in national media reflects the outcome of multiple discourse competitions. The logic of national image communication is bidirectional: on one side, nations shape their image through diplomatic actions, cultural transmission, and international aid (Cull, 2008); on the other side, external media interpret and reconstruct national images based on their own frameworks and ideologies (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, while China attempted to project an image of a responsible major power through "vaccine diplomacy" and "pandemic assistance," Western mainstream media interpreted its image negatively through reporting frames focused on "virus origin tracing" and "information opacity."

Crisis events (such as pandemics, wars, and economic crises) typically serve as critical junctures in national image construction. Crises not only challenge national governance capabilities but also present windows of opportunity for image construction (Boin et al., 2016). In international communication, crisis events are framed through media narratives, shaping global public perception of the involved nations. For instance, during the 2008 financial crisis, some countries were labeled as examples of "governance failure," while others earned positive recognition for their "economic resilience."

The COVID-19 pandemic stands as one of the most globally impactful crises in recent years. In pandemic narratives, China has attempted to construct an image of a "responsible major power" through stringent public health policies, vaccine development, and international assistance (Cascini et al., 2022), while simultaneously facing criticism from Western mainstream media over issues of "virus origin tracing" and "information transparency" (Jaworsky & Qiaoan, 2021). The coexistence of

"construction" and "deconstruction" reveals the complexity of national image building: while nations seek to strengthen positive images through proactive communication, external media employ crisis narratives to frame and discursively encapsulate national images.

The structural inequalities in the global news system grant Western mainstream media a dominant position in crisis narratives, further limiting the voices of Global South nations (such as China) in the international public opinion sphere (Thussu, 2018). Therefore, studying the construction and challenges of China's national image during the COVID-19 pandemic helps reveal power relations in global communication and provides practical references for enhancing national discourse power.

## 2.2 Reporting Frames and Characteristics of Western Mainstream Media's Coverage of China's Image

### 2.2.1 Historical Narrative of Western Media Coverage on China

Western media coverage of China exhibits two distinct characteristics: "threat narrative" and "instrumental narrative," rooted in Western historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. The "threat narrative" portrays China as a potential challenger to the existing international order, emphasizing its expansionary and external nature in economic, military, and technological domains (Callahan, 2009). Since the 1990s, the "China threat theory" has repeatedly emerged in Western media and think tank discourse, primarily focusing on China's rapid economic growth and its impact on global markets (Yang & Liu, 2012).

Simultaneously, Western media's "instrumental narrative" depicts China as a "useful other" in the international system, framing its role as a manufacturing center in global supply chains or an economic actor in international cooperation (Zhao, 2008). This dualistic tendency in reporting reveals that when China's behavior aligns with Western interests, its image is constructed as a "rational, effective economic partner"; however, when its actions challenge Western rules or values, it is portrayed as an "opaque, threatening" nation (Salzberger et al., 2020).

Existing research suggests that Western media's reporting inertia regarding China continued during the COVID-19 pandemic (van Dijk & Lo, 2023). Prior to the pandemic, coverage of China's human rights issues, Tibet issues, Hong Kong issues, and U.S.-China trade conflicts had already established negative frames in Western media. The COVID-19 outbreak provided new material for this narrative, with Western media quickly positioning China as the "responsible party" in the "virus origin" discourse (Cai & Mason, 2022). This narrative continuity is not coincidental but stems from "framing inertia" in Western media operations: media tend to apply existing narrative frameworks to interpret new events, reducing reporting costs and catering to audience preconceptions (Entman, 1993). In early pandemic coverage, The New York Times and The Washington Post repeatedly emphasized the "lack of transparency" in the Chinese government's early response, drawing parallels with government behavior during the SARS epidemic, further reinforcing the narrative logic of "threat" and "responsibility."

### 2.2.2 Frames and Tendencies in Pandemic Coverage

According to framing theory, media construct reporting logic through four aspects: "problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the most prominent frames in Western media coverage of China were the "responsibility attribution frame" and the "threat frame."

