

# Research on Narrative Differences of Medical Hotspot Events and the Construction of China's Image Under the Background of Political Multipolarization in the New Century

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, the construction and dissemination of national image have emerged as a significant research agenda. As a global issue, media coverage of public health events has become a critical arena for the shaping of national image and discursive contention. This study focuses on three major public health crises—SARS, Ebola, and COVID-19—and selects relevant news reports from *China Daily* (English edition) and *The New York Times* as its corpus. By analyzing high-frequency words, lexical co-occurrence, and the modal system, this research comparatively examines the discourse construction logics of Chinese and Western media, with a particular emphasis on their divergent pathways and representational effects in shaping China's national image. By revealing the underlying discursive mechanisms of both media traditions, this study aims to provide empirical support and practical insights for optimizing China's international communication strategies, challenging Western discursive dominance, and precisely constructing and disseminating a truthful, comprehensive, and multidimensional image of China.

*Keywords:* public health events, discourse analysis, national image, *China Daily*, *The New York Times*

## Introduction

### Background

Since the turn of the 21st century, China's international standing has been steadily rising, with its global influence continuously expanding. This trajectory has presented the world with a more authentic and comprehensive image of China as a major power. In a broad sense, national image encompasses both a country's domestic self-perception and the perceptions held by other nations within the international system (Feng & Hu, 2008). A deep analysis of representative public health events is instrumental in deciphering the pathways through which China's national image is constructed. It provides valuable insights for shaping this image and amplifying China's voice on the global stage.

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This study selects *China Daily* (English edition) and *The New York Times* as its media platforms. Utilizing the Octoparse web crawler, we compiled a corpus of news reports covering the SARS, Ebola, and COVID-19 epidemics. Data analysis was conducted by using ANTCOCONC. Guided by theories of semantic prosody and Halliday's modal system, this research dissects the divergent discourses of Chinese and Western media across four dimensions: high-frequency vocabulary, lexical co-occurrence, the modal system, and discourse analysis, to ultimately unveil the underlying logic of discourse construction employed by these media traditions.

### **Literature Review**

In the context of deepening globalization and intensifying inter-state competition, the discursive power carried by news texts and their implicit ideological tendencies are receiving increasingly extensive attention from academia (Li, 2018). In light of this, conducting an in-depth analysis of news discourse—deconstructing its forms of representation and pathways of image construction, and examining its linguistic choices and collocational preferences—holds significant academic value for uncovering the latent ideological connotations and national image aspirations behind such discourse. In particular, a systematic investigation into the logical mechanisms through which Western mainstream media construct China's national image can offer empirical and theoretical support for China's efforts to optimize its international image.

The construction of China's national image is inherently rooted in its specific global context and bears distinct temporal characteristics. As Meng Yun (2023) pointed out, clarifying the current real-world backdrop against which China's national image is being shaped, as well as the practical imperatives for its construction in the new era, is essential to summarizing the fundamental processes and patterns of official narratives on social media and their relation to national image building. Ren Liying (2024) further noted in her research that China, leveraging its positioning as a peaceful and autonomous actor, engages in "self-shaping" of its national image. By capitalizing on the communicative advantages of new media, it has progressively attenuated the externally shaped perceptions prevalent within Western discursive frameworks. This implies that in various high-profile medical incidents and major public events, the discursive construction strategies of Chinese media and the underlying logic of national image projection are subject to dynamic adjustment.

In global academic discourse, discourse analysis has predominantly centered on the COVID-19 pandemic as a global public health crisis. The outbreak triggered extensive and intensive media coverage worldwide. These reports served not only as a primary channel for public information dissemination, but also through linguistic choices, narrative framing, and the employment of metaphor, reflected the cultural values, ideological stances, and governance logics of different nations (Zhang et al., 2022). Existing studies, often employing methodologies, such as critical discourse analysis and metaphor analysis, have conducted multi-dimensional comparisons of pandemic-related reporting in Chinese and Western media. These investigations have clearly delineated the pronounced disparities between the two in terms of information presentation, value orientation, and public opinion construction (Fu, 2024; Sun, 2025).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Fairclough (1992) distinguished discourse analysis between "critical" and "non-critical" approaches, arguing that a methodology fundamentally connected to social structures is "critical." Critical discourse analysis brings the critical tradition of social analysis into the study of language and contributes two perspectives to critical social analysis: One is discourse, and the other is the relationship between discourse and other social factors

(power relations, ideology, institutions, social identities, etc.) (Fairclough, 2012, p. 9). Fairclough (1992) posited that texts are products of discursive practices, which encompass the production, distribution, and consumption of texts. Both are constrained and shaped by broader socio-discursive practices.

