

# The Construction of China's National Image under the COVID-19 Epidemic by the American News Media

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**Abstract:** As the coronavirus presents a serious challenge to the international public opinion towards China, more recent attention has focused on China's national image under the Covid-19 outlined by the Chinese and Western media. This paper aims to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the construction of China's national image under the Covid-19 epidemic by The New York Times and analyze the social power and ideologies behind the reports. Using the analytical framework of DHA, we find that the American mainstream media seize the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China to promote Trump government's "America First" doctrine by politicizing the epidemic and stigmatizing and smearing China. China has borne the brunt of the hostility and attack from the negative public opinion across the globe.

**Keywords:** China's National Image; COVID-19; The New York Times; Social Power and Ideologies.

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## 1. Introduction

In the new global economy, the construction and spread of national image has become a central issue in the areas of media communication, international relations, and literature studies. Benedict Anderson (1983) defined nations and other communities that are larger than "face to face groups" as imagined communities and claimed that communities distinguished from one another "not by their authenticity but by the way in which they are imagined" (p. 15). According to Stuart Hall (1996)'s description of the concept of "imagined community", nations are not only political formations but also "systems of cultural representations" (p.612). Following the above interpretations, we assume that national images are mental constructs which are produced discursively and interrelate dialectically with social conditions. As regards a nation's international image, scholars proposed the assessment criteria composed of goal compatibility, relative capability, and relative cultural sophistication (Alexander et al., 2005). Specific cognitive schemata of a nation is generated and a threat or opportunity appraisal towards the other nation is determined based on the three-dimensional evaluation structure (Alexander et al., 2005).

Due to ideological and political differences, China's rise is interpreted as a threat by the western society and the national image of China has predominantly claimed to have been intentionally and socially misproduced by the Western media (Song et al., 2019). The outbreak of coronavirus from Wuhan, China in 2020 has greatly challenged the current world order and exerted a significant impact on the economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions across the world. The Sino-US relationship has deteriorated and generated multiple conflicts in various areas such as trade frictions, human rights issues, China's territory sovereignty, and environmental degradation. Based on the data displayed by Pew Research Center in the period of first half year of 2020, the Americans' negative rating towards the Chinese people and Chinese government leaders has risen to a peak since 2005.

As the coronavirus presents a serious challenge to the international public opinion towards China, more recent attention has focused on China's national image under the Covid-19 outlined by the Chinese and Western media. Media

studies drawn to this topic have mainly focused on three areas. The first area deals with the biased and politicized construction of China's national image in the era of pandemic by the western media (Awad AlAfnan, 2020; Jia & Lu, 2021; Yao & Lyu, 2021); Zhang et al. (2021). Jia & Lu (2021) pointed out that the US media reports implemented the rhetorical strategy of naming, shaming, blaming, and taming in the media coverage of China's handling of COVID-19. In their critical investigation of news framing about COVID-19 associated with China by US stream media, they revealed that most of the news coverage adopted a biased and negative tone towards China's fight against the virus to arrest China's ascendancy. By tarnishing China's image as a virus and shifting the blame to China, the US media supported Trump's political strategy to knock down China and served as a weapon of Trump's cold war against China. Drawing on ten selected articles from the top-selling British newspaper The Sun, Yao & Lyu (2021) argued that British media was heavily biased against China's anti-pandemic action and reported the topic with ideological prejudice, creating the impression that Chinese government's response to the outbreak was authoritarian, inadequate, and ineffective. Zhang et al. (2021) adopted the Appraisal Theory and Systemic Functional Grammar as instruments to undertake a comparative analysis of the psychological insights and ideologies behind the Chinese and American media coverage on China's efforts in combating the COVID-19. Resonant with Jia & Lu (2021)'s finding, the comparative study found that the US media supported the Trump administration to create China's national image as "strategic competitor" and shaped China as a threat. The US media maintained a negative attitude towards the Chinese government with the use of more emotional and negative evaluation words and less appreciative words compared with the Chinese media. Zhang et al. (2021) provided in-depth analysis of the 11 articles selected from China Daily and TIME, showing that the US media exaggerated the danger and consequences of the spread of the coronavirus in China, ignored China's achievements in containing COVID-19, and compiled discriminatory reports to attack the Chinese government. Another contrastive study by Awad AlAfnan (2020) drew our attention to the media bias, media ideologies and dominance in the US media. Drawing

on two articles selected from Washington Post and People's Daily Newspaper, the author set out the different ways in which economic, political, and cultural facets interrelate with the media bias, ideology, and dominance in newspaper coverage on COVID-19, and identified how they impacted the stance taking and topic selection of newspaper reports. These two comparative studies also discussed the challenges and strategies for promoting readers' critical thinking and raising their awareness of the ideology and power relations interacting with the media discourse.