Regarding the responsibility attribution frame, Western media linked the pandemic's origin to China and reinforced China's "responsibility" label for the pandemic's spread by highlighting issues such as "virus origin tracing" and "information opacity" (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020). For instance, The Economist repeatedly used terms like "Wuhan virus" and "Chinese cover-up" in multiple reports, attributing early pandemic control failures to Chinese government governance issues. The responsibility attribution frame not only focused on China's internal governance but also extended to its role in global pandemic response through transnational reporting (Cascini et al., 2022). For

example, reports on China's support for WHO and vaccine diplomacy were typically interpreted as "external PR strategies" meant to obscure domestic issues (Lee, 2021).

In terms of the threat frame, during the pandemic, China's vaccine diplomacy was portrayed by media as a "geopolitical tool" rather than "public health assistance." The Washington Post described China's vaccine promotion as "attempting to consolidate strategic influence in Africa and Southeast Asia through vaccines," emphasizing its underlying "geopolitical intentions" (Suzuki & Yang, 2023).

The framed reporting not only shaped China's image of "responsibility" and "threat" during the pandemic but also employed "othering" narrative techniques to position China in opposition to mainstream Western society.

### 2.2.3 Ideological Tendencies in Western Media Coverage

Western mainstream media's ideological inclinations permeate their coverage of China and influence international public opinion through reporting frames and discourse strategies (Çoban, 2018). The structural inequalities in the global news system grant Western media a dominant position in the international public opinion sphere, and this dominance is closely linked to Western ideological biases (Thussu, 2018).

For instance, Western media's reporting on China often uses "liberal democracy" and "market economy" as benchmarks, viewing China's governance system and development model as a "threatening alternative," thus manifesting obvious bias in content presentation (Zhao, 2013). Research suggests that Western media's coverage of China's pandemic response typically employs discourse contrasts between "transparency in democratic countries" and "concealment in authoritarian states" to reinforce their own ideological sense of superiority (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020). For example, in a 2020 editorial, The Guardian described China's anti-pandemic measures as products of "high-pressure governance" and "social surveillance," while attributing Western countries' pandemic challenges to the "complexity of democratic societies."

The structural inequalities in the global news system provide Western mainstream media with discursive power advantages in agenda-setting and reporting frames. This advantage is reflected not only in selective event coverage but also through the framing of report content, shaping audience cognition and emotional responses to events (Thussu, 2018).

### 2.3 Integration of Media Discourse Analysis and National Image Studies

### 2.3.1 Application of Framing Theory

Framing Theory constitutes an essential instrument in media studies, employed to analyze how media outlets influence public perception of events through specific reporting frameworks (Entman, 1993). Media frames encompass four fundamental functions: problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Through selective emphasis on particular information while disregarding others, media outlets not only shape public comprehension of events but also guide public opinion regarding moral judgments and policy orientations pertaining to relevant actions (Houston et al., 2015). For instance, media can characterize an event as a crisis through "problem definition," identify accountable parties through "causal attribution," reinforce value orientations through "moral evaluation," and ultimately influence public preferences for solutions through "treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993). Research indicates that when covering international conflicts, media frequently employ "responsibility attribution frames" to ascribe conflict responsibility, which directly influences public attitudes toward the nations involved (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

### 2.3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis and Media Studies

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) represents an analytical methodology focused on the relationship between language and power dynamics, with its primary objective being the revelation of underlying ideological and social power structures in discourse (Fairclough, 1996; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). The analysis unfolds across three dimensions: textual analysis (linguistic features), discursive

practice (production and dissemination), and social practice (ideology and power structures). Media coverage functions not merely as information transmission but as an instrument for ideological production and social power reproduction (Fairclough, 2013).