Firth (1952) contended that the study of collocation is central to the study of meaning. Extending this, Sinclair (1991), through corpus-based keyword analysis, observed that certain words habitually attract other lexical items with semantically related features, forming characteristic collocations or “co-occurrence.” He proposed that these node words carry positive or negative semantic prosody or exhibit specific semantic preferences. Analyzing semantic prosody in specialized texts can reveal whether a lexical item demonstrates a distinct prosodic tendency within a specific genre or register, differing from general usage (Wei, 2002).

Halliday (1994) defined the modal system as the grammatical realization of a speaker’s judgment regarding the probability or obligation of a proposition, expressed through high, median, and low modal values (Halliday, 2000). He further noted that polarity in English is realized through the Finite element, typically expressed by temporal or modal auxiliaries (Halliday, 2000). Building on this, Lyons (1977) argued that modality expresses the speaker’s opinion or attitude toward a proposition’s content, thereby serving an evaluative function. He distinguished between subjective and objective modality. Subjective modality involves the speaker directly expressing their own viewpoint, attitude, volition, or authority, rather than adopting a neutral, observational stance (Lyons, 1995).

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach integrating corpus linguistics with critical discourse analysis, hereafter referred to as CDA, to explore how Chinese and Western media discursively construct China’s national image during public health crises, involving four interconnected phases: specifically, a bilingual comparable corpus was built to compare the English edition of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, with news reports covering three public health events—the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak from 2002 to 2003, the West African Ebola epidemic from 2014 to 2016, and the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022—retrieved by Octoparse using search terms that combine each event name with “China” from the official website of *China Daily* and the LexisNexis database for *The New York Times*, forming a final corpus of 1,591 cleaned and normalized articles, among which 701 are from *China Daily* and 890 are from *The New York Times*; only publicly available articles were collected with their sources properly attributed to enable both synchronic and diachronic analysis. The analysis was conducted at three linguistic levels, namely lexical-level analysis, which uses AntConc Version 4.2.0 to generate word frequency lists and identify keywords; collocational and semantic analysis, which applies the collocates and cluster functions of AntConc based on Sinclair’s theory of semantic prosody and Louw’s concept of discourse prosody; and grammatical-pragmatic analysis, which combines manual annotation with targeted corpus queries and is based on Halliday’s systemic functional grammar framework. Meanwhile, quantitative corpus findings were qualitatively interpreted via Fairclough’s CDA framework, which covers textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and socio-political practice analysis.

### **Coverage of the SARS Epidemic**

This section analyzes news reports collected using “SARS” and “China” as keywords. A corpus was constructed comprising 171 articles from *China Daily* and 95 articles from *The New York Times* (sourced via

LexisNexis), gathered using the Octoparse web crawler. Data processing and analysis were conducted with ANTCOnc, with all texts undergoing standardization to ensure thematic relevance and analytical reliability.

### High-Frequency Vocabulary Analysis

Table 1

*Word Frequency of China Daily Reports on SARS*

<i>China Daily</i>		
Rank	Word	Frequency
1	China	458
2	Beijing	242
3	Percent	213
4	Chinese	209
5	Cases	196
6	Disease	189
7	Year	175
8	Yesterday	174
9	People	171
10	Health	170
11	Government	149
12	Patients	140
13	World	91
14	First	89
15	Ministry	80

***China Daily*: Constructing a “nationally coordinated” narrative framework.** The high-frequency lexicon exhibits a clear hierarchical distribution (see Table 1). Four keywords, led by “China” (458 instances), each occur over 200 times, forming the high-frequency stratum ( $\geq 200$  occurrences) that defines the core thematic focus. Eight terms, including “Disease” (189 instances), constitute the mid-frequency stratum (100-200 occurrences), providing contextual and action-oriented semantic support.

Notably, operational terms, such as “Health” (170 instances) and “Patients” (140 instances) are concentrated in this mid-stratum, directing narrative emphasis toward concrete containment actions—patient care and public health measures—rather than abstract commentary. The term “Patients” centers the discourse on fundamental human needs, reflecting a people-centric containment philosophy, while “Health” anchors it in practical intervention. This lexical focus on tangible outcomes avoids subjective appraisal disconnected from events, instead constructing an evidence-based narrative of “actions taken and beneficiaries served” that allows readers to infer efficacy directly.

These terms function synergistically to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of the national SARS response while simultaneously performing the media’s institutional role of disseminating authoritative information, stabilizing public perception, and guiding discourse. Five terms, including “Government” (149 instances), populate the low-frequency stratum ( $\leq 150$  occurrences), completing the semantic architecture.

Overall, the prominent use of entity and institution-related terms—exemplified by high-stratum items “China” and “Beijing,” mid-stratum “Government,” and low-stratum “Ministry”—visually reinforces a three-tier “national-regional-institutional” response framework. This specific lexical set reconstructs the organizational hierarchy and accountability structure of the containment effort, enabling readers to discern a top-down,

systematic mechanism characterized by “central coordination, local implementation, and specialized execution.” The lexical pattern semantically aligns with the practical logic of a coordinated collective response, thereby enhancing the communicative legitimacy of the reported facts. This approach achieves dual objectives: providing an objective account of the response’s organizational foundations, while through its systematic lexical logic, discursively projecting authority and reliability.