The second important strand of studies has been mainly interested in analyzing the discourse of Chinese media which hermeneutically preserved and defended China's national identity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jaworsky & Qiaoan, 2020; Yu, 2021). Drawing on the cultural sociological approach which focuses on the identities and narrations of individuals and collectives in the imagined community, Jaworsky & Qiaoan (2020) revealed that the Chinese media discourse implemented a reactive nationalism positioning and represented China as a country rising from "sick man of Asia" to a strong world power combating the COVID-19 crisis that "no longer needs to suffer the bullying of a hypocritical West full of double standards" (p. 312). By adopting critical discourse analysis, Yu (2021) found out that the Chinese media formulated the discourse of resistance when confronted by the undue western hostility towards China during the COVID-19 epidemic. Based on detailed analysis of 63 reports from China's English language news media, Yu (2021) identified that discursive strategies of victimization, enemification, and heroization were employed along with various linguistic approaches in the discourse of resistance in response to the hostility directed against China during COVID-19 to highlight the national solidarity and heroic sacrifice of Chinese people. In addition, Yu (2021) mentions the crucial role of nationalism in constructing the resistance discourse and delegitimizing unjust aggression towards China. Together, these two studies outlined the critical role of state-run media in China in shaping China's national image and conveying its sociopolitical messages to the world.

The third strand intends to investigate the relationship between national identification and people's disease-preventive behaviors in the country during COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the social identity approach, Chan et al. (2021) implemented a two-wave longitudinal survey in China and five-wave longitudinal survey in USA respectively and revealed that national identification played a positive role in motivating people to take disease-preventive measures and benefiting the welfare of ingroup members of a nation in both of the political contexts of China and the USA. However, the reciprocal effect of disease-preventive behaviors to heighten national identification was detected only in China. This study highlighted the role of political context in enhancing or limiting the effectiveness of mobilizing citizens via national identification.

Together the above-mentioned studies provide important insights into the construction, spread, and motivating effect of China's national image during the COVID-19 epidemic. So far, however, most studies in China's national image have only been carried out based on a small number of selected news reports and the research method has tended to focus on in-depth qualitative textual analysis rather than systematic quantitative analysis such as the recurring linguistic phenomenon. This paper aims to bridge the gap by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to

investigate the construction of China's national image under the Covid-19 epidemic by The New York Times and analyze the social power and ideologies behind the reports. The research question is: How does the US mainstream press construct China's national image during the COVID-19 Epidemic?

## 2. Methodology

This study implements an integrated approach and combines corpus linguistics (CL) with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the discursive construction of China's national image by the US mainstream newspaper The New York Times. CL examines the linguistic phenomenon at the micro level and presents several advantages such as allowing the analyst to have an initial focus in the data based on frequency of lexis, collocations or keywords as well as lending credibility to generalizations through extensive collections of electronically encoded data (Baker et al., 2013). Critical discourse analysis is used to complement CL and examine the macro-level of the news texts by embedding the data in the social context. Specifically, social issues that are exacerbated by the encoded texts, such as dominance, hegemony, social inequality, and ideology will be explored (Baker et al., 2013). In this study, the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) will be used to deconstruct the hegemony of specific discourses and investigate the ideology and discursive relationships between texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The three discursive strategies comprising nomination, predication, and argumentation will be employed in the qualitative analysis of the texts. According to Wodak & Meyer (2016, p.94), nomination refers to "discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions"; predication focuses on the positive or negative discursive qualification of the above-mentioned social agents; and the topoi within the argumentation theory reflects "formal or more content-related warrants or conclusion rules" connecting the arguments with the conclusion (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p.74).

Factiva is used to retrieve relevant news articles from The New York Times, which is the leading national newspaper in the USA that sets the agendas for news media and targets the elite readerships. The selection criteria used for the data retrieval are that the articles must have at least five occurrences of the word "China" and at the same time contain at least three occurrences of one the following words (coronavirus, COVID, or COVID-19). The time period of the retrieved articles is from 1 January to 1 May 2020, which covers the time span from the outbreak of the coronavirus to China's phased victory against the virus and implementing regular epidemic prevention and control measures. A total of 376 articles, comprising 554514 words, are retrieved and selected for data analysis.

For the purpose of this paper, the investigation focuses on the collocations of the word "China" which reflect the construction of China's national image. The analysis involves first of all making a word sketch of China via the online corpus analysis tool Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). Sketch Engine allows researchers to create, upload, and manage their own corpora. With the core function of the "word sketch", the analysis tool provides the researcher with a summary of a word's grammatical and collocational patterns. Then another core function of the Sketch Engine, namely, "concordance", takes us to the raw data and allows us to examine qualitatively where and how the collocations of

China occur and uncover the prosodies associated with them (Kilgarriff et al., 2014).

### 3. Findings and Discussion

Using Sketch Engine, the word sketch of China shows that the most salient and frequent pattern of collocation is the verbs with “China” as subject, with the frequency of 1406 times, accounting for 30% of all collocations of China. According to the frequency, the next four categories are China and/or..., China’s..., nouns modified by China, and verbs

with “China” as object, with their frequency of 713, 710, 346, and 319 times respectively. The top 10 collocates of each category are scrutinized and the three discursive strategies from DHA are applied in the analysis.

