



Legitimizing Narratives: The U.S. Media's Framing of China's COVID-19 Response

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ABSTRACT

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In the backdrop of global health emergencies, news media assumes a pivotal role in disseminating information and shaping public perception. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the U.S. media has consistently tracked its progression in China. The way it is portrayed in the media has significant impacts on how the international community assesses China's response to COVID-19. This study investigates what discursive strategies were adopted by the U.S. media to characterize COVID-19 in China at its three development stages and how these strategies legitimized the U.S. media's framing of China's COVID-19 response over time. Under the guidance of Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach, this study examined salient discursive strategies present in the three sub-corpora that correspond to three development stages from four U.S. mainstream newspapers. The goal was to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the complete legitimization process. The results suggest that the newspapers used all five discursive strategies to portray COVID-19 in China, with some being shared across stages and others unique to a specific stage. They collectively functioned to legitimize the U.S. media's framing over time. In addition to the overall negative representation, numerous positive portrayals were also identified, notably highlighting China's swift responses, the effectiveness of lockdown measures, and the efficacy of Chinese vaccines. Revealing the discursive strategies and their roles in legitimization aids readers in comprehending the process of representation in the U.S. media. Additionally, the positive representation also contributes to fostering mutual understanding and amicable relations between the two countries.

KEYWORDS

legitimization, discursive strategy, COVID-19 in China, the U.S. media, discourse-historical approach

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which surfaced in the city of Wuhan, China in December 2019, has significantly impacted the global landscape (Chakraborty and Maity 2020), garnering widespread attention from the international community. In the backdrop of this global health crisis, the media assumes a pivotal role in disseminating information and updating anti-pandemic progress. Discursive construction of the pandemic by global media shapes public perception and assessment. Since the onset of the pandemic, the U.S. media has consistently tracked the progression of COVID-19 in China. However, the prevailing tone conveyed in the reports is negative and derogatory. China is frequently blamed by the U.S. for the global dissemination of the virus (Zhang and Trifiro 2022). Additionally, the U.S. media's coverage constantly engages in denigrating portrayals of China, naming the novel coronavirus as "Wuhan virus" or "China virus" (Jia and Lu 2021).

Naming the virus stands as merely one facet of the discursive strategies employed by the U.S. media, which has exerted a profound impact on the public's attitudes and feelings of blame for the pandemic (Holt et al. 2022). In addition, other strategies such as shaming, blaming and taming are also applied with the aim to contain the rapid development and rise of China (Jia and Lu 2021). The existing studies obviously demonstrate how America reproduced COVID-19 in China through the discursive strategy of negative other-representation. However, our understanding of this representation remains incomplete and insufficiently comprehensive, given the dynamic evolution of COVID-19 in China and concurrent evolution of media coverage. China's response to COVID-19 pandemic is categorized into five stages (The State Council Information Office of China 2020). The media may adjust or retain certain discursive strategies in respond to the pandemic development at the different stages. Therefore, examining the U.S. media's diachronic discursive construction of COVID-19 in China, spanning its entire developmental continuum, becomes imperative for a better understanding of dynamics inherent in such representation. A thorough comprehension of the dynamics can aid China in comprehending the whole process of being-represented and subsequently taking measures accordingly to repair its tarnished image after deciphering the discursive strategies.

The objective of this study is to reveal the discursive strategies employed by the U.S. mainstream media in representing COVID-19 in China across its different development stages. The study aims to address two key research questions: (1) what discursive strategies are selected by the U.S. media to characterize COVID-19 in China across its three stages? And (2) how do these discursive strategies legitimize the U.S. media's framing of China's COVID-19 response over time?

The subsequent segment of this study is divided into four sections. Firstly, a review of literature about the stages of China's response to COVID-19, COVID-19 in China in the U.S. media, and the discourse-historical approach is presented. Secondly, we introduce the methodology employed for the analysis of news reports pertaining to COVID-19 in China, along with a discussion on data collection. Thirdly, we examine the discursive strategies used in the U.S. media's representation, exploring the implied meanings and the process of legitimization. Lastly, the study is wrapped up by presenting the main findings, discussing implications, and providing suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Stages of China's Response to COVID-19

