A Comparative Study on the Aggressiveness of Journalists' Questions at COVID-19 News Briefings in China and the US

Quan Lihong

South China Business College of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

Using the data collected from the press briefings held by Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of State Council of China and Center for Disease Control of the US in 2021, and applying a modified version of Clayman et al.'s question analysis system which quantifies questioning aggressiveness into four dimensions, eight indicators, and various design features, this study aims to explore whether there is significant difference in the level of questioning aggressiveness between Chinese and American journalists. The results reveal that there is significant difference between Chinese and American journalists in the dimension of initiative, directness and in two of the indicators of the dimension of adversarialness—"preface adversarialness" and "global adversarialness". However, there is no significant difference between Chinese and American journalists in the dimension of assertiveness and in one of the indicators of the dimension adversarialness. Finally, potential factors for such differences are discussed from the perspectives of Face Theory and journalistic norms.

Keywords: questioning, aggressiveness, adversarialness, news briefing, Face Theory

Introduction

At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the Chinese government reported the COVID-19 outbreak through a press briefing of the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council, enhancing information transparency and establishing a positive public opinion orientation. After the Biden administration came to power in the United States in early 2021, an expert group formed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention held a White House press briefing to inform the media of the pandemic information and progress. In the event of a major public health emergency, the media can play a role in responding to public concerns in a timely manner, unblocking information channels, and interpreting national pandemic prevention policies. In recent years, the research on the design and aggressiveness of journalists questions at press briefings held by the central government has attracted the attention of more and more scholars at home and abroad. This study uses the scripts and videos of journalists' questions at the COVID-19 press briefings of the Chinese and American governments in 2021, and draws on the analytical framework of Clayman, Heritage, et al. (2006) to explore the differences in the questioning patterns and aggressiveness of journalists at the Chinese and American press briefings.

Literature Review

Questioning is the act of using certain forms of language resources to obtain information from the person being asked. It has the functions of extending the sequence, initiating corrections, and seeking information (Hayano, 2013). As a social action of verbal communication, questioning is common in people's natural conversations and institutional conversations. Clayman and Heritage's (2002; 2023) research showed that, in general, questioning in presidential news conferences has grown more vigorous and aggressive. Previous studies have not given a precise definition of the aggressiveness of journalists' questions, but the hostility and confrontation presented by the aggressiveness of questions are contrary to the context of politeness (Zhang, 2012). Kaur (2022, pp. 425-427) pointed out that journalists can tighten agenda of the question, and reflect the aggressiveness of the question through different question types and vocabulary choices. Clayman et al. (2006) conducted a diachronic study of journalists' questions at press conferences of successive US presidents from 1953 to 2000 based on their previous research (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), and proposed an analytical framework for analyzing the aggressiveness of journalists' questions. This framework provides a highly operational quantitative analytical system for subsequent research, and domestic and foreign scholars have conducted relevant research in different cultural contexts (Rendle-Short, 2007; Zhang, 2012; Alfahad, 2015; Du & Rendle-Short, 2016; Wu, Cheng, & Chao, 2017; Wu & Clayman 2016). Among them, the research of Du and Rendle-Short, Wu et al., Zhang, et al., verified the applicability of this framework in the context of Chinese government press conferences.

Previous studies on the special context of the COVID-19 pandemic have mainly focused on two perspectives. One is the study of journalism and communication (Chen & Du, 2022; Li & Liu, 2021; Guo, 2021; Huang, 2021, et al.), which mainly focuses on how the government guides public opinions and shapes the national image and achieves the purpose of enhancing government image. The other is the linguistic perspective, which is carried out from the fields of discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics. Linguistic research can be summarized as follows: (a) Using media reports on the pandemic as the data, the studies investigated how government officials use metaphors to show their positions and views on the epidemic (Liu & Li, 2022; Liu & Cai, 2023; et al.); (b) using the scripts and videos of government pandemic press briefings, the relevant research explored the interaction between government and media (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Wu & Wang, 2022; Liu, 2021; Guo & Pan, 2020; et al.); and (c) using mainstream media reports on the pandemic, the studies analyzed the government's crisis response and prevention and control strategies for the pandemic (Chan & Yu, 2023; Chen & Du, 2022; Chen & Li, 2023; Pow & Crosthwaite, 2022; Ngai, Yao, & Singh, 2022; Takovski, 2022; et al.). The above research also includes comparative studies on the response of the Chinese and American governments to the pandemic. Among them, Ngai et al. (2022) used a corpus-assisted discourse analysis method to compare the pandemic prevention and control strategies of the two governments and the emotional attitudes reflected in the reports based on the newspaper reports on the pandemic in the People's Daily and the New York Times. The study shows that the People's Daily tends to use positive evaluation words and emotional words for the government's prevention and control strategies, while the New York Times tends to use negative evaluation words and emotional words. The study pointed out that the positive reports of the People's Daily helped promote the domestic people's compliance with and support for the government's pandemic prevention policies, and the Chinese government did not downplay the pandemic crisis in order to maintain political stability. We found that previous studies still have the following shortcomings:

