

# A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports about China on COVID-19 in *The New York Times*

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**Abstract:** In 2019, the COVID-19 has spread around the world and there have been numerous reports about this topic. In fact, these seemingly objective and unbiased news reports contain underlying ideologies and influence readers' opinions and judgments. During April and July 2020, negative public perceptions of China in the U.S. reached a historical high point. Therefore, this study uses Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model as the theoretical framework and Halliday's systemic-functional grammar as the analytical tool, and selects 40 articles from the beginning of April to the end of July 2020 as the research corpus with the help of AntConc 4.0.5 (macOS) 2022, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. The following key findings emerged from the study. Firstly, *The New York Times* tends to use negative linguistic elements to portray an arbitrary image of China, but the expression of Sino-U.S. relations is neutral. Secondly, *The New York Times* tends to use direct quotations in its news coverage, but the quotations tend to be negative in content. Finally, political, economic and cultural aspects have a direct impact on the ideological production of news reports. This thesis contributes to the enrichment of research in the field of critical discourse analysis and enhances the critical awareness of readers.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis, News reports, COVID-19, China-U.S. relation, *The New York Times*.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak had triggered a global health crisis. The first confirmed case was found in Wuhan, China, but the outbreak of the virus has not only swept through mainland China, but suspected and confirmed patients have also been found in other countries. As the outbreak spread, the two central world powers began an endless war of words via media. Statista published the COVID-19 confirmed cases in China and the United States [23, 24]. It shows that excluding the outbreak point, there is a new turning point as the number of confirmed cases in the United States began to spike while the number of confirmed cases in China leveled off at the end of March. Despite China's effectiveness in containing the spread of the epidemic, it does not seem to have been recognized and praised by the U.S. public. This fact can be reflected in the attitude of the public. According to the Pew Research Center [21, 22], negative perceptions of China in the United States reached a new historical high point from April through June 2020 and continue to climb. About two-thirds (64%) of Americans said China had done poorly to respond to the coronavirus outbreak.

The mass media is considered credible and objective because it has original sources of information and is responsible for the accuracy of the news [29]. During the pandemic, it plays a vital role in disseminating news about what is known and unknown about the pandemic and the virus around the world. It is also an effective mean of influencing people's attitudes and judgements.

*The New York Times* (NYT), which has considerable influence worldwide, is a representative of serious publications and has long held good credibility and authority. It is widely trusted for the objectivity of the information it conveys as well as its neutrality. However, Critical Discourse

Analysis notes that the construction of discourse is bound to occur under the constraints of complex ideology structure [9]. It can argue that the production of news is impossible to be completely neutral and objective, and the richness of potential ideology and power inevitably goes into producing a text. Van Dijk also illustrates that even when a text or discourse is expressed in a public information vehicle, ideology still leads to uncertainty [27]. Discourse analysis of news reports on epidemics is becoming increasingly popular. However, more studies focused on comparing Chinese and Western measures and attitudes towards the prevention and control of epidemics in the outbreak stage [1, 31]. Few scholars have delved into the reasons for underlying ideological manipulation in other stages.

Therefore, this article will focus on *The New York Times* as the main subject of study for a more in-depth analysis, exploring and explaining the underlying ideology behind its seeming impartiality and objectivity.

### 1.2. Research Purpose and Significance

This paper is to conduct the critical discourse analysis of news report about China on COVID-19 in *The New York Times* under the guidance of Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Halliday's systemic-functional grammar (SFG). With the help of qualitative and quantitative methods, it aims to explore the hidden ideologies and potential power behind news discourse by answering three main research questions:

(1) How does *The New York Times* use linguistic elements to describe China related news about COVID-19?

(2) What ideologies behind news report on China from *The New York Times* are revealed?

(3) What factors influence ideologies behind news reports on China from *The New York Times*?

The importance of this research reflects both theoretical and practical aspects. From theoretical perspective, this study

extends the application of CDA and enriches the use of corpora in linguistics. Practically, this paper will fill the gap by focusing on reports related to the mid-term of the 2019 Coronavirus outbreak and exploring some new findings from U.S.-China relations. In addition, this study aims to enhance the critical awareness of the reader. When people read a wide range of news stories, they should interpret them from a historical as well as an open perspective and actively explore the ideological control behind the news discourse.

### 1.3. The Structure of the Research

This thesis is composed of six sections. Chapter one is the introduction, which introduces the research background, research purpose and significance, and the structure of this paper. Chapter two is the literature review, which contains two parts. The first part presents studies related to linguistics on news reports of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second part reviews studies related to COVID-19 pandemic news coverage in the CDA field. Chapter three is about theoretical frameworks, which explains Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Halliday's systemic-functional grammar. Chapter four is the research methodology, including research methods, data collection and corpus building, and data processing and analysis. Chapter five is the discussion and finding section, which consists of three parts. The first part contains the keyword analysis and concordance analysis, the second part involves the reporting mode analysis, and the third part focuses on analyzing political, economic, and cultural context. Chapter six is the conclusion, including the main findings, implications, limitations of this thesis, and the recommendations for further study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Relevant Studies of News Reports on the COVID-19 in Linguistics

The existing studies have diverse research directions in the news report on the COVID-19 pandemic in linguistics. Most studies focus on cognitive linguistics, especially from a metaphorical perspective. A few studies focus on systemic functional linguistics and ecolinguistics.