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, China has swiftly taken measures to confront the challenges it posed, despite facing significant sacrifices. *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action*, a white paper released by the State Council of China, delineates the nation's battle against the virus across five distinct stages: (1) a prompt response to the public health crisis spanning from December 27, 2019 to January 19, 2020; (2) initial strides in curbing the virus from January 20, 2020 to February 20, 2020; (3) a notable reduction in newly confirmed cases on the Chinese mainland to single digits from February 21, 2020, to March 17, 2020; (4) an initial triumph in a pivotal fighting in Wuhan and Hubei from March 18, 2020, to April 28, 2020; (5) continuous efforts in prevention and control from April 29, 2020 onward (The State Council Information Office of China 2020). Since April 29, 2020, the situation of COVID-19 in China has experienced fluctuations. Nevertheless, the overall situation remains manageable. The frequent mutations of the virus make it more infectious but less virulent (Wang et al. 2021). Considering factors including the development of the pandemic, the increase in vaccination rate, and the virus's negative effects on social development, from January 8, 2023, China began to downgrade COVID-19 as a Category B disease, a less virulent one. This adjustment means a gradual easing of China's stringent pandemic restrictions.

Based on the stage division above, to prevent an excessively detailed division that might obscure discursive changes over time, this research opts for a three-stage division: (1) the development stage, spanning from the first reported COVID-19 case on December 27, 2019, to the day preceding the Wuhan lockdown on January 22, 2020; (2) the blocking stage, encompassing the period from Wuhan's lockdown on January 23, 2020 until the day preceding Wuhan's initial triumph over COVID-19 on April 27, 2020; (3) the normalization stage, extending from Wuhan's initial victory on April 28, 2020 to the downgrade of COVID-19 as a Category B disease on January 8, 2023.

2.2 COVID-19 in China in the U.S. Media

There is a growing body of literature that investigates the U.S. media's representation of China's COVID-19 response. Ample research findings support the view that the U.S. media is inclined to take a negative or even hostile attitude when depicting COVID-19 in China (Alshahrani 2021, Chung et al. 2021, Ju et al. 2023, Zhang 2023, Zhang and Trifiro 2022). The research content involves negative reports of China in spreading COVID-19, the persuasive use of evidentiality in the coverage of China-related pandemic by the U.S. media, and multiplatform partisan framing in the U.S. news coverage about China in the COVID-19 pandemic and so forth.

A key question in studies on the coverage of COVID-19 in China by the U.S. media is how they represent and justify their portrayals. In a study by Jaworsky and Qiaoan (2021), a chronological analysis of the narrative battle between China and the U.S. over COVID-19 demonstrated the politics of blaming. In the narration from the U.S. side, China was blamed for the global pandemic, the sentiment of which was intensified through highlighting China's threat, such as China as a "dangerous juggernaut" and the "real sick man of Asia". In addition to the discursive strategy of blaming, Jia and Lu (2021) also identified the strategies of naming, shaming and taming adopted by the U.S. media, aiming to seize the pandemic in China as an opportunity to serve the "American First" doctrine and arrest China's ascendancy at the same time. Beyond that representation at the macro level, the U.S. media's framing also extends to the micro level. Ju et al. (2023) analyzed the U.S. media's coverage of Chinese COVID-19 vaccine. The study found that *The New York Times* favors conflict and skepticism frames, finally constructing the discourse of "diplomatic tool" and "competition", thereby shaping a selfish and competitive image of China.

The existing studies have provided insights into the discursive strategies adopted by the U.S. media to represent COVID-19 in China from multiple perspectives, which helps us understand the legitimization process of COVID-

19 discourse. However, our comprehension still has its limits. The above studies only provide short-termed or fragmented understanding, limited to a few months. Since COVID-19 in China experiences a dynamic process of development with different features at different stages, the question of how the U.S. media represent the entire development of COVID-19 in China and consistently legitimize their framing over time remains to be explored. Tracing discursive strategies to understand the U.S. media's diachronic representation contributes to the comprehensive picture in our mind and further expounds its implications.

2.3 The Discourse-Historical Approach

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), delineated by Ruth Wodak and scholars affiliated with the Vienna School of discourse analysis (Wodak 2001, Wodak et al. 2009), constitutes a prominent facet of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). Consistent with other approaches in CDS, DHA perceives discourse (written or spoken language in use) as a form of social practice (Fairclough 1992, 1995, Wodak 1996) and mainly examines how various discourses are socially constructed to serve dominant interests (Richardson and Wodak 2009). This study provides insights into how China-related COVID-19 discourse is socially constituted by the U.S. mainstream media to maintain the dominant interests of America.