CDA excels at revealing how media employ "implicit discourse strategies" to construct "othering" narratives. Through linguistic choices, metaphorical usage, and contextual framing, media can portray certain groups or nations as "heterogeneous, threatening entities" (Wodak, 2001). During COVID-19 coverage, CDA research illuminated how Western mainstream media constructed China's negative image through "othering" strategies. For instance, when reporting on China's pandemic response, Western media frequently interpreted Chinese containment measures as extensions of "authoritarian governance" rather than science-based public health policies, employing terms like "high-pressure governance" and "surveillance society" (Tian et al., 2020). In covering China's vaccine diplomacy, Western media regularly deployed negative terminology such as "conditional aid" and "hidden agenda," insinuating ulterior motives in China's global pandemic response. This discourse strategy, through metaphor, grammatical structure, and contextual setting, frames China's international cooperation as "strategic expansion" rather than "public health assistance."

Framing Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis demonstrate high complementarity in media studies. While Framing Theory emphasizes structured patterns in media reporting, focusing on how frame functions shape public cognition, CDA delves into ideological and power relations behind language and symbols, revealing micro-level reproduction logic of social inequalities (Fairclough, 1995; Entman, 1993). Their integration enables comprehensive analysis from structure to detail, surface to depth. In this research, Framing Theory illuminates Western mainstream media's reporting logic in constructing China's national image during COVID-19, examining manifestations of "responsibility attribution" and "threat" frames. Meanwhile, CDA examines implicit ideological biases and "othering" strategies, particularly how linguistic symbols construct China's negative image.

## 3.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Theoretical Framework

National image construction is a dynamic communicative process that encompasses both media framing practices and the underlying power structures and ideological operational logic inherent in discourse (Wang, 2003). To systematically examine how Western mainstream media constructed China's national image during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research integrates Framing Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to establish a comprehensive analytical framework.

Building upon Framing Theory, this research focuses on how media shapes public perception and attitudes toward China through four core functions: "problem definition," "causal attribution," "moral evaluation," and "treatment recommendation," constructing both "responsibility attribution frames" and "threat frames" (Entman, 1993). Furthermore, to address the limitations of Framing Theory in analyzing linguistic symbols and their ideological implications, this research incorporates Critical Discourse Analysis, employing Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical model. This model examines textual analysis, discourse practice, and social practice to dissect how metaphors, rhetoric, and contextual settings in media coverage construct China's "otherness," while unveiling the power dynamics and ideological predispositions underlying linguistic symbols.

By combining the structured analysis of Framing Theory with CDA's in-depth interpretation, this research framework endeavors to reveal the construction and deconstruction logic of China's national image in Western mainstream media's pandemic coverage through three dimensions: macro (global communication and power dynamics), meso (media framing and narrative logic), and micro (linguistic symbols and communication strategies). This comprehensive approach provides a more thorough theoretical perspective for national image studies. The theoretical framework is illustrated in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Theoretical Framework

## 3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative research methods, combining content analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to systematically examine relevant coverage from Western mainstream media. The study focuses on influential Western news organizations, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Times, The Guardian, CNN, and BBC. The textual data encompasses various formats, including news reports, commentary articles, and editorials, ensuring diversity and representativeness of data sources, with analysis conducted using NVivo 14. Temporally, the research examines coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2020 to December 2022), with particular emphasis on the origin controversy during the pandemic's early stages, vaccine diplomacy phase, and shifting public discourse regarding various nations' pandemic responses, thereby mapping the dynamic construction process of China's national image.

To achieve the research objectives, the textual analysis and theoretical interpretation are conducted in three stages, as illustrated in Table 3-1.

**Table 3-1 Research Stages**

| Step | Main Task | Specific Content and Analytical Dimensions |
|---|---|---|
| Step 1: Content Analysis | Conduct preliminary classification of media texts, extract keywords and thematic frameworks. | 1. Extract keywords and themes (e.g., "virus origins," "Chinese hidden purchases," "vaccine diplomacy," etc.). 2. Categorize into specific framework types (e.g., "responsibility attribution framework," "threat framework"). |
| Step 2: Critical Discourse Analysis | Conduct in-depth interpretation of the text, analyzing linguistic symbols and the implicit ideologies and power relations behind them. | 1. Textual level: Analyze linguistic symbols (modifiers, implications, keywords, etc.). 2. Discourse practice level: Analyze the production and dissemination of news reports. 3. Social practice level: Analyze the ideologies and power relations behind the news reports. |
| Step 3: Macro Background Analysis | Place the findings in the context of global communication and power structures to explore how Western media construct China's national image. | 1. Analyze the inequalities in the global news system and their impact on the construction of China's national image. 2. Study the construction and deconstruction process of China's national image during the pandemic-related events. |

