

# National Image Shaping by Chinese and Foreign Media in Reporting the Lockdown in Wuhan: A Case Study of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*

Cui Wanqi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Nursing, Wuxi Taihu University, Wuxi, China

Correspondence: Cui Wanqi, School of Nursing, Wuxi Taihu University, Wuxi, 214000, China.

Received: March 26, 2024

Accepted: May 6, 2024

Online Published: May 31, 2024

doi:10.5539/ass.v20n3p112

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v20n3p112>

## Abstract

The lockdown in Wuhan in 2020 represents the largest-scale epidemic quarantine measure in human history. During this period, the media's influence on shaping international public opinion was significant. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis and comparison of the articles related to this critical public health event from both Chinese and foreign media sources are essential. In this paper, the articles regarding the Wuhan lockdown by *China Daily* and *The New York Times* are selected as the research object. By comparing these articles, this study provides reference opinions for future reporting on similar events in China.

**Keywords:** Wuhan lockdown, international media, comparative analysis, media studies

## 1. Background and Significance

The lockdown policy implemented in Wuhan on January 23, 2020, marked the first instance of city closure due to an epidemic since the founding of the People's Republic of China, heralding the commencement of a nationwide epidemic response. This pivotal decision sparked significant domestic and international reactions. In terms of epidemic management, cutting off the source of infection was paramount, especially as Wuhan served as the epicenter. From the "lockdown" to the "lifting of the lockdown," the city garnered global attention from major media outlets.

The core principles of journalism professionalism are objectivity and independence. However, in some Western countries, the privatization and monopolization of the media sector have resulted in its saturation with capitalist ideologies, leading to the publication of content that exhibits a pronounced subjective bias. In the context of reporting on the pandemic, Western media have assumed a dominant role, guiding international public opinion, whereas China has found itself in a disadvantaged position, experiencing a "loss of voice." (Peking University School of New Media, Senior Maoge, 2020) Influenced by the antagonism between social camps, the longstanding bias in the West's reporting on significant affairs in China is evident. How to accurately assess the differences in the articles from both sides and comprehensively protect China's image presents a profound issue for consideration.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This paper employs a case study approach, selecting representative newspapers from China and the United States, *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, for their coverage from January 23, 2020, to June 23, 2020. Utilizing the LexisNexis@ database, specifically *The New York Times* and *China Daily* sub-databases, this study searches for articles using "Wuhan" in combination with "lockdown," "limitations," and "travel restrictions" as keywords. The articles were selected based on their relevance, in descending order, choosing the top 100 articles. After eliminating duplicates and irrelevant articles, 89 articles from *China Daily* and 80 articles from *The New York Times* were selected for analysis.

Building on this foundation, the collected data were subjected to quantitative processing from the perspectives of reporting tendency, themes, and sources of information. A longitudinal comparative analysis of Chinese and foreign reporting was conducted from various dimensions, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This comprehensive approach aims to more fully showcase the images of China's politics, economy, culture, and social life constructed by both sides, and thereafter, to compare the images of China shaped by each.

### 3. Data Analysis

#### 3.1 Comparison of Reporting Timeframes

To objectively understand the distribution patterns of articles in *China Daily* and *The New York Times* from a temporal perspective, this paper categorized the selected reports based on phases and specific times after organizing information from 169 articles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Time distribution

Date	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>	Total
January 23	1	4	5
January 24 - January 31	4	13	17
February 1 - February 29	14	28	42
March 1 - March 31	23	14	37
April 1 - April 7	7	5	12
April 8	7	1	8
April 9 - April 30	26	8	34
May 1 - May 31	2	3	5
June 1 - June 23	5	4	9
Total	89	80	169

The lockdown in Wuhan was a sudden public health event characterized by unpredictability, hence there were no related articles prior to January 23. As shown in Table 1, after January 23, both sides began to focus on and report on this incident. By April 8, *The New York Times* had published a total of 65 articles related to the Wuhan lockdown, slightly more than *China Daily*, indicating the degree of attention the American media paid to this event. After the lifting of the lockdown in Wuhan, the number of articles from *China Daily* exceeded that of *The New York Times*, reflecting the Chinese media's commitment to ongoing coverage and reflection on significant events.

