Contesting legitimacy in China's crisis communication: a framing analysis of reported social actors engaging in SARS and COVID-19

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Contesting legitimacy in China's crisis communication: a framing analysis of reported social actors engaging in SARS and COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The study provided a framing analysis of *China Daily* in its coverage of the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics. By understanding social actors as a particular frame element, the study introduced word-frequency-based cluster analysis as a method of corpus collection and generation for qualitative frame analysis. The study identified four main social actor groups and 14 news frames during the two pandemics. The discursive centrality of the Chinese government among other social actors from *China Daily* and the persistent positive portrait of the government's institutional performance under the *responsibility-solution* frame is discussed. The results imply that China's crisis communication did not experience much change from reporting SARS to reporting COVID-19. In particular, the drop in frame diversity and the focus on information uniformity in reporting the pandemic may have limited the effectiveness of the Chinese news media in accessing international awareness and contributing to the global meaning construction of the unfolding crisis.

1. Introduction

We live in a world that has become radically interconnected, interdependent, and communicative in news journalism's complex formations and flows (Cottle, 2009). Especially when the world is encountering crises, the unpredictable and uncontrollable risks in global society are constantly shaped by the world's news media for public understanding and political response. During different health crises, we have witnessed how the symbolic and communicative power of news has been engaging the entire process to

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facilitate the public needs of information and decision making for crisis management (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Herrabin et al., 2003; Pan & Meng, 2016; Sesen et al., 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, different governments adopted different measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus and mitigate the economic consequences of the massive disturbance of normality. Domestic and international news media engaged actively to follow, support, justify, question, criticize, and halt decision making during different phases of the pandemic, with considerations of the different health systems and different social, economic, political, and cultural contexts.

By the last day of September 2021, the unprecedented world pandemic of COVID-19 caused over 233 million infected cases and took more than 4.7 million lives (WHO, 2021). With the United States and countries in Europe still struggling to maximize COVID vaccinations and control the spread of coronavirus variants, China, being the first place hit by coronavirus in December 2019, claimed its success in the rapid and effective control of the crisis one year ago, with an outstanding economy rebound (White, 2020). The WHO praised the "sustained commitment and co-operation of the Chinese government, scientific institutions, public health institutions, and communities to reach the successful outcome" (WHO, 2020). The IMF predicted an overall drop in worldwide GDP in 2020, whereas China kept its steady growth pace at 1.9% as the only major economy (IMF, 2020). However, China's successful experience has not received much recognition from the worldwide public. Especially in the West, a historic negative plunge in the perception of China was documented in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a survey from the PEW Research Center, a median of 61% of the 14 advanced economies believes that China has done a poor job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak (Silver et al., 2020). Another PEW survey in 2021 observed a slight positive change, as the median negative attitude toward how China is dealing with the outbreak dropped 10% (Silver et al., 2021). However, the overall confidence in Chinese leadership's handling of world affairs, which closely connects to COVID-19 management, remained very low at 20% (Silver et al., 2021). Such contrast between the high recognition from international organizations and the low favorability from the international public posed questions about China's outbound communication during the crisis. With Chinese media being the central apparatus for the "voice of China" to reach an international audience, it becomes necessary to evaluate how the Chinese media functioned in accessing global awareness of the country's crisis management during the pandemic. Why did they fail to empower Beijing to enhance its presence and actions in crisis control for the global audience?

To answer these questions, this study—taking *China Daily*'s reportage during SARS and COVID-19 as examples of China's outbound communication—aims to identify the prevailing and emerging news frames that Chinese news media have used during the two crises. In doing so, we access and evaluate discursive changes in China's outbound reportage on pandemics from SARS in 2003 to COVID-19 in 2020. Although the infection scale of SARS (8096 cases from 29 territories) and its impact on the world is not comparable to COVID-19, in both crises, China received worldwide attention at the first place. With China's response strategy connecting directly to the perceived acceptance of responsibility (Coombs, 2007), the engagement of Chinese media in shaping the language of crisis communication has the potential to affect people's attitudes and evaluations about Beijing's accountability and legitimacy amid crises. What's more, China's outbound communication experienced great changes between the two crises, with the nation's efforts to expand state-run media worldwide and significant material resources into disseminating the views of China (Nye, 2020). A framing comparison between the two crises will also provide insights into the changing narrative strategy from the Chinese international media in constructing the country's global image under its soft power campaign.

