

Strategies for Optimizing the International Discourse System Tailored to China's Modernization—A Study Based on COVID-19 and Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: *With China getting closer to the center of the world stage, it is more important and urgent to build a Chinese-style modern international discourse system. Based on the three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) by Fairclough and using the corpus method, this study collected reports from December 27, 2019 to March 12, 2024. With the help of the corpus tool AntConc, this study analyzes the use of high-frequency words and modal words in reports as well as the Chinese image constructed in reports. Through comparative analysis, this study advocates for the establishment of a differentiated, multidimensional, and diversified international discourse system, so as to better tell China's stories, make China's voice heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable.*

Keywords: COVID-19 epidemic; The Chinese story; Corpus; Critical discourse analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is urgent that China accelerate the development of China's discourse and narrative systems, better tell China's stories, make China's voice heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government has taken a series of anti-epidemic measures. These measures have not only curbed the development of the pandemic to the greatest extent but also adjusted the anti-epidemic guidelines in a timely manner according to the latest situation of the pandemic. They have won the understanding and support of the people and drawn wide attention from the international community. Many countries have expressed their appreciation for China's high efficiency and flexibility in handling the pandemic, while some countries have taken the opportunity to distort China. Media serve as critical conduits for the construction and projection of national image. Analyzing the characteristics of Western media coverage of COVID-19-related issues concerning China, alongside the ideological implications underpinning such reporting, holds substantial significance for China's international communication and image-building efforts. This study employs a self-compiled corpus and conducts a comparative analysis of reports from three mainstream domestic and international media outlets spanning the period from December 27, 2019, to March 12, 2024. By utilizing pandemic control as a lens, the research examines the shifts in focal points within mainstream media coverage of China before and after the pandemic. The identification and analysis of such differences contribute to the advancement of China's international discourse systems tailored to China's modernization.

2. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL ANALYTICAL MODEL

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views discourse as a multidimensional, multimodal, and multifunctional phenomenon. It systematically examines discourse from linguistic, intertextual, historical, social, and situational contexts (Liu et al., 2016). CDA encompasses various analytical orientations and methodologies, including Roger Fowler's Critical Linguistics, Fairclough's Social Cultural Analysis, Van Dijk's Social Cognition Analysis, and Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach. Among these, Fairclough's Social Cultural Analysis is considered the most comprehensive and systematic approach to critical discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005).

Fairclough proposes that discourse consists of a three-dimensional unity of text, discourse practice, and social practice. The framework for analysis is structured around three key components: descriptive, interpretive, and

explanatory. Descriptive analysis focuses on the linguistic features of the text; interpretive analysis explores the relationship between the text and discourse practice; and explanatory analysis reveals the deep connections between discourse practice, social context, and ideology (Fairclough, 2010: 27-45). This framework aims to uncover the social construction of discourse, systematically studying social issues from micro, meso, and macro perspectives.

CDA emphasizes critique and social significance, with the primary objective of revealing underlying ideologies and power relations (Xu Zhongyi, 2020: 20). Although scholars such as Widdowson (1995) and Stubbs (2002) have questioned its objectivity and quantifiability, Fairclough's framework remains widely applied in fields such as political news discourse. By analyzing "what is said," "how it is said," and "why it is said," it effectively explores the interaction between discourse bias and ideology. This study combines Fairclough's three-dimensional model with corpus-based methods to analyze the coverage of China's COVID-19-related reporting by mainstream media both domestically and internationally. The aim is to uncover the ideological characteristics embedded within the media discourse.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Corpus

This study utilizes the Factiva database, with "China" as the search term, to retrieve pertinent reports. Articles from *China Daily*, *The Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* were selected, covering the period from December 27, 2019, to March 12, 2024. The selected reports predominantly address the themes of the "COVID-19 pandemic" and "epidemic outbreaks." After de-duplication, relevant texts were extracted, while those with marginal relevance to the subject matter, despite containing related themes, were excluded. A specialized corpus was subsequently constructed (see Table 1). The compiled corpus is thematically consistent, spans a uniform time frame, and is sufficiently substantial to facilitate robust comparative analysis within the scope of this study.