Reisigl and Wodak (2001) propose that the Discourse-Historical Approach to discourse analysis is three-dimensional: (1) identify the specific themes of a particular discourse; (2) investigate the discursive strategies employed within the discourse; (3) examine the linguistic means (as types) and context-dependent linguistic realizations (as tokens). In more detail, linguistic means refer to general types of linguistic strategies used in discourse, like metaphors, hedging or syntactic structures. Conversely, linguistic realizations denote the specific examples of certain linguistic means as they appear in actual discourse. Discursive strategies are primarily classified into five categories: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification or mitigation (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). Nomination involves the act of naming social actors or objects and defining an in-group or out-group membership. Predication seeks to attribute specific characteristics to social actors or objects, whether they are positive or negative. Argumentation refers to how "content-related warrants" are developed to bridge arguments and conclusions in a specific manner and justify the conclusion (Richardson and Wodak 2009, p. 255). These three strategies are usually used in conjunction with perspectivization, and intensification or mitigation. Perspectivization explores the perspective through which the views are expressed. Intensification involves techniques that intensify the importance, severity or impact of a particular phenomenon or argument while mitigation entails strategies that downplay, soften, or minimize the significance or consequences of certain events or arguments (Reisigl and Wodak 2009).

Among the five discursive strategies, argumentation is the central focus of examination in this study, since other strategies are usually integrated into argumentation and subordinated under the persuasive aims of the texts (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). Legitimization routinely relies on recurring argumentation schemes to persuade the public of the acceptability or necessity of a certain action or policy (Wodak 2021). In the analysis of argumentation, three basic elements are investigated: argument, conclusion rule, and claim (Reisigl 2014, p. 75). To be specific, an argument is a series of statements intended to justify a particular position or viewpoint; a conclusion rule specifies the criteria that determine whether a claim is accepted or rejected within a particular discourse context; a claim is a statement asserted as true or valid within an argument, representing the main position that the speaker seeks to establish or defend. A compelling argumentation is constructed by integrating these three elements. Claims serve as the central assertions that the argument aims to establish, supported by statements which provide

evidence and reasoning. Conclusion rules, also referred to as topoi, define the criteria for evaluating the validity of the argument within a particular discourse context (Wodak 2015).

3. Data and Method

The present study is a component of a larger research project designed to examine the evolving portrayal of COVID-19 in China in the U.S. media through a mixed research approach combining both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. In the project, we constructed a specialized corpus consisting of news articles on COVID-19 in China from the U.S. mainstream newspapers. LexisNexis, an online database, was employed to gather China-related news articles from *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. These newspapers hold significant authority and influence in America. Regarding political biases, *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* are classified as Lean Left, while *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* are rated as Lean Right (AllSides 2022). Consequently, the gathered texts cover diverse viewpoints and ideologies prevalent in America. The search term “China’s or Chinese and COVID-19 or corona virus disease or pandemic or epidemic” was utilized to ensure the inclusion of texts relevant to the topic. After text clean-up, the constructed corpus comprises 26,127 types and 359,443 tokens. Based on the aforementioned three-stage division, this corpus was further divided into three sub-corpora: Development Stage Corpus, Blocking Stage Corpus, and Normalization Stage Corpus. These three sub-corpora comprise 20 texts, 99 texts, and 152 texts respectively.

The research project mentioned above consists of two phases of studies. The first study (Liu and Bakar 2024) examined the frequency and salience of discourse surrounding COVID-19 in China within the U.S. media employing quantitative analytical methods in corpus linguistics. The current study is the second one, centering on the qualitative analysis of discursive strategies and their legitimization in the U.S. media’s representation of China’s COVID-19 response. The data for this study comprise the down-sampled texts derived from the three sub-corpora, selected through their keyword lists in the quantitative analysis. Keywords, the terms that exhibit statistical significance within a given corpus when compared against another corpus, provide insights into the specific linguistic patterns and themes in a particular body of text (Baker and Ellece 2010). Consequently, the technique of keywords helps to remove researcher bias and pave the way for more complex analyses of linguistic phenomena (Baker 2004). For qualitative analysis, based on the three lists of keywords generated by frequency, we selected 10 news reports from each of the three sub-corpora, totaling 30 texts. Each text within this selection contains one of the top five keywords with the highest keyness specific to its respective sub-corpus. This approach ensures the representativeness of the data and mitigates the risk of intentional “cherry-picking” (Baker and Levon 2015) to prove a preconceived idea.

