Chinese crisis communication in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic: a discourse analysis of 'People's Daily' news articles in response to threatening international news coverage

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Chinese Crisis Communication in the Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Discourse Analysis of *People's Daily* News Articles in Response to Threatening International News Coverage

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Abstract

This paper examines China's international communication strategy during the initial phase of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2020, Western governments and media began criticising the systematic lack of transparency and accountability in the Chinese political system in relation to the failed containment of the Wuhan outbreak. Facing an unprecedented reputational crisis, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mobi-lised its foreign-language media in an attempt to influence the international discourse on COVID-19. Surveying the English and Chinese editions of the *People's Daily*, this study identifies CCP discourses aimed at foreign audiences and traces their evolution during the early stages of the pandemic. Overall, the study provides a comprehensive

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map of Chinese narratives on COVID-19 and generates fresh insights into CCP crisis communication.

Introduction

The failed containment of the 2019 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-coronavirus-2 in the Hubei Province posed a significant challenge to the status and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Domestically, the CCP has been able to control the spread of information, censoring outspoken doctors, and concealing evidence of an outbreak (Buckley, 2020). Yet, when the regional epidemic turned into a global pandemic, the CCP found itself at the mercy of increasingly hostile international news coverage, on which it exerted little control and no censorship. We argue that the CCP thus had to resort to crisis communication strategies directed towards international audiences to respond to, and possibly pre-empt, discourses that undermined China's national interest. In this study, we ask how the CCP responded to damaging international news coverage, and what discourses the CCP directed towards international audiences regarding China's role in the pandemic.

We isolate discourses directed at foreign audiences and relate them to the broader CCP political communication agenda. To do so, we analyse the Chinese and English editions of the *People's Daily* (人民日报, *Renmin Ribao*) for April 2020. Since the *People's Daily* is directly controlled by the Central Committee's Propaganda Department, we use the newspaper as a proxy to observe the broader CCP's crisis communication strategy. Moreover, by comparing the Chinese and English editions, we isolate discourses targeted exclusively at foreign audiences. Several studies have investigated the *People's Daily's* role in China's political communication (cf. section "The People's Daily and Chinese Political Communication During Crises"). This, however, is the first study to employ the newspaper to analyse CCP crisis communication directed at foreign audiences during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, we aim to fill existing research gaps and show how the CCP used state-owned media to react to threatening news coverage and influence international perceptions of China's role in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our contribution is twofold. First, we provide a dataset of *People's Daily* articles published during April 2020 (cf. online supplemental materials), which we then use to analyse the CCP's response to threatening international news coverage. The findings from this analysis show that the discourses on "international cooperation" and "responsible management of the pandemic" have played a central role in the CCP's communication strategy. Furthermore, we record a shift towards an emphasis on China's proactive role in the

global pandemic response during the second half of April, indicating the CCP's ambition to perpetuate the perception overseas that China has won the battle against COVID-19 and is now helping the world follow its example. In addition, findings show the CCP refuting allegations that the virus originated from a laboratory and using the fight against the pandemic in support of further Chinese geopolitical objectives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and neighbourhood diplomacy.

Second, we find that, despite COVID-19's unprecedented scale, the CCP was able to rely on lessons learned in previous crises. Although it initially tried to censor the information flow, the Chinese leadership eventually recognised that a complete cover-up was impossible, and instead pursued a crisis communication strategy that sought to be ahead of the news cycle. The CCP, we argue, attempted to highlight the central government's success in fighting the pandemic, mirroring communication strategies already tested during the 2003 SARS outbreak and other crises. This was observable in both Chinese and English articles. The conventional wisdom that assumes that the Chinese government is in full control over Chinese and foreign-language media programming in China is corroborated by the present study. Similar to prior crises, Chinese media emphasises the Chinese government's success in contrast to foreign governments' shortcomings. The pattern of especially negative coverage of the US in Chinese media also continued in this period.