On the basis of metaphor theory, Kozlova investigated metaphoric representations in English of the COVID-19 pandemic in *The Financial Times* [13]. Lexical choice, semantic meaning and collocation were mainly considered in this research. The finding showed that the lexical means of expressing the dynamic images of the pandemic were diverse, showing a shift from military metaphors to different interpretations. For example, in the international-oriented report, the author introduced the concept of the COVID-19 pandemic as a common enemy, hinting the importance of the world cooperating with each other to address the crisis. Moreover, Luporini explored the headings and subheadings of the COVID-19 pandemic report from the perspective of applied conceptual metaphor theory and systemic functional linguistics [16]. The study found similarities in the conceptualization of viral metaphors and significant differences in framing. For instance, the viral metaphor in *The Wall Street Journal* was negative compared to *the China Daily*, which further contributed to the negative image of China. These studies confirm the prevalence of metaphors in mass media communication and the importance of metaphors in communicating ideas effectively and influencing audiences.

Kalotong also analyzed the selection of lexical words in the headline on *The Jakarta Post* with the theme-rheme analysis method [14]. The data was from 20 headlines during the first week of September. The interpretation of the different types of participants with transitivity tool demonstrated that *The Jakarta Post* highlighted the danger and lethality of the virus to the public during the outbreak. The main finding was that the representation of COVID-19 in Indonesia was an extremely dangerous virus.

In the ecolinguistics field, Khotimah et al. elaborated that health lexicons related to COVID-19 could be a tool to recognize the information in news reports on the pandemic [15]. They collected data in the form of health lexicons from five online news websites with the interpretation from the ecolinguistics perspective. They considered the expression of the health ecolixicons in the form of synonyms, acronyms, exonyms, and English abbreviations, as well as the coding of physical, social, and symbolic realities. This study validated the crucial role of mass media in the generation of words related to the COVID-19, and health terms previously understood only by specific professional fields were shifting toward socialization.

The existing linguistic literatures on COVID-19 pandemic news coverage shows a broad and diverse range of research directions. However, their analysis process and results still have limitations. Firstly, the data analysis from these studies only remains at the lexical level. For instance, they mainly focus on lexical choice, semantic meaning, and collocation. Secondly, their discussions are from a microscopic perspective. They simply consider the hidden meaning of the news reporters' message and the core topic of the news report from a lexical perspective, but do not explore the causes and effects from a social perspective. Thirdly, some studies lack critical thinking. For example, some studies only confirm the positive influence of mass media in the socialization of new terms related to the virus, but ignore its negative influence. Other studies fail to realize that the content of media coverage is affected by political, economic and cultural changes in a country. Thus, this paper will choose CDA as a theoretical basis to fill these gaps, which involves micro and macro perspectives.

### 2.2. Relevant Studies of News Reports on the COVID-19 based on CDA

CDA, a new branch of modern linguistics, has been widely concerned by many scholars. They have realized that the mass media is not just a tool for disseminating information to the public but a tool for political confrontation between nations from CDA's perspective. In this context, more studies focus on interpreting the potential ideology and power behind the different national news institutions, especially that reports about China.

Few studies focus on the quantitative method. Yu et al. used the search terms 'COVID-19' and 'coronavirus' to collect a large sample of news reports on the COVID-19 from the 'Lexis Advance' database in the *China Daily* and *The Guardian* [31]. The study started with the first official report of a new coronavirus outbreak in both countries and ended with the official lifting of the embargo in both countries, which was from January 9, 2020, to April 8, 2020. Based on the corpus and CDA analysis, *China Daily* used more objective and neutral terms in describing the COVID-19, expressing a more positive attitude towards fighting the epidemic. In contrast, *The Guardian* used more negative terms

and was less restrictive in reporting on the prevention and control policies of the epidemic. Although the data from this study was large enough to make the conclusions generalizable, its aim was limited to comparing the different epidemic prevention initiatives in China and the UK, which lacked a deeper look into the reasons for the differences shown by the media in different countries.

Most studies on CDA analysis have utilized the qualitative method. Alafnan examined two newspaper articles in *The Washington Post* and *People's Daily* from March 20, and March 19, 2020 respectively [1]. The article focused on the qualitative method to reveal the biased views, ideologies, and practices dictated by the reporter through the choice of topic and tone of reporting. The main finding was that *The Washington Post* and *People's Daily* articles both disparaged each other's government's achievements in the fight against the virus and exaggerated the effectiveness of their own country's response to the COVID-19. However, its sample size was too small to be credible. Wang combined Fairclough's CDA and Halliday's SFL to analyze 12 reports in the *People's Daily* and *The New York Times* from February 2020 to October 2020 [30]. They found that the *People's Daily* tended to condemn the ineffectiveness of preventive measures and the spread of infectious diseases due to capitalism in the United States. *The New York Times* preferred to use specific sources, citing other critics of China's anti-epidemic policies, to condemn China for spreading disinformation against the United States and worsening U.S.-China relations. Furthermore, Mu et al. used Fairclough's three-dimensional framework with a corpus method to analyze 35 news articles from September to December 2020 [20]. It found that *The New York Times* placed China in a hostile position as a threatening country and criticized China's actions for fighting the virus. The advantage of the qualitative method of CDA analysis was that this article had more space to explain the factors that influenced the different tendencies of the media in news reporting, both in terms of politics and culture, with in-depth reflections. However, the sample selection process was not meticulously described in these studies, which could easily be questioned as subjective factors dominating their samples.

Throughout reviewing these studies on the COVID-19 news report with CDA theory conducted by other researchers, some gaps are found. Firstly, the timeline choice and data size of some studies are unscientific. For example, the timeline is long, but the number of samples collected is relatively small. Secondly, data selection is overly influenced by subjective factors. Some studies do not elaborate on the data selection process. Thirdly, more studies focus on the beginning stage of the epidemic, and few explore the mid-term stages, which is a turning point in the epidemic. Lastly, some studies tend to devote much space to comparing media coverage to explore the different measures taken by different countries to prevent the epidemic without delving into the causes of underlying ideological formation on coverage.