By accessing the particular framing element "social actors" and analyzing the most used general frames, this study questions the drop in frame diversity and overuse of positive attributes, especially when referring to the Chinese government, by *China Daily* to reach the international public during global sufferings. Despite the changes in the domestic and international environment between 2003 and 2020, the narrative strategy the Chinese state media used to shape the image of the country has not improved much in response to China's renewed efforts in public crisis management. Neither has it helped build a locally grounded but globally minded media practice (Jiang, 2017; Wu & Ng, 2011). Ultimately, the findings illustrate the limits of information uniformity rather than plurality during crisis communication and provide implications for further research on different nations' strategic communication during pandemics on a global scale.

2. Literature review

2.1. General news frames in reporting health crises

A crisis is an emergency that leads to disruption of social order and requires rapid intervention (Raboy & Dagenais, 1992). In such an event, for which people seek causes and make attributions, causal dimensions, response strategy, social expectations of stakeholders, and organizational responsibilities all became important (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Coombs (2011)

called this gathering, processing, and sharing of information necessary to cope with a situation **crisis communication**. Since people may watch media more in times of crisis to learn, explain, and interpret the changing situation (Graber, 1980), how the news media frame (define) the crisis is of importance, as most stakeholders experience and adopt the media's frame for a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Moreover, the media's tendency to fabricate or emphasize crises also became visible as "they tend to be consistent with powerful actors and interests" (Raboy & Dagenais, 1992, pp. 2–5).

According to Goffman, the first to introduce the concept of framing, frames help people use the "schemata of interpretation" to find, understand, and label information and recognize a particular event (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Other scholars extended the definition (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001), and the framing process became more widely recognized as a way to "select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Under this broader definition, five dominant general news frames were identified by scholars to be applied in different news contexts (see Hallahan, 1999; Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999): (1) attribution of responsibility frame—to describe the responsibility of a person, group, or institution in the problem or solution; (2) human interests frame—to provide an individual perspective to the presentation of a subject or problem with personal stories; (3) conflict frame—to reflect conflicts between individuals, groups, or institutions; (4) morality frame—to reveal problems or facts in the context of ethics, social rules, moral values, and religious principles; and (5) economic frame—to explain the economic situation of individuals, groups, institutions, or societies as part of the effects caused by the problem.

When it comes to health crises, news frames have been widely used to heighten or reduce the public's attention to certain issues, offering interpretations of the crisis and advising protective actions (Dudo et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2016; van Gorp, 2007). Frame diversity is particularly required with greater openness to ensure that "outbreak responses are actually working" (Leach et al., 2010, p. 375). Hallahan (1999) suggested *attribution of responsibility* as the most crucial frame during a health crisis. In Sesen et al. (2019) case study of a health crisis in Turkey in 2017, the researchers found *responsibility* frame to be the most common frame, followed, in order of prevalence, by *conflict*, *economic, human interest*, and *moral* frames. In Pan and Meng (2016) case study about the H1N1 pandemic in the United States in 2009, the researchers added the *medical* and *scientific* frames, as opinions from health professionals and medical specialists are credible sources

during health crisis management processes. Among emerging news analyses about COVID-19 from global media (Ogbodo et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2020), a few new frames—such as *politicization*, *ethnicization*, *fear/scaremongering* and *hope*—were further added in the language of covering COVID-19 (Ogbodo et al., 2020). This study considers these available general frames to measure how the Chinese news media have highlighted certain features while overlooking others when covering the two pandemics to the global audience.

2.2. Frame elements, social actors, and response strategy

Based on Entman's (1993) definition of frame elements, Matthes and Kohring (2008) designed a list of framing variables by highlighting the role of "actors" in composing news frames. In crises, and especially during pandemics, how social actors collectively define, understand, and contribute to crisis communication is especially important (Schultz & Raupp, 2010). However, only a few case studies have investigated the role played by social actors in meaning construction through news frames during pandemics (see Gerken et al., 2016; Gerken & van der Meer, 2019; Lee & Basnyat, 2013). Most of these studies solely focused on one social actor—governmental organizations, as the key holder of information and trustworthy source to respond, inform, protect, and guide the public during health crises (Gerken & van der Meer, 2019; Liu & Horsley, 2007).