Table 2

*Word Frequency of The New York Times Reports on SARS*

<i>The New York Times</i>		
Rank	Word	Frequency
1	Health	152
2	World	119
3	Disease	108
4	Kong	107
5	Beijing	105
6	Hong	104
7	More	101
8	Epidemic	88
9	People	86
10	Chinese	55
11	Officials	76
12	Government	56
13	Organization	52
14	Spread	47
15	Patients	43

***The New York Times: Constructing a “risk and skepticism” narrative framework.*** The high-frequency vocabulary displays a distinct distribution pattern: a concentrated high-frequency core, a consolidated mid-frequency band, and a dispersed low-frequency set (see Table 2). The high-frequency stratum ( $\geq 100$  occurrences) contains seven terms—nearly half the list—with minimal frequency intervals, forming a dense lexical cluster that anchors the narrative.

A notable pattern involves geographical referents. The conspicuous co-occurrence of “Hong” (104 instances), “Kong” (107 instances), and “Beijing” (105 instances) is often embedded in syntactically segmented phrases (e.g., “China and Hong Kong,” “students from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan”). Such formulations erroneously position Hong Kong, China, as an entity parallel to the Chinese mainland and obscure the sovereign status of Taiwan, China. The persistent repetition of these inaccurate representations functions to discursively fragment China’s geographical and political integrity, constituting a lexical violation of the One-China principle.

The mid-frequency stratum (70-90 occurrences) comprises four terms with comparable frequencies, serving a narrative bridging function. Terms like “Officials” (76 instances) and the collocation “World Health Organization” (evidenced by “World” at 119 instances and “Organization” at 52 instances) become focal points. The reporting selectively highlights statements from officials and assessments from international bodies, often emphasizing critical perspectives. This strategy leverages perceived external authority to recast subjective skepticism as ostensibly “objective” critique, thereby attempting to discursively undermine the legitimacy and

perceived efficacy of China's containment measures. Essentially, this constitutes a selective construction that diverges from journalistic objectivity, manipulating event perception through strategic lexical framing.

The low-frequency stratum (40-70 occurrences) contains four relatively evenly distributed terms. They primarily function as associative support for the core lexical sets above, providing supplementary semantics and ensuring discursive cohesion, thereby supplying the necessary linguistic infrastructure for the overarching narrative framework.

### **Analysis of Lexical Co-occurrence**

**Focus on containment facts in Chinese media.** The collocation of core vocabulary in *China Daily* is oriented toward factual assertion, characterized by neutral semantic prosody and the avoidance of subjective evaluation.

“Ministry of Health”: It frequently co-occurs with phrases such as “announced the latest developments” and “issued an epidemic notification.” For example, in “Mainland reports 28 new SARS cases, 17 in Beijing,” the accompanying content consists purely of factual information, devoid of emotional inclination.

“Chinese”: Its most frequent collocates is “traditional medicine” (19 instances), as seen in headlines like “TCM takes up SARS challenge” and quotes, such as “the director of Beijing Xiyuan Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine pointed out that TCM can mitigate the side effects of Western drugs.” The focus remains on the practical application of TCM in treatment, with neutral semantic prosody that merely states technical possibilities.

“Beijing”: It commonly co-occurs with authoritative entities like “Municipal government” (15 instances) and “Municipal Health Bureau”, as exemplified by quotes, such as “Information provided by the Beijing Municipal Government is reliable” (as cited from the Mexican Ambassador to China). This pairing with authoritative sources reinforces the objectivity of the information, resulting in a positive yet measured semantic prosody.

**Western media intensifying risk discourse.** The collocation of core lexical items in *The New York Times* is oriented toward risk and skepticism, exhibiting predominantly negative semantic prosody and implying a critical stance toward China's containment efforts.

“Beijing”: This term frequently collocates with phrases, such as “information missing” and “unreliable data.” For example, one report states: “The WHO has pointed out that information on the infection pathways of at least half of the SARS patients in Beijing is missing, hindering epidemic containment efforts.” The use of negative lexical items like “missing” and “hindering” constructs a narrative of “informational opacity.”

“China”: This item often co-occurs with terms like “cover-up” and “slow response.” While explicitly derogatory language may be avoided, reports imply critiques, such as “China's initial response to the SARS outbreak was delayed.” The modifier “slow” and similar expressions carry a negative evaluative load.