### 3. Theoretical Frameworks

#### 3.1. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

Norman Fairclough, is recognized as one of the leading founders of the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Since the 1980s, he had worked on the development of CDA

theory and practice, examining the roles of language in social relations of power and ideology and identifying how language influenced processes of social change. In 1989, Fairclough proposed the following framework model called "Discourse as text, interaction, and context". This model is shown below.

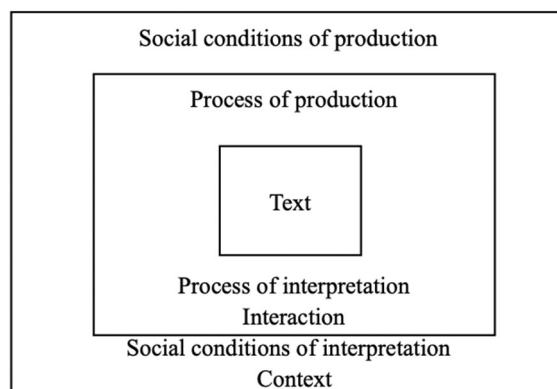


Figure 1. Discourse as text, interaction and context [5]

From Figure 1, Fairclough regards discourse as a unity consisting of three dimensions: context, interaction, and text. The text is located at the base and was the result of the interaction. The process of production and interpretation are based on social conditions [5]. Fairclough created this model to show that when people considered language as discourse and social practice, it was not just the process of production and interpretation analyzed, but to look for the relationship between different texts, processes and social conditions. Then, Fairclough subsequently revised these three terms in the book *Discourse and Social Change* to improve the concept of discourse [6]. He changed the 'context' to 'social practice' and changed the 'interaction' to 'discursive practice'. The 'process of production and interpretation' was turned into the three processes of 'production', 'distribution' and 'consumption'.

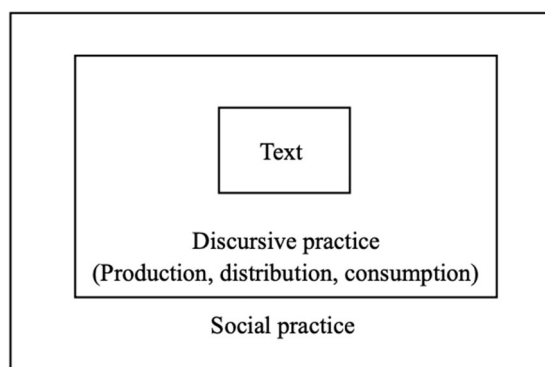
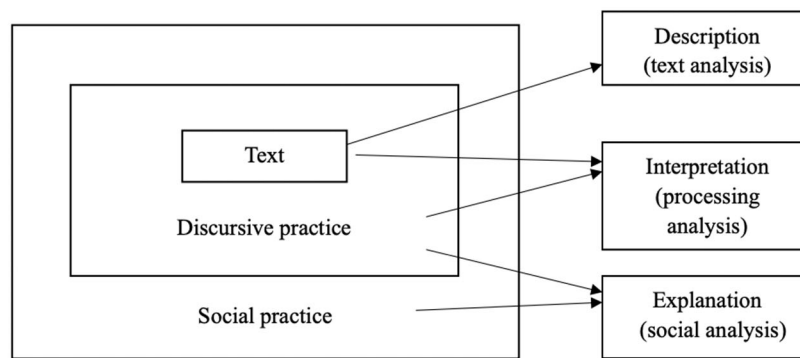


Figure 2. Three-dimensional conception of discourse [7]

Next, Fairclough argued that text was the product of discursive practice. This process, which includes the production, distribution, and consumption of discourse, is shaped by specific social practices. On the basis of the three-dimensional model, Fairclough further explored the procedure for CDA, which was divided into three stages, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Three-dimensional View of Discourse Analysis [7]

Fairclough stated that the approach to discourse analysis included the linguistic description of the linguistic text, the interpretation of the relationship between the discourse process and the text, and the explanation of the relationship between the discursive and the social process [7]. According to this model, CDA research can be carried out in three steps: description, interpretation, and explanation.

The description is the first stage in the three-dimensional model. As shown in Figure 3, this stage concentrates on linguistic features of the text, including lexical choice, grammar use, text structure, and so on. Lexical choice focuses on the usage of individual words in a specific context and is often used as a tool for analyzing news reports. Grammar using and text structure aim to explain how words are organized into clauses and sentences, which can be studied in terms of transitivity, modality, and thematic structure. In news discourse analysis, the analytical tools draw on Halliday's systemic-functional grammar.

As the second stage of the three-dimensional model, interpretation focuses on the relations between text and discursive practice [5]. According to Fairclough, discursive practice consists of the production, distribution, and consumption of text. In the second stage, intertextuality, cohesion, and coherence are considered to be vital aspects of interpretation analysis. Fairclough argues that intertextuality is a crucial concept that provides a good account of the interpretation of discursive processes [7]. When researchers conduct an intertextuality analysis, it is easy to see how speakers and writers implicitly communicate their views and beliefs and how ideological elements and power domination are embedded in the discourse. Therefore, discourse representation is one of the key components of intertextuality, which can be achieved through reporting methods. Therefore, this paper will analyze the reporting modes of selected sample news at the interpretation level.

The last stage is the explanation which focuses on the relationship between social practice and social context. The broad social context in which texts and discursive practices are established greatly impacts on social practice. Indeed, external contexts largely influence journalists' texts, which conceal their ideologies and attitudes. Therefore, it is worth exploring the social factors that influence discourse at the explanation phase. This essay will explore the political, economic, and cultural contexts at this stage.