The article is structured as follows. In the section "Rationale and Research Design," we introduce the argument of our study, justify the choice of the *People's Daily* as a research subject, and outline the research design. In the section "The *People's Daily* and Chinese Political Communication During Crises," we review the existing academic literature on the *People's Daily*, define concepts, and discuss relevant scholarship on Chinese political communication, public diplomacy, crisis communication, and perception management. In the section "The *People's Daily's* Coverage of the Pandemic in English and Chinese," we undertake a qualitative content analysis of the collected English and Chinese news articles. We identify dominant discourses in both language editions, enabling a cross-edition comparison. In the section "Analysis of Observations," we perform an automated content analysis of the English edition to identify recurring themes via the selection of keywords, semantic patterns, and co-occurrences of words, which are then analysed in the context of the CCP's efforts to shape the discourse on China's role at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude with a discussion of the article's key findings and its contribution to the literature on China's crisis communication with domestic and foreign audiences, address limitations, and point to further research.

Rationale and Research Design

By April 2020, the international coverage of China's role in the pandemic was not only damaging China's image but also undermining its centennial objective of fulfilling the Chinese Dream (中国梦, *Zhongguo meng*) of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中华民族伟大复兴, *zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*). The Chinese Dream and national rejuvenation have a clearly defined foreign policy dimension, which, in the

words of Yoshihara and Holmes (2018: 1–2), is to make "the nation prosperous and confident at home and abroad," to "assume its rightful station as a pole in a multipolar world, presumably Asia's dominant power," and to "make good on its intent to alter the US-led status quo and revise the international order to its liking." We contend that the international media coverage of China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 presented the CCP with a grave challenge that threatened its national and international policy objectives of realising the Chinese Dream, necessitating a strategic response of crisis communication. This is supported by a survey by the Pew Research Center, which reported an unprecedented reputational crisis affecting China in early 2020 (Silver et al., 2020). We argue that the CCP used foreign-language editions of its party-owned media outlets in an attempt to respond to negative and potentially damaging foreign media coverage through messaging that emphasised China's success in fighting the pandemic.

The Choice of the People's Daily as a Research Subject

The *People's Daily* represents an obvious choice to test our argument and demonstrate how the CCP employed state-owned media to react to threatening international news coverage. The newspaper is the official mouthpiece of the Central Committee of the CCP, directly controlled by the Central Committee's Propaganda Department (Wang et al., 2018: 129). It was founded in 1948, predating the People's Republic of China (PRC) itself and thus underlining its alignment and affiliation with the party rather than the state. The hegemonic standing of the *People's Daily* within China's media landscape is exemplified by local newspapers and radio stations' practice of reprinting and re-broadcasting its commentaries and editorials, which are "seen as indicators of the loyalty of local leaders to the central-party state" (Wu, 1994: 195). The Chinese print edition has a circulation of three million (*People's Daily*, 2021). Exact readership numbers of the English online edition are not known and difficult to estimate, but the *People's Daily* English app has over 200 million downloads, providing some measure to gauge recurring readership of the English edition (Zhang, 2017). It is worth noting that a significant portion of the English edition's readership consists of Chinese people inside the PRC, including members of the CCP leadership that bankrolls China's sizeable foreign propaganda machine (Yip, 2018). However, since our objective in the present research is to find how the CCP sought to communicate with foreign audiences in response to threatening international news coverage, not the success of such endeavour, exact readership numbers and overall credibility of the *People's Daily* among foreign audiences are of secondary importance.