“Epidemic”: This word shows strong collocation with “spread” (47 instances) and phrases like “out of control.” A representative headline reads: “Study Says Virus Has Remained Stable, Not Weakening as the Illness Spreads.” Although ostensibly reporting on viral stability, the persistent pairing with “spreads” reinforces an impression of “uncontrolled dissemination,” contributing to an overall negative semantic prosody.

### **Halliday's Modality System**

High-certainty modality highlights the effectiveness of prevention and control and the authority of information. In reports related to epidemic prevention and control, Chinese media have always taken facts as the

core, extensively using explicit high-certainty adverbs, such as “already” and expressions with implicit high-certainty semantics.

By emphasizing the factual attributes and semantic certainty of information, they clearly convey the progress, measures, and true picture of epidemic prevention and control. In event progress reports, such as “Beijing authorities have not dropped their guard following yesterday’s lifting by the World Health Organization (WHO) of their SARS warning,” the present perfect tense, as a typical high-certainty adverb, directly locks in the established fact of the easing of the epidemic situation, completely abandoning semantic ambiguity, allowing the public to intuitively and clearly understand the phased achievements of epidemic prevention and control. In information disclosure reports, “To date, no foreign experts have been infected by SARS.” Although it uses the negative expression “no,” paired with the clear temporal boundary of “to date,” it forms a high-certainty semantic logic, accurately stating the objective fact that there are currently no cases, effectively ensuring the rigor and credibility of information transmission. This linguistic choice is essentially the practice of the principle of news authenticity, avoiding information ambiguity through high-certainty expressions, which not only fully restores the truth of various aspects of epidemic prevention and control, but also reflects the responsibility of Chinese media in transmitting authoritative information, safeguarding the public’s right to know, and guiding positive public opinion.

Low-Certainty Modality reinforces risk speculation and skepticism. In its coverage of topics related to China—such as epidemic spread, information disclosure, and containment measures—*The New York Times* frequently employs low-certainty modal verbs and adverbs, including “may,” “might,” and “allegedly.” This linguistic strategy, which attenuates factual objectivity and introduces speculative risk, serves to convey a subjective evaluative stance. In reporting on epidemic transmission, the newspaper uses formulations like “WHO says virus may have spread in Beijing’s educational institutions.” The low-certainty structure “may have” downgrades what should be a fact-based assertion about viral transmission into a speculative claim lacking conclusive evidence, thereby deliberately generating informational ambiguity. In reporting on information reliability, through implicitly evaluative statements, such as “Reports from Chinese officials allegedly undercount the number of SARS cases,” the newspaper leverages the “unverified” semantic load carried by “allegedly.” This usage insinuates the unreliability of official Chinese data without providing evidential support, thereby conveying subjective doubt rather than objective fact. In reporting on containment efficacy, a statement like “The effectiveness of China’s SARS prevention measures might be overstated” employs “might” to reduce propositional certainty. This is coupled with the negatively charged lexical item “overstated” to construct a modal logic that casts doubt on the effectiveness of containment efforts, guiding readers toward a negative perception.

Such linguistic choices fundamentally contravene the journalistic principle of objectivity. Through this implicitly subjective modal orientation, individual judgments or one-sided conjectures are packaged as “cautious reporting.” In essence, this practice serves a specific discursive agenda rather than presenting a comprehensive and truthful picture.

### **Coverage of the Ebola Epidemic**

This section employs “Ebola” and “China” as keywords to construct a corpus comprising 117 reports from *China Daily* and 257 reports from *The New York Times* (sourced via the LexisNexis database). Data was collected using the Octoparse web crawler and processed with ANTCONC, following standardized screening to ensure thematic relevance and analytical validity.

### Analysis of High-Frequency Vocabulary

**Chinese media: Projecting a collaborative stance.** Analysis of the top 15 high-frequency terms reveals five core lexical items (frequency  $\geq 110$ ), each demonstrating strong thematic relevance. The prominence of “Health” (147 instances) directly reflects the global imperative for recovery amid a public health crisis, foregrounding a universal human concern. The parallel high frequency of “China” (134 instances) and “Africa” (119 instances) signals a narrative of partnership and mutual support between China and Africa during the crisis. This lexical pattern illustrates the multi-actor coordination in China’s assistance and underscores a principle of equitable partnership within international cooperation (see Table 3).

Table 3

#### *Word Frequency of China Daily Reports on Ebola*

<i>China Daily</i>		
Rank	Word	Frequency
1	Health	147
2	China	134
3	Africa	119
4	People	119
5	Virus	112
6	Disease	100
7	Outbreak	86
8	World	78
9	Country	76
10	Medical	67
11	Hospital	62
12	Workers	59
13	Percent	54
14	Spread	53
15	Deadly	50

The concentrated use of “People” (119 instances) aligns with a people-centric developmental philosophy, indicating a dual commitment to domestic welfare and the collective well-being of the international community. In contrast to the macro perspective of these primary terms, mid-frequency items (60-100 instances), such as “Medical” (67 instances) and “Hospital” (62 instances), serve to concretize China’s tangible contributions—such as dispatching medical teams and supplying resources—which played a significant role in the global containment effort.