In summary, Fairclough's three-dimensional framework is often applied by many scholars to conduct the analysis of news reports which is considered to be one of the most influential and practical theoretical models in the field of CDA.

## 3.2. Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), a socially-oriented functional linguistic theory proposed by Michael Halliday, is one of the most influential linguistic theories of the 20th century. This theory is mainly concerned with meta-functions in functional grammar, including ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions [11]. Fairclough mentioned that SFL is "a valuable resource for CDA, and indeed major contributions to CDA have developed out of SFL" [8].

### 3.2.1. Ideational Function

The ideational function explores how people represent experience in language. This function primarily focuses on the propositional 'content' of a message [26]. Transitivity is a vital term that can embody language's ideational function most intensively. Halliday elaborated on six process types: material processes, mental processes, relational processes, behavioral processes, verbal processes, and existential processes.

### 3.2.2. Interpersonal Function

The interpersonal function uses language to express social and interactive relations, which is realized by mood and modality. It concentrates on the most fundamental types of speech roles, including giving and demanding. In addition to identifying the distinction between giving and demanding, goods-&-services and information are two kinds of commodities exchanges. Hence, speech roles and commodities exchanges define the four fundamental speech functions named offer, command, statement and question.

### 3.2.3. Textual Function

This paper will focus on intertextuality to realize the textual function, which refers to how texts can transform previous texts and reorganize existing discourses to produce new discourse [6]. According to Fairclough [7], intertextuality can be analyzed by exploring reporting modes in news discourse. There are two main categories of reporting modes, including direct speech and indirect speech [6]. In a direct quotation, the word represented is in quotation marks, and the tense and indicative are related to the time and place of the discourse. Direct quotes are usually considered to be the use of the exact wording of the person being reported. Thus, the line between the voice of reporter and the voice of the person being reported on is clear. In an indirect speech, the quotation mark disappears and the part of speech represented is grammatically subordinated to the subordinate form of the quoted sentence. The line between the voice of the reporter and the reported is not clear [6].

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1. Research Method

According to Lund [17], it mentions that qualitative and quantitative methods are only suitable for hypothesis generation and hypothesis testing, respectively. In contrast, mixed methods allow researchers better to answer both exploratory and confirmatory questions. In order to conduct the critical discourse analysis comprehensively, this study combines qualitative and quantitative research methods to do a further analysis. The qualitative method is the main research method. Firstly, it clarifies the definitions and functions of CDA, news reports institution, keyword list, concordance lines, and reporting modes. Secondly, the analysis will reveal potential ideologies by following linguistic analytical tools. Thirdly, it focuses on exploring the reasons for the emergence of the latent consciousness through economic, political and cultural aspects.

The quantitative method will support the qualitative method. This method applies a corpus to present the statistical results of keywords list and concordance lines from AntConc 4.0.5 (macOS) 2022, a free corpus software, a multiplatform tool designed by Japanese scholar Laurence Anthony with many features. Baker clarifies that in CDA research, discourse increments can be more effective in exploring how language is used to construct discourse or ways of looking at the world, rather than the subjective implication and manipulation of the author [2]. In short, the use of corpus can help avoid the influence of subjective cognitive bias on research. In this study, this tool help function in searching and generating keyword lists and concordance lines to support further analysis. Based on the statistics generated by AntConc 4.0.5 (macOS) 2022, some tables are created for further analysis and summary.

To sum up, this study will use the qualitative study as its core method with quantitative study as its complement. Both methods are adopted to conduct the CDA of news report of China on COVID-19 in *The New York Times*.

### 4.2. The Data Collection and Corpus Building

In this thesis, the corpus data is collected from *The New York Times* from April 1, 2020 to July 31, 2020. The reason for timeline choice is based on two aspects. Firstly, relying on the trend of increasing actual epidemic data. Statista published confirmed cases of COVID-19 in China and the United States [23, 24]. The chart shows a new inflection point as the number of confirmed cases in the U.S. begins to surge from the end of March, while the number of confirmed cases in China plateaus. Secondly, focusing on the poll data. Pew Research informed that unfavorable views of China in the U.S reached a new historical high point around March to July 2020 [21, 22]. The sample contains 40 articles in total, and 10 are from each month (see Appendix A). The detail about data collection is entering 'Covid-19; China' as keywords, sorted by 'relevance', which is disorders, and all articles shown on the first web pages in each month will be chosen.

The process of corpus building is as below. Firstly, paste and copy the selected news from the web page into a word document, 40 documents in total. Next, select 'corpus manager' to import 40 documents to create a new corpus named 'NYT\_corpus'. There are totally 53175 tokens.

### 4.3. The Data Processing and Analysis

The data processing will follow keyword list tool, Key word in context (KWIC) tool, and file tool. Firstly, the keyword list tool compares words that occur with unusual frequency in the target corpus with words in the reference corpus by means of a statistical measure. This paper uses as its reference corpus the Brown Corpus, contains 1014300 words founded in 1960s, which is uses to study contemporary American English. Then, the word categories presented are categorized, and a preliminary judgment makes about the direction the New York Times was focusing on when reporting. Secondly, the KWIC tool shows search results in concordance lines and allows to see how words and phrases are commonly used. Due to the word limit, it is impossible to analyze all the categories of words in the first step in depth. Thus, this paper will focus on selecting individual words that fit the research direction in this part. Their concordance lines are collected with the help of the KWIC tool and studied for further interpretation. Lastly, the file tool is a view of the original file and to know the specific position of the search term in the text.