Table 1: Corpus Information

Source	Number of Articles	Type Count
<i>China Daily</i>	6905	5532097
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	5231	5626062
<i>The Times</i>	1529	1228923
Total	13665	12387082

3.2 Research Methodology

Firstly, this study employs AntConc 4.2.4 as the analytical tool, focusing on high-frequency content words and modal verbs. The study design uses December 7, 2022 (the date the "10 New Measures" for pandemic control were introduced) as the time node to categorize the reporting content of the three mainstream media outlets and perform descriptive analysis. This analysis aims to reveal the media's attitudes toward China's pandemic control measures. Additionally, a random selection of indexed words is extracted for further analysis of the image of China constructed by the three media outlets.

Secondly, based on the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study analyzes the discourse practices of the three mainstream media outlets, interpreting the processes of text generation, dissemination, and reception. This step explores the relationship between the texts and discourse practices.

Lastly, this study examines the social practices surrounding the reporting of COVID-19-related news by the three media outlets, exploring the relationship between the reports and the social-cultural context. It seeks to uncover the similarities and differences in the portrayal of China across the media outlets since the outbreak of the pandemic, along with the underlying ideological factors that influence these representations.

4. RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

High-frequency words serve as indicators of the focal issues or concerns of the discourse's subject, directly contributing to the construction of the subject's image. This study involves the analysis of the top 15 high-

frequency content words, as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Top 15 High-Frequency Words from Three Major Media Outlets (Prior to the "10 New Measures")

Rank	<i>China Daily</i>		<i>The Times</i>		<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	
	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words
1	china	49844/0.94	china	4708/0.40	china	23894/0.47
2	covid	21936/0.41	percent	4232/0.36	covid	17867/0.35
3	pandemic	16345/0.31	people	3518/0.30	people	13497/0.27
4	people	16129/0.30	covid	3456/0.29	coronavirus	12881/0.26
5	chinese	16012/0.30	coronavirus	3362/0.29	pandemic	12766/0.25
6	percent	15377/0.29	virus	2848/0.24	health	10347/0.20
7	countries	12593/0.24	pandemic	2456/0.21	virus	9440/0.19
8	global	12555/0.24	government	2240/0.19	chinese	8482/0.17
9	country	10385/0.20	health	2053/0.17	government	8127/0.16
10	health	10271/0.19	UK	1957/0.17	vaccine	7507/0.15
11	economic	9982/0.19	country	1691/0.14	company	6977/0.14
12	international	9722/0.18	global	1674/0.14	country	6674/0.13
13	development	9515/0.18	lockdown	1646/0.14	countries	6473/0.13
14	virus	9138/0.17	deaths	1564/0.13	global	6472/0.13
15	market	8255/0.16	time	1490/0.13	economy	6061/0.12

Table 3: Top 15 High-Frequency Words from Three Major Media Outlets (Following the "10 New Measures")

Rank	<i>China Daily</i>		<i>The Times</i>		<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	
	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words
1	china	3179/1.13	china	0.61/232	china	5940/0.88
2	covid	1793/0.64	covid	0.52/201	covid	4206/0.62
3	chinese	1060/0.38	percent	0.51/197	chinese	2223/0.33
4	people	959/0.34	people	0.31/119	people	1880/0.28
5	health	879/0.31	pandemic	0.27/102	pandemic	1395/0.21
6	percent	844/0.3	virus	0.24/93	government	1357/0.20
7	medical	757/0.27	government	0.21/79	beijing	1311/0.19
8	pandemic	730/0.26	chinese	0.19/73	growth	1234/0.18
9	measures	590/0.21	johnson	0.16/63	economy	1187/0.18
10	market	564/0.2	health	0.16/60	country	1175/0.17
11	country	561/2	time	0.16/60	health	1063/0.16
12	control	558/0.2	lockdown	0.14/55	shanghai	974/0.14
13	growth	544/0.19	restrictions	0.14/54	officials	918/0.14
14	global	520/0.19	country	0.14/53	global	905/0.13
15	travel	499/0.18	UK	0.13/50	economic	894/0.13

China Daily's coverage prominently reflects the themes of pandemic control and international cooperation. The persistence of terms such as Chinese, health, global, and international in both the pre- and post-"10 New Measures" periods underscores a continued emphasis on China's prioritization of public health and its commitment to global cooperation. The frequent co-occurrence of terms such as government and people demonstrates the people-centered policy orientation, which constructs an image of national unity in the fight against the pandemic.