Lower-frequency items (below 60 instances) function as semantic complements. For example, “Spread” (53 instances) frequently collocates with “Virus.” Notably, lexicon associated with negative impacts, such as “Deadly” (50 instances), appears with markedly reduced frequency. This suggests a deliberate editorial strategy to mitigate undue public alarm while maintaining a commitment to factual reporting. The overall lexical profile projects a coherent international identity: As a major global actor, China is portrayed as both deeply engaged with a shared human crisis and proactively fulfilling its responsibilities, thereby contributing distinct resources and strategic approaches to the global epidemic response.

**U.S. media: Lexical patterns and discursive focus.** The lexical distribution indicates a degree of thematic homogeneity in the coverage (see Table 4). The high-frequency stratum ( $\geq 200$  instances) includes five items,

such as “Health” (497 instances) and “Africa” (266 instances), pointing to a concentrated focus on the epidemic’s immediate manifestations, impacts, and the primary affected region. Notably, “World” (171 instances)—a term implying a global scope—ranks only eighth, outside this core cluster. This pattern suggests a narrative frame that prioritizes localized suffering and regional circumstances over the pandemic’s global interconnectedness and international coordinated responses, revealing a distinct editorial emphasis.

Mid-frequency terms are predominantly institutional, including “Officials” (165 instances), “Organization” (141 instances), and “Hospital” (187 instances), constructing a narrative centered on formal response mechanisms. Within the lower-frequency stratum ( $\leq 150$  instances), terms like “Care” (114 instances)—which could signal empathetic reporting—appear with relatively lower prominence, implying a constrained expression of empathy. “Response” (127 instances) further indicates a focus on official rhetoric and public messaging, with comparatively less lexical weight given to substantive, operational countermeasures.

Table 4

*Word Frequency of The New York Times Reports on Ebola*

<i>The New York Times</i>		
Rank	Word	Frequency
1	Health	497
2	People	300
3	Africa	266
4	Disease	254
5	Outbreak	247
6	Hospital	187
7	Infected	171
8	World	171
9	Officials	165
10	Spread	149
11	Organization	141
12	Countries	130
13	Response	127
14	Died	122
15	Care	114

The significant frequency disparity between the highest and lowest strata—approximately threefold—cannot be attributed solely to the difference in article volume. It points toward a consistent thematic and affective orientation in the U.S. media’s Ebola coverage. Overall, the reporting relies heavily on a lexicon of pathology, infection, and mortality. Beyond describing the outbreak’s severity, this word choice carries a latent negative affective stance, framing the event as an unmitigated disaster for the affected populations and, by extension, for the American audience. This aligns with the perspective that media narratives are shaped by, and subsequently reinforce, dominant institutional viewpoints.

**Collocation Analysis**

In the sampled corpus, “China” demonstrates strong collocation with “relationship,” while terms like “friend” and “friendship” frequently appear in its proximity. This pattern contributes to constructing a national image characterized by amicability, reliability, and a commitment to partnership. The item “Chinese” commonly co-

occurs with active, positive verbs, such as “waving” and “kissing,” which connote warmth and approachability, as well as with nouns denoting professions of aid providers (“helpers,” “sailors,” and “companies”). This lexical environment portrays Chinese actors as empathetic and proactive in offering assistance during crises, reinforcing an image of a peace-loving and responsible international stakeholder.

Conversely, the term “government” exhibits strong collocation with action-oriented terms like “battle,” “lead,” “provide,” and “efforts.” This framing situates the government within a narrative of decisive leadership, substantive support, and diligent action, reflecting a state-society relationship where governance is explicitly linked to public welfare provision. In contrast, foreign media reports show a marked decrease in the use of foundational terms like “people” and “country,” while “government” is often substituted with more impersonal or bureaucratic terms, such as “officials” and “organization.” This lexical shift reflects not only differing political paradigms, but also a discursive downplaying of the populace as the central concern of state action and of the state as a unitary actor in international affairs—a representation inconsistent with China’s constitutional and operational reality.

The discursive tendencies and lexical preferences evident in foreign media are products of their specific institutional and ideological environments. The narrative of China they propagate often relies on established stereotypes, creating a clear divergence from the practice-based, experiential narratives dominant in Chinese media. This contrast underscores fundamental differences in the logic of image construction across ideological divides, wherein foreign media seeks to cultivate a discursive hegemony that normalizes its own interpretive frameworks and rules of engagement within the global public sphere.