The data analysis will compactly follow Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, which includes description, interpretation and explanation stages. Halliday's SFG as an analytical tool is utilized to analyze the description and interpretation stage in detail. Its core concept is about three meta-functions which include ideational, interpersonal and textual functions. In ideational function, the selected data will be analyzed with the help of 'transitivity' tool. Secondly, mood and modality will be identified to explore different interpersonal meanings in the selected sample articles. Lastly, intertextuality will be analyzed by relevant speech modes to find the textual meaning. In the explanation phrase, economic, cultural, and political elements are considered to explain the reason for emerging the potential ideologies and unequal power within the news report.

## 5. Critical Discourse Analysis of COVID-19 News Report on China in *The New York Times*

### 5.1. Description: Corpus-based Studies on the Keyword List and Concordance Lines Analysis

Based on the theoretical framework of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the first step of conducting CDA is to concentrate on the analysis of the text. Consequently, in the description level, the author will first identify lexical choice with the help of a corpus tool, and then analyze concordance lines of COVID-19 news on China from *The New York Times* with the supporting of Halliday's systemic-functional grammar.

#### 5.1.1. Keyword Analysis

Scott and Tribble mentioned that corpus processing tools assisted linguistics to come much easier to transform a set of texts and produce comprehensive lists [25]. It identifies words with a significantly higher word frequency than the corresponding word in the reference corpus. Firth elaborated that the connection between keywords and social aspects could reflect certain social meanings [10]. Thus, keywords can reflect the underlying status and attitudes that news producers want to emphasize. After comparing the reference

corpus in AntConc, 355 keywords are shown. In the keyword list, words are sorted according to the keyness and the function words like conjunctions, prepositions, and particles are eliminated as they are not meaningful for analysis. Then, selecting the top 100 keywords and classifying them as a chart (See Appendix A).

According to Table 5.1, it shows that the ‘people’ and ‘place’ account for a large percentage. The category of ‘place’ includes countries, cities in different countries, and some public places, with particularly frequent references to cities in China. It is worth noting that *The New York Times* quotes Chinese pinyin for the new outbreak site, such as ‘Xinfadi’. Additionally, three findings can be drawn from the category of ‘people’. The first category is the name of the specific person, such as Wang, Zhao, Zhang, and Xu. The second category is people in groups, such as Chinese, European, people, protesters, residents, activists and foreigners. The third one is relevant to the government such as Xi, Trump, Kim, officials, party, governments, diplomats, and Pompeo. In summary, *The New York Times* incorporates Chinese expressions when reporting on the outbreak in China and begins to talk about people associated with the political sphere.

Moreover, there is also a high proportion of words about prevention and action, which reflects the fact that *The New York Times* is still following the relevant anti-epidemic initiatives of China. Furthermore, words about COVID-19 account for a large proportion, such as ‘event’, ‘virus and disease’, and ‘influence and effect part’. It shows that *The New York Times* continues to mention the various events in response to the outbreak and the multiple accounts of COVID-19. In the ‘impact’ category, *The New York Times* mainly focuses on trade, media, and strained diplomatic relations after the outbreak.

### 5.1.2. Concordance Lines Analysis

This section will analyze the concordance lines of the keywords. The analysis will reveal the position and collocation of keywords in the sentence, and the attitude, position and ideology of the news producer can be analyzed to a great extent. The terms of the categories ‘China’ and ‘COVID’ will be used as research terms because it is more relevant to the topic of this paper. The KWIC tool will assist in seeing how these selected words are commonly used in specific sentences. Then, the ‘Result Set’ tool of the corpus will be used to randomly select the sample sentences for the study of this paper for further analysis.

‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ will be used to analyze the potential ideology of the New York Times when reporting about China. The analysis of these two words can get the most intuitive picture of how China is described and portrayed in *The New York Times*. The 20 concordance lines of the word ‘China’ shows that *The New York Times* focuses on three main categories (see Table 5.2 in Appendix C). First and foremost, the coverage of China from April to July focuses on the extent to which China’s diplomatic relations with other countries have deteriorated. In particular, the causes and consequences of the deterioration are objectively described in the description of Sino-U.S. relations. The SFL perspective clearly illustrates who is an entity, and who undertakes some actions to create a material process [26]. For example, in sentence 1, ‘the bitter recriminations’ is the main cause of the low point in Sino-American relations as an actor. In sentence 2, ‘China and the United States’ involved in a political

struggle as the main participants. It demonstrates the neutral perspective TNYT takes when reporting on diplomatic relations to criticize both sides of their actions. It implies that the endless condemnation goes both ways and the deterioration of relations is the responsibility of both sides. In the second place, TNYT implies arbitrary image of China’s response to the epidemic. Firstly, powerful terms are used to portray an autocratic and powerful China, such as ‘have threatened punishment’ in sentence 7 and ‘Mr. Xi’s China’ in sentence 6. Additionally, TNYT conveys that there is a conspiracy to prevent and control the epidemic in China. For example, ‘uses...to tout’ ‘had generated’ and ‘has also tried to’ in sentence 11, 15, and 16. These verbs and sentences convey China’s efforts to consolidate its position in the world through the effective achievement of epidemic control. The third point is to communicate that China is facing criticism from the world. The criticism mainly comes from the ambiguity and non-transparency of the number of confirmed cases in China in the initial stage of the pandemic. For instance, sentence 12 states that ‘China deliberately covered up...’, and in sentence 13, it says ‘China faces growing criticism’ ‘attempts to conceal...’. These sentences make it clear that the main actor in the cover-up and the criticism received is China. When conveying such information, TNYT will quote statements and comments from others in order to ensure the credibility of the information, which is explained in detail in the Interpretation section.