The three sets of texts, symbolizing three development stages of COVID-19 in China, are intended to undergo the examination concerning their discursive themes, discursive strategies, and linguistic means, respectively. First, three sets of texts are examined through the coding method to identify their discursive themes. More precisely, inductive coding is adopted for its capacity to offer a complete and unbiased understanding of the data (Creswell and Creswell 2017) and discovery of subtle themes (Charmaz 2006). This qualitative analysis focuses on uncovering emergent themes for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted narratives surrounding China’s response to COVID-19 in the U.S. media. This process is also beneficial for identifying the segments that contain discursive strategies. Second, the study identifies and analyzes the discursive strategies used by the U.S. media to depict COVID-19 in China in each development stage. Third, special attention is dedicated to the strategy of

argumentation as the legitimization of COVID-19 discourse is largely reliant on it. Different types of topoi and linguistic means of expression are examined to clarify the legitimization process from arguments to claims. Topoi (plural form of “topos”, the Greek word for “place” or “topic”) refer to common themes or argumentative strategies used in discourse. They are conclusion rules justifying the transition from the arguments to the conclusion, the claim (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). Numerous types of topoi can be identified within the discourse examined in this study, such as topos of authority, topos of numbers, and topos of responsibility.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Theme Identification of Texts in the Different Stages

By inductively coding the three sets of texts, we identified the prominent themes across the three stages. For a clear presentation, we have consolidated the three groups of themes into the following Table 1.

Table 1. Prominent Themes in the Three Stages

Three Development Stages	Prominent Themes
The development stage	(1) Virus identification and outbreak (2) Public concern and fears (3) Human-to-human transmission (4) China's response and challenges (5) Global impact and response
The blocking stage	(1) COVID-19 threat (2) China's containment strategies (3) China's global image (4) Criticism to China (5) Wuhan lockdown
The normalization stage	(1) Economic downturn (2) Lockdown concerns (3) Zero-COVID policy (4) Lab-leak theory (5) COVID-19 vaccination

The above three thematic groups collectively depict China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic across health, socio-political, and economic dimensions. However, each set of themes has its distinctive focus. Grasping these themes aids in comprehending the roles of discursive strategies and their legitimization processes.

4.2 Discursive Strategies and Legitimization in the Development Stage

Three salient discursive strategies were identified in the development stage, including nomination, predication, and argumentation. Nomination strategy answers the question of how persons or objects are linguistically named and referenced (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). At the development stage before the official name was designated to the new virus, numerous names emerged, such as the deadly virus, mysterious new virus, mysterious virus, and Wuhan virus. The first three names are in accordance with the cognition degree of the virus at that time. However, scrutiny is required for the name “Wuhan virus” due to its derogatory connotations.

4.2.1 Nomination

Excerpt 1

The new **Wuhan virus** appears milder, though some people have been severely ill and there have been a small number of deaths. (Source: *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2020)

In terms of “Wuhan virus”, the qualifier “Wuhan” functions as an adjective to modify the virus. This naming method assumes that the virus was first identified in Wuhan, aiming to legitimize the use of this name as both comprehensible and logical. However, this legitimization is untenable. Historically, the names of viruses often do not derive from the locations where the viruses were first reported. For example, when the first HIV/AIDS cases emerged in the United States, the virus was not designated as the U.S. virus. Consequently, labeling the virus as “Wuhan virus” violates the official recommendation made by the World Health Organization (WHO), which discourages the inclusion of geographic locations, such as cities, countries, or regions in disease names (World Health Organization 2015). Moreover, although the official name, COVID-19, was not announced until February 11, 2020 by the WHO, there is no justification for referring to it as the “Wuhan virus”. Also, even after the recommended official name was introduced, “Wuhan virus” continued to be favored by American government and some U.S. media outlets (Hudson and Mekhennet 2020, Vazquez 2020). As such, the continued use of this term is intentional and discriminatory (Su et al. 2020).

4.2.2 Predication

Various devices, such as metaphor, apposition, explicit predicates, and relative clauses, were employed to implement the predication strategy. While certain positive representations are recognized, the negative tone still dominates the discursive characterization of COVID-19 in China.