There is a lack of studies linking governmental organizations' response strategies with other social actors' contributions to public health crisis framing. The stakeholder theory of crisis management suggests that stressful internal and external interactions among stakeholders can promote conflict (Pearson & Clair, 1998), and that relevance, trustworthiness, and perception of different social groups can affect the understanding of the crisis and the adoption of protective actions during the crisis (Arlikatti et al., 2007). By connecting crisis framing from Chinese media to the Chinese official response strategy, this study tries to find out how different social actors were discursively linked, if not biased, toward specific powerful stakeholders, such as the government, in the Chinese media context. Considering Chinese news media always intend to represent and disseminate a consistent official voice of the authority (Zhang et al., 2019), and *China Daily*, in particular, tends to positively report China in comparisons with Western media (Liu et al., 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2017), this paper further considers Coomb's (2006, 2007) "denial-diminish-rebuild" crisis response strategies to measure the validity of the news frames offered by *China Daily* as China's official outbound communication channel during the two health crises.

A contextual analysis of the news frames around the reported social actors from *China Daily*'s coverage of SARS and COVID-19 is offered to determine:

RQ1: Who are the main social actors in reporting the two pandemics from China Daily, and how were these actors discursively interconnected to each other?

RQ2: What identical (unchanged) and emerging new frames of "social actors" were used during the two pandemics to retain or strengthen their legitimacy?

RQ3: Has the centrality of "positive attribute" in China Daily's reportage changed overtime or has COVID-19 led to an even more homogeneous enthusiastic tendency?

RQ4: To what degree do the news frames from China Daily respond to the five dominant general frames and why has the Chinese crisis response strategy for accessing international awareness during the health crisis not been effective?

3. Data and method

3.1. Data collection

The data for this paper consisted of English-language news articles covering SARS in 2003 and COVID-19 in 2020 from all sources of China Daily available on the Factiva database.[1] China Daily was chosen because it is the first and the widest print circulation of English-language newspapers in China, and it was formed as a state-owned news outlet to communicate with the international public—especially the Western audience (Wang, 2008). As one of Beijing's representative information channels, China Daily was founded in 1981, and is formally managed by the Information Office of the State Council (China Daily, 2015). It is recognized by Chinese scholars as "the only Chinese newspaper with access to the mainstream international community" (Liu, 2006) and by international scholars as "an authoritative provider of information, analysis, content, and entertainment for global readers with a special focus on China" (Hartig, 2018, pp. 122–140).

The author applied the two-designed-week model (Riffe et al., 1993), which allows reliable estimates of local stories in a year's worth of entire newspaper issues, to generate the first-round dataset (see Table 1). The Factiva database retrieved 71 articles under the keyword search of SARS in 2003 and 205 articles with the keyword search of COVID[2] in 2020 (without duplication). The author applied the word frequency test with all the words from these 276 articles through Voyant Tools concerning the basic idea that specific words are the building blocks of frames (Entman, 1993). Prominent social actors reported during SARS and COVID-19 were identified based on the number of tokens (see Table 2).

The author then went back to the context of each identified social actor and collected the complete sentence or paragraph where the social actor was situated in the text. This generated the second-round dataset of 11 composed corpora grouped with different social actors. After running another word-frequency test of the 11 separate corpora, the author could

Table 1. Two-sampled week of 2003 related to SARS & 2020 related to COVID-19 (the numbers indicate the collected articles published by China Daily on that day).

Year	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
2003	Feb.17/0	Mar.25/2	May.21/11	April.10/13	Jan.24/0	July 26/4	June.27/28
	Oct.13/11	Nov.4/10	Sept.24/3	Oct.30/6	Dec.5/5	Aug.9/0	April.27/0
2020	Feb.17/9	Mar.10/15	May.20/30	April.09/28	Jan.24/1	July.25/14	June.28/5
	Oct.12/19	Nov.3/16	Sept.30/10	Oct.29/24	Dec.4/22	Aug.8/12	April 26/0

Note: Numbers indicate the collected articles published by *China Daily* on that day.

access the most frequent word clusters around each social actor (see Table 3). A qualitative assessment of news frames was then applied as the last step by investigating the contextual corpora.