From Table 5.3, the results of 20 concordance lines of ‘Chinese’ show that TNYT focused on two main directions of coverage. The first point is to convey the toughness of the Chinese government and officials in the face of the epidemic. For instance, in sentence 3 and 6, ‘new limits’ and ‘a tough approach’ can convey the firm determination of Chinese officials and the Chinese Communist Party to combat the epidemic, while at the same time, ‘limits’ and ‘tough’ reflect the negative nature of such measures. The second point is that the Chinese government is seen as a risk factor and the opposite position. For example, in sentences 1, 4, and 11, there are a number of expressions that deliberately portray the Chinese government, such as ‘have continued to call on the W.H.O’ ‘kill the report’ and ‘fired right back’. These reflect that the Chinese government and its officials are persistent and coercive in order to achieve their aims. Moreover, in sentences 9 and 10, the repetitive expression of ‘the Chinese government see this (a pivotal moment)’ shows that TNYT is conveying that the Chinese government has reached a moment when it can build up momentum, describing the threatening nature of China’s global position. To sum up, the analysis of the concordance lines of ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ shows that TNYT’s expression of China’s multilateral relations is neutral. At the same time, the description of China’s epidemic measures and the policy of China is negative, dissatisfying and threatening.

As the keyword category shows, there are many synonyms for COVID-19 expressing the development of the epidemic. The sample taken in Table 5.4 can firstly conclude that TNYT’s focus on the outbreak has shifted in a new direction. The first finding is that *The New York Times* is more inclined to express suspicion about the origin of COVID-19 when referring to ‘coronavirus’ and ‘virus’. From the ‘transitivity’ perspective, these sample sentences focus on propositional content of COVID-19 and illustrate how the virus is discovered. Some material processes are shown, such as ‘spill out’ ‘spread’ ‘brought’ ‘carried’ and ‘identified’ in sentence

4, 8, 14, 15 and 16. It is obviously that the main actor is about ‘virus’ or ‘coronavirus’, while the goal is diverse, such as ‘a lab in Wuhan’ ‘vendors and workers’ ‘masked palm civets’ or ‘Chinese people’. Moreover, in some sentences, the ‘virus’ is identified as the goal. For example, in sentence 14, the United States military is an actor in conducting the whole process, which is about ‘brought the virus to China’. These changeable actors and goals express the continuing uncertainty about the source of the previous outbreak and the source of the new wave of transmission. This uncertainty is also reflected in the modality analysis. Some evidence shows the low degree of certainty, such as ‘might’ ‘in part’ ‘would be’ ‘mainly’. These reporters take less responsibility for the claim and focus on passing information with detachment. The expression of non-determinism about the source of the virus is an approach for news reporters to maintain rigor. The second finding is that when referring to the pandemic and the outbreak, TNYT focuses more on holding China accountable for its mistakes regarding the COVID-19. Some examples are ‘China’s mixed messaging’, ‘amid accusations’, ‘criticism’, and ‘delay and prevarication’ in sentence 25, 33, 31, and 34. There seems to be little mention of China’s official response to the epidemic but rather an amplification of the failure of China’s response to the epidemic. The third finding is that allusion to and politicization of Chinese anti-epidemic behavior. For example, in sentence 32, the reporter considers the currently effective preventive measures as a disguised purpose of Mr. Xi, which is to cover up previous mistakes. Another example is in sentence 38, China’s move against the epidemic is seen as a long-term strategic objective. Anti-epidemic measures no longer seem to have the simple primary goal of preventing the spread of the virus but are constantly metaphorically targeted to achieve complex political objectives.

## 5.2. Interpretation: Reporting Mode Analysis

Interpretation is the second step in Fairclough’s three-dimensional model. This part will discuss intertextuality from the perspective of Halliday’s systemic-functional grammar. Fairclough pointed out that “intertextuality essentially means that a text is filled with fragments of other texts” [6]. Bazerman emphasizes the importance of intertextual analysis, which is “the relation of a statement to that sea of words, how it uses those words, how it positions itself in respect to those other words” [3]. The analysis of intertextuality in this paper will be discussed in terms of reporting modes to reveal the ideologies concealed behind news reports. It should emphasize that this section will select two articles from each of the earlier dates in the months of April to July, for a total of eight articles (see Table 5.6 in Appendix D). Based on the selection of eight samples, this paper focuses on two basic reporting modes, which are ‘direct quotation’ and ‘indirect quotation’ [3]. The distribution of the two types is presented in the following table:

**Table 5.5.** Distribution of Reporting Modes

	Number (proportion)
Direct mode	57 (54%)
Indirect mode	49 (46%)
Total	106

According to Table 5.5, the preliminary finding is that TYNT reflects the objectivity and authenticity because the direct mode accounts for a larger proportion than the indirect mode in these eight samples. However, Bazerman argued that although words and sentences could be taken entirely from the original author, it was up to the second author to decide which words were quoted and which fragments were cut out [3]. An in-depth discussion will look at two aspects: the first aspect is the source of the quotation, and the second one is the content of the quotation.

In using direct quotes, *The New York Times* quotes extensively from authoritative sources on the current situation in China and its future development to demonstrate its authority and credibility. Here are some examples.

(1) “They are on the defensive, clearly,” said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a political science professor at Hong Kong Baptist University and an expert on Chinese politics. “It’s an uphill battle now for China to improve its image.” (Sample 2)

(2) “If you look at the state of public opinion around the world, it’s not a good omen for China,” said Mr. Cabestan of Hong Kong Baptist University. (Sample 2)

(3) “China is also highly polarized,” said Professor Zhu, the Nanjing University scholar. “Some people just believe that there’s no way but to just fight back. But I don’t think so,” he said. China, he said, “needs to be very coolheaded.” (Sample 11)

From the voices of these experts, it can sense that China is being criticized, condemned and warned from all over the world, and China’s image and status have both declined. While the New York Times quotes extensively from authoritative experts commenting on and analyzing China to demonstrate objectivity, it is worthy to note that apart from these three examples, the other direct quotes from experts and professors commenting on China are almost negative. Besides, *The New York Times* also quotes direct voices from the public to add authenticity to the news. Here are some examples.