#### 3.2 Comparison of Themes

The national image is a multi-dimensional concept, encompassing the sum of descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs about a specific country (Ingrid et al., 1993). This study adopts a multi-dimensional perspective, analyzing the samples' themes as analytical units and categorizing them into primary and secondary themes. The primary themes include politics, economy, culture, and social life, while the secondary themes provide further detail within the primary themes.

##### 3.2.1 Primary Theme Analysis

Table 2. Distribution of primary themes

	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>	Total
Primary theme			
Politics	31	40	71
Economy	6	5	11
Culture	5	7	12
Social Life	47	28	75
Total	89	80	169

According to Table 2, *China Daily* published a greater number of articles on politics and social life, with political reports often presenting positive epidemic control policies. Social life topics comprised 52.8% of its coverage, allowing the public to tangibly experience societal changes and improvements through articles on this theme.

*The New York Times* also focused on issues related to China's politics and social life, with political themes constituting 50% of its total coverage. However, unlike Chinese media, *The New York Times* exhibited a tendency to elevate other themes to the level of political discourse, contributing to the higher proportion of

political themes.

In terms of economy and culture, both outlets dedicated a minority of their coverage to these areas. *China Daily* focused on the role of traditional culture in combating the epidemic during the lockdown and the recovery of the national economy after the lockdown was lifted. *The New York Times* emphasized the impact of the lockdown on human rights and freedom concepts.

### 3.2.2 Secondary Theme Analysis

Table 3. Distribution of political secondary themes

	Current situation in China	Foreign propaganda	Human rights/democracy issues	Policies and implementation	Activities of leaders	China-US relations	Relations with other countries	Total
<i>China Daily</i>	3	5	0	16	4	2	1	31
<i>The New York Times</i>	12	2	2	17	5	1	1	40
Total	15	7	2	33	9	3	2	71

Political themes are among the topics with the highest volume of samples and are a core element of the Wuhan lockdown. This study divides the political theme into seven different secondary themes for comparative analysis.

Of the 40 political articles in *The New York Times*, 12 focus on the current situation of the lockdown and 17 on lockdown policies, accounting for 30% and 42.5% of its total reporting volume, respectively, and 16.9% and 23.9% of the total political reporting volume. This reflects the level of attention and importance given to this event by foreign authoritative media. Additionally, there are five articles about national leaders and their evaluations, making up 12.5% of its reporting volume. Regarding human rights and democracy issues during the lockdown, there are 6 articles evaluating the Chinese government's foreign propaganda and international relations, accounting for 15% of its reporting volume.

Compared to *The New York Times*, *China Daily* places more emphasis on reporting foreign propaganda policies, accounting for 16.1% of its total reporting volume, primarily focusing on reports about the number of infection cases. Reports on the situation in Wuhan and the implementation of policies total 19 articles, accounting for 61.3% of its reporting volume, with most adopting a positive and proactive stance towards the authorities' fight against the epidemic and attention to the people inside Wuhan.

Out of 31 articles in *China Daily*, 22 are positive reports. Among these, 10 articles positively report on policies and implementation, making up 45.5%, followed by reports on the current situation in Wuhan and its promotion. *The New York Times* has 26 negative reports, mainly focusing on comments on the current situation of the Wuhan lockdown and critiques of the lockdown policies, accounting for 65.4%. Negative reports on national leaders total five, making up 19.2%.

Table 4. Distribution of economic secondary themes

	Chinese enterprises	Chinese economic situation	International economic cooperation	Economic policies	Total
<i>China Daily</i>	3	2	0	1	6
<i>The New York Times</i>	1	3	1	0	5
Total	4	5	1	1	11

The reporting on the economy by both parties is not voluminous and tends to concentrate on the economic recovery period shortly before the lifting of the lockdown. This study divides the economic theme into four different secondary themes for analysis.

According to Table 4, Chinese media focus more on Chinese domestic enterprises and economic recovery, with such news accounting for 83.3% of the coverage. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, focuses more on the realistic socio-economic situation, evaluating the economic conditions during the lockdown period.

Out of the six reports in *China Daily*, five portray a positive and affirming attitude, one of which introduces Wuhan's economic situation during the pandemic and plans for the future. In contrast, among the five articles in

*The New York Times*, two take a negative stance, while two maintain a neutral stance, featuring evaluations of China's economic situation and enterprises. One article offers a positive evaluation, advocating for international cooperation.