3.2. Combining word clusters and qualitative analysis

Considering news frame as an abstract variable and an "elusive concept" that is hard to code, measure, and identify (Maher, 2001, pp. 83–94), reliability and validity have always been a big concern in the analysis of media frames (Matthes & Kohring, 2008, p. 258; Miller, 1997, p. 376). To avoid the risk of the traditional qualitative approach's inherent subjectivity due to selection bias and robustness (Coleman & Dysart, 2005; Simon, 2001, pp. 75–89) and to increase the objectivity of the identified frames, Matthes and Kohring (2008) designed a hierarchical cluster analysis of dividing the frame into separate elements before identifying the pattern frames. In this paper, the author follows this design and tries to bring the concept of word clusters into the qualitative framing analysis. On the one hand, the "bag-of-words" approach was utilized to avoid selection bias and reach certain reliability of corpus collection and generation. On the other hand, detailed qualitative analysis was applied, instead of empirical co-presence from the original cluster analysis, to subtly understand the complexity of human language (Simon, 2001, p. 87) and improve the identified frames' validity and topical coherence (Schäfer & O'Neill, 2017).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The centrality of the Chinese government as the dominant social actor

4.1.1. In terms of frequency
Based on the word frequency test of the entire text of the 276 sampled articles, four social actor groups were identified from the two datasets in 2003 and 2020 (see Table 2):

- **Government**: including Chinese government (2003 & 2020), Hong Kong government (2020), and international governments (2020).[3]

Table 2. Word frequency of social actors in SARS (2003) and COVID (2020).

2020

Word	No. of tokens	Category
People	361	People
Cases	212	Medical
Government	181	Government
Public	155	People
Country	138	Government
Patients	103	People (Medical)
Market	102	Economic
Company	94	Economic
Workers	88	People (Economic)
Research	82	Medical
Hospital	81	Medical
Experts	80	People (Medical)
Community	79	People
Organization	59	Medical
Vaccine	50	Medical
Technology/internet	45	Medical

2003

Word	No. of tokens	Category
Government	60	Government
Capital/money	59	Economic
Prices	58	Economic
Industry	52	Economic
People	50	People
Cases	45	Medical
Business	43	Economic
Disease	43	Medical
Market	43	Economic
Public	34	People
Experts	31	People (Medical)
Organization	30	Medical
Province	30	Government
Farmers	28	People (Economic)
Patients	24	People(Medical)
Minister	23	Government

- **People**: including Chinese people (2003 & 2020) and people in other countries (2020); patients, farmers, and workers, for example, were considered sub-groups.
- **Economic social actors**: including companies, industries, businesses, etc.
- **Medical social actors**: including experts, scientists, researchers, and organizations like the WHO (2003 & 2020).

Government was the most frequently appearing single actor group in 2003 and the third most frequent in 2020, primarily referring to the Chinese government in both years. People was the most frequently appearing single actor group and actor category in 2020, primarily referring to Chinese

people, with a wide variety of subgroups. Economic social actors belonged to the most important actor category in 2003, and such importance was reduced significantly in 2020. Instead, medical social actors increased in prevalence and became the second most frequently appearing actor category in 2020; technology is partially regarded as a medical social actors' group in 2020, as it primarily connects to medical fields in the contextual corpus (see Sec. 4.3).

Government also appeared as the most frequent word cluster among the other social actor groups, especially in connection to people and economic social actors in both years (see Table 3).

- A clear message about people is that they are at the core of the Chinese government's political mandate, and the nation's feeling of togetherness is vital to fight against the ruthless pandemics. For example, in the case of SARS, "use my power for the people, link my feelings to the people, and to focus my heart on the pursuit of public welfare" from then president Hu Jintao (Yan, 2003). The government support for economically-disadvantaged people during COVID-19 was constantly under spotlight regarding the free distribution of traditional Chinese medicines, temporary living allowances, and unemployment insurance (Mo, 2020). Therefore, the legitimacy of the Chinese government in directing the battle against the spread of the virus was broadly supported by the Chinese people.
- Economic social actors were mostly registered in reporting the resilience of the domestic economy during the unpredictable interruption caused by the crisis in both years. The Chinese government's support through increased investment, tax reduction, and direct financial supplies became a clear highlight in reporting on these actors. According to *China Daily*, the overall reaction of the government reflected the leaders' efficiency and capability ("Bo'ao gears up," 2003; Liu, 2020). Therefore, stable economic growth can be ensured even during the pandemic ("Chinese economy steps," 2003; Xu, 2020), and the negative effect caused by the interruption can be reduced to a minimum ("Macau Foundation plans," 2003; Chen, J. 2020).

4.1.2. In terms of forcefulness

Among the 14 issue-specific news frames identified from the contextual corpus of the study, 10 were associated with the Chinese government, and these 10 frames all portrayed the Chinese government in a positive way (see Table 4). Similar word clusters appeared from the corpus about the Chinese government during the two crises, including *control*, *measures*, *prevention*, and *efforts* (see Table 3). In this way, *China Daily* consistently

Table 3. Contextual word frequency of social actors in SARS and COVID-19.