(4) “The way they are treating black people, you cannot accept,” Mr. Mwamba said by telephone. “We are not animals.” (Sample 1)

(5) “I had a plan for business, being able to build something for my family,” said Mr. Destiny, 28. “If this continues, I will try to leave.” (Sample 1)

(6) “We feel this is dangerous,” Chen Xiaoxi, the owner of a shop about two miles from a market linked to the new outbreak, said by telephone. (Sample 21)

(7) “I feel that the epidemic situation is too worrisome now, I am afraid that it will become even worse later on,” said Bao Gengxin, a 19-year-old high school senior, as he waited for a train to flee Beijing on Wednesday. (Sample 22)

Example (4) and (5) show that *The New York Times* is using the voices of non-Chinese nationals to demonstrate the injustice they suffered in China during the epidemic, such as ‘we are not animal’. Additionally, the voices from Chinese people feeling fear in the face of the virus are also quoted, such as ‘dangerous’ ‘worrisome’ and ‘worse’. These examples show that public opinion of China is also negative, fearful, and discontented. While direct quotes allow news producers to demonstrate a degree of objectivity by quoting directly from the original author’s voice, it is clear that *The New York Times* chooses words and sentences to quote in a negative light. Thus, it can note that *The New York Times* uses direct modes with an element of subjective consciousness that places China in opposition.

Indirect quotations allow the wording and attitude of the second author to filter the meaning and therefore provide a more direct reflection of the author's intentions and attitudes [3]. The source of indirect quotations is almost from Chinese officials, authorities, and experts. Here are some examples.

(8) The Beijing government said on Thursday that the number of coronavirus cases in the recent outbreak had risen to 158, after an additional 21 cases were reported that day. (Sample 22)

(9) The city government said that traces of the virus turned up on surfaces in the market, including on cutting boards for salmon. (Sample 21)

(10) epidemic experts sought to reassure the public. They said that like other countries, China should get used to the idea that outbreaks were likely even as overall infection rates fell. (Sample 31)

(11) But Wu Zunyou, an investigator from the Chinese Center for Disease Control, said on a government website on Sunday that it would take more time and testing to pin down the source. (Sample 21)

A point worth mentioning is that the *New York Times* frequently contrasts the Chinese government's orders with the views of experts. In examples (8) and (9), it shows that the *New York Times* often quotes the Chinese government and officials' utterances to explain the source of the outbreak and the number of confirmed cases in China. In examples 10 and 11, *The New York Times* quotes experts to illustrate their perspectives on the epidemic. It is clear from these four examples that the understanding of the epidemic of the government and the experts is different. *The New York Times* constantly switches between these two different sources of indirect quotation to visualize this discrepancy and to illustrate the Chinese government's arbitrary image and its irrational decisions.

### 5.3. Explanation: Factors towards the Ideology behind News Reports

Through the description and interpretation stage, a short conclusion is that *The New York Times* frequently presents the news about China in a tone of blame and condemnation. According to Hong et al. [12], it states that the WHO Joint Expert Group describes China's response as "the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history". The affirmation given by the experts does not appear in the *NYT*. The explanation is the third step of Fairclough's three-dimensional model. In this stage, the discourse is regarded as a social practice and Fairclough sees as 'social wrong' is no longer simply understood as negative and in need of revision in this study [9]. This section will explore hidden bias, power, and ideologies behind the news discourse in *The New York Times* and provide further explanation. The analysis is to be conducted in three aspects: political, economic, and cultural contexts.

#### 5.3.1. Political Context

Political context is a vital factor that significantly affects ideology within news reports. First of all, from the U.S. perspective, China's rise poses a threat to its dominant position in the international system. In the Trump administration's strategy documents, China is described as a 'revisionist power' seeking regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, a long-term quest for global hegemony [18]. China's response to the timing of a once-in-a-century pandemic is flawed and failed, but its overall response is swift, robust, and

adequate, and the first round of the epidemic is largely contained by the spring of 2020. China's early warning prevention, containment and mitigation system is largely effective and has been praised from the WHO Joint Expert Group [12]. Therefore, the U.S. is wary of China's reputation and influence in the world and will act accordingly. Secondly, a consensus has developed in Washington over the past fifteen years to criticize China. In particular, the US Congress has tended to be more supportive and reinforcing rather than moderating its hardline policy towards China in recent years. Leading Democrats in Congress and most Democratic candidates running in the 2020 presidential primaries have touted policies similar to Trump's on China [18]. The fact is that tough policy on China is seen as an advantage in the presidential election. In the spring of 2020, it is clear that U.S. policy toward China will be a major issue in the election. The key issue that the Trump and Biden camps are blaming each other for is who is weaker on China.

The media is an important way for citizens to gather political information about the performance of political institutions [4]. Therefore, the messages conveyed by the press need to be in line with government and national policies. Although *The New York Times* is a mainstream media outlet in the United States and a global news organization with a reputation for authority and objectivity, it is difficult to escape the influence of its politics and insist on protecting the interests of its government when reporting on the epidemic in China and the frosty relationship between the United States and China.

#### 5.3.2. Economic Context

The unstable, uncertain economic relationship between the U.S. and China can also affect the focus of news coverage. Although the idea that China's economic expansion is unstoppable and the relative weakening of U.S. power is based on dubious assumptions and predictions, China is indeed the only country that could potentially threaten the position of the U.S. [18]. According to McNally [19], Chinese manufacturing exemplifies the possession of competitive advantages that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere, and the fact that China's global economic function cannot be easily replaced. During the pandemic, new restrictions introduced by China to ensure better quality exports of masks and other medical supplies have threatened the U.S. supply chain. Therefore, it is difficult to find some synchronicity, a win-win situation, in the U.S.-China economic relationship in this environment, replacing it with hostility.