Nomination. The nomination of China’s national image can be identified through the linguistic patterns such as verbs with “China” as object, nouns modified by China, and language indicators such as China is+noun phrases, and China as+noun phrases. The following is a table based on the salience of the collocates in these categories.

**Table 1.** Collocational patterns of Verbs with China as object, Nouns modified by China, and China is a ...

Verbs with China as object	Frequency	Salience	Nouns modified by China	Frequency	Salience	China is a ...	Frequency	Salience
visit	21	10.56	Sea	20	10.71	Man	6	11.83
leave	14	9.67	hawk	16	10.47	source	5	11.44
say	14	7.94	virus	12	9.07			
be	14	7.12	expert	11	8.75			
help	10	9.5	official	10	7.34			
blame	9	9.63	Daily	9	9.61			
ravage	7	9.41	month	9	8.82			
see	7	8.65	Television	7	9.28			
make	7	7.93	year	7	8.4			
antagonize	5	8.98	Kong	7	8.22			

Scrutinizing the concordance lines of “China is a..” with the salience score of 11.83, we find that The New York Times construct China’s image as an unhealthy and sickly civilization prone to diseases with intertextuality to the headline of a previous opinion column which reads “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia”. And the high frequency of the negative name “China virus” in the news media reinforces the biased and discriminatory image of China being the “real sick man of Asia” and elevates Trump’s smear campaign against China. What emerges from examining the column of verbs with China as object is the image of China being ravaged by the virus and mishandling the COVID-19 epidemic. China appears alongside words with negative connotations such as blame, ravage, and antagonize. By looking at concordance lines, we find that the trump administration laid the blame on the Chinese government and China’s political system for the spread of the coronavirus, for example, “The Trump administration has consistently blamed China for responding slowly when the virus emerged late last year and for spreading false information about the pandemic”. The argumentation scheme of “topoi of responsibility” is employed by the US press who falsely considers China to be the cause of the COVID-19 and that China should be responsible for the health crisis and pay compensation to other countries. Meanwhile, the US press intensifies the impact of the epidemic on China with descriptions such as “the virus ravaged China and doubts grew about how forthcoming Chinese officials were being”. In general, nomination is applied by the US press to reinforce stereotypes and biases against China and instigate racism and nationalism.

Predication. For the predication strategy, we focus on the collocation of China’s... (see table 2) to find out evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits linked with the patterns. The news coverage of China could be divided into the following semantic categories according to the high frequency words co-occurring with China.

The first semantic category focuses on China’s economic development with words such as economy, growth, and factory. The second semantic category reflects China’s political system with words such as leader, system, and

government, showing that the US media link the pandemic to China’s authoritarian regime. Examining the concordance lines, we find that the US press construct China’s economy during the pandemic in a negative way and exaggerate China’s economic recession during the first two months using presuppositions with negative prosody such as “a significant blow”, “take a heavy toll”, “shrinks for the first time in nearly half a century”, and “grinding halt”. Observing the co-occurrences with China’s leader, China’s government, and China’s system, we discover that the US press directs hostility against the Chinese government and accuses Chinese authorities of mishandling the pandemic. Linguistic manifestations of prejudice in the political discourse include “draconian measures taken by China’s authoritarian government” and “the tools the Communist Party has exploited to do this are threatening China’s international standing”, etc. The topoi of threat is extensively used in the discourse topic around China’s political system where the US press uses the COVID-19 as a catalyst for boasting of its own political system’s superiority, isolating China, and tarnishing the image of Chinese government.

**Table 2.** Collocational patterns of China’s...

China's ...	Frequency	Salience
leader	79	11.61
economy	28	10.17
effort	24	9.97
system	23	9.97
government	18	9.62
response	15	9.25
growth	14	9.3
Cross	11	8.96
Ministry	11	8.94
handling	11	8.91
border	9	8.65
factory	8	8.47

### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed the news reports on the

construction of China's national image done by the US mainstream news media The New York Times. Using the analytical framework of DHA, we find that the American mainstream media seize the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China to promote Trump government's "America First" doctrine by politicizing the epidemic and stigmatizing and smearing China. And China has borne the brunt of the hostility and attack from the negative public opinion across the globe. The differences from the ideological and politically strategic perspectives between China and the US have an important function in establishing US hegemony and maintaining the unequal power relations through reports from the US media. In response to the hegemony of the US media, the Chinese government should increase the discourse power on the global stage by telling China's stories well and use the media as a platform to increase the soft power and global influence to combat the accusations and stigmatization from countries like the US and defend its national image in the post-pandemic era. However, since news reporting on COVID-19 is still ongoing and accumulating, a more updated and systematic analysis is further needed to uncover news framing from mainstream US press, and more key functions of CL such as keywords could be applied in analysing the stance taking of US press towards China during different phases.

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