1. There are many studies based on discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, but there are few studies combined with quantitative analysis from the perspective of conversation analysis (hereafter CA);

2. There are few studies based on the data collected from the government press briefings to analyze journalists' questioning practices in the Chinese context;

3. There are still few comparative studies on the interaction between government and media at press briefings in China and foreign countries.

In summary, there are still few comparative studies using the data collected from government pandemic press conferences to explore the aggressiveness of questions by Chinese and foreign journalists. We believe that:

1. The subjects of this study are the highest-level officials in the pandemic prevention and control of the Chinese and American governments. Exploring the differences in question design and aggressiveness of questions by Chinese and American journalists would help analyze the face needs of interpersonal communication at press briefings and the influencing factors of media professional norms under different cultural backgrounds;

2. This type of comparative study would help explore whether the design of journalists' questions is affected by the lexical and syntactic structures of Chinese and English languages;

3. It can help interpret how the Chinese and American governments use press briefings to respond to the pandemic crisis and shape the national image.

Based on the above research purposes, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the differences in the questioning patterns of journalists at the pandemic press briefings of the Chinese and American governments?

2. What are the differences of journalists' questions at the pandemic press briefings of the Chinese and American governments in terms of the four dimensions and eight indicators?

Research Method

Data Collection

We collected the scripts of all press briefings held in 2021 from the official website of the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council of China (http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/gwylflkjzwj.htm), a total of 34 press briefings, and we counted 531 questions from these press briefings. In addition, the corresponding videos can be watched online. At the same time, we collected the scripts of 82 press briefings held by the COVID-19 Task Force in 2021 from the official website of the White House of the United States (https://www.whitehouse. gov/briefing-room/), and counted 446 questions, and the corresponding videos of the US texts can be downloaded on YouTube. The press briefings held by the Chinese and American governments in 2021 are highly comparable in form and procedure[1].

Analytical Framework

Previous studies have verified the applicability of Clayman et al.'s (2006) framework for analyzing the aggressiveness of journalists' questions in press briefings in the Chinese context (Du & Rendle-Short, 2016; Wu & Claytie, 2016; Wu et al., 2017; Zhang, 2012; et al.). For example, the indicators of the four dimensions—

---

[1] China's pandemic press conference was an offline meeting, with the highest official of the State Council's joint prevention and control mechanism reporting the epidemic and answering reporters' questions; the US side held a video conference, with officials from the White House's epidemic task force reporting the epidemic and answering reporters' questions. Both sides had a host who will be in charge of the question-and-answer session. The press conference is highly consistent in procedure.

"absence of self-referencing", "absence of other-referencing", and "statement preface" are all reflected in Chinese contexts. Therefore, this study made a revision to the framework, removing two indicators that did not appear in the data—"follow-up questions" in the initiative dimension and "negative interrogatives" in the assertiveness dimension[2], and divided the aggressiveness of questions into four dimensions and eight indicators.