### **Narrative Analysis**

A search of *The New York Times* archive yielded only seven articles concurrently addressing China and the Ebola epidemic. Of these, two published during the outbreak focused specifically on China’s role. In both instances, China’s portrayal was predominantly negative, including distorted representations, such as characterizing Chinese entities as indiscriminate producers of generic pharmaceuticals. One report suggested China’s aid to Africa was motivated primarily by external pressure—a claim starkly at odds with the narrative presented in Chinese media and with documented facts, thereby revealing a deficit in objective reporting.

Furthermore, the coverage included assertions from various commentators that lacked empirical substantiation, such as implicitly linking China to the origins of the Ebola virus in Africa. Other reports acknowledged China’s significant economic role in Africa only to insinuate that such engagement facilitated corruption. Notably, these same articles invoked the expectation for China to exercise “great power responsibility,” a concept also prominent in China’s own diplomatic discourse. This juxtaposition suggests that while foreign media may accurately acknowledge certain factual aspects of China’s status, the interpretive conclusions they draw are frequently skewed, compromising their credibility and impartiality.

As an establishment media outlet with considerable global reach, *The New York Times* publication of such narratives raises concerns regarding adherence to principles of journalistic fairness. These reporting patterns also illuminate the sustained attention paid to China by U.S. institutional actors and indicate the potential instrumental use of media platforms to shape international perceptions. Consequently, this mediated environment may contribute to a public understanding of China in the United States that is fragmented and influenced by strategic framing rather than comprehensive objectivity.

### Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section employs “COVID” and “China” as keywords to construct a corpus comprising 701 reports from *China Daily* (English edition) and 250 contemporaneous reports pertaining to China from *The New York Times*, sourced via the LexisNexis database. Data was collected using the Octoparse web crawler and underwent standardized screening to ensure thematic relevance and analytical reliability.

#### Analysis of High-Frequency Vocabulary

**Chinese media: Emphasis on containment mechanisms and public participation.** The hierarchical frequency distribution reveals the core keyword “China” (571 instances) occupying the top position with a significantly higher count than other terms, establishing it as the primary semantic anchor and highlighting China’s central role as the primary agent of containment. The high-frequency stratum ( $\geq 270$  instances) comprises six terms with relatively small intervals between them, forming a cohesive core semantic cluster. Action- and outcome-oriented terms, such as “Pandemic” (283), “Cases” (295), and “Medical” (184) focus on “transparent epidemiological data” and “guaranteed medical resources,” using quantitative language to underscore containment efficacy. Terms related to public engagement, such as “People” (285 instances) and “Chinese” (274 instances), project a spirit of collective solidarity. Reports with headlines like “Hong Kong residents rising to the COVID-19 challenge” and “Taiwan people join front-line COVID fight” leverage these high-frequency “people” related terms to construct a collective narrative of “nationwide anti-epidemic mobilization” (see Table 5).

Table 5

#### *Word Frequency of China Daily Reports on COVID-19*

<i>China Daily</i>		
Rank	Word	Frequency
1	China	571
2	Year	307
3	Cases	295
4	Health	295
5	People	285
6	Pandemic	283
7	Chinese	274
8	Control	247
9	Province	233
10	City	221
11	Beijing	192
12	Medical	184
13	World	170
14	Country	163
15	Measures	163

The mid-frequency stratum (180-250 instances) contains five terms, including containment mechanism-related words like “Control,” “Measures,” “Province,” and “City.” These reflect the operational logic of “national coordination with regional implementation.” In reports discussing policy adjustments like “reclassification to Category B management” or “provincial implementation of containment measures,” such regional terminology highlights inter-jurisdictional coordination, providing semantic support related to containment actions, regional collaboration, and medical safeguarding. The low-frequency stratum ( $< 180$  instances) contains three

terms that complete the semantic framework concerning global perspective, national positioning, and containment initiatives.

Overall, the prominent distribution of containment-related terms (“Control” and “Measures”), regional coordination terms (“Province,” “City,” and “Beijing”), action-efficacy terms (“Cases,” “Medical,” and “Pandemic”), and public participation terms (“People” and “Chinese”) clearly aligns with the newspaper’s “systematic containment—public response” narrative framework.

**Western media: Selective narrative with a specific discursive agenda.** The frequency gradient shows the high-frequency stratum ( $\geq 200$  instances) containing four terms with small intervals, forming the core semantic cluster. Notably, the top two positions are occupied by terms related to individuals, highlighting an individual-centric orientation. Simultaneously, the high frequency of “Vaccine” amplifies vaccine-related controversies, shifting the narrative focus from “containment efficacy” to the negative dimension of “infringement upon individual rights” (see Table 6).