No.1	No.2	No.3	No.4	No.5	No.6	No.7	No.8	No.9	No.10	No.11
2003-Chinese government	2020-Chinese government	2020-Hong Kong government	2020-international governments	2003-Chinese people	2020-Chinese people	2020-international people	2003-Economic actors	2020-Economic actors	2003-Medical actors	2020-Medical actors
SARS	Central	COVID	Pandemic	SARS	Chinese	Chinese	Market	Market	Experts	Research
Billion	Local	Control	Health	Chinese	Health	China	Farmers	Industry	SARS	Experts
Local	Medical	Health	People	Public	Hong Kong	Virus	Tourism	Workers	China	Vaccine
Control	Measures	Pandemic	Measures	Farmers	Wuhan	Covid	Industry	China	Chinese	Health
Central	Support	Quarantine	Medical	Hong Kong	Workers	World	China	Chinese	Research	China
Measures	Control	Cases	Chinese	Beijing	Risk	Health	Beijing	Medical	WHO	Covid
Leaders	Help	China	Lockdown	Epidemic	Epidemic	Pandemic	Chinese	Technology	Disease	Development
Disease	Financial	People	Support	Government	Help	Infected	Reforms	Government	Control	Medical
Farmers	Fiscal	City	Cases	Health	Life	Fight	Business	Financial	Medical	Chinese
Efforts	Prevention	Coronavirus	Outbreak	Cases	Medical	American	Financial	Global	Clinical	Science
Increase	Supplies	Measures	Public	Infected	Online	Medical	Government	Help	Guangdong	Public
Prevention	City	Adding	Restrictions	Million	Virus	Government	Rural	Film	Prevention	Coronavirus
Tax	Companies	Developing	Spread	Work	Government	CPC	Travel	Domestic	Respiratory	Global
Prices	Development	Economy	Work	World	Outbreak	Global	Domestic	International	Cases	World
Conference	Health	Effective	China	Business	Infection	Number	Increasing	Migrant	Medicine	Company
Reforms	Technology	Infection	Control	Guangdong	Medicine	Support	Prices	Development	Ministry	Disease
N = 137	N = 174	N = 74	N = 100	N = 100	N = 236	N = 227	N = 218	N = 581	N = 181	N = 411

Table 4. News frames from China Daily reporting SARS and COVID-19.

	Year	Generic frame	Issue-specific frame
Frame 1	2003/2020	Responsibility	Chinese government's effective control measures to combat the spread of the virus
Frame 2	2003/2020	Responsibility	Chinese government's support in the domestic economy during the two pandemics
Frame 3	2003/2020	Responsibility /human interests	Chinese people's togetherness (with the government) in the fight against SARS and COVID-19
Frame 4	2003/2020	Economic	The sustainability (and potential) of the Chinese market for domestic economy growth in the face of the disruption caused by SARS and COVID-19
Frame 5	2003/2020	Responsibility /medical science	China collaborates with WHO experts for SARS investigation and COVID-19 knowledge & experience sharing
Frame 6	2020	Responsibility	Hong Kong government's support on the disease control and local economy stability during COVID-19
Frame 7	2020	Responsibility/conflict	The protest in Hong Kong is caused by a group of Hong Kong citizens who are constantly seeking problems in government policy
Frame 8	2020	Responsibility/conflict /politicizing	International government's efforts in control the spread of COVID-19 and the insufficient measures of some Western governments (especially the United States)
Frame 9	2020	Responsibility /human interests	Chinese government's support to the vulnerable groups of Chinese people during COVID-19
Frame 10	2020	Responsibility /conflict/politicizing	International people's suffering from COVID (especially in the United States)
Frame 11	2020	Responsibility	Chinese diaspora's contribution to local community and support for China
Frame 12	2020	Responsibility/conflict /politicizing /medical science	China's progress in COVID-19 vaccine and its positive contribution to global public health
Frame 13	2020	Responsibility/conflict/economic economic/medical	China's positive contribution to the global economy recovery
Frame 14	2020	Science/technology	Technology innovations are China's driving forces in combating COVID-19

focused both the central and local government's strenuous efforts in disease control and effective prevention measures for the spread of the respective viruses during the two outbreaks (Zhang & Qin, 2003; Zhong & Zheng, 2020).

Additionally, 17 international governments[4] were reported with two primary discursive purposes in the contextual corpus in 2020: (1) praising Beijing's direct assistance and donation to evidence China's contribution to the global community (Cai, 2020; Huang, 2020); (2) serving as a foil to China's successful control. Washington was given as the bad example in comparison

to Beijing, for the US federal government "has failed it (the COVID crisis management) miserably" ("US woes of administration's own making," 2020). China's support of WHO and offering cooperation to other countries were also compared to US politicians' scorn of WHO and economic sanctions on Iran and Venezuela (Chen, 2020a; "The opposition in HK," 2020).

From 2003 to 2020, the positive portrayal of the Chinese government extended from a responsible national administration within its border to a responsible institutional power demonstrating "a community of health for humankind" with people from all over the world (Chen, 2020b). Such discursive change of *China Daily* not only responds to the Chinese president Xi Jinping's renewable guideline of community with shared future for humankind, which was included in the preamble of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China in 2018, but also corresponds to the nation's growing enthusiasm for becoming a responsible great power amid the geopolitical developments in recent years. Additional evidence can be found of this homogenous enthusiastic tendency:

- During SARS in 2003, China passively received WHO investigation, and the favorable response from the WHO was used as international evidence to support the claims from the Chinese government that the contagious disease had been brought under control ("WHO optimistic about atypical pneumonia research," 2003). In contrast, during COVID-19 in 2020, Beijing actively enabled WHO experts to understand the pandemic situation and control measures being implemented in Chinese society (Wang, 2020), so that China's experience could support the global fight against the virus.
- During SARS in 2003, the Chinese economy had a passive and low profile, as it was newly opened to international investment and market competition after joining WTO, and the general economic growth of the country partly relies on international investors from the West (Gong, 2003; "Top US businessman urges more foreign investment," 2003). In 2020, China's success in stringent crisis control and economic recovery was not only fulfilling domestic development but also fueling global prospects (Steinbock, 2020). Therefore, the Chinese government's excellent job of navigating the uncertain economic climate and ensuring economic growth set a good example and took the lead in the world economy rebound during COVID-19 (Xu, 2020).

Such quantified and qualified importance undoubtedly empowered the Chinese government as the most active single actor and the key node connecting other social actors in the meaning construction of the crisis. Therefore, information is unified around this powerful actor in the Chinese

news sphere. Competing interpretations among other crisis actors were reduced to a minimum (Seeger, 2002). To the domestic public, such dominant spotlights on the Chinese government and information uniformity might help prevent further crisis escalation with a narrow subset of narratives (Stirling, 2008). Nevertheless, to the international public, such unevenly distributed information on a single actor and the intensified positive attribute poses challenges to the heterogeneity of the news media. It raises questions about the media's accountability for embracing alternative viewpoints to respond appropriately to epidemics (Leach et al., 2010).

4.2. The rising focus on science and technology

As previously mentioned, the overall frequency and importance of medical social actors increased in 2020 (see Table 3). In 2003, more than half of the subgroups of the medical social actors referred to "experts" from the WHO; in 2020, experts referred mostly to Chinese doctors and researchers in the contextual data. Local scientific research and development, especially technology innovation, is documented as a new subgroup actor and an emerging news frame in reporting COVID-19 (see Tables 3 and 4).

Aside from offering discussion of coronavirus research and developing a COVID vaccine, *China Daily* also intensively reported the wide use of technology in prevention and control of the coronavirus. Various topics like laboratory research on fast-track testing, 5 G technology in remote diagnosis, AI technology in reducing human resources for screening suspected infections in crowded areas, smart robot solutions for isolation ward service, delivery service, disinfection, and cleaning tasks in hospitals, and whole-genome detection and analysis for speed and accuracy were covered in detail ("Robots on the front line," 2020; Chen, 2020; Lu, 2020). Additionally, the topic of e-commerce, which developed in the aftermath of the 2003 SARS crisis, was also picked up often by *China Daily*, as it played a significant role during the Wuhan lockdown and in the months of strict quarantine measures in many Chinese cities. The efficient operation of the digital infrastructure and multiple online platforms enabled users across the country "to buy fresh food and daily necessities without any major disruption during the difficult period" (Lu, 2020).