Table 5. Distribution of cultural secondary themes

	Chinese traditional culture	Patriotism	Liberalism	Sports	Other	Total
<i>China Daily</i>	2	1	0	2	0	5
<i>The New York Times</i>	0	2	3	1	1	7
Total	2	2	3	3	2	12

Due to numerous factors, significant differences exist between Chinese and Western cultures, leading to vastly different judgments on the value of news born from these diverse cultural contexts (Zeng, 2018). This study divides the cultural theme into five different perspectives for analysis.

China has always placed great emphasis on the inheritance and development of traditional culture, with articles on traditional culture and patriotism accounting for 60% of its total cultural coverage. Additionally, there are two sports-related articles about the Wuhan Marathon.

Western media focus on the realm of Chinese ideology. In the selected articles from *The New York Times*, evaluations of Chinese patriotism and the promotion of Western liberalism constitute 71.4% of its total coverage, with another article evaluating "The Wuhan Diary."

The five studied articles from *China Daily* related to culture are all positively inclined, with two articles on traditional culture highlighting the preservation work of cultural relics inside the Wuhan Museum during the lockdown and the positive role of papercutting art in combating the epidemic. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, used the lockdown period to promote freedom and independence externally, with four articles having a negative stance.

Table 6. Distribution of secondary themes in social life

	Public life	Personal profiles	Medical health	Employment	Life of overseas students	Livelihood protection	Environmental protection	Other	Total
<i>China Daily</i>	22	7	6	2	3	4	0	3	47
<i>The New York Times</i>	17	1	5	1	1	2	1	0	28
Total	39	8	11	3	4	6	1	3	75

Social life is closely related to the public, and articles on this theme were the most prevalent. This study categorizes social life into eight themes, as illustrated in Table 6. Scientific prevention and treatment were hot topics at the time, resulting in many public-oriented health education articles, totaling 11, accounting for 14.6% of the articles on social life themes. Articles covering the everyday lives of people across various professions totaled 39, accounting for 52% of the theme.

In the related articles from *The New York Times*, the focus is primarily on medical health and the lives of residents in Wuhan, accounting for 17.9% and 60.7% of its total coverage, respectively. Medical and health topics are mostly highly professional and objective. However, articles about public life often carry a subjective tone and tend to intensify and shift conflicts. There are also a few articles on overseas students, social security in Wuhan, and environmental protection, offering a broader perspective compared to *China Daily*.

Public life and personal profiles are the two parts that occupy the most proportion in *China Daily*. The former mainly reflects the anti-epidemic process and the stable and harmonious society through public life, while the latter plays the role of public figures leading by example, calling on residents to learn from them. There are also some articles on livelihood protection, overseas students, and employment of residents.

Out of 47 articles in *China Daily*, 42 are of a positive nature, with 21 involving public life, accounting for 50%, reflecting the media's focus on public life. Of the 28 articles in *The New York Times*, 12 are negative, accounting for 42.9%.

3.3 Comparison of Information Sources and Bias

Table 7 Cross-table of information source types and bias

	Information source type	Positive affirmation	Negative denial	Neutral or no clear bias	Total
<i>China Daily</i>	Government	18	0	11	29
	General public	24	0	2	26
	Chinese media	17	0	3	20
	American media	1	0	0	1
	Other countries' media	1	0	0	1
	Experts or professionals	21	0	1	22
	Corporate officials	7	0	3	10
	Literature	1	0	1	2
	Public figures	4	0	1	5
	Total	94	0	22	116
<i>The New York Times</i>	Government	3	5	5	13
	General public	10	20	5	35
	Chinese media	1	8	0	9
	American media	7	14	6	27
	Other countries' media	8	16	7	31
	Experts or professionals	1	0	1	2
	Corporate officials	0	5	0	5
	Literature	2	0	2	4
Public figures	32	68	26	126	

Media studies show that exposure to different media and information sources leads to vastly different perceptions and judgments of the same event by audiences, subsequently leading to varied reactions and decisions (Li, 2020). The data in Table 7 demonstrates the relationship between information sources and article attitudes. China has always emphasized the guiding role of public opinion. Positive affirmations in *China Daily* account for 81.0% of its coverage, with the government and general public as information sources being most representative, accounting for 19.1% and 25.5%, respectively. There are also 11 articles that solely relay government information. *The New York Times*, with fewer direct quotes from the Chinese government, has a higher percentage of negative and neutral articles, making up 76.9% of its coverage. Of the 35 articles citing the general public, more than half have a negative tone, representing 57.1%, including some foreign residents in China, highlighting the limitations in surveying and interviewing the Chinese public.