## 4.ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Analysis of Linguistic Symbols and Framing Logic

### 4.1.1 Extraction and Analysis of Keywords and High-frequency Terms

In the textual analysis of Western mainstream media's coverage of China's pandemic response, the selection and frequent occurrence of specific keywords serve as crucial mechanisms in constructing particular framing logic. Analysis of coverage from The New York Times, The Washington Post, and BBC reveals the frequent occurrence of keywords such as "cover-up," "opacity/lack of transparency," "threat," "responsibility," and "epicenter." These lexical choices not only describe events but also convey negative evaluations of China through their emotional and semantic implications.

For instance, a New York Times article from September 2020 titled "Local Officials in China Hid Coronavirus Dangers From Beijing, U.S. Agencies Find" employs terminology that both defines the

nature of the problem (global crisis) and constructs a "Chinese responsibility" narrative frame through negative verb choices. Additionally, the phrase "lack of transparency" appears repeatedly across multiple reports, exemplified in BBC's coverage titled "Coronavirus: China rejects call for probe into origins of disease," which states "The virus spread to 26 countries and China was criticised by the UN's global health body for concealing the scale of the outbreak," further reinforcing China's negative image in global discourse. The extraction of keywords and high-frequency terms is presented in Table 4-1.

**Table 4-1 Keyword and high-frequency word extraction results**

| Keywords/High-Frequency Words | Original Headline or Sentence |
|---|---|
| cover-up | "concealed the extent of the coronavirus outbreak in its country." "The Chinese Communist Party's Coronavirus Cover-up" |
| lack of transparency | "WHO official criticizes China's 'inexcusable' lack of transparency on pandemic's origins" "China's 'suspicious behaviour' and lack of transparency is fuelling rumours, says US expert" |
| threat | "U.S. Views of China Increasingly Negative Amid Coronavirus Outbreak" |
| responsibility | "China Is Legally Responsible for COVID-19 Damage and Claims Could Be in the Trillions" |
| epicenter | "Wuhan with its seafood market is concluded to be the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic" |
| delay | "The delay is significant because it may have wasted time for the world to develop COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, causing needless deaths, the committee said." |

**4.1.2 Functional Use of Metaphors and Rhetoric**

The metaphorical deployment of linguistic symbols represents a significant mechanism in Western media's textual frame construction. Metaphor theory suggests that metaphors function not merely as linguistic phenomena but as cognitive tools, facilitating the construction of specific social meanings by mapping complex events onto familiar scenarios (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In pandemic-related coverage of China, Western media extensively employed "war metaphors" and "disaster metaphors" to reinforce China's image as a "threat" to global stability.

For instance, IANS published an article titled "Scientists in 2007 warned China was a 'time bomb' for COVID-19," utilizing the "bomb" metaphor to portray China as a potential crisis catalyst. This rhetorical device not only possesses strong emotional resonance but also constructs negative cognitive associations by personifying China as a "threatening entity." Similarly, The Guardian's employment of the metaphor "epicenter of the virus" links China's national image with the concept of "disaster source," further intensifying the emotional impact of the "responsibility attribution frame." Additionally, the selection of adjectives and adverbs demonstrates significant emotional manipulation. Phrases such as "completely opaque" and "highly dangerous" amplify negative emotional connotations through intensifying modifiers, transforming China's portrayal from "factual statements" to "emotional judgments."