1) *Metaphor*

Excerpt 2

“I hope this pathogen is a less harmful one so it would suggest either that the source of the virus,” he (a Hong Kong expert in public health) said. “It would be a **nightmare** for all of us.” (Source: *The New York Times*, January 6, 2020)

“If you cannot find the source and control the source of the virus, you **cannot extinguish the fire**,” said David Hui, the director of the Stanley Ho Center for Emerging Infectious Disease at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. (Source: *The New York Times*, January 19, 2020)

The device of metaphor is utilized in the two examples presented in excerpt 2. Metaphors help convey abstract or complex concepts by relating them to more familiar experiences, facilitating a deeper and more intuitive understanding (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In the first example, the virus is figuratively compared to a nightmare which means a horrible and intimidating dream. This metaphor conveys the potential severity or negative consequence of the virus. The term “nightmare” suggests that if the virus turns out to be harmful, it would be a distressing and challenging scenario, like a nightmare. While this metaphor invokes a general apprehension surrounding the outbreak, it also carries subtle implications of fear and uncertainty, particularly in the context of

China's role as the epicenter of the outbreak.

The second example contains a “fire metaphor”. The word “fire” is used metaphorically to represent the spread and threat of the virus. The metaphor implies that, if you cannot find and control the virus's source, it will continue to spread and cause harm, akin to an uncontrolled fire leading to heavy losses if not promptly extinguished. In the broader socio-political context, the negative connotation of this metaphor with China is also prominent. It seems to construct a discursive link that since the new virus was first identified in China, it is incumbent on China to find and control its source. Otherwise, China would be seen as accountable for the uncontrollable spread and resulting losses.

2) *Explicit predicates, apposition, and relative clauses*

Excerpt 3

Wuhan **has all the ingredients for a coronavirus outbreak, ... a big, densely populated city with live animal markets where people and possibly infected pigs, bats, or other mammal mingles.** (Source: *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2020)

Excerpt 4

Health authorities around the region **have responded quickly.** ... But more recently, the government **appeared to be moving more quickly to disclose information about new cases in a sign that it has learned its lesson from SARS.** (Source: *The New York Times*, January 6, 2020)

The Chinese government, **which has been praised by the W.H.O. for its efforts so far,** has said it took time to analyze the coronavirus. (Source: *The New York Times*, January 21, 2020)

There is a stark difference in discursive meanings constructed in the excerpts 3 and 4, despite both using a predication strategy. First, in excerpt 3, the explicit predicate “has all the ingredients for a coronavirus outbreak” acts as an assertive statement, claiming Wuhan possesses the necessary elements for a coronavirus outbreak. This claim is further legitimized by the apposition by offering the characteristics (a densely populated city) of Wuhan that contribute to the outbreak and specifying the potential sources of the virus (live animal markets). Consequently, negative discursive meanings were established, highlighting the blame on China and its responsibility for the epidemic outbreak.

In contrast, excerpt 4 generated positive meanings, commending China for its quick response and timely news updates. The explicit predicates “responded quickly” and “moving more quickly to disclose information” contribute to legitimizing the positive portrayal of China's responsiveness. The relative clause “in a sign that it has learned its lesson from SARS” implies a lesson from an experience (SARS) and suggests a proactive approach by the Chinese government to improve its responsive actions. In addition, the relative clause “which has been praised by the W.H.O. for its efforts so far” not only reinforces the positive image of China in combating the virus but also connects China's efforts with the endorsement from a credible source (the WHO).

4.2.3 Argumentation

The prominent topoi in the argumentation strategy identified during the development stage are topos of numbers, topos of history, and topos of responsibility.

1) *Topos of numbers*

Excerpt 5

... the number of people killed by the outbreak had increased to **nine** and the number of cases had reached **440** since illness from coronavirus were reported in December.

In addition to those in Wuhan, **five** people in Beijing, **two** in Shanghai, and **14** in the southern province of Guangdong have been diagnosed with the new virus. (Source: *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2020)

Excerpt 5 provides statistical details, indicating the increased number of deaths (9), total confirmed cases (440) in Wuhan, and diagnosed cases (5, 2 and 14) in other cities after the initial report of the novel virus. These numbers serve as evidence to support the argument that the coronavirus outbreak is a threatening and spreading health crisis. According to Wodak (2017, p. 33), "If the numbers prove a specific claim, a specific action should be taken or not carried out." Therefore, the argument leads to the conclusion that targeted measures must be taken to address the identified threat posed by the coronavirus, as is evidenced by the provided numerical data. This also elucidates the rationale behind China's timely and strict containment measures (Liu et al. 2020).