Table 1

The Question Analysis Framework

Dimensions	Indicator	Description	Question design features	Values
Initiative	Single questions	1 question preceded by statement(s)	No preface + 1 question	0
			Preface + 1 question	1
	Multiple questions	2 or more questions in a single turn at talk	No preface+ 2 or more questions	0
			Preface + 2 or more questions	1
Directness	Absence of other-referencing frames	Frame refers to officials' ability or wiliness to answer	Would you like to…? Will you/Would you…	0
			Could you please…? Can you/Could you…	1
			No frame	2
	Absence of self-referencing frames	Frame refers to journalist's own intension or desire to ask	May I ask (Prime Minister)… Can/Could/May I ask…	0
			I would like to ask… I'd like to ask…/I want to ask…	1
			I wonder/I don't know… I wonder/I wondered/I was wondering whether…	2
			No frame	3
Assertiveness	Preface tilt	Preface favors either yes or no	No tilt	0
			Innocuous tilt	1
			Unfavorable tilt	2
Adversarialness	Preface adversarialness	Q preface is oppositional	Non-adversarial preface	0
			Oppositional preface focus of Q	1
			Oppositional preface presupposed	2
	Global adversarialness	Overall Q is oppositional	Not oppositional overall	0
			Oppositional overall	1
	Accountability questions	Q seeks explanation for administration policy	Not an accountability Q	0
			Why do you… Why did you…	1
			How do you… How could you…	2

Table 1 shows the four dimensions of aggressiveness, the design features that serve as indicators of each dimension, and the values or levels of each indicator. According to the coding scheme of Clayman et al. (2006), the aggressiveness reflected by the question design features is marked at different levels from 0 to 3.

According to Clayman et al. (2006, p. 565), initiative refers to the extent to which journalists are enterprising rather than passive in their questioning. Directness refers to the extent to which journalists are blunt rather than cautious in raising issues through their questions. Assertiveness refers to the extent to which questions invite a

---

[2] The video and corpus show that at the press conferences of both sides, the host only allowed one reporter to ask questions in one turn at talk, so there were no follow-up questions. In addition, there were no negative questions in the randomly sampled Chinese corpus, and only one negative question in the English corpus, which is not statistically significant. Therefore, this study tends to focus only on polar questions.

particular answer and are in that sense opinionated rather than neutral. Adversarialness refers to the extent to which questions pursue an agenda in opposition to the president or his administration.

Although both the "content" and "form" of a question are measured by the coding scheme, the majority of indicators are concerned with relatively formal aspects of question design, with the first three dimensions focusing on the form of the question, and only the fourth dimension focusing on the content of the question (Clayman et al., 2006, p. 569). Drawing on the coding scheme of Clayman et al. (2006), we marked the aggressiveness reflected by the question design features at different levels from 0 to 3. We conducted a pilot experiment and extracted 53 and 46 question turns from the two corpora at a ratio of 10/1 respectively. According to the question analytical framework, we counted the frequency and Cohen Kappa value of each dimension and indicator of both sides to verify[3] the credibility of the data coding. On this basis, with the help of a random number table (Li, 1999, pp. 165-167), we adopted a random sampling method and extracted 106 domestic and 90 American question turns for statistics.

Results and Analysis

Based on the above analysis framework, we used SPSS to calculate the distribution of the questions raised by Chinese journalists (hereafter JCN)[4] and American journalists (hereafter JUS) in four dimensions and eight indicators. The results are shown in Tables 2 to 5. The χ^2 test is used to compare the number of named variables and whether there is significant difference between the observed frequency and the expected frequency (Field, 2009; Li, 1999). Therefore, we combined the χ^2 value, observed frequency, and expected frequency to examine the differences in questions by Chinese and American journalists.

Results and Discussion on Initiative

Table 2

Initiative

Indicator	Design features	Value	JCN			JUS		
			Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%
Single questions	No preface +1 question	0	5	2.7	4.7	0	2.3	0
	Preface + 1 question	1	55	38.9	51.89	17	33.1	18.89
Multiple questions	No preface + 2 or more questions	0	8	5.9	7.5	3	5.1	3.33
	Preface + 2 or more questions	1	38	58.4	35.85	70	49.6	77.78
	Total		106		100	90		100

Notes. χ^2 = 35.742, *df* = 3, *p* = 0.000.

Table 2 shows that there is significant difference between JCNs and JUSs in terms of initiative (*p= 0.000*). It can be seen from the difference between the observed frequency and the expected frequency of both parties that JCNs (55 *vs*. 38.9) are more likely to use No preface + 1 question than JUSs (17 *vs*. 33.1) while JUSs (70 *vs*. 49.6) are more inclined to use Preface + 2 or more questions than JCNS (38 *vs*. 58.4). Although both JCNs and JUSs tend to add a preface before a question, JUSs are more likely to ask more questions in a turn at talk; thereby,

---

[3] We have two raters and verify the reliability of the corpus annotation by calculating the inter-rater reliability coefficient (Cohen's kappa coefficient) (on eight indicators, three indicators exceed 0.85, and the other five indicators exceed 0.75). For differences, consensus was finally reached through discussion.