Furthermore, the prominence of terms such as "health" and "medical" conveys the prioritization of public health in China's pandemic response. The recurrent presence of terms like "global" and "international" highlights China's proactive engagement with the international community during the pandemic. The reports emphasize the scientific rigor and coordination inherent in China's pandemic response, underscoring the balanced consideration of public welfare and economic stability.

The tone of China Daily is predominantly positive, with an emphasis on responsibility and cooperation. The

language employed reflects a commitment to collective action and mutual support, contributing to the construction of China as a peace-loving nation dedicated to global collaboration. Moreover, the recognition of the effectiveness of pandemic control measures reinforces the positive image of China's governance and administrative capabilities.

The Times primarily concentrates on the global transmission of the pandemic and its economic consequences. The frequent usage of terms such as "percent", "economic", and "market" signals a strong focus on economic metrics and market dynamics. Reports frequently reference specific economic indicators, providing a comprehensive analysis of the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Following the release of the "10 New Measures", terms like "economy", "market", and "growth" remain consistently present, reflecting sustained attention to China's economic adjustments and their global ramifications. Additionally, *The Times* places significant emphasis on the social and economic consequences of pandemic control measures, often analyzing the comparative effectiveness of governance at national and local levels.

The Wall Street Journal directs its focus on governance and policy implementation. The frequent occurrence of terms such as "government", "officials", and "authorities" highlights the continued scrutiny of policy execution and social management. Reports examine various aspects of pandemic-related policy adjustments, with particular emphasis on evaluating local governmental performance.

Before and after the introduction of the "10 New Measures", *The Wall Street Journal* maintains a steady focus on economic and governance-related topics. Terms such as economy, global, and health continue to be prevalent, reflecting an overarching interest in the pandemic's influence on global economic and social systems. The continued prominence of terms like growth and control indicates a sustained investigation into China's economic recovery process and its strategies for maintaining social stability.

4.2 Interpretive Analysis

Interpretive practice analyzes the relationship between texts and the broader social context, particularly the processes involved in the production, dissemination, and reception of discourse. In particular, the construction of news texts involves the selection of information sources, with journalists frequently drawing from various sources to construct an authoritative representation of the subject matter. By analyzing the sources cited in news reports, it is possible to identify the underlying ideological influences that shape the discourse.

4.3 Explanatory Analysis

According to Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, explanatory analysis seeks to identify the societal and cultural factors that influence the production and interpretation of discourse. This analysis requires consideration of the historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts in which the discourse is situated.

China has long adhered to a collectivist ideology, with governmental actions prioritizing the well-being of the people. Accordingly, media coverage in China typically focuses on the achievements of the government in pandemic control, using reports on positive attitudes and successful measures to bolster public confidence. These portrayals serve not only to strengthen national morale but also to highlight the perceived superiority of China's socialist governance model.

However, significant ideological and cultural differences exist between China and Western countries, particularly in terms of political systems. As a result, Western media often exhibit prejudices toward China's political system, reflecting an ideological bias in their reporting. This bias undermines their ability to provide impartial and objective coverage, thereby compromising the fairness of their representation of China.

5. THE OPTIMIZATION STRATEGY OF CHINESE MODERNIZATION INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE SYSTEM

5.1 Construct a Diversified, Multidimensional and Three-dimensional Discourse System for International Communication and Systematically Tell China's Stories Well

In the international discourse system where the West is dominant and we are in a relatively weaker position, we should take advantage of the latecomer's advantage and actively build a diversified, multidimensional and three-

dimensional discourse system for International communication. We should make full use of multiple subjects, such as government officials at all levels, democratic parties, senior intellectuals, doctors, students, workers, farmers, international students in China, Chinese students studying abroad, embassy staff, popular stars, overseas Chinese and international friends who are friendly to China. We should also make full use of a large number of vivid cases, such as the Chinese government leading the people to prevent and fight the epidemic during the pandemic and boosting the economy after the relaxation of epidemic prevention and control measures. From multiple perspectives like treating patients, mass prevention and control, children's fight against the epidemic, taking care of the elderly, medical assistance, the military's role in epidemic prevention and control and international aid, we should carefully edit them into media materials like micro-videos and pictures. Through multiple channels including central media, local media, media in Hong Kong and Macau, non-governmental media, overseas media as well as new media like TikTok, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, and in multiple languages such as English, Russian, French, German and Arabic, we should tell China's stories well, combine what we want to tell with what foreign audiences want to hear, combine "expressing emotions" with "presenting reasons", and show the world the institutional advantages of China in concentrating resources to accomplish major tasks and the feelings of the Chinese government that attaches great importance to the national economy and people's livelihood as well as the safety of people's lives and property.