The mid-frequency stratum (160-200 instances) contains four terms, including “United” and “States,” reflecting an intrinsic U.S.-centric perspective. The low-frequency stratum (100-130 instances) comprises seven terms with relatively larger frequency gaps, predominantly associated with controversy and cost. The dense use of policy- and skepticism-related terms like “Government” (124 instances) and “Officials” (101 instances) focuses reporting on “the legitimacy of government control.” Phrases, such as “Chinese government’s COVID reporting criticized,” through the repeated mention of actors like “government” and “officials,” position the containment policies themselves as objects of scrutiny, guiding readers to question the legality and transparency of China’s measures.

Table 6

*Word Frequency of The New York Times Reports on COVID-19*

<i>The New York Times</i>		
Rank	Word	Frequency
1	People	246
2	Chinese	245
3	World	238
4	Vaccine	212
5	States	181
6	United	174
7	Country	164
8	Health	160
9	Global	124
10	Government	124
11	Business	120
12	Economy	116
13	Beijing	115
14	Lockdowns	107
15	Officials	101

Economy-impact terms like “Economy” (116 instances) and “Business” (120 instances) further expand the dimension of critique. Reports, such as “COVID-19 hits global business, China’s economy faces pressure” forcibly link the pandemic to “economic recession” and “business stagnation,” deliberately amplifying the

perceived negative economic impact of containment measures while omitting China's documented efforts to balance epidemic control with economic development. The combination of high-frequency terms "People" (246 instances) and "Vaccine" (212 instances) with the low-frequency term "Lockdowns" (107 instances) creates a deep associative link between lockdowns and the populace. For instance, a report titled "China Gets Its First mRNA Vaccine Approval. In Indonesia" includes the phrase "36 cities and 270 million people under lockdown," deliberately foregrounding the contentious point that "containment measures infringe upon individual freedom."

The lexical selection in *The New York Times* does not constitute a comprehensive representation of facts. Rather, through deliberate association and guided linkage, it distorts pandemic containment into a controversial issue framed as "infringing on freedom, lacking legitimacy, and hindering the economy," exhibiting clear characteristics of a selective narrative that diverges from the journalistic ideals of objectivity and comprehensiveness.

### Collocation Analysis

**Chinese media: Highlighting containment efficacy and R&D progress.** The collocation patterns of core terms in Chinese media are oriented toward containment outcomes, vaccine progress, and regional collaboration, exhibiting neutral or positive semantic prosody.

"Control": Most frequently collocates with "prevention" (137 instances), "measures" (62 instances), and "center" (34 instances), forming a neutral collocational chain of "prevention-control-institution." For example, "Containment measures aim to reduce the pandemic's impact on production," focusing on the practical effects of measures with neutral prosody.

"Vaccine": Collocates with "development," "vaccination," and "herd immunity." For Example, "COVID-19 herd immunity feasible in China, experts say—with 165 million cumulative doses administered, the target is 70%-80% herd immunity." The use of positive terms like "feasible" and "target" lends a confirmatory semantic prosody.

"People": Collocates with "join front-line" and "mutual help." Examples include headlines like "Taiwan people join front-line COVID fight" and "Hong Kong residents rising to the COVID-19 challenge." The use of positive collocations like "join" and "mutual help" constructs a narrative of "societal collaboration" with positive prosody.

**Western media: Amplifying vaccine skepticism and control controversy.** The collocation patterns of core terms in *The New York Times* are oriented toward vaccine doubt, criticism of control measures, and economic anxiety, exhibiting predominantly negative semantic prosody.

"Chinese Vaccine": Collocates with "doubt," "drawbacks," and "unproven." For example, a report titled "China approves a fifth COVID-19 vaccine" states in its lead: "The vaccine fails to generate sufficient T cells." While the headline states a fact, the lead uses "drawbacks" to directly frame it negatively.

"Lockdowns": Collocates with "strict," "harsh," and "affect millions." For example, "China's strict lockdowns affect 270 million people in 36 cities." Terms like "strict" and "affect" bind containment measures to "public hardship," creating negative prosody.

"People": Frequently collocates with "asymptomatic" and "affected." For example, a headline "Antibodies Didn't Last Long After Infection, Especially for Asymptomatic" focuses on the risk of "weak immune protection in asymptomatic individuals," using "didn't last long" to convey anxiety, resulting in negative prosody.

### **Analysis Based on Halliday's Modal System**

Chinese media consistently employ high-certainty modal verbs and adverbs to affirm the scientific foundation and practical efficacy of containment policies, framing them as authoritative and successful. For instance, in reporting on vaccine progress, statements, such as “cumulative vaccinations have reached 165 million doses, with the next-phase target being 70%-80% herd immunity” utilize definitive phrases like “have reached” and “target being” to present clear data and objectives, thereby constructing a narrative of measurable achievement and national coordination. Similarly, in defending containment strategies, authoritative declarations like “the dynamic zero-COVID policy is scientifically effective” combine the high-certainty evaluative verb “works” with the definitive descriptor “scientifically” to directly validate official policy with an unambiguous modal stance, reinforcing state discourse and public confidence.