"To enhance China's scientific and technological development and its capacity for independent innovation" was put forward by the fourth generation of Chinese leadership right after the SARS pandemic in 2003. It then became part of the national development strategy for the next decade, and the Scientific Outlook of Development was finally adapted into the Constitution of the PRC in 2018 by the fifth generation of Chinese leadership. Even if this emerging frame on science and technology from *China*

Daily's reporting of COVID-19 did not directly link to the Chinese government, it offered a deliberate response to how this enforced national strategy—pushed by the various iterations of Chinese leadership—has helped society react differently during COVID-19 compared to SARS. Like its positive portrait of the Chinese government, *China Daily* also reported the country's progress in science and technology through a positive technonationalism sentiment. To some extent, COVID-19 was reported deliberately as a test for technological advances to prove China's rising position during the Fourth Industrial Revolution after falling behind the West for over a century.

4.3. The dominant general frames and crisis response strategy of China daily

Corresponding to Hallahan's (1999) and Sesen et al. (2019) studies, 12 out of 14 news frames from *China Daily* fell into the category of attribution of responsibility in covering health crises (see Table 4). While this frame usually entails "responsibility for cause and solution" (Semetko & Valkeburg, 2000, p. 96), *China Daily* did not respond much to the cause of the problem. Among the 71 articles retrieved in 2003, no argument questioned the cause of SARS. Among the 205 articles retrieved for COVID-19, only one piece referred to the origin of the coronavirus as a response to the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's misuse of "Wuhan virus" (Chen, 2020a). The article quoted the WHO expert and the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce to support the claim that "there has been no scientific evidence to conclude that the virus originated in Wuhan or other parts of China" (Chen, 2020a).

Clear deny-and-diminish response strategies were applied here against the rumor circulating around "Wuhan virus" by viewing the pandemic as an "accidental crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 167) that happened to occur in Wuhan. However, the international public may view COVID-19 as a "preventable crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 168) based on the similarity of the SARS crisis in the past in combination with the prior perception of China's early-stage control measures due to its strict information control, which resulted in the lethal virus running rampant around the globe (Ogbodo et al., 2020). When the international public was seeking answers about the cause of the pandemic during the beginning phase (de Vreese et al., 2001), they could not find sufficient counterinformation from the Chinese source. From the sampled articles of this study, *China Daily* did not even offer authentic Chinese voices to respond to the escalating emotions about "the cause of the problem." Therefore, it failed to rebuild a solid reasoning base to prevent further misjudgment of China's crisis control from the international audience.

China Daily's responsibility frame was focused on "solution," which discloses actions that are implemented to solve the problem and prevent similar occurrences in the future (Kim & Liu, 2012). As previously mentioned, through the intensive focus on institutional performance as a "solution," the legitimacy of the Chinese government mobilizing social resources to direct the Chinese public in immediate reaction and application of prevention measures was established. The dominance of this responsibility-solution frame gave the Chinese government the largest discursive space to mitigate the damage to public safety, financial loss, and, perhaps most importantly, to its reputation (Coombs, 2011). One of the purposes of such a framing strategy is that the catastrophic results caused by the contagion would no longer be attributed to the institution's inaction (Seeger, 1986, p. 148).

In Semetko & Valkeburg's (2000) study, the conflict frame was the second most common frame among the general frames, and the more serious the newspaper, the more the conflict frame was evident. No conflict frame was recorded from *China Daily*'s sample in reporting SARS; however, it appeared as the second most frequent general frame in reporting COVID-19. *China Daily* used the comparison between Beijing and Washington in combating the pandemic to respond to the central issue of the conflict frame as losing—the out-of-control situation and the irresponsible behavior of the Trump administration—or winning—China's successful control of the crisis within its border and its generous contribution to the global community (d'Haenens & de Lange, 2001). This also corresponds with the politicizing frame identified by Ogbodo et al. (2020), in which the politics of supremacy between Washington and Beijing has been reignited by the fallout of the pandemic. *China Daily* further extended such a politicizing frame through discursive engagement with other involved international governments.

The economic frame and the medical and science frames appeared in the reporting of both SARS and COVID-19 by *China Daily*. However, the general economic focus from *China Daily* was far less significant than news from other international media that discussed international and domestic economic consequences during COVID-19 (Calarossi, 2020). The human-interest frame only appeared on a few occasions when reporting about vulnerable groups of Chinese people during COVID-19. With this frame bringing a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of the problem (Semetko & Valkeburg, 2000), the people-mandate of the Chinese government was further emphasized in an individual and sentimental way. No moral frames were recorded in this study.