2) *Topos of history*

Excerpt 6

Local officials have pledged to handle the outbreak with transparency. But the memory of how China initially covered up the extent of a deadly **SARS outbreak** that infected more than 8,000 people in 2002 and 2003 has not completely faded. (Source: *The New York Times*, January 20, 2020)

The topos of history connects SARS with COVID-19 as both are attributed to the coronaviruses, SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2 respectively. The mention of how China initially covered up the extent of the SARS outbreak sets the stage for the historical argument. The historical reference to the SARS outbreak acts as evidence to support the argument that, similar to the response during the SARS outbreak, concerns arise regarding the current officials' pledge for transparency in addressing COVID-19. Given the historical context, there are doubts about the transparency in combating COVID-19, and it's essential to undertake actions in line with historical lessons to fulfill the pledge for transparency. This echoes America's persistent call for increased transparency in investigating COVID-19 and its origin (Hagström and Gustafsson 2021).

3) *Topos of responsibility*

Excerpt 7

President Xi Jinping said in his first public statement on the crisis. "Party committees, governments, and relevant departments at all levels **should put people's lives and health first.**" (Source: *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2020)

Topos of responsibility is introduced through President Xi's statement. The emphasis on putting people's lives and health first establishes the argument that the responsibility of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is to prioritize people's well-being. This commitment embodies the motto of "serving the people wholeheartedly" and

the “people-oriented” thought (Song and Zhang 2023). To fulfill the responsibility, the CPC should take measures at all levels to address the crisis and protect the safety of the population. The tangible deeds such as virus identification, lockdown measures, and vaccine development in the different stages of COVID-19 exemplify the commitment of the CPC.

4.3 Discursive Strategies and Legitimization in the Blocking Stage

Similar to the development stage, the predication strategy and topos of numbers in the argumentation strategy are also employed in the blocking stage. The analysis of predication strategy reveals both China's effective containment measures, lauded by the WHO, and criticisms directed at China for delays in publicizing information. Topos of numbers confirms the efficacy of a stringent lockdown by presenting numerical data. In contrast, the blocking stage prominently features the perspectivization strategy, along with the topoi of burdening, finance, and humanitarianism in the argumentation strategy.

4.3.1 Perspectivization

Excerpt 8

“Right now, the strategic and tactical approach in China is the correct one,” **Dr. Micheal Ryan, the WHO's chief of emergency response, said on Tuesday.**

China's lockdown has slowed the spread of the virus from its epicenter, ... **WHO officials said.** (Source: *The New York Times*, February 18, 2020)

The perspectivization strategy is prominent in excerpt 8. The direct speech, quoting the exact words of Dr. Micheal Ryan, reinforces the authority and credibility of the statement that China's lockdown strategy is the correct choice. This serves as a beneficial factor for China in earning recognition and praise from the international community. The exceptional Chinese system of governance at the outset of the lockdown received widespread praise, and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus also lauded the Chinese government's COVID-19 response, describing it as “setting a new standard for outbreak response” (Tyler and Liu 2020). By contrast, the indirect speech in the second sentence attributes the statement to a more generalized source, “WHO officials”, lacking specific names and exact words. This mitigates the statement's authority and results in reduced credibility compared to direct speech. Hence, the varied degree of authority and credibility in the U.S. media's representation is identified, influencing the varied attitudes to China's response.

4.3.2 Argumentation

1) *Topos of threat*

Excerpt 9

The virus that has crippled China for more than one month now **threatens to become a pandemic** that could touch virtually every part of the globe. (Source: *The New York Times*, February 24, 2020)

Excerpt 9 begins with identifying the threat that the virus has tortured China for more than one month. The word “crippled” underscores the gravity of the situation, framing it as a severe threat. In addition, words like “threaten” and “pandemic” further amplify the perceived danger, indicating the potential for the threat to escalate on a global scale. Topos of threat inherently implies the need for actions to reduce or mitigate certain threat (Wodak 2017). Therefore, the topos of threat leads to the conclusion that China should establish the first line of defense while urging global collaboration for preventive measures to address the threat. Indeed, the measures implemented by China, such as early reporting, situation monitoring, large-scale surveillance, and the preparation or donation of medical supplies, demonstrated China’s effective epidemic preparedness and management (Altakarli 2020).