4.1.3 Grammatical Structure and Attribution of Responsibility

At the syntactic level, the deployment of grammatical structures reflects Western media's strategic framing logic in textual construction. Fairclough notes that grammatical choices can manipulate linguistic directionality and meaning production through subject prominence, verb selection, and sentence arrangement (Fairclough, 2003). In pandemic coverage, Western media predominantly employed a "single-subject responsibility attribution" syntactic pattern to reinforce China's position as the "sole responsible party" in the crisis.

Specifically, The New York Times' multiple reports on virus origin tracing frequently utilize the syntactic structure "China + verb + negative outcome," as exemplified in headlines such as "China's Abrupt Covid Pivot Leaves Many Without Medicines" or "China Protests Break Out as Covid Cases Surge and Lockdowns Persist." This syntactic pattern simplifies complex global crises into single-subject responsibility issues through explicit subjects (China) and negative verbs (concealed, delayed), while overlooking other nations' shortcomings in pandemic response. This grammatical "simplification" not only aligns with media's need for "narrative conciseness" but also serves Western media's discourse construction objectives by reinforcing China's image of "negative actions."

Through the multiple combinations of keywords, metaphors, rhetoric, and grammatical structures, Western media constructed two primary framing logics at the textual level: responsibility attribution frame and threat frame, as shown in Table 4-2.

**Table 4-2 Framing Logic**

| Framework Logic | Type of Linguistic Symbols | Specific Content and Function |
|---|---|---|
| Responsibility Attribution Framework | Keywords | High-frequency words such as "cover-up," "delay," and "lack of transparency" point to the negative attributes of China's actions, attributing the global crisis to China. |
| | Implication | Words like "epicenter" and "ticking time bomb" imply that China is the starting point or a potential danger source of the global crisis, using emotional descriptions to heighten readers' sense of urgency. |
| | Grammatical Structure | Phrases like "China + verb + negative outcome" (e.g., "China delayed sharing critical information") explicitly attribute responsibility to China, simplifying the complexity of the issue. |
| Threat Framework | Keywords | Words like "threat," "expansion," and "geopolitical influence" emphasize the strategic and geopolitical implications of China's pandemic diplomacy, suggesting potential conflicts with Western interests. |
| | Modifier Techniques | Descriptions like "seeks to expand influence" or "challenges the existing order" imply that China's actions are threatening existing global structures. |

At the textual level, the selection and combination of linguistic symbols constitute the core discursive strategies employed by Western mainstream media in their coverage of China's pandemic situation. Keywords and high-frequency terms define China's role in the pandemic through emotionally charged and value-oriented expressions. Metaphorical and rhetorical devices amplify the communicative impact through visualization and emotional resonance, while grammatical structures simplify the complexity of the global crisis into unidirectional accusations against China through explicit responsibility attribution. This profound integration of linguistic symbols and framing logic not only shapes China's negative image in global public opinion but also provides symbolic tools for Western media in the competition for international discourse power.

## 4.2 Analysis of Context and Communication Strategies

### 4.2.1 Analysis of Context and Communication Intent

Analysis of Western mainstream media's discourse practices regarding China's pandemic coverage must be contextualized within specific production and communication environments. The production of coverage is influenced not only by media's ideological inclinations and economic interests but also by audience cognitive needs and political preferences. Taking The New York Times,

BBC, and The Washington Post as examples, their reporting contexts demonstrate the following characteristics:

First, these media primarily serve European and American audiences whose historical and worldview perspectives are influenced by "Western-centrism." Their complex attitudes toward China's rise make them more receptive to negatively framed narratives. Second, media faced intense competition for public opinion during the pandemic, leading to "crisis news frames" aimed at attracting reader attention, which further reinforced negative reporting tendencies toward China. For instance, analysis of The New York Times' pandemic coverage reveals frequent use of narrative patterns emphasizing "cover-up" and "lack of transparency" regarding virus origin tracing and early information disclosure. These communication intentions not only cater to readers' psychological need for "responsibility attribution" but also serve the media's goal of strengthening their dominance in public opinion.