There are of course other nationwide Chinese newspapers, some of which have English and further foreign-language editions that are read abroad, such as the *Global Times* (环球时报, *Huanqiu Shibao*), a daily newspaper founded in 1993 guided by the *People's Daily,* the *Guangming Daily* (光明日报, *Guangming Ribao*) launched in 1949, or the *Xinhua Daily* (新华日报, *Xinhua Ribao*) initiated by the CCP already in 1938. Some Chinese party-controlled media also reach international audiences with their foreign-language media products, such as the *China Daily* or the TV channel *CGTN* (short for China Global Television Network, former *CCTV* channel 9). But the

China Daily is a newspaper predominantly targeted at foreigners and hence not suitable for our research design, which begins with comparing the English and Chinese editions to identify discourse exclusively targeted at foreign audiences. *CGTN* may have its Chinese original on *CCTV* channels 1 to 4 and 13, but it is categorically different from newspapers and hence not included in the scope of this research. This is not to say that the CCP does not use other media attempting to influence the international discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, including those mentioned above, but the *People's Daily's* Chinese and English articles are deemed the most useful to test our argument. Given its position directly under the Central Committee and the fact that other large Chinese newspapers sometimes reprint its articles confirms the *People's Daily's* position as the most authoritative newspaper in China that also publishes in foreign languages.

Data Collection

In this study, we attempted to analyse the initial stage of the pandemic, thus we selected the month of April 2020 as it well encapsulates the time when the pandemic reached a global scale. In the first two months of 2020, COVID-19 was believed to be a regional epidemic, largely limited to China and a few other countries in the region. In March, infections started appearing globally at an increasing rate and, on 11 March, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). With the diffusion of the virus abroad, China's international image came under fierce attack. In April, US government officials, including President Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo, accused China of having potentially manufactured the virus in a laboratory and demanded reparations (Holland and Brunnstrom, 2020; Mason and Spetalnick, 2020; Wingrove, 2020). Meanwhile, European leaders began openly questioning China's management of the virus outbreak, thus implying Beijing's responsibility for the global pandemic (*BBC*, 2020).

We analyse forty-five articles from the English and Chinese versions of the *People's Daily*. Chinese articles were derived from the *People's Daily's* "Graphic Database," which contains digitised versions of all *People's Daily* print versions since 1946 and is updated daily. English articles were derived from the archive function of the *People's Daily Online*. For English, one article per day in April 2020 was chosen. For Chinese, one article every other day was chosen. Since Chinese articles only serve as a baseline to identify dominant discourses in the English edition and were not subjected to an automated content analysis, a reduced number was deemed expedient for this research. For each day, we selected the first and most prominent article on the front page that discussed China in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the unlikely situation that the first page did not contain an appropriate article, an article from page 2 was chosen instead.

Discourse Analysis as Research Method

We employ a mixed methodology for discourse analysis. A discourse is, according to Hajer (2006: 66), "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which

meaning is given to social and physical phenomena." Thus, the role of discourse analysis is to understand how meaning is constructed from the interplay of written words, syntaxes, and rhetorical devices (Scartozzi, 2015: 315). Meaning is rarely literal; instead, it is often the product of analogies and inferences, which are in turn informed by assumptions and ontological perspectives. For this reason, we use a mixed approach to discourse analysis that combines natural language processing tools (NLP) with the analytical skills of a multilingual research team.

The English *People's Daily* articles were first analysed using AntConc, a text analysis application, to allow the researchers to identify keywords and discern discourse patterns (Anthony, 2020). They were then subjected to an NLP analysis with Python's Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) (NLTK Project, 2020). NLTK was first used to remove stopwords and tokenise the text, then it was used to tabulate frequencies of words and bigrams. Finally, NLTK was employed to create a lexical dispersion plot, search for concordances, and identify co-occurrences. The latter were also processed using WORDij (Danowski, 2013) and Gephi to create network visualisations (Gephi Consortium, 2017). Overall, the NLP analysis was used to categorise and analyse the linguistic structure of the text. Informed by the NLP analysis, we were able to identify and list the most prevalent discourses on COVID-19 for April. The discourses in the English version of the *People's Daily* were then compared with their Chinese correspectives to isolate the discourses that were exclusively targeting international audiences.

The *People's Daily* and Chinese Political Communication During Crises

In this section, we briefly discuss prior literature on the *People's Daily and* China's crisis communication, introduce relevant concepts that inform the debate on China's political communication with domestic and international audiences, and review prior relevant studies on Chinese crisis communication.

The People's Daily and Chinese Crisis Communication in Prior Research

The *People's Daily* has been the subject of research in several studies on Chinese media and political communication. Notable examples are Stockmann (2010), who identified the *People's Daily* to be the most official, least commercialised, and least open newspaper. But since commercialised newspapers are also censored, the plurality and objectivity of Chinese newspapers are illusory, allowing Chinese authorities to control public opinion while satisfying the people's need to express and consume nationalist tendencies, such as resentment against Japan. Liu and Yang (2015) investigated various issue foci of the *People's Daily* between 2000 and 2010 and found that attention intensity towards the United States is higher than towards any other country. For eleven years, the *People's Daily's* issue foci were on "other/noncritical" (43.51 per cent), followed by "economic-trade" (20.94 per cent), the "US role in world affairs" (19.19 per cent), "military-strategic" (11.49

per cent), and "political-ideological" (4.87 per cent). Wang et al., (2018) found that the *People's Daily* as well as more commercialised newspapers largely base their articles on the same official sources, mostly cover politics, and engage in propaganda.

The US traditionally receives especially negative news coverage by both Chinese state-owned and commercialised media. It is noteworthy that in the past, the *People's Daily* still reported more positively, or rather less negatively, about the US than commercialised Chinese newspapers, suggesting that the CCP occasionally attempts to constrain criticism towards the US relative to public opinion, which tends to be more anti-American (Stockmann, 2012: 21). Relatedly, Shi et al. (2012: 111) attest that the CCP consistently attempts to shape popular opinion about the US, particularly regarding US foreign policy, through its propaganda apparatus. Moving beyond the *People's Daily*, Brazys and Dukalskis (2020) analysed 1.8 million foreign-language articles from the *Xinhua News Agency*. They find that the average tone was mostly negative in English, French, and Spanish, but rather positive in Korean and Japanese. The negative tone coincided with news coverage of international events and issues with no relation to China. Coverage on China was exclusively positive but much more positive in foreign languages than in Chinese. They conclude that it is *Xinhua's* objective "to paint China in a positive light and to mention only shortcomings that the Party has already solved, or that it can at least blame on external actors" (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2020: 64).

Media such as newspapers, television, and increasingly social media, constitute a central tool for the CCP to shape domestic and international discourse on China. The concept of political communication allows us to understand the CCP's efforts to set the agenda and to control political discourse, propagate policy, monitor public opinion, and improve the regime's legitimacy, absent of a national or international crisis. For our purposes, we treat the concept of political communication as synonymous with propaganda, a concept that carries historical baggage from National Socialism, Communism, Cold War tactics, and psychological operations (Melissen, 2005: 17). At its core, propaganda is perhaps best understood as an umbrella term for the concepts discussed in this section. As Holbrooke (2001) wrote: "Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or – if you really want to be blunt – propaganda." Thanks to the high degree of control over media organisations, both public and commercial, the CCP retains a firm grip over political communication with domestic and foreign audiences. Political communication strategies are formulated by the Politburo Standing Committee and implemented by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee. As Tang and Iyengar (2012: 1) put it, the "[e]ffective use of the media as a political tool is always a top CCP priority [and] state agencies control the full spectrum of media programming, either through ownership or the power to regulate."

Relevant Concepts to Understand Chinese Crisis Communication with Foreigners

The concept of public diplomacy can be helpful to understand the process of China's political communication with foreign audiences. The origins of PRC public diplomacy can

be found in the early days of CCP engagement with foreigners, inviting selected foreign journalists to write about selected topics of China's successful development. They also created foreign-language publications, notably in English, French, Spanish, and Japanese, "to inform foreigners about developments in China and to propagate the blessings of Communism. The latter, of course, dominated the contents of these publications; problems or drawbacks were never mentioned" (d'Hooghe, 2005: 91). China's public diplomacy has different target groups. Whereas the peaceful rise is targeted at