Furthermore, *China Daily* features 22 articles citing experts or professionals, accounting for 19.0%, with clear identification of the experts' credentials and information. Among the 31 articles in *The New York Times* citing experts and professionals, 16 exhibit a negative denial stance, accounting for 51.6% of the relevant themes. These articles primarily feature commentary from Western scholars, with occasional opinions from Chinese officials or professionals, often refusing to disclose informant details under reasons like "respecting privacy" or "fear of retaliation."

In terms of citing media materials, *China Daily* shows a strong positive support attitude in 17 out of 20 articles citing Chinese media, accounting for 85%, and includes one article citing American media, which refutes inappropriate remarks by the relevant American media. *The New York Times*, in 27 articles citing American media, holds neutral and negative attitudes in 74.1% of them. There are also nine articles citing Chinese media, with eight presenting a negative denial stance.

In summary, the study found significant differences in the evaluation of the Wuhan lockdown between *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. The former predominantly uses positive language to demonstrate the correctness of policies and social stability, thereby shaping a positive national image. In contrast, the latter's coverage often carries political biases and subjective perspectives, presenting a negative image of the country to the outside world.

### 4. Comparison of National Image Construction

Building on the foundation of the aforementioned studies, this research begins with the primary themes of the articles, constructing the national image map based on the proportions of positive, negative, and neutral articles, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

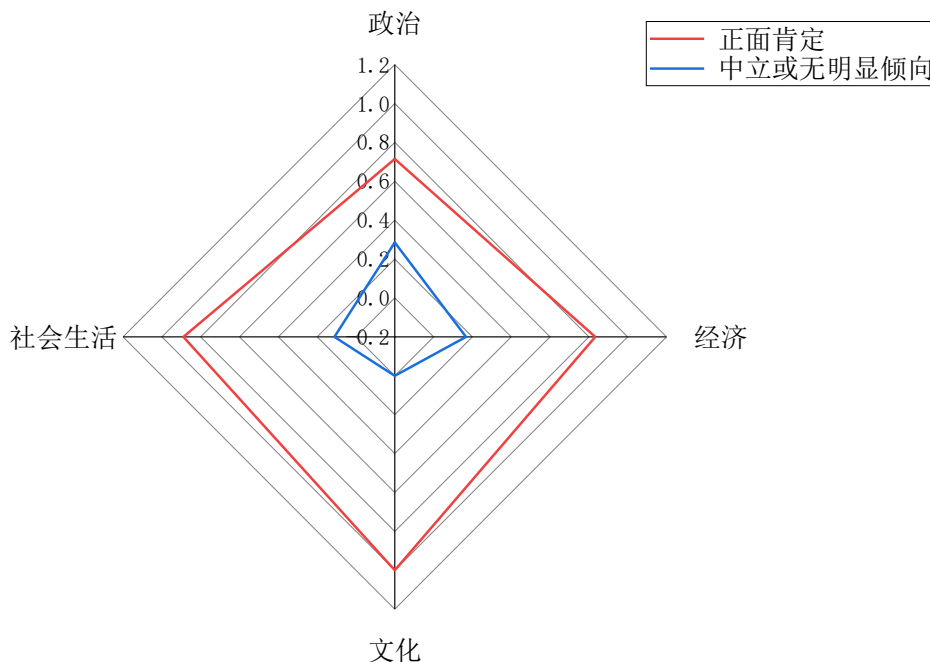


Figure 1. National image map constructed by *China Daily*  
政治 Politics, 社会生活 Social Life, 经济 Economy, 文化 Culture  
正向肯定 Positive affirmation, 中立或无明显倾向 Neutral or no clear bias