### 4.2.2 Selective Citation and Agenda Setting

Western mainstream media extensively employ selective citation and agenda-setting strategies in their coverage of China's pandemic situation to construct specific narrative logic and reinforce negative perceptions of China.

Selective citation serves as a core mechanism for controlling narrative logic. In coverage of virus origin tracing, The Washington Post's April 2020 article cited anonymous "U.S. intelligence officials" claiming the coronavirus "may have originated from a Wuhan lab." This unverified information, presented through the ambiguous wording "may," was amplified in headlines as a "credible possibility," generating widespread public attention. However, the coverage notably omitted contradictory evidence from multiple international scientific studies. Similarly, in vaccine diplomacy coverage, BBC emphasized criticism of Chinese vaccines in some developing countries for "lacking transparent clinical data" while rarely mentioning their practical effectiveness in controlling outbreaks post-vaccination.

Agenda-setting theory suggests that media can influence audience understanding and attention direction by controlling topic selection and presentation order. In China pandemic coverage, agenda-setting manifestly constructs a binary narrative of "Chinese responsibility" versus "Western victimhood." For instance, The New York Times' coverage between February and March 2020 heavily focused on "consequences of China's delayed information disclosure" while barely mentioning policy failures in pandemic response by Italy, Spain, and the United States. Through selective arrangement of reporting focus, agenda-setting shaped a narrative logic of "Western nations as victims, China as responsible party," further reinforcing Western readers' negative perceptions of China.

### 4.2.3 Communication Strategies

Western mainstream media's communication strategies in pandemic coverage reflect their dual pursuit of discourse power and economic interests. These strategies primarily manifest in two aspects: attention attraction and authority maintenance.

In the early stages of the outbreak, Western media rapidly drew audience attention to "Chinese responsibility" through emotionalized narratives and crisis-oriented language. For instance, BBC employed phrases like "The Chinese city of Wuhan is the epicentre of the outbreak" and "But the virus has spread across China and to at least 16 countries globally," positioning China as the virus's source and center. Emotionalized narratives not only enhanced communicative impact but also reinforced negative perceptions through emotional rendering.

Western media also attempted to maintain their authoritative position in international public opinion through narrative logic manipulation. The New York Times and BBC frequently cited "Western experts" and "government officials," framing these comments as "authoritative voices" to undermine the credibility of Chinese official statements and scientific research.

Through selective construction of specific contexts and multiple applications of communication strategies at the discourse practice level, Western mainstream media reinforced negative narratives

in China pandemic coverage. Media production contexts are constrained by target audience preferences and existing worldviews, while communication strategies manipulate audience cognition through selective citation, agenda-setting, and emotionalized narratives. This dual effect not only reproduces power inequalities in global communication but also provides important clues for subsequent ideological analysis at the social practice level.

## 4.3 Interpretation of Ideology and Power Relations

### 4.3.1 Ideological Bias

Western media universally adopted "Othering" narrative strategies in pandemic coverage, portraying China as an "external threat" to global stability, thereby serving the ideological reproduction of Western-centrism. Taking The New York Times as an example, its multiple reports on the pandemic's origin frequently employed terms like "lack of transparency" and "cover-up." These linguistic symbols not only directly criticized the Chinese government's behavior in pandemic information disclosure but also reinforced China's association with "responsibility" and "dereliction" through structural arrangement of report content. Behind this narrative strategy lies the political logic of Western-centrism: through the "Othering" of China, constructing China as an entity opposed to Western values of "openness" and "transparency," thereby highlighting Western moral superiority.

Furthermore, "Othering" is also evident in coverage of China's vaccine diplomacy. For instance, BBC frequently used expressions like "geopolitical influence" and "soft power expansion" when discussing Chinese vaccine assistance. These terms not only implied China's "hidden motives" in international pandemic cooperation but also made China's actions appear threatening by politicizing public health issues. In contrast, Western countries' vaccine assistance was described as "humanitarian aid," emphasizing their selflessness and moral high ground.