2) *Topos of finance*

Excerpt 10

The **economic cost** of the outbreak, which has **paralyzed China**, the world’s second-largest economy, also **continues to grow**. (Source: *The New York Times*, February 18, 2020)

The excerpt initially illustrates the economic cost resulting from the outbreak. Depicting China as “paralyzed” stresses the magnitude of the economic toll, and noting China’s standing as the second-largest economy in the world highlights its global influence. The predicate “continues to grow” in the statement suggests that the economic cost is still escalating, heightening concerns regarding its negative effects on economic development. This worrisome situation legitimizes the necessity to mitigate the economic downturns posed by the outbreak. This aligns with the rationale of the topos of finance, which advocates for taking measures to improve the situation incurring excessive costs (Wodak 2017). On the other hand, this topos negates China’s mitigation measures at the cost of economic development and urges China to make a change.

3) *Topos of humanitarianism*

Excerpt 11

“This is almost a **humanitarian disaster**, because there are not sufficient medical supplies,” said Willy Wo-Lap Lam, an adjunct professor at the Center for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. “**The Wuhan people seem to be left high and dry by themselves.**” (Source: *The New York Times*, February 6, 2020)

This excerpt creates an atmosphere of inhumanity by quoting the words of a professor from Hong Kong while intensifying its legitimacy. The statement begins by framing the situation in Wuhan as “almost a humanitarian disaster”, setting the critical tone for the discourse. The “humanitarian disaster” is characterized by the insufficiency of medical supplies, exacerbating the severity of the situation. In addition, the act of leaving people “high and dry” is not aligned with human rights and humanitarian values, but the term “seem” lessens the validity of this statement. Similar to the topos of finance in excerpt 10, the topos of humanitarianism seeks to reject the stringent lockdown in Wuhan at the expense of human rights and calls on China to discontinue it. However, the effectiveness of Wuhan lockdown in curbing COVID-19 spread and safeguarding lives is obvious, as endorsed by the WHO. Additionally, one previous study has indicated that the Chinese public believed Wuhan lockdown did not conflict with humanitarianism (Chen et al. 2020).

4.4 Discursive Strategies and Legitimization in the Normalization Stage

The U.S. media persists in employing some strategies prevalent in the preceding two stages. In particular, nomination strategy is still used to name the virus when discussing its origin; predication strategy defines America's attribution of blame to China for the spread of the disease, as well as the competition in vaccine development between China and America; topos of numbers and topos of finance within argumentation strategy continue to justify the pandemic development and the detrimental impact of containment measures on China's economy. Furthermore, intensification or mitigation strategy, topos of usefulness, topos of disadvantage, and topos of authority emerge as distinctive features in the normalization stage.

4.4.1 Intensification or Mitigation

Excerpt 12

Nevertheless, significant circumstantial evidence raises serious concerns that the COVID-19 outbreak **may** have been a leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. (Source: *The Washington Times*, July 21, 2021)

What's missing from all this reexamination is a fundamental fact: There is no evidence -- **not a smidgen** -- for the claim that COVID-19 originated in a laboratory in China or anywhere else, or that the China lab ever had the virus in its inventory. (Source: *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2021)

Both of these examples focus on the discussion of the virus's origin. The first one describes a statement with an internal contradiction. The phrase "significant circumstantial evidence" implies strong evidence for the concern with the virus leak. However, the use of the modal word "may" suggests a possibility rather than a definitive assertion, significantly mitigating the reliability of the claim. The second example begins with an appositive clause that carries an assertive tone, indicating no evidence of the virus's origin from a Chinese laboratory. The emphatic phrase "not a smidgen" contributes to intensification by emphasizing the lack of any supporting evidence. In a word, the use of both mitigation and intensification heightens the illocutionary force of rejecting the "laboratory leak theory". Even the U.S. intelligence community acknowledged the absence of evidence supporting this theory, affirming it as a mere possibility (Looi 2023).

4.4.2 Argumentation

1) *Topos of usefulness*

Excerpt 13

Experts on a World Health Organization advisory panel recently said they had seen data from Chinese companies Sinopharm and Sinovac that **their vaccines met WHO requirement of 50% and full safety**. (Source: *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 2021)

The topos of usefulness can be identified by referencing that the WHO evaluates the data from two Chinese biopharmaceutical companies regarding the efficacy of their vaccines. The WHO, a globally recognized authority in health, declared that the vaccines produced by Sinopharm and Sinova met its criteria of 50% efficacy and ensured

complete safety. This assessment and positive comment underscore the usefulness of the Chinese vaccines. Following the principle of topos of usefulness, it suggests that if an action proves useful from a specific relevant point of view, then it should be undertaken (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Therefore, it is advisable for China to manufacture and distribute vaccines, joining the global efforts to mitigate this widespread health crisis. Actually, Chinese vaccines are internationally acknowledged, with numerous countries including them among the recommended options (Lee 2021). However, America often characterizes China's action as "vaccine diplomacy", criticizing China for leveraging vaccines to enhance its stature and influence on the global stage (Flint 2021).