[4] The Chinese journalists here do not include journalists from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

they are more initiative in nature. This is consistent with the results of previous research. The research of Du and Rendle-Short (2016) shows that compared with Chinese journalists, foreign journalists are more likely to ask multiple questions in one turn at talk.

Results and Discussion on Directness

Table 3

Directness

Indicator	Design features	Value	JCN			JUS		
			Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%
Absence of other-referencing	Will you/Would you…	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Can you/Could you…	1	7	12.40	6.60	16	10.60	17.78
	No other-referencing	2	99	94.60	93.40	74	79.40	82.22
	Total		106		100	90		100
Absence of self-referencing	Can/Could/May I ask…	0	64	26.70	60.38	4	31.20	4.44
	I'd like to ask…/I want to ask…	1	8	5.90	7.55	7	6.90	7.78
	I wonder/I wondered/I was wondering whether…	2	5	8.30	4.72	16	9.60	17.78
	No self-referencing	3	29	13.60	27.36	63	42.20	70.00
	Total		106		100			100

Notes. Absence of other-referencing: $\chi 2 = 5.867$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.015$; absence of self-referencing: $\chi 2 = 161.127$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.000$.

Table 3 shows that there is significant difference between JCNs and JUSs in the indicator of absence of other-referencing ($p = 0.015$). The difference is mainly reflected in that JUSs tend to use more "Can/Could you…" sentence patterns than JCNs, which is consistent with the findings of previous research. Clayman and Heritage's (2023) study of government press conferences found that among such questions involving officials' willingness or ability to answer questions, "Will you tell us…" is the least common, followed by "Can/Could you…". A typical finding is that neither party uses the sentence structure "Will you…and Will you/Would you…?". The research by Clayman and Heritage (2023) shows that the traditional indirect questioning method "Will you tell us…" is on a downward trend, and American journalists' questions have generally become more aggressive. Secondly, this is also a reflection of the decline in formality of speech in American culture (Clayman et al., 2006, p. 577). It is suggested that the equivalent of "Would you like to…" in Chinese, a way of asking questions that reflect subjective wishes, may cause officials to refuse to answer due to potential embarrassment, which will harm their negative face. When in the context of potential verbal conflicts, Chinese people usually adopt indirect face negotiation strategies to take care of each other's face (Zhao, 2012).

As for the indicator of absence of other-referencing, there is very significant difference between JCNs and JUSs ($p = 0.000$). It can be seen from the difference between observed frequency and expected frequency that JCNs (64 *vs.* 26.7) tend to utilize more "Excuse me (qingwen…)" while JUSs (4 *vs.* 31.2) tend to use more "Can/Could/May I ask…". It should be noted here that "please (qing)" in Chinese is an honorific and is often followed by a verb to implement requests or other social actions (Institute of Linguistics, CASS, 2013, p. 1063). In traditional Chinese culture, people focus on and emphasize the value of harmony and are inclined to avoid verbal conflicts (Chen, Ye, & Zhang, 1995). A person's face not only represents his public image, but is also closely related to respect (Tan, 2013; Ran & Huang, 2020). By using "Excuse me…", JCNs expect to obtain the official's permission and then explain the intention of asking the question through a prefaced statement, which is

often composed of certain mitigating content to make the question respectful (Jiang, 2006). This non-direct and non-hostile communication style may exercise damage control and cause less threat to the other party's face (Brown & Levinson, 1979; 1987). Furthermore, JCNs often ask more neutral and receptive evaluative questions after "Excuse me", such as, "What's your opinion on this?", so as to avoid offending and threatening the other person's negative face. In addition, it is observed that JUSs use more "I wonder/I wondered/I was wondering whether…". Clayman and Heritage (2023) found that, regarding self-referencing, the sentence pattern "I wonder…" is utilized more frequently than the sentence pattern of asking for permission—"I would like/want to ask..." and "Can/May I ask...". The possibly persuasive explanation is that questions with strong directness often require the other party to give an acceptable answer, while questions with strong indirectness show a respectful stance towards the other party (Clayman & Heritage, 2023, p. 65).