### 4.3.2 Power Relations in Global Communication Landscape

Western mainstream media coverage reflects deeper power asymmetries in global communication beyond mere news narratives. Through control of agenda-setting and selective information presentation, Western media reinforces its position as "discourse dominator" in the global communication system. The reproduction of power relations can be interpreted through two aspects:

First, the exercise of symbolic power. Symbolic power serves as a crucial tool for Western media to maintain its dominant position in global communication. In pandemic coverage, Western media positioned China in opposition to moralized concepts like "transparency," "responsibility," and "cooperation." For example, The Washington Post repeatedly emphasized that "China's lack of transparency threatens international scientific cooperation" in virus origin discussions. In this framing, "transparency" is constructed as a universal value in global governance, while China's non-compliance is characterized as "anti-globalization" behavior.

Second, the communication logic of power inequality. In the global communication landscape, Western media's control over information flow exemplifies power asymmetry. During the pandemic, although China actively promoted its pandemic control experience and vaccine assistance through diplomatic means and global media platforms, this information was often marginalized in Western mainstream media coverage. For instance, scientific reports and data released by the Chinese government regarding virus origin were downplayed in The New York Times and BBC coverage, while anonymous "intelligence information" was repeatedly cited.

Western mainstream media's coverage of China's pandemic situation represents not just communicative practice but also profound reflections of global communication patterns and international political shifts. At the social practice level, Western-centrism implicit in coverage reinforces Western moral superiority and symbolic power through "Othering" narratives of China, while power inequalities in global communication serve Western media's need to maintain discourse dominance through information flow control and agenda-setting.

# 5.CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

## 5.1 Conclusions

Western mainstream media coverage of China's pandemic situation represents not merely news communication practice but a concentrated manifestation of global discourse power contestation. Through comprehensive application of linguistic symbols, communication strategies, and ideology, Western media systematically constructed narrative frameworks of "Chinese responsibility" and "Chinese threat" during the pandemic.

This reporting logic, through manipulation of keywords (like "cover-up," "lack of transparency"), metaphors (like "epicenter," "time bomb"), and grammatical structures (like "China + negative verbs"), simplified the complex global public health crisis into a singular issue of Chinese responsibility while further reinforcing China's "Othered" image to highlight Western moral superiority.

In terms of communication strategy, Western media focused attention on China's alleged "dereliction" while downplaying reflection on their own countries' pandemic response inadequacies through selective citation and agenda-setting. For instance, anonymous intelligence and unverified hypotheses were repeatedly cited while Chinese scientific research was marginalized. This information flow asymmetry not only weakened China's international discourse power but also consolidated Western media's position as "authoritative information sources."

At a deeper level, this coverage reflects Western structural anxiety about China's rise. By interpreting China's pandemic actions as "geopolitical tools" or "soft power expansion," Western media attempted to undermine the legitimacy of Chinese actions to maintain their dominant international order and value system. Meanwhile, this ideological reproduction serves Western-centrism's cultural hegemony, symbolizing China as a potential threat to global order.

Nevertheless, the global communication landscape is undergoing transformation. China is gradually challenging Western communication dominance through expansion of international communication capabilities via media and diplomatic means.

## 5.2 Implications

### 5.2.1 Strengthening International Communication Capabilities and Building Multi-level Discourse Systems

Facing negative narratives dominated by Western mainstream media, China must accelerate the construction of multi-level international communication systems to enhance its discourse power (Liu et al., 2023). Current challenges indicate that relying solely on official media or diplomatic voices is insufficient to comprehensively address Western media's agenda-setting. China needs to establish more flexible communication networks closer to target audiences through diverse channels, including think tanks, academic institutions, international media cooperation, and social media platforms (Hu & Ji, 2012). For example, promoting localized narrative strategies through cooperation with non-Western media can construct narrative frameworks more aligned with local cultural contexts, breaking through Western-centric communication barriers. Additionally, China should focus on introducing internationalized talent and third-party credible sources to enhance objectivity and credibility of communication content, gradually changing the current lack of diversity in "Chinese voices" in international public opinion.