In contrast, Western outlets, such as *The New York Times* frequently utilize low-certainty modal verbs and adverbs alongside negatively charged lexicon to amplify narratives of risk, skepticism, and institutional controversy. Coverage of vaccine efficacy may emphasize uncertainty, as seen in headlines like “Antibodies Didn't Last Long After Infection in Study, Especially for Asymptomatic,” where the phrase “didn't last long” implicitly suggests the speculative conclusion that “immune protection may be insufficient,” thereby directing reader attention toward potential vulnerability rather than scientific progress. Reporting on social control often incorporates epistemic distancing, exemplified by the description of a citizen journalist being sentenced “allegedly for ‘spreading false information.’” Here, the low-certainty adverb “allegedly” casts doubt on the official rationale, subtly conveying skepticism about transparency and freedom of speech. Furthermore, economic analyses may employ speculative modality, as in the claim that “China's economy may face long-term pressure due to COVID lockdown.” The use of “may” elevates a contingent prediction to the level of a plausible fact, often without robust empirical support, primarily serving to project anxiety and critique the sustainability of China's policy approach.

A comparative analysis reveals a fundamental discursive divergence rooted in contrasting ideological positions and institutional roles. Chinese media's affirmative strategy, characterized by high modality and definitive statements, functions to legitimize state policy, project governance competence, and foster social cohesion by presenting public health measures as scientifically grounded and effectively implemented. Conversely, Western media's interrogative and risk-amplifying strategy, marked by low modality, speculative framing, and a focus on controversy, aligns with a watchdog function and liberal democratic critique of authority, often seeking to scrutinize official narratives, highlight potential costs, and articulate skepticism toward state control. This dichotomy is not merely stylistic but reflects deeper socio-political epistemologies: one oriented toward consensus-building and authoritative knowledge dissemination, the other toward adversarial accountability and the foregrounding of dissent. The resulting media discourses thus construct markedly different social realities—one of coordinated efficacy, the other of contested risk—which in turn reinforce their respective audiences' perceptions of the pandemic and state-society relations.

## **Discussion**

### **Findings**

The findings indicate that *China Daily* predominantly adopts an objective and neutral discursive stance. Its narrative is structured around concrete containment practices and international cooperation, thereby constructing an image of China as a responsible, people-centric, and collaborative global actor. In contrast,

*The New York Times* employs discursive strategies characterized by selective lexical filtering and the use of collocations with negative semantic prosody. This results in a narrative framework with a predominantly critical inclination. The analysis reveals a clear divergence in the discursive approaches of Chinese and foreign media when confronting global public health events. The authoritative press within a nation often reflects its institutional stance on such issues. Chinese official media, grounding their reporting in an objective and practical foundation, engage in rational analysis aimed at shaping a positive national image. Conversely, the discursive construction logic evident in U.S. media reflects its specific ideological underpinnings and public opinion orientation.

### **Implications**

Enhancing the international communication of China's national image necessitates a multifaceted strategy. First, there is a need to construct an autonomous discursive framework with universal resonance—embodying principles, such as “people-first”—to strengthen the global communicative power of Chinese narratives. Second, cultivating a synergistic communication mechanism involving multiple actors, including government entities, media organizations, and citizens, is crucial. Third, innovation in content creation and dissemination methods is required to achieve more targeted and interactive communication. Fourth, improving systems for communication governance and public opinion response will help ensure the orderly and effective global dissemination of China's national image. The ultimate goal is to present a truthful, multidimensional, and comprehensive portrayal of China to the international community.

### **Limitations**

This study is based on an analysis of 1,591 reports from only two publications, *The New York Times* and *China Daily*. Consequently, its findings cannot be generalized to represent the entirety of the media landscape in either China or the United States. Furthermore, the inherent disparity in the volume of reports collected from the two sources results in an imbalanced corpus size, which may affect the comprehensiveness of the analytical conclusions. Future research could address these limitations by establishing parallel corpora of bilingual (English-Chinese) texts for direct comparative analysis. Such an approach would allow for a more nuanced and concrete examination of the differing attitudes, discursive strategies, and image-construction techniques employed by various media outlets when covering the same events under the influence of distinct ideological frameworks. This would provide a valuable direction for further scholarly inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

This study comparatively analyzes the discursive construction of China's national image in the English edition of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*' reports on three major public health crises (SARS, Ebola, and COVID-19) using corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. The findings show that *China Daily* adopts an objective and neutral narrative, focusing on concrete epidemic prevention practices and international cooperation to construct an image of China as a responsible, people-centered and collaborative global actor. In contrast, *The New York Times* adopts discursive strategies, such as selective lexical filtering and negative semantic prosody collocations, forming a predominantly critical narrative framework. The discursive differences between the two media outlets reflect their respective institutional positions, ideological underpinnings, and public opinion orientations.

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