2) *Topos of disadvantage*

Excerpt 14

One concern driving zero-Covid policies has been fears that **a severe outbreak could cause widespread deaths among the elderly**, who are less likely to be vaccinated. (Source: *The Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2022)

Excerpt 14 explains one of the reasons for China to embrace zero-Covid policies. The topos of disadvantage is evident in the fear that a severe outbreak might result in widespread fatalities among the elderly. Compared with other people, the elderly population is at a potential disadvantage which is further emphasized by noting that the elderly are less likely to be vaccinated, suggesting increased vulnerability. Therefore, the legitimacy for the necessity of implementing zero-Covid policies is established. Indeed, many countries, including South Korea, Vietnam, and Australia, have previously implemented the zero-Covid strategy (Zhan et al. 2023), aiming to achieve effective control of limited cases and zero transmission (Skegg and Hill 2021). However, China extended the duration of this strategy for the sake of public safety, in contrast to numerous countries gradually shifting towards a "living with COVID-19" policy (Wu 2023).

3) *Topos of authority*

Excerpt 15

Their (18 eminent experts) letter was directed to **the World Health Organization, which in April labeled the laboratory origin of COVID-19 "extremely unlikely."** (Source: *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2022)

Similar to excerpt 12, excerpt 15 also discusses the origin of COVID-19. Differently, the topos of authority is prominent in this excerpt. This topos suggests that "if one refers to somebody in a position of authority, then the action is legitimate" (Wodak 2009, p. 44). The WHO, a widely acknowledged international health authority, labeled the laboratory origin of COVID-19 as "extremely unlikely", with the adverb "extremely" intensifying the strength of this assertion. Hence, the conclusion that the coronavirus is unlikely to originate from the Wuhan laboratory establishes its legitimacy. Despite the endorsement of this statement by the WHO, the American government still advocates for the "Wuhan laboratory leak theory" (Barker and Chen 2022) and also criticizes the WHO for standing with China. This action not only undermines the WHO's authority but also incurs China's counterattack, finally sparking a "war of words" (Tyler and Liu 2020).

5. Conclusion

With Wodak's DHA as a guiding framework, this study revealed that the U.S. media selected all five discursive strategies to characterize COVID-19 in China during its entire development process. Among them, predication and argumentation emerge as the most prevalent, adopted across the three stages. This is logical given their respective advantage of discursive construction: "discursive qualification" (evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits) and "justification" (the process of providing evidence to support certain claims) (Reisigl and Wodak 2009, p. 33). In addition, we also identified the prominent strategies exclusive to one particular stage, such as perspectivization in the second stage and intensification in the third stage. All these discursive strategies, whether shared or unique to a particular stage, work collectively to legitimize the U.S. media's framing of China's COVID-19 response over time.

The dominant negative tone observed throughout the three stages in the U.S. media's representation is in accordance with the conclusions drawn in earlier studies (Alshahrani 2021, Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2020, Jia and Lu 2021, Ju et al. 2023). However, an interesting finding is that unlike previous stereotypes, some negative frames are directed at the virus or pandemic itself rather than China, the country. This is not as negative as we would have expected. In addition to this, this study also offers the following distinct contributions. First, it expands our understanding of the discursive strategies utilized by the U.S. media, surpassing the predominant focus on strategies such as naming, shaming, blaming, and taming in earlier studies (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2020, Jia and Lu 2021). Second, examining discursive strategies from a diachronic perspective sketches a holistic picture of how the U.S. media consistently portrayed and legitimized China's response to COVID-19. Third, our study uncovers a number of positive portrayals, notably highlighting China's swift responses, the effectiveness of lockdown measures, and the efficacy of Chinese vaccines. These positive findings, diverging from earlier research (Ju et al. 2023, Zhang 2023), offer a promising avenue to potentially reconcile the narrative conflict between the United States and China regarding COVID-19.

For future research, employing a corpus-based quantitative method or multi-modal analytical method could yield deeper triangulated findings. In addition, a study on how China used discursive strategies to legitimate its representation of COVID-19 in America throughout its entire development process will be valuable for understanding the mutual discursive construction between China and America. This would be more advantageous for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between the two countries.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary