

Framing the Pandemic: Self and Other Representations in China Daily's COVID-19 Coverage

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Abstract: The present study focuses on *China Daily's* COVID-19 pandemic reporting to explore how the Self and Others (US, UK, Japan, and Africa) are constructed by Chinese mainstream media and discusses the possible reasons for those constructions. A corpus of news titles in the column "The global fight against COVID-19" on *China Daily's* official website is investigated within the framework of the transitivity system of systemic functional linguistics. The study suggests that, through the linguistic resources of the transitivity system, *China Daily* builds shared images of Actors and Victims for both the Self and Others, with China being the most typical actor and the US and the UK the most typical victims. It also constructs salient images of Helper, Sensor, and Soldier for China, Japan, and Africa respectively. Based on these findings, we argue that positivity is much more salient than negativity in China's pandemic reporting and that besides national interests, Confucianism, the self-perception of a large country, and the sentimentality rooted in Chinese culture may have influenced *China Daily's* portrayal of such international configuration.

Keywords: COVID-19 Reporting; National Images; Transitivity Analysis; Systemic Functional Linguistics; *China Daily*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bare facts are preferred in news reports to keep objectivity. However, news media are more than information transmitters: they set the agenda of public discussion and tell people what to think about (Cohen, 2015; Morgan & White, 2020). Studies in international relations suggest that mass media contributes to changes in the images held by one nation's population about other nations (Mowlana, 1997; Smith, 1973). Moreover, in the field of international communication, a large body of literature confirms that media representations create different symbols and images that they then attach to nations (Fair, 1993; Gabore, 2020; Leung & Huang, 2007; McNelly & Izcaray, 1986; Mustafa-Awad & Kirner-Ludwig, 2017; Zhang & Meadows, 2012). Recently, research from a linguistic perspective has

provided further discursive evidence for positive/negative image news media constructed for targeted nations (e.g., (Pan et al., 2020; Tang, 2021)). During the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in its early stages, there was an increase in people's reliance on international news as a source of information. However, the reporting of COVID-19 should not be viewed solely as a delivery of facts, but also as a discursive construction of international relations in a new context.

Previous research on media image construction shows that positive self-image is the default choice of media organizations in order to serve the best interests of their countries, whereas negative images are usually constructed for groups they identified as Others (Saeed, 2007; Van Dijk, 1988). In the case of China, some researchers suggest that there is positive Self-/negative Other-representation in Chinese media (e.g., (Pan et al., 2020; Yang & Chen, 2020)), while others argue that they adopt a different media strategy that focuses more on the positive side of reality (Gagliardone, 2013; Lemus Delgado, 2016). Research on China's construction of international society in relation to COVID-19 will shed light on the image China "has of itself and of those other bodies in the international system that constitute its international environment" (Boulding, 1959:121) in the context of the global crisis.

Content analysis has dominated relevant studies providing quantitative and/or qualitative evidence for the patterns of frames or agendas in news coverage (Tang, 2021). However, a linguistic perspective has recently been proposed and adopted by a growing number of researchers to better handle the complexity of implicit meanings in news discourse. In light of this, we base our research on the linguistic theory of transitivity within the framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), to examine how China's mass media constructs the world under COVID-19 conditions. This will be achieved by a discourse analysis of the national images of the most important participants (US, UK, China, Japan, and Africa) in the pandemic reporting of Chinese mainstream media outlet *China Daily*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since Joseph Nye (Nye, 2004) developed the theory of soft power, national image, as an essential element of soft power, has been a widespread concern. Research on media image construction has found that media organizations usually create negative images and stereotypes of groups they have identified as Others (Saeed, 2007; Van Dijk, 1988). For

example, earlier studies have shown that there was widespread use of a “Dark Continent” metaphor in Western media, and racist images of Africa and Africans have been produced through the repetition of extremely unfavorable attributes (Fair, 1993; Jarosz, 1992). Recent media representation studies also reveal this negative portrayal of Africa in Western media (Franks, 2010; Nothias, 2020; Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015). Similarly, China’s image in Western media, especially US media, has been largely negative, with persistent ideological biases (Liss, 2003; Peng, 2004; Syed, 2010; Yan, 1998). This trend has continued until the present day although its economic achievements contribute to a positive image in a way.

It is especially important for China, as a developing country pursuing national rejuvenation, to promote its image and its relationships with other countries. In fact, one irreplaceable mission of Chinese news media is to present a positive self-image for international audiences (Tai, 2014; Wu & Ng, 2011). However, discrepancies in the Chinese media representations of Others are present. Some researchers report that while media organizations usually create negative images of the Other, China adopts a different media strategy, which focuses more on the positive side of reality (Chen & Liu, 2024; Gagliardone, 2013; Lemus Delgado, 2016). Based on a chronological analysis of US images in Chinese media, Liu et al. (Liu et al., 2002) argue that although influenced by the ups and downs of Sino-US relations, Chinese media always tended to present a positive aspect of the US whenever possible. James and Boukes (James & Boukes, 2017) found that in contrast to Western media’s negative inclinations toward Africa, Chinese media create a positive image of Africa through its ‘rising Africa’ narrative. With regard to the image of Japan, Guan and Liu (Guan & Liu, 2019) propose that it was through the alignment and balance of the discourses of geopolitical fears and that the image(s) of Japan emerged in Chinese media. Similarly, Zhong et al. (Zhong et al., 2013) suggested that the mainstream media in China have presented a creative, innovative, humorous, and amiable image of Britain.

Other researchers have challenged this general inclination and suggested that there is a positive Self-/negative Other-representation in Chinese media (e.g., (Pan et al., 2020)). For instance, in their study of *China Daily*’s construction of Donald Trump’s America in the 2016 presidential election, Pan et al. (Pan et al., 2020) argued that the Othering offensive in the Chinese media, which portrayed Trump’s America as a dysfunctional and declining Other, served to represent China as more responsible, dynamic,

and attractive. With regard to Africa, although there is a prevailing view that Africa is positively represented by Chinese media (Gabore, 2020), some researchers suggested that some Chinese news reports cover African stories with sadness, conflict, and despair, which is similar to the negative portrayal of Africa in Western media (Li & Rønning, 2013).

The reasons for the positive or negative construction of Self and Others by Chinese media are attributed to various factors, such as selection of targets (e.g., public or government, Stockmann (Stockmann, 2013)), national interests (e.g., (Zhang & Matingwina, 2016)), international relations between China and a particular country in a particular period (Liu et al., 2002), and the events or fields under observation (Zhou et al., 2012). While these elements may have covered most of the relevant factors, this study intends to include Chinese culture to explain the possible reasons, since, as a stable system of value and thought, it has always played a critical role in shaping behavior.

Previous studies on national images have also tended to focus on the image constructed by another country's media, such as China's representation in American media (e.g., (Tang, 2021)) or comparison between self-constructed and other-constructed images, such as China's depiction in Chinese and Spanish media (e.g., (Wang, 2021)), or U.S. media (Zhao & Wang, 2025), which put emphasis on bilateral relations. Given that international society is a network of multilateral national relations, and that understanding how China construes the ecology of the world contributes to the international communication, this study is to offer readers a glimpse into the ways in which Chinese mainstream media construct national images for its own country and for the most relevant Others against the background of COVID-19.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The 1970s witnessed that CDA became an important tool for analyzing the functions of mass media in social relations (Fairclough, 2010). In combination with the CL approach, it has been used in studies of mass media image construction (e.g., (Tang, 2021)). The advantage of this combination is that it promotes the objectivity of research findings, since CL makes it possible to enlarge the scale of data with computer techniques, while CDA, often drawing on the transitivity system of SFL (Halliday, 1994) provides a detailed linguistic model that pins down both explicit and implicit meanings in the media discourse. Specifically, with the transitivity

system, implicit evaluations realized by the selection of ideational meaning can be revealed (Martin & White, 2005), which is particularly important for deconstructing the images built in news discourse.

Being the most fully developed contemporary functional theory (Fowler et al., 2018), transitivity construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types, namely, material, mental, relational, verbal, existential, and behavioral (Halliday, 1994)^①. The clause realizing the semantic process has three components: the process itself, the participant(s) in the process, and the circumstance associated with the process (Halliday, 1994). The process is mostly realized by verbs, participants by nominal groups, and circumstance by adverbial groups. For instance, in the clause *He ate an apple in the house*, *ate* is an action process, *He* and *an apple* are participants, and *in the house* is the circumstance component. Corresponding to the process types, participants are categorized into Actor, Carrier, Senser, Communicator and so on. Observation of these categories allowed us to identify the roles assigned to the countries in COVID-19 reporting. Some role-assigning patterns, especially those with high dispersion or mental salience, may contribute to image construction, since role assignment is a way of implicit evaluation. Readers may be informed, even without explicit evaluative linguistic resources, of how the news agency evaluates a country by assigning a particular role.

In a study of China's image representation, Tang (Tang, 2021) used transitivity theory to examine the pattern of "who does what to China" in interpreting China's image in mainstream US newspapers. Our study examines another important pattern "China does what (to whom)" to interpret China's image in *China Daily*. For other major countries involved, the variants would be, for instance, "US does what (to whom)" or "Japan does what (to whom)". This pattern is a typical construction which shows the process a country engages in. It also assigns the country a semantically important role, the theme of the clause "the element which serves as the point of departure of the message" and "that with which the clause is concerned" (Halliday, 1994: 37). Therefore, we consider it to have special significance both for conveying information and exerting an impact on readers' perceptions of the nations involved.

The process of analysis also follows Fairclough's three steps: description, identification, and explanation (Fairclough, 1989). The first two steps were

^①The "material process" and "verbal process" are also called "action process" and "communicative process," respectively, by functionalists like Fawcett (2009). We will refer to them as "action process" and "communicative process" hereafter.

used to analyze the images in the Results section, and the latter was used to explain possible reasons (see Table 1) in the Discussion section.

Table 1: Process Analysis of the National Images Constructed In China's Pandemic Reporting

Steps	Analytical Focuses
Description	Transitivity System: Frequencies and Proportions of the Process Types (Action, Relational, Communicative, Mental, Behavioral, and Existential)
Identification	"Who Does What (to Whom)" : Semantic Patterns Concerning the Nations
Explanation	Possible Reasons for Images of Self/Others

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Corpus for Analysis

This article aims to reveal the international images constructed by the Chinese mainstream media outlet *China Daily* through an analysis of the transitivity system. *China Daily* is the largest national English-language newspaper in China. It is selected because it serves the primary function of communicating the stances of the Chinese government to the world (Liu & Li, 2017). Also, it gives an extensive coverage of COVID-19, and there is a special column of "Global fight against COVID-19" on its official website, which is considered a very suitable corpus for our study. The column first appeared on January 27, 2020, and continues to be updated, focusing on international pandemics.

A small-sized corpus of Chinese media discourse was built, consisting of news headlines of all COVID-19 reports in the column. All news items from January 27 to October 1, 2020 (the day this research was launched) were downloaded, and 3,102 news stories were collected. The headlines were extracted and saved for the corpus to help identify the patterns of transitive resources. The reasons for choosing news headlines are two folds. One is operational. In order to avoiding subjectivity in choosing the corpus of different time periods, all news stories in the column were included. However, the number of global texts available would make the necessary tagging a task impossible to accomplish. That's where headlines were a better choice than texts, in that they allowed the researchers to create a manageable corpus. The second reason is a functional one. It is not uncommon to investigate the social functions of news story based on headlines (e. g., (Seo, 2013)). As news headlines carry the most important information of the reports and provide the cognitive frameworks of all

reports for readers (Van Dijk, 2015). In addition, there is a great possibility that readers browse headlines without going in for details in the news texts, which leaves the headlines the only source of information. Therefore, headlines are sufficient both operationally and functionally to achieve the goal of the present study.

4.2 Data Collection

The data collection procedure involves two major steps. First, the corpus is processed to pin down major countries to be analyzed. A typical CL approach of discourse analysis often starts with selecting a node word to examine its collocates and concordance lines, as Tang (Tang, 2021) uses the node word *China* to observe the pattern of “who does what to China.” However, the present study meant to examine the international society constructed in Chinese media, so there was not a pre-fixed list of countries. Besides, using the country name as a node word might cause semantic loss, because many words other than *China*, such as *Xi Jinping*, *Beijing*, and *Wang Yi*, and nominal groups with *Chinese* as modifiers (e.g., *Chinese businesses*) may remind readers of the nation as well. Therefore, all the important participants that contribute to readers’ perception of a country were tagged in the present study. For example, names referring to the country, institutions (e.g., *Harvard*, *Apple*) and specific individuals (e.g., *Harvard President*, *Trump*) of the US were tagged [US]. Countries to be analyzed were determined by the frequencies of these symbols.

Countries and international institutions were tagged 3,956 times in the corpus. Organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations are also important participants in Chinese pandemic reporting. However, due to space limitations, we focused on the analysis of the nations in the present study. For the sake of typicalness, a cut-off point of 100 relating to dispersion was imposed, requiring the same tagging to occur a minimum of 100 times. As *Africa* had a relatively high rate of occurrence (N=125), which appeared much more than its individual countries, we included it as a unit of collective nations. Table 2 shows the nations of most occurrences.

Table 2: Major Nations in *China Daily* Epidemic News

Rank	Tagging	Countries	Frequency
1	[US]	United States	711
2	[CHN]	China	454
3	[UK]	United Kingdom	269
4	[AFR]	Africa	125
5	[JA]	Japan	110

Second, using the software package BFSU Qualitative coder 1.2, all the collocates in the first slot to the right of the nodes (i. e. [US], [CHN], [UK], [AFR], and [JA]) were manually tagged within the framework of Transitivity of SFL to observe the pattern “who does what (to whom).” Here “does” is used in an abstract way, and all process types, not just action process, are considered. The coding procedures are shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Coding Procedures

Coding Procedures	Scope	Examples
Tagging Major Countries (Selecting Countries as Nodes)	All the Headlines in the Corpus (The Nations Occurring more than 100 Times)	Trump [US] China [CHN]
Tagging the Process Types	The Collocates in the First Slot to the Right of the Nodes	Trump [US] <COM> <i>says</i> </COM> COVID-19 is ‘Receding’ in US China [CHN] <ACT> <i>offers</i> </ACT> Global Help in Combating COVID-19

<COM> and <ACT> symbolize the beginnings of a communicative and an action process respectively, and </COM> and </ACT>, symbolize the endings of them. Symbols for all process types are listed in Appendix I.

The process type was the basic unit with which we began when calculating the collocates, in that we chose a semantic orientation (Halliday, 1994) instead of a formal one, so that the implicit meanings hidden in the commonalities among verbal collocates would be uncovered.

There were 23 collocations of the five nodes across the corpus, and 948 concordance lines were obtained. As shown in Table 4, the process types action, relational, communicative, and mental collocate more frequently with these nations, whereas behavioral and existential processes are rare. The behavioral processes (e.g., *laugh*, *dream*, *cry*) represent the motions of body reflexes that normally happen beyond the control of human will, while the existential processes (e.g., *exist*, *locate*) mean that there is, or happens to be, something somewhere. In public emergencies, the meanings embodied in these processes can hardly constitute the focus of news reporting, which explains their absence in the corpus. Therefore, our analysis of the transitive pattern is mainly based on the other four dominating processes (20 collocations and 939 concordance lines). While the frequencies and proportions of the process types are the primary concerns, analysis of concordance lines are taken as an important measure as well, because meaningful details are also critical in revealing the semantic

patterns.

Table 4: Frequencies of Process Types and Major Patterns in the Corpus

Process Types and Patterns	US	CHN	UK	AFR	JA
Action	44.34%(188)	64.32%(146)	49.45%(90)	56.25%(27)	38.81%(26)
Patterns Shared by all	Offer	Offer	Offer	Offer	Offer
	Plan to Start New Processes	Plan to Start New Processes	Plan to Start New Processes	Plan to Start New Processes	Plan to Start New Processes
Patterns Specific to Some	Take Actions to Make Things Undone	Take Actions	Take Actions to Make Things Undone	Defend	
		Help			
Relational	22.88%(97)	11.01%(25)	15.93%(29)	14.58%(7)	20.90%(14)
Patterns Shared By Majority	Be Positive for the Virus		Be Positive for the Virus		Be Positive for the Virus
	Case Set New Record		Case Set New Record	Case Set New Record	Case Set New Record
Communicative	20.52%(87)	18.06%(41)	23.08%(42)	14.58%(7)	19.40%(13)
Pattern Specific to Some	Feel Anxious		Feel Anxious		
Mental	10.61%(45)	6.17%(14)	10.99%(20)	14.58%(7)	20.90%(14)
Patterns Specific to Some	Feel Anxious		Feel Anxious		Sense
Behavioral	1.65(7)	0.44%(1)	0.55%(1)	0.00%(0)	0.00%(0)
Existential	0.00%(0)	0.00%(0)	0.00%(0)	0.00%(0)	0.00%(0)
Total	100%(424)	100%(227)	100%(182)	100%(48)	100%(67)

5. RESULTS

This section reports on the images of the members of the international society that are constructed through the transitivity system in COVID-19 reporting by *China Daily*. Through the identification of semantic patterns concerning the sample nations, some shared images and distinctive images are observed.

5.1 Shared images: Actors and Victims

According to Halliday(Halliday, 1994), action processes are those of doing, mental processes are those of sensing, relational are of being, and verbal, of saying. The proportions of process types in our corpus show that

there is a commonality among all nations; that is, action processes of all nations under observation rank the highest of all process types (see Table 4). The semantic functions of processes suggest that by assigning an excessive portion of action processes, *China Daily* construes the world as a busy community of active countries.

A further observation for “who does what (to whom)” shows that—although varying in degrees—all nations sampled are taking actions against the pandemic, which represents them as Actors trying different measures to deal with the situation. A typical meaning realized by action processes is OFFER. As verbs such as *help* (N=92), *donate* (N=34), *offer* (N=26), *support* (N=62), *provide* (N=10), etc. occur repeatedly at the first slots right to the sample nations, which involves literally all of them in the processes of offering something either to their own citizens or to other countries in need. Also, searching the construction “to + <ACT>”, 81 items which means *to plan to do something* are returned. The concordance lines show that the “who” who have taken part in the processes of planning to take certain actions includes all the sample nations. Thus, the two corresponding patterns OFFER and PLAN TO START NEW PROCESSES construct the role of Actor as a shared identity for all the nations. Some examples of the patterns are seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Examples of Action-Patterns Shared by all Nations

Patterns	Examples
OFFER	
US	Gates Foundation <i>Donates</i> Undisclosed Amounts for Virus study at Shenzhen Hospital
CHN	China <i>Offers Global Help</i> in Combating COVID-19
UK	London Cookery School <i>Provides</i> Meals for Needy
AFR	African Students <i>Help</i> Disinfect Train Stations, Check People's Temperature
JA	Japanese Govt <i>May Offer</i> Free COVID-19 Vaccines to all Residents
PLAN TO START NEW PROCESSES	
US	New York State <i>To Build</i> Temporary Hospitals Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak
CHN	Beijing <i>to Start</i> Direct Flights with Eight Nations;
UK	UK Universities <i>Prepare to Reopen</i> Amid Coronavirus-Related Uncertainty
AFR	Africa <i>Set to Wage</i> United Pandemic Fight
JA	Japan <i>to Boost</i> Stimulus to \$1.1 Trln

While action processes build a shared image of Actors, the relational

processes construct a shared image of Victims for the nations. In contrast to action processes that describe a dynamic world, relational processes show the static aspect. There are two modes of relational clauses, the attributive one (e.g., *X is good.*) and the identifying one (e.g., *X is the leader.*). There are excessive examples of the former found in the corpus, which goes X BE POSITIVE FOR THE VIRUS, as the attribute *positive (for the virus)* alone counts 28 times. Further vertical examinations of “who is positive” show that the Carriers of this attribute can be officials, celebrities, and certain social groups, covering all the sample nations except Africa (see Table 6). The fact that Africa is not included in this pattern does not mean that Africa is constructed otherwise, as this pattern is more likely to take individual people or social groups as Carriers than a group of nations.

Table 6: Examples of the Carriers in the Pattern of BE POSITIVE FOR THE VIRUS

Carriers	Examples
US	Another US Diploma at Tests Positive for COVID-19 in Cambodia
UK	UK PM Johnson Tests Positive for Coronavirus
JA	Head of Japan Soccer Association Tests Positive for Coronavirus- Kyodo
CHN	Shandong Luneng's Fellaini Tests Positive for Coronavirus

Conjunctively, there is another pattern reoccurring frequently, which goes (X'S CASES) SET NEW RECORD. Instead of focusing on individual person or group, it describes the overall situation of the pandemic of a country. With this pattern, new cases and deaths are constantly identified by growing verbs (*rise, increase, top, double, set another record climb, surpass, pass, go up, near, hit record with, exceed, jump to, record the highest number, soar, close to*). This and the previous pattern portray the relevant nations, which are US, UK, Japan, and Africa, as victims in the COVID-19 crisis.

It is quite noticeable that China's concordance lines rarely show these patterns of relational clauses, except for one rare case in Table 6. Instead, what is intensely articulated by its relational processes is the value of China's pandemic fighting experience for the world (e.g., *China's recovery may be key globally*), the depiction of the situation as “under control” (e.g., *Beijing's actions to contain coronavirus proved right*), or the ability of the Chinese government and technological institutions (e.g., *Chinese lab nearly doubles Serbia's COVID-19 testing capacity*). This constructs China as the least typical country of the victim group.

5.2 Typical images: Helper, Sufferer, Senser, Soldier

5.2.1 China as typical Actor and Helper

Among all the members of international society, China is constructed as the most typical Actor. It is also one of the most significant self-images built by *China Daily*. The proportion of action processes (64.32%) China takes alone is enough to make the impression that China is a busy actor, more active than any other country in dealing with the pandemic, as of all the process types collocating with China ([CHN]), nearly two-thirds are presented as actions. A semantic pattern CHINA TAKES ACTIONS is formed through the overall distribution of action processes and China's constant occurring as Actor.

Secondly, the selections of action processes are characterized by concrete operations such as *head (to)*, *deliver*, *send*, *start*, *use*, *arrive*, *consult*, *hold*, and *train*, which makes it distinguishing from other nations with large portions of action processes (e.g. US, 49.5%, UK, 44.34%). Also, a close look at the participants of these processes, reveals that not only Chinese central and local governments, but also non-political institutions, businesses, experts and the public (see Table 7 for examples) are all devoted to concrete anti-virus operations. These representations may impose a strong implication that China, from the government to the public, all of one mind, is taking down-to-earth actions to deal with COVID-19, which would reinforce the Actor image of China.

Table 7: Examples of Participants and Processes in the Pattern CHINA TAKES ACTIONS

Participants	Examples	Processes
Central and Local Governments	Beijing, China, Chinese Embassy, CPC, PLA, Changsha, Chongqing, Guangxi, Guangzhou, Guizhou, Hubei, Shenzhen, Tibet's Chamdo, Wuhan	Head (to), Deliver, Send,
Non-Governmental Institutions and Businesses	Alibaba, Jack Ma Foundation, BYD, China Eastern, China Southern Airlines, China-Europe Railway, Chinese American Organization, Chinese Companies, Chinese Companies, Chinese Companies, Chinese 'Fire Eye', Chinese Organizations, Chinese Restaurants, European Businesses, Overseas Chinese, Gansu Hospital, Huaxi Village, Shanghai Organizations, Wuhan Environmental Firm	Start, Use, Arrive, Consult, Hold, Train, etc.
Experts	Chinese Doctors, Chinese Expertise, Chinese Experts, Chinese Medical Experts, Chinese Medical Team, Chinese Team, Chinese Medics, WHO-China Expert Team, Wuhan Experts	
Local Communities	Beijing Pupils, Chinese American Teenagers, Chinese Community, Chinese Photographers, Chinese Students, Chinese, Overseas Chinese Communities	

The concordance lines of China also feature another related but distinguishing pattern, CHINA HELPS OTHERS. By examining “China does what (to whom),” we find that many concrete actions involve two other participants (besides China). One is mostly anti-virus products (e.g., *masks, medical supplies, equipment, medical aid, free meals, medical team, coronavirus test kits*) or international cooperation (e.g., *anti-virus assistance, helping hands, cooperation, virus prevention conferences, experience, and global help*), and the other is the international community abroad (e.g., *Seoul, Tebran, Tokyo, eight nations, Liberia, Arab League, Philippines, Greece, Japan, Italy, Uzbekistan, European countries, US health center, Cambodia*). Taking together, they convey the meaning that China offers anti-virus products and international cooperation to the international community. Without explicit wording, these processes describe the same kind of actions realized by verbs like *help, aid, donate, contribute, offer, and provide*, and together with them generate the pattern CHINA HELPS OTHERS and the image of the Helper.

5.2.2 The US and UK as Typical Victims (Sufferers)

As analyzed above, the US and the UK are constructed as both actors and victims. However, their image as actors is not as prominent as their image as Victims. Given that their concordant lines bear more resemblances than differences, we will focus on the US to illustrate their features.

In our corpus, there are a number of observable instances which show the U.S. government and its social institutions are taking action in anti-virus work. However, its image as an Actor is not as prominent as that of the Victim. On the one hand, the action processes do not serve to accentuate its actor image. In comparison to the processes devoting to substantial work, such as *building (temporary hospitals)*, or *donates (undisclosed amounts)*, the actions presented as having been performed in order to prevent someone from doing something, or events that ultimately resulted in nothing happening, are more frequent (27.55%), from which a pattern of US TAKES ACTIONS TO MAKE THINGS UNDONE is observed. For example, in the headline, *New York state cancels the Democratic presidential primary due to COVID-19*, the action of postponing undid what was due to happen, so that no action would take place.

On the other hand, in addition to the shared victim-constructing patterns BE POSITIVE FOR THE VIRUS and SET NEW RECORD, US concordance lines are characterized by another pattern, FEEL ANXIOUS, which highlights the American public’s suffering under the current situation. As it involves intensely negative feelings, we would like to call it

the Sufferer image to contrast to other nations in the category of Victims. Mental processes of [US] are often used to provide a direct description of the anxiety. For example, *Americans suffer higher risk of dying, New York parents anxious as schools make third bid to open, US hospitals press for ventilators*, etc.

Table 8: Communicative Processes Contributing to Pattern FEEL ANXIOUS

Processes	N		Examples
Attitudinal			
Negative	25	96.15%	Fauci <i>Blames</i> Virus Surge on US not Shutting Down Completely
Positive	1	3.48%	Oxford Professor <i>Praise</i> Role Played by China
	26	100%	
Non-Attitudinal			
With Wanted	7	13.73%	Fauci <i>Says</i> Remdesivir Shows Promise in Coronavirus Trial
Communicated with Neutral	24	47.06%	Bill Gates: Pandemic to Define Era
Communicated with Unwanted	20	39.22%	New York States <i>Report</i> Deadliest Day Yet of COVID-19
Communicated			
	51	100%	
Total			77

The suffering is also indirectly realized through many communicative processes. In the 87 communicative processes, the US is assigned the role of Sayer in 77 (the other 10 are in passive voice), among which the lexical realizations could be divided into two groups: those that show the attitudes of Sayers toward the communicated information (N=26, see Table 8), typically *warn, urge, advise, refute, praise, and call for*, and those realized by *say, report* and the colon mark (:), etc., which do not show attitudes (N=51). Further observation shows that most of the former (N=25, 96.15%) express unsatisfactory attitudes, while 1 in 3 (N=20, 39.22%) of the latter take unwanted information about the situations in US. These communicative processes give readers the impression that the Americans are in deep worries, as what they are expressing features a great load of negative thoughts. They, in an implicit way, contribute to the pattern of FEELING ANXIOUS, which further reenforced the image of Sufferer of the US.

What is worth noticing, though not significant in frequency (N=4), are the headlines concerning negative comments of US (Trump and the White House) on China. As they are all rejected by the voices of US experts (e.g., *US experts refute Trump's Wuhan theory*). They reflect that US experts are objective and trustworthy.

5.2.3 Japan as Senser

Collocates of Japan show that a pattern JAPAN SENSES, realized largely by mental processes, distinguishes it from other nations. As is seen in Table 4, the proportion of mental processes collocating Japan (20.90%) ranks the highest, nearly 10% higher than that of other nations. Mental processes are concerned with the experience of the world of our own consciousness. To construct a participant as a Senser, journalists must depict what is going on inside a person, as if they know what is in his/her mind. To accomplish this, they are either God-like superiors or someone familiar. That is why news stories feature far fewer mental processes than action processes, which indicates that even a small difference between the two nations in the proportion of mental processes may carry significant semiotic value.

Mental processes could be further divided into three subcategories, meanings concerning people's desires (e.g. *want*), cognition (e.g. *think*) and feelings (e.g. *cheer*). Covering all of them, the concordance lines of Japan show two essential features. One is that the processes used to depict desires of Japanese (e.g., *seeking more public support, rejecting London's offer to take over the 2020 Games*) and their cognition of the current situation (e.g., *holding firm on closed borders as infections rise, insisting Olympics still on track, mulls extension of emergency*) seldom involve negative attitude. The second is that the processes used to describe their feelings are mostly positive (e.g., *Japanese fans can cheer remotely, Japanese moved as China repays favor*). While the number of cases supporting this idea may not be large, but they are highly effective to construct a rational and nice Senser image of Japan.

5.2.4 Africa as Intimate Fellow Soldier

Africa is also characterized by its collocation of mental processes (14.58%, see Table 4), which show a relatively higher degree of intimacy of China to Africa than other nations except for Japan. However, a more prominent feature of Africa is revealed with its action processes collocates, which account for more than half of all the process types (56.25%). Further observation of the concordance lines may reveal that many of them (one in every four) contain war-related words, such as *fight, combat, protect(ive), conquer, hit* and *hurt*. Some function as participants (e.g., *African virus fight, support for virus fight, pandemic fight*), some processes (e.g., *to conquer the COVID-19 pandemic, to combat COVID-19*), and some are modifiers to the participant (e.g., *protective measures*). The large portion of action processes and the prevailing war metaphor, indirectly though, generate a pattern, AFRICA DEFENDS.

In addition, *China Daily* shows a touch of intimacy to Africans. For although every country under investigation expressed support to China, relevant concordance lines with Africa rank the highest in proportion (6.25%). Besides, the only communicator role assigned to Africa (*African businessman*) expresses its support to China (*voice support for China*) in a particularly kind way (*in Mandarin*). Together, these processes help construct an image of an intimate fellow soldier.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that *China Daily's* pandemic coverage portrays a highly positive self-image of China. China is depicted not only as an active participant in combating the pandemic with effective measures, but also a country willing to extend aid to other nations in need, showcasing its power and moral superiority. However, images of other countries are more complicated. Although the image of the Victim is collective, there are subtle differences between the US, UK, Japan, and Africa. The typical Victim images of the US and the UK, may imply that their governments are not as capable as they should be in the fight against COVID-19, which goes against their stereotypes as major powers. Therefore, their Victim images may be viewed as negative. Conversely, Japan and Africa are more likely to be perceived in a positive light, since their Victim images are presented to some extent alongside their Senser and Soldier images, which tend to stimulate intimate feelings. Thus, the relationships between China, Japan, and Africa appear tighter than those between China, the US, and the UK.

That said, a closer examination reveals that that positivity is much more salient than negativity. Firstly, while the Self is positively depicted in *China Daily* pandemic reporting, a considerable number of resources are devoted to positive portrayals of Others as well, such as the depiction of Japan as a sensitive Senser and Africa as an intimate fellow Soldier. Second, the portrayal of weak Victims might be viewed as a negative image of Others, but it also tends to arouse sympathy, which may strengthen the emotional ties between countries. Thirdly, when hostility is implied, remarks prone to generating negative impressions are often rebuked by voices from the same country, which reduces the hostility to the minimum. These aspects stand in stark contrast to the persistent negative evaluations of China in U.S. media coverage of the pandemic (Liu, 2021).

Thus, the findings of the transitivity analysis may support the statement

that there is a global ideological strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Van Dijk, 2006), and Chinese media also adopt it in COVID-19 reporting in the nation's best interests. But interest alone can't fully explain the way Chinese construct itself and the limited negativity toward Others. Here we turn to Chinese culture for possible reasons.

The positive self-construction of Chinese media could be attributed to the sense of being a large country. Historically, China was at the center of the Southeast Asian tributary system and was notably larger than other countries in the system. As a suzerain state, China accepted tributes from neighboring nations and reciprocated with properties and physical support as part of its etiquette. This was crucial in the early days for both political and economic purposes, as it served to deter neighboring countries and maintain and consolidate its power (Zhang, 2015). However, over the years, this kind of etiquette, emphasizing righteousness over profit, has been integrated into the culture as unconscious behavior, and its connection to politics and national interests has become increasingly blurred. Now that the tributary system no longer exists, but the sense of a large country remains. In the context of international crisis, it's natural for China to position itself as a Helper.

Confucianism may provide a proper explanation for the positivity toward Others. Developed by a Chinese sage teacher Confucius (551–479 BC), Confucianism is a system of moral, social, political, and philosophical thought that has had tremendous influence on the history of China. Passing down from generation to generation, it has become a core of Chinese culture and still very much alive in today's society. One of the most salient features of Confucian culture is its emphasis on order and harmony (Qin, 2007), which excessively favors moral virtues (like love and filiality) and cooperative attitudes between people. The believe that harmonious relationship is brought by hospitality rather than hostility is so internalized that not only the public but also the media are more inclined to view the positive aspect of Others and minimized the hostility in international communication.

Lastly, elements of emotion and ethics also exert an impact on Chinese journalistic representations of Others. Chinese culture places more emphasis on ethics than other nations do. Behaviors that “forsake good for the sake of gold” are despised, while those that put “justice before profit” may earn respect and intimacy (see *The Analects*). Consider Japan's Senger image as an example. In early February 2020, when China was in the midst of the struggle against coronavirus, medical supplies from Japan

arrived with short notes in Chinese characters attached to the packages, “山川异域，风月同天。” It aroused intense emotional reactions from both the public and the government. The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party of China (the CCDI) posted news entitled “疫情下的人类温情：山川异域，风月同天” (targeting the domestic public), calling Japan’s support “人类之间的惺惺相惜,” which means “the love between the like.” This explains the journalistic construction of China’s closer relationship with Japan in the pandemic reports and proves that Chinese journalistic representations may be influenced by ethical judgment and the emotions aroused by it.

Overall, the present study suggests that with transitivity system *China Daily* constructs positive Self-image and negative Other-image in the COVID-19 reporting. But the balance in favor of positivity over negativity may distinguish Chinese media from those of other countries. Apart from the national interest, Confucianism, the sense of being a large country, and the sentimentality rooted in Chinese culture, each through distinct linguistic manifestations, have exerted an influence on *China Daily*’s portrayals of the international situation.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is limited in terms of sample collection. Global fight against Covid-19 has undergone several stages, and some changes may have taken place since the launch of this study. Notably, later stages of the pandemic may also shift China’s representations of Self and Others. A wider time span of reports can better reveal the trends in China’s positioning of Self and Others in the international society in context of COVID-19. So, it would be desirable to further examine Chinese media’s use of transitive resources in different stages of global pandemic fight in the future research.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX

Appendix I Tagging Symbols for Process Types

Process Types	Tagging Symbols	Process Types	Tagging Symbols
Action	<ACT>...</ACT>	Communicative	<COM>...</COM>
Relational	<REL>...</REL>	Behavioral	<BEH>...</BEH>
Mental	<MEN>...</MEN>	Existential	<EXI>...</EXI>