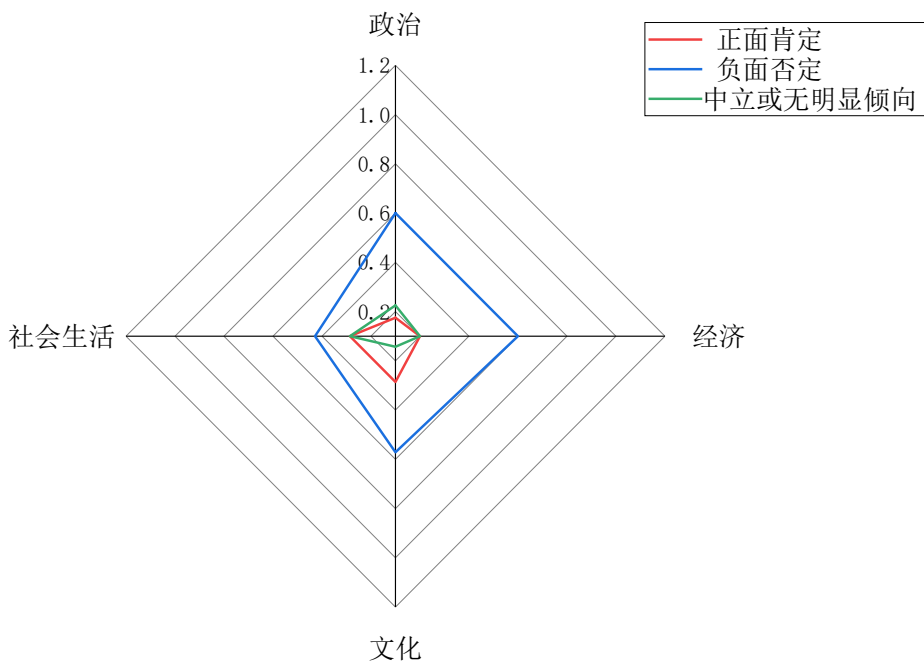


Figure 2 National image map constructed by *The New York Times*  
政治 Politics, 社会生活 Social Life, 经济 Economy, 文化 Culture  
正向肯定 Positive affirmation, 负面否定 Negative denial, 中立或无明显倾向 Neutral or no clear bias

#### 4.1 Political Image Analysis

In the new era, China has been building the image of a responsible major power, committed to telling China's story well. During this event, *China Daily's* reporting and communication of policies were timely, aiming to ensure that all residents of Wuhan comprehended the government's actions. However, the analysis and interpretation of related policies were not sufficiently detailed. At the beginning of the lockdown, responses to misunderstandings about the policies and questions regarding freedom restrictions were not adequately addressed. At a macro level, it demonstrated the nation's decisive decision-making and a responsible image towards its people. Nonetheless, there were shortcomings in balancing overall considerations and in the detailed interpretation of policy nuances.

In contrast to Chinese media, *The New York Times* portrayed positive political issues negatively, portraying the multifaceted lockdown policy as an attempt to control the population or as a dictatorial measure by the Chinese government. For instance, in the January 30 article titled "Virus Spreads as World Pays for Dictator Xi," the media attributed the spread of the virus to the government's deliberate concealment, questioning the timeliness and reliability of the lockdown policy. *The New York Times* believes the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the flaws in the "Chinese model" of governance (Fisher, 2020), presenting an image of a country lacking in democracy, with decision-making errors and a lack of transparency in information. Although some articles acknowledged China's contribution to global public health and called for international unity (Xie, 2020), the portrayal of China's political image remained predominantly negative.

#### 4.2 Economic Image Analysis

In *China Daily*, the focus of economic reporting is concentrated around the period before and after the lifting of the lockdown in Wuhan. These articles are primarily related to industries connected to people's livelihoods, including logistics and food production, with mentions of corporate investments as well. The media also explained the current state of economic recovery from a macro perspective, showcasing China's rapid economic recovery and development. Due to the lockdown policy and the pandemic, Wuhan experienced significant adverse effects on most tertiary industries during the lockdown, with the service sectors such as catering, tourism, entertainment, and retail being the most affected (Liu, He, & Qi, 2021). However, *China Daily's* coverage of the individual service sectors affected by the epidemic was limited, and its economic reporting was not as timely during the initial period of the lockdown.

American media examined the economic development during the lockdown from both a global and Chinese perspective. *The New York Times* predominantly presented negative reports on the economy, suggesting that the lockdown measures halted nearly half a century of growth, leading to unprecedented declines in industrial and retail sales (Bradsher, 2020), as well as unemployment among the people of Wuhan and bankruptcy for individual enterprises. In terms of global development, while acknowledging China's contribution to the world economy amidst global negative growth, it also prompted reflections on manufacturing, expressing concern over the industry's over-reliance on China.