Results and Discussion on Assertiveness

Table 4

Assertiveness (Polar Questions)

Indicator	Design features	Value	JCN			JUS		
			Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%
Polar questions	Unbiased preface	0	6	3.80	15.79	5	7.20	6.10
	Innocuous preface	1	18	21.30	47.37	44	40.70	53.66
	Unfavorable preface	2	10	8.90	26.32	16	17.10	19.51
	Total		38		100	82		100

Notes. $\chi^2 = 2.962$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.227$.

Table 4 shows that there is no significant difference between JCNs and JUSs in the use of polar questions ($p = 0.227$). Nevertheless, our statistics show that JUSs use far more polar questions (82) than JCNs (38). Therefore, although the statistical results did not reach statistical significance, the trend of our data is that the questions of JUSs are more confrontational than those of JCNs. Polar questions tend to be confrontational (Emmertsen, 2007). By asking a yes-or-no question through a prefaced statement, the interviewee needs to accept the presupposition of the question and give a "Yes" or "No" (type-conforming) response, so this type of yes-or-no question is more tendentious and puts pressure on the interviewee (Raymond, 2003; Clayman et al., 2006). Furthermore, the use of polar questions demonstrates a grammatical preference, and conversationalists may use different lexical and syntactic structures to conduct different social actions (Clayman & Loeb, 2018, pp. 128-129). In Chinese, in addition to using the interrogative marker "?", JCNs also use other types of polar questions, such as "Will you… (hui bu hui…)", "whether (shifou…)", "Can you (neng bu neng…)", etc. Examples are as follows:

Example 1 (2021-10-30 15:29:41 Southern Metropolis Daily journalist):

01: → It has been confirmed that the Delta strain caused this wave of pandemic in

02: → Inner Mongolia.

03: → How is the treatment situation of this round of pandemic?

04: → Is the proportion of severe cases high?

05: → Especially since Ejin Banner is located in a border area, is its medical treatment capacity

06: → sufficient to cope with the pandemic? Thank you.

In Example 1, after the journalist from Southern Metropolis Daily mentioned in the prefaced statement that the Delta virus caused this wave of pandemic in Inner Mongolia, he used three interrogatives to raise questions,

among which "Is the proportion of severe cases high?" and "Is its medical treatment capacity sufficient to cope with the pandemic?" are polar questions. The journalist mainly confirmed the information by focusing on the proportion of severe cases and the treatment capacity. Compared with the polar questions in English, the polar questions in Chinese are more moderate in tone and may be directed at a third party. Therefore, the strength of the tone of the question also involves the positive face of the third party's authoritative identity. Using this type of polar question helps the questioner reduce the face threat that may be caused by the question (Yang & Ran, 2017).

Example 2 (2021-10-13 11:25 AM EDT Meg Tirrell at CNBC):

01: → Well, thank you. I was just hoping to follow up on what Dr. Fauci was saying about

02: → "control."

03: → Dr. Fauci, what is that threshold that would actually mean that COVID is under

04: → control? I think in the past you've said maybe 10,000 cases per day, which might

05: → be 100 deaths per day, which would make it similar to the flu.

07: → Does that mean we are kind of coexisting with the new coronavirus permanently, like in

08: → a heavy flu season?

09: → What does "control" actually mean?

10: → What's that threshold?

In Example 2, Meg Tirrell, a journalist from CNBC (Consumer News and Business Channel), asked Dr. Fauci questions about pandemic control. First, the journalist asked, "What is the threshold for the pandemic to be under control? You pointed out that that means about 10,000 confirmed cases and 100 deaths per day. That's similar to the flu". Then by employing "but" as a transition, he confirmed the information by raising a polar question: "Does that mean we are kind of coexisting with the new coronavirus permanently, like in a heavy flu season?", and two WH-questions: "What does 'control' actually mean?" and "What is that threshold?". It can be seen that the journalist challenged Dr. Fauci's use of "control" by using the adverb "actually" that emphasizes the fact, and seemed to have doubts about the wording of "threshold" and the related data. Compared with Example 1, the journalist's questions here are more proactive, and his clarification and confirmation questions are thus more confrontational.