### 5.2.2 Strengthening "Responsible Major Power" Image Through Global Public Goods

Against the backdrop of transforming international political patterns, China needs to strengthen its national image as a "responsible major power" by providing more global public goods. During the pandemic, China's vaccine assistance and anti-pandemic supplies initially demonstrated its important role in global public health governance, but Western media's questioning of its motives indicates China's legitimacy in international cooperation narratives needs further consolidation. Future deep engagement in issues like climate change, food security, and development assistance can

demonstrate China's long-term commitment to international society through practical actions (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). For instance, China's proposed Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative provide Chinese solutions for global governance but require strengthened operability through specific actions and multilateral cooperation mechanisms to counter Western "threat-based" narratives of Chinese behavior.

### 5.2.3 Creating More Inclusive and Universal National Image Narratives

In shaping its national image, China should avoid simple confrontational expressions and instead construct a global image that transcends cultural and ideological differences through more inclusive and universal narrative approaches (Hartig, 2016). Currently, Western media's negative construction of China's image often exploits cultural differences and ideological opposition. Therefore, China needs to demonstrate a multidimensional, open China to the international community through "soft power" means such as art, culture, technology, and education. For example, strengthening global promotion of international film and television, literary creation, and technological innovation achievements can present Chinese society's diversity, innovation, and modernity, diluting negative labels from "Othering" narratives (Shambaugh, 2015). Meanwhile, China's narrative system should emphasize common interests and the concept of a shared future for mankind, gaining broader international society recognition by emphasizing commonalities rather than differences in global cooperation.

### 5.3 Research Significance and Practical Value

This study focuses on textual and framing analysis of China's pandemic narrative in Western mainstream media, revealing the profound influence of linguistic symbols, communication strategies, and ideologies on global communication patterns. This research not only provides new case support for studying the current international communication power structure but also deepens theoretical explanations of "discourse power" and "othering." In the context of coexisting globalization and post-globalization, the traditional communication system is gradually shifting from Western dominance to multipolar competition. Through analyzing the negative narrative construction of China's image, this study reveals how Western media maintain their dominant position in global communication through symbolic power and agenda-setting.

By uncovering the selective use of keywords, metaphorical rhetoric, and grammatical structures for attribution of responsibility, this study provides empirical support for China to optimize its narrative frameworks and construct a persuasive and appealing national image in international communication. For instance, Western media successfully shaped a singular narrative of "China's responsibility" through emotionally charged "threat framing," indicating China's need to place greater emphasis on agenda-setting and semantic strategies in communication to avoid reactive responses. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the significance of multilateral cooperation and localized communication, offering actionable recommendations for China to achieve more effective image management in global communication practices.

### 5.4 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study conducts textual analysis of Western mainstream media coverage of China's pandemic situation, illuminating the profound impact of linguistic symbols, communication strategies, and ideological logic on China's national image construction. However, certain limitations exist in this research. Primarily, the study concentrates on coverage from archetypal Western media outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and BBC, lacking comprehensive inclusion of narrative perspectives from regional or non-Western media, thus presenting an insufficient analysis of global communication pattern diversity. Additionally, while the research employs textual analysis as its primary methodology, emphasizing interpretation of report content and linguistic structures, it lacks in-depth exploration of news production processes (such as editorial decisions and news sources) and communication effects (including reader feedback and public opinion), limiting comprehensive understanding of the complex power relations underlying media discourse practices. Furthermore, the research primarily focuses on reporting characteristics within the pandemic context, whereas

future studies could attempt to incorporate other major international issues for more universal and longitudinal comparative analysis.

To address these limitations, subsequent research could expand the media sample scope to include textual analysis from more non-Western media outlets, enhancing understanding of global communication system multipolarity. Simultaneously, incorporating audience surveys and communication effect studies could explore the practical impact of media narratives on public perception and international relations, thereby developing more systematic theoretical and practical guidance.

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