#### 4.3 Cultural Image Analysis

During the challenging period of the lockdown, Chinese media played a foundational role in real-life activities through various forms of culture. *China Daily*, by reporting on online exhibitions of traditional artifacts and residents' paper-cut window decorations among other rich traditional activities, provided a pathway to enrich the spiritual world of those in home isolation, thereby bolstering their confidence in combating the epidemic. This approach communicated the diversity and superiority of Chinese culture to the outside world.

Influenced by their societal systems, the West places greater emphasis on individualism, pursuing freedom and democracy, which led to significant confusion and misunderstanding by American media regarding Wuhan's freedom-restricting policies. As a result, evaluations in *The New York Times* were filled with considerable opposition to China's restrictions on freedom and admiration for the concept of liberty. Moreover, there were also articles highly praising the spirit of mutual assistance and unity during the lockdown.

#### 4.4 Social Image Analysis

In Wuhan's lockdown and the nationwide epidemic prevention efforts, the public formed the backbone. Thus, *China Daily* paid special attention to the masses, covering aspects of medical protection, employment, and concern for people's welfare. Chinese media focused on these areas, with *China Daily* and related media highlighting the advantages of China's concern for the people's welfare through policies on livelihood protection, consultations with doctors, experts, government officials, and surveys of the public.

Similarly, starting from the perspective of the public, American media aimed to broaden its influence, quoting

numerous residents' expressions of dissatisfaction with Wuhan at the onset of the lockdown, thereby portraying an image of a Chinese society fraught with conflicts.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through comparative analysis of *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, in the face of the significant public health event of the Wuhan lockdown, the tendencies in reporting and the construction of China's image vary due to different class stances. *The New York Times* offers valuable lessons in the selection of information sources and topics. However, it tends to focus excessively on unearthing negative information in certain instances, overlooking China's efforts and achievements. *China Daily* constructs the image of a responsible major power from multiple dimensions, yet it falls short in the selection of information sources and attention to minority groups. The image of China constructed at a macro level lacks international visibility and needs to be grounded in reality.

In terms of research, this paper has its limitations: firstly, the selection of samples may not be accurate enough since China cannot directly access foreign newspapers' official websites, and the data collected through databases may not be as precise as those from the official websites. Secondly, the content analysis involves a certain degree of subjective bias. Thirdly, relying solely on *China Daily* and *The New York Times* cannot fully represent the perspectives of Chinese and foreign media on the lockdown event. Future research could build on this foundation, continuously expanding news sources and actively cooperating with foreign scholars to obtain more comprehensive and extensive conclusions.

#### References

- Bradsher, K. (2020, April 28). Coronavirus Could End China's Decades-Long Economic Growth Streak. *New York Times*.
- Fisher, M. (2020). Coronavirus Exposes Core Flaws, and Few Strengths, in China's Governance. *New York Times*.
- Ingrid, M., Martin, et al. (1993). Measuring a multi-dimensional construct: Country image. *Journal of Business Research*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963\(93\)90047-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(93)90047-S)
- Li, X. J. (2020). Information Source, Media Trust, and Preventive Control in Public Health Emergency: Taking COVID-19 as an Example. *Library & Information*, (2), 19-24.
- Liu, Y. J., He, K., & Qi, W. X. (2021). The Impact of the COVID-19 Epidemic on the Economy of Wuhan and Suggestions. *Modern Business*, (25), 81-83.
- Peking University School of New Media, Senior Maoge. Reflections on Foreign Media Reporting on China's Epidemic Situation [EB/OL]. (2020-03-13) [2024-01-30]. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/112902029>
- Xie, F. (2020, February 28). To Protect Global Health, Work with China. *New York Times*.
- Zeng, Y. M. (2018). A Comparative Study of Disaster News Reporting in Chinese and Western Media. *Future Communication*, 25(4), 83-88. DOI: 10.13628/j.cnki.zjcmxb.2018.04.014.

#### Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

#### Authors contributions

Not applicable.

#### Funding

Not applicable.

#### Competing interests

Not applicable.

#### Informed consent

Obtained.

#### Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).



**Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

**Open access**

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.