According to Ogbodo et al. (2020), human interest frames and fear/scare-mongering frames dominated the global coverage of COVID-19, and the

universal media language combined gloom, hope, precaution, anger, and frustration. In contrast, the Chinese media primarily used the responsibility frame, referring to the positive achievements of the Chinese government's crisis management. From *China Daily*'s perspective, Beijing's overall actions were desirable, proper, and appropriate within both the Chinese and international systems of norms and values. While this narrative may help unite the nationalism-oriented public sphere of the Chinese people during the chaos (Zhang, 2020), such a high level of information uniformity may fall short for the international readership of *China Daily*. Even if more social actor groups and new frames emerged in 2020, they essentially reinforced the same framing logic and further consolidated the tendency of the newspaper to be consistent with the single powerful actor—the Chinese government—in reporting the crisis. Therefore, the frame diversity dropped in quality. On the one hand, the significant positive attributes of *China Daily* silenced competing viewpoints about critical problems that were questioned by the international media and the public during the crisis, such as the origins of the virus. On the other hand, the tendency for enthusiastic homogeneity failed to offer diverse insights from other social actors within Chinese society that could connect and resonate with the same actor groups in different societies. Eventually, the Chinese media could not respond to the various sentiments surrounding international news circulation; neither could it relax public tension or reach mutual rapprochement of actors' frames to understand the unfolding pandemic (van der Meer et al., 2014).

5. Conclusion

News media are essential in reporting health crises, as they are the first information source for people to understand the ongoing situation and perceive global suffering for themselves and others. Given that news frames may lead to various interpretations, it is essential to understand the different framing dynamics of international news outlets, which engage with the global information flow during pandemics. This study offered a framing analysis of *China Daily* as China's official outbound communication channel in reporting SARS and COVID-19 to the international audience in 2003 and in 2020.

According to the findings of this study, the Chinese government played the most active and interactive role among all identified social actors from *China Daily*, and all the frames associated with the Chinese government focused on responsibility-solution through a persistent positive portrayal. Such frequency and forcefulness given to one single powerful social actor from the Chinese narrative did not undergo significant change from reporting SARS to reporting COVID-19. Instead, it intensified during COVID-19, as the

emerging social actors and frames from *China Daily* carried the same framing logic and eventually dropped frame diversity during crisis reporting.

While China's experience in crisis management should be communicated to the international community, Chinese outbound communication and crisis response strategies must be improved to facilitate this global connection. First, the Chinese narrative must construct an open framing dynamic that actively engages multiple social actors and their different perspectives on an alternative, encompassing discourse. Merely focusing on the achievement and success of the local experience associated with the Chinese government and reinforcing information uniformity and positivity will not help the Chinese media create discursive resonance and establish credibility with international audiences. Moreover, by knowing that international stakeholders select the frame provided by the source they find most credible amid the crisis (Coombs, 2007), the Chinese crisis response strategy must learn to connect to the dominant frames circulated in other societies. In contrast to the Western media context, where negative, sensational, personalized, and emotional language is primarily used in the health news coverage (Herrabin et al., 2003), the positive, rational, and institutional language of *China Daily* set its own limits to soothe the public sphere, or to help the international audiences make inferences of the pandemic as global suffering.

This study has some limitations. First, only one Chinese international news source was included, and articles using unofficial names for SARS and COVID-19 during the outbreak in both years were not included in the sample. Additionally, the data generation of the 11 corpora associated with different social actors may risk neglecting other important information that is not included in the sentence or paragraph where the social actor was located in the text. A comparative framing analysis between Chinese news media and international news sources during the pandemic would provide a more profound background to discuss the discursive limits of Chinese storytelling in reaching the international audience. The methodological attempt of bringing word-cluster analysis into qualitative framing analysis needs to be further tested. Further research about different countries' strategic communication in reaching international awareness during pandemics should explore a global meaning construction of the unfolding crisis, which is fundamentally changing our perceptions about the world and our societies.

Notes

1. The Factiva database of *China Daily* mostly includes *China Daily & Business Daily Updates* in 2003 and *China Daily & China Daily Global Edition* in 2020.
2. The keyword search of COVID includes all the results of the keyword search of COVID-19 and other articles discussing COVID-19 while referring it as COVID.

3. The government actor and people actor in 2003 referred mostly to the Chinese government and the Chinese people in the context. Therefore, other governments and people from other regions and countries were excluded from the contextual analysis in 2003.
4. The 17 countries include Japan, Singapore, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Philippines, Russia, Turkey, Portuguese, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Cuba, Bahamas, South Africa, Canada, and the United States.

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