The media exists on a national basis, and the rise and fall of the media is tied to the economic interests of the state. Therefore, when reporting news about China, the *New York Times* must take the same stance as its own country in terms of the country's economic interests.

#### 5.3.3. Cultural Context

Culture is another vital element that affects the ideologies of news reports. In particular, culture and language are inextricably linked, making the cultural context an essential part of the analysis of news discourse.

Firstly, the American media emphasizes the individual's value and the supremacy of human existence [32]. In news coverage of disaster events, there is often a tendency to be based on the perspective of the victim. At the same time, the American media make the individual victims of a disaster the subject of disaster news coverage, describing the disaster from the individual's perspective [33]. For instance, *The New*

York Times often quotes voices from the Chinese public to express their discontent with the epidemic prevention regulations. Secondly, American egoism and pragmatism lead them to insist that anything that is detrimental to their interests will be punished [32]. Thus, when the U.S. side faced a failure of prevention and a surge in the number of confirmed cases, the media received this deep-rooted cultural influence and blamed it on China's initial prevention gaps and failures. Furthermore, the Chinese cultural way of doing things is not appreciated by Americans, who consider it immoral and, in their view, negative to force others to conform [32]. As a result, the New York Times often portrays the Chinese government as a coercive power, and they disapprove of and condemn China's coercive epidemic prevention measures.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Major Findings

This paper has combined quantitative and qualitative methods to critically and discursively analyze *The New York Times'* coverage of the China epidemic between April and July 2020. After a detailed analysis, the main findings based on three research questions are as follows.

Through the keyword list analysis, the author has found that *The New York Times* begins to frequently mention the names in the political sphere, such as Xi Jinping, Trump, Pompeo, and so on. Secondly, it continues to focus on China's policy on epidemic prevention. Additionally, *The New York Times* begins to turn its attention to trade, media, and diplomatic relations in the epidemic context.

From the concordance lines analysis, there have been three main findings. When *The New York Times* describes the image of 'China', it favors negative terms to suggest its unscientific nature of measures as well as its non-transparency. However, it is neutral when describing bilateral relations between U.S. and China. When describing the Chinese government and its institutions, *The New York Times* uses arbitrary and powerful terms to portray the Chinese government in a threatening and antagonistic light. However, when describing the measures taken to prevent the epidemic, it objectively conveys the determination of Chinese officials to face the epidemic. When *The New York Times* refers to terms related to the epidemic, it mainly expresses suspicion about the source of the virus and frequently mentions China's initial failure to counter the epidemic. Furthermore, *The New York Times* complicates China's fight against the epidemic as a tool to achieve long-term strategic political goals.

In terms of analyzing reporting mode, it has been found that direct mode is more frequently used than indirect mode. *The New York Times* focused on quotes from the public as well as experts when using direct quotes, and most of these references to China are negative. In addition, TNYT used indirect quotes to select the content and attitudes it wanted to focus on, contrasting the Chinese government's measures with the advice of authoritative experts and questioning the arbitrariness and lack of science in the Chinese government's decisions.

The above findings have answered research question one and two and concluded that *The New York Times* describes the news coverage of the epidemic in China in a negative, incomprehensible and condemnatory way. However, this criticism and condemnation are directed at the Chinese government, and its description of the Chinese people expresses a kind of sympathy and compassion.

Additionally, this article has examined the ideology behind *The New York Times* news coverage as influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors. Firstly, the message conveyed by the news media needs to be relatively consistent with government and national policies. Secondly, the development of media is closely related to the economic interests of the state, and therefore *The New York Times* puts the economic interests of the state at the forefront of its reporting. Finally, in terms of culture, the Chinese way of doing things is not appreciated by the American culture, which considers it immoral to force others to follow the rules. As a result, the news coverage is mixed with the subjective ideology from the media institutions and news producers, and its formation is influenced by the political and economic situation of the country, and the deep-rooted national culture.

### 6.2. Implications and Limitations

This thesis has two significances. Firstly, most studies on discourse analysis of epidemic coverage focus on the immediate outbreak phase, but this paper has focused on the middle of the epidemic and helped to enrich research on news coverage in the field of CDA, especially on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S.-China relations. In addition, this study will encourage readers to read news with critical thinking. It helps them look objectively at *The New York Times'* portrayal of China, identify underlying ideologies, and understand news reports objectively when reading Chinese news stories about the COVID-19.

Nevertheless, there have been limitations to this study. First of all, the size of the research data is small. Due to the time and length requirements of the thesis, the data in the corpus is relatively small, reducing the credibility and validity of the conclusion. Secondly, although the corpus construction method is the most effective way to achieve discourse analysis, it does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of the whole text but only fragments. It is not sufficient to obtain a convincing conclusion. The third point is that, although the author tries to remain neutral when conducting the discourse analysis, the data collection and analysis stages are subject to subjective factors, such as background knowledge, personal experience, and nationality.

### 6.3. Suggestions for Further Study

Based on the mentioned drawbacks above, some suggestions for future research are as follows.

Firstly, the sample size should be larger, and the timeline should be wider to increase the precision and scientific validity of the study. The large corpus improves the objectivity of research results.

Secondly, the analysis tools could be more extensive. For example, collocation, semantic prosody, and transformation are suggested to be adopted in further studies to make the analysis more convincing and innovative.

Thirdly, although it is difficult to get rid of personal value preferences, scholars should read extensively about the field and improve their critical thinking in order to remain as objective and neutral as possible when doing academic research.

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