Results and Discussion on Adversarialness

Table 5

Adversarialness

Indicator	Design features	Value	JCN			JUS		
			Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	%
Preface adversarial	Non-confrontational preface	0	32	21.7	33.68	6	16.3	8.45
	Confrontational preface focus of Q	1	48	52.1	50.53	43	38.9	60.56
	Confrontational preface presupposed by Q	2	15	21.2	15.79	22	15.8	30.99
	Total		95		100	71		100
Global adversarial	Non-confrontational	0	66	48.8	70.97	28	45.2	32.56
	confrontational	1	27	44.2	29.03	58	40.8	67.44
	Total		93		100	86		100

(Table 5 to be continued)

Accountability questions	Non-accountability	0	89	89.2	83.96	73	75.8	81.11
	Why did you…	1	4	4.9	3.77	9	4.1	10.00
	How do you… How could you…		13	11.9	12.26	8	10.1	8.89

Notes. Preface adversarialness: $\chi 2 = 16.258$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$; global adversarialness: $\chi 2 = 26.434$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; accountability questions: $\chi 2 = 3.410$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.182$.

Table 5 shows that there is significant difference between JCN and JUS in the use of preface adversarialness ($p = 0.000$). Comparing the differences between the observed frequency and expected frequency of the three question design features of this indicator, it can be seen that JCNs use more non-confrontational preface while JUSs use more confrontational preface. In addition, there is significant difference in global adversarialness between JCNs and JUSs ($p = 0.000$). This is also verified by their observed frequency and expected frequency: JUSs (58 *vs*. 40.8) and JCNs (27 *vs*. 44.2). JUSs prefer to make the prefaced statements more contradictory than JCNs. Finally, Table 5 also shows that there is no significant difference in the use of accountability questions between JCNs and JUSs ($p = 0.182$). From the frequency distribution, we can see that most of the questions raised by JCNs and JUSs are not accountability questions (JCN [83.96%]; JUS [81.11%]). Among the accountability questions raised, JCNs tend to use the phrase "Why did you…?" less frequently than JUSs (3.77% *vs*. 10.0%), but JCNs tend to use more "How could you…?" than JUSs (12.26% vs. 8.89%).

Example 3 (2021-10-30 15:29:41 AM EDT Kaitlan Collins from CNN):

01: → Thanks so much. My question is for you, Dr. Walensky.

02: → You said "regardless of gathering size" and "even if indoors," you don't have to wear a mask. I noticed that you did not list exceptions beyond healthcare providers, I believe.

03: → So does this mean vaccinated people can take their mask off on an airplane?

In Example 3, the journalist first quoted the remarks of Dr. Walenski, the director of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the prefaced statement: "You said: 'No matter the size of the crowd', 'even indoors', masks are not required", "I noticed that you did not list exceptions beyond healthcare providers". Then she asked a clarifying polar question: "Does this mean that vaccinated people can take off their masks on the plane?" (Line 3). It can be seen that both the prefaced statement and the question are somewhat confrontational and adversarial, posing a threat to Dr. Walensky's positive face.

Conclusion

To sum up, the main differences in the aggressiveness of questions between JCNs and JUSs can be summarized as follows:

1. In terms of initiative, JCNs and JUSs have significant difference, with the latter more inclined to ask multiple questions in one question turn at talk;

2. There is a significant difference between the two parties in terms of directness. JUSs use more "Can/Could/May I ask…" sentence patterns. A typical finding is that neither party uses the "(Excuse me) Do you want/Will you…and Will you/Would you…" sentence patterns. When it comes to self-referencing, JCNs use less "I want to know/(I) don't know…", while JUSs use more "I wonder…" pattern;

3. There is no significant difference in the use of polar questions between the two sides, but JUSs use far more polar questions than JCNs;

4. There is significant difference between the two parties in terms of the dimension of adversarialness. JCNs are more inclined to use non-confrontational prefaced statements, while JUSs are more inclined to add prefaced adversarial statements before the question.

There is significant difference in the global adversarialness between the two sides. JUSs are more inclined than JCNs to adopt a questioning mode in which both the prefaced statement and the question are confrontational. There is no significant difference between the two sides on accountability questions. The above results and discussion could answer the first research question.