5.2 Pay Attention to the Differentiation of the International Discourse System and Reflect Regional Differences in the Promotion Path

This study adopts Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis model to conduct a critical discourse analysis of China-related reports of mainstream media in China, the UK and the US in nearly five years before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The comparative study found that China Daily reports from an objective perspective, and the language of its reports generally shows a positive attitude and tendency, shaping the image of a responsible major power. Although most of the information sources cited in the news reports of The Times are relatively authoritative and authentic, on the whole, it one-sidedly focuses on the negative impacts brought by epidemic prevention and control, and the image of China it shapes does not conform to the facts. The Wall Street Journal portrays China as "arrogant and blindly self-confident with rampant bureaucracy", reflecting its obvious ideology and prejudice.

Therefore, in view of the differences in the publicity and reports of media around the world and the differences in the reports of European and American media, when constructing the International discourse system, China should pay attention to differentiation and strategies. For example, in response to the arrogance and prejudice of North American media, we should mainly refute and conduct comparative analysis, and especially attach importance to the diversified dissemination by intellectuals, ordinary people, international students in China and overseas media. For the out-of-context quotations of European media, we should focus on presenting facts and reasoning, show the facts through multiple languages and multiple perspectives, and comprehensively display China's good image. For African media, with the help of international students in China, Chinese enterprises in Africa, friends who are friendly to China and government officials of African countries, we should display China's assistance and China's epidemic prevention and control facts in multiple forms and with diverse contents, and jointly build a community with a shared future. As the saying goes, rumors stop at the wise. The differentiated International publicity paths will help improve efficiency and accuracy.

5.3 Actively Advocate the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and Establish the Image of a Responsible Major Power

With the unpredictable changes in the global medical and health environment, the variability and infectivity of germs increasing, all countries in the world are a community with a shared future in the face of the epidemic. The only way out for mankind lies in helping each other and strengthening international cooperation and coordination. In the early stage of the raging epidemic, China had already adopted strict and thorough prevention and control measures, which prevented the epidemic from spreading to other countries, reflecting the sense of responsibility and value pursuit that attached great importance to the community with a shared future for mankind. Meanwhile, China took the initiative to maintain communication and cooperation with the World Health Organization, promptly and publicly released epidemic information, strengthened the international exchange of experience in epidemic prevention and control, and promptly eliminated the fears and concerns of the outside world, winning the understanding and support of many governments and international organizations. When the prevention and control situation changed significantly, China fully absorbed the experience of other countries and adjusted the prevention and control measures flexibly and rapidly. This is both the proper attitude that the world should adopt

in the face of risks and challenges and the powerful appeal released by the consciousness of the community with a shared future for mankind advocated by China. After the relaxation of epidemic prevention and control measures, China has been committed to economic regulation, adopted various measures to boost the economy, alleviated the difficulties of enterprises and the masses, and improved people's livelihood. Black swan events represented by the COVID-19 pandemic should not become barriers to exchanges between countries, but should become catalysts for the full cooperation of countries around the world. China should continuously optimize its international discourse system, improve and broaden the publicity paths, actively advocate the community with a shared future for mankind, and establish the image of a responsible major power. Those behaviors that deliberately create estrangement will surely be spurned, and those words full of arrogance and prejudice will surely be feeble.

Finally, due to the differences in Western and Chinese cultures and perspectives, Western media often distort the image of China when shaping it. China needs to build a diversified, multidimensional and three-dimensional international discourse system of Chinese modernization with differentiation to deal with the distortion of China-related news reports by foreign media, pay attention to strengthening the foundation of international publicity work, promptly report China's real measures and respond to the false information in the international community, establish a good image of a major power, tell China's stories well to the Western world, and spread the real voice of China.

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