Furthermore, potential factors for such differences are discussed from the perspectives of Face Theory and journalistic norms. Firstly, from the perspective of Face Theory, in terms of question design, both parties abide by the norm of the press conference of "question-answer norm" in terms of question design. Nevertheless, JUSs often ask more questions in one turn at talk, making the questions more acute, which is easy to threaten the negative face of officials. In terms of question types, JCNs tend to use more evaluative questions, which appear to be neutral and receptive, and are less likely to pose a threat to the negative face of officials. In contrast, JUSs tend to use more clarifying or confirming questions such as polar questions, which are easy to damage the face of officials (Jiang, 2006, p. 2). From the perspective of the professional norms of Chinese and American media, JUSs are inclined to make the questions more acute by using more polar questions and confrontational prefaced statements. Ngai et al. (2022) pointed out that American journalists play the role of "watchdogs" and usually form a confrontational situation with the government. The mainstream media in China is the link between the government and the public. The main role of the media is to convey information and maintain social stability and harmony. Therefore, journalists show respect for the government on the basis of abiding by the professional ethic rules of Chinese journalists (Jiang, 2006).

To sum up, this study uses the videos and scripts of journalists' questions at the 2021 COVID-19 press briefings of the Chinese and American governments as the data, and draws on the question analysis framework proposed by Clayman et al. (2006) to compare the adversarialness of the questions by JCNs and JUSs. We mainly analyze the reasons for the differences from the perspective of Face Theory and the professional norms of Chinese and foreign journalists. Future research can further explore the reasons why both JCNs and JUSs rarely use accountability questions. Secondly, the influencing factors of Chinese and English lexical and syntactic structures on the design of journalists' questions need to be further explored. Finally, due to manpower limitations, the data extracted in this article is still insufficient, and the research results may have certain limitations.

References

Alfahad, A. (2015). Aggressiveness and deference in Arabic broadcast interviews. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 88, 58-72.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1978; 1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. New York: CUP.

Chan, F. T., & Yu, Y. T. (2023). Building a global community of health for all: A positive discourse analysis of COVID-19. *Discourse & Communication, 17*(4), 522-537.

Chen, L., & Li, C. (2023). Interpersonal metadiscourse in news commentaries: A corpus-based study of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. *Journal of Pragmatics, 212*, 29-40.

Chen, X., Ye, L., & Zhang, Y. (1995). Refusal in Chinese. In G. Kasper (Ed.), *Pragmatics of Chinese as a native and target language* (pp. 113-163). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Chen, X. H., & Du, M. X. (2022). Research on the positive public relations practice of local government news releases during public emergencies: Taking the 2020 Guangdong Province epidemic prevention and control press conference as an example. *Jinan Journal (Philosophy & Social Sciences), 44*(4), 33-47.

Clayman, S., & Heritage, J. (2002). Questioning presidents: Journalistic deference and adversarialness in the press conferences of US presidents Eisenhower and Reagan. *Journal of Communication, 52*(4), 749-775.

Clayman, S., & Heritage, J. (2023). Pressing the president: Changing language practices and the growth of political accountability. *Journal of Pragmatics, 207*, 62-74.

Clayman, S., Heritage, J., Elliot, M., & McDonald, L. (2006). Historical trends in questioning presidents, 1953-2000. *Presidential Studies Quarterly, 36*(4), 561-583.

Clayman, S., & Loeb, L. (2018). Polar questions, response preference, and the tasks of political positioning in journalism. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 51*(2), 127-144.

Du, X. J., & Rendle-Short, J. (2016). Journalist questions: Comparing adversariness in Chinese political press conferences. *Discourse, Context and Media, 12*, 51-58.

Emmertsen, S. (2007). Interviewers' challenging questions in British debate interviews. *Journal of Pragmatics, 39*(3), 570-591.

Field, A. (2009). *Discovering statistics using SPSS*. London: Sage.

Guo, R. T., & Pan, Y. Y. (2020). A study on the convergence of anti-epidemic institutional discourse: A case study of the US CDC's COVID-19 telebriefing text. *Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University, 38*(2), 1-10.

Guo, H. J. (2021). Characteristics of online rumor propagation and response strategies under public emergencies: Taking the COVID-19 epidemic as an example. *Journalism Communication, 37*(11), 13-16.

Hayano, K. (2013). Question design in conversation. In J. Sidnell and T. Stivers (Eds.), *The handbook of conversation analysis* (pp. 395-414). London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Huang, Q. (2021). Discourse bias of the mainstream American media on China's image: Taking the reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic as an example. *Foreign Languages and Literature, 37*(4), 85-96.

Institute of Linguistics, CASS. (2013). *Modern Chinese dictionary* (6th ed.). Beijing: Commercial Press.

Jiang, X. Y. (2006). Cross-cultural pragmatic differences in US and Chinese press conferences: The case of the North Korean nuclear crisis. *Discourse and Society, 17*(2), 237-257.

Kaur, T. (2022). Conversation analysis in a US Senate Judiciary hearing: Questioning Brett Kavanaugh. *Discourse Studies, 24*, 423-444.

Li, S. S. (1999). *Statistics in language research*. Xi'an: Xi'an Jiaotong University Press.

Li, Z. H., & Liu, S. B. (2021). Fighting stigmatization: Chinese government legitimacy discourse management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China), 43*(11), 60-65.

Liu, Y. F., & Li, D. C. (2022). The US-China battle over Coronavirus in the news media: Metaphor transfer as a representation of stance mediation. *Discourse & Society, 33*(4), 456-477.

Liu, D. J. (2021). A corpus-based diachronic analysis of US media reports on China during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Foreign Languages, 44*(6), 52-63.

Liu, X. Y., & Cai, C. Z. (2023). Analysis of critical metaphors in the discourse of COVID-19 in Western media. *Media, 25*(1), 70-74.

Martikainen, J., & Sakki, I. (2021). Boosting nationalism through COVID-19 images: Multimodal construction of the failure of the "dear enemy" with COVID-19 in the national press. *Discourse & Communication, 15*(4), 388-414.

Ngai, C. S. B., Yao, L., & Singh, R. G. (2022). A comparative analysis of the U.S. and China's mainstream news media framing of coping strategies and emotions in the reporting of COVID-19 outbreak on social media. *Discourse & Communication, 16*(5), 572-597.

Power, K., & Crosthwaite, P. (2022). Constructing COVID-19: A corpus-informed analysis of prime ministerial crisis responses communication by gender. *Discourse & Society, 33*(3), 411-437.

Ran, Y. P., & Huang, X. (2020). Politeness and relations from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics. *Journal of Foreign Languages, 43*(3), 35-45.

Raymond, G. (2003). Grammar and social organization: Yes/no interrogatives and the structure of responding. *American Sociological Review, 68*, 939-967.

Rendle-Short, J. (2007). Neutralism and adversarial challenges in the political news interview. *Discourse and Communication, 1*(4), 387-406.

Sambaraju, R. (2022). "My countrymen have never disappointed me": Politics of service in Modi's speeches during COVID-19. *Discourse, Context & Media, 47*, 1-10.

Takoski, A. (2022). Political alliance with COVID-19: Macedonian politics and the strategic use of the pandemic. *Discourse and Society, 33*(2), 215-234.

Tan, W. H., Zhu, Y. Y., & Wang, J. J. (2021). A study on China's self-image from the perspective of conceptual metaphor: A case study of documentaries on the epidemic. *Foreign Languages Research, 38*(5), 38-43.

Tan, X. (2013). Face theory embodied in Chinese speech acts. *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences, 5*(2), 207-213.

Wu, F., & Claytie, B. (2016). A study on the content preference and modality orientation of reporters' questions at the prime minister's press conference. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China), 38*(9), 56-60.

Wu, F., Cheng, Y., & Chao, D. (2017). Global questioners: Examining journalists' aggressiveness at Chinese premiers' press conferences (1993-2015). *Asian Journal of Communication, 27*(4), 357-377.

Wu, L. F., & Wang, X. L. (2022). Analysis of the discourse of China's mainstream newspapers and periodicals in reporting major emergencies: Taking China Daily's report on the COVID-19 outbreak as an example. *Journalism Lover, 37*(5), 24-26.

Yang, N., & Ran, Y. P. (2017). A pragmatic study of yes-no assertive questions in news commentary. *Foreign Languages Research, 34*(3), 12-17.

Zhao, Z. J. (2012). Review of research on face theory. *Journal of Chongqing University (Social Science Edition), 18*(5), 128-137.

Zhang, D. (2012). How China-based foreign reporters' aggressiveness changed: The honeymoon effect of the Chinese government's media relations strategies. *Asian Journal of Communication, 22*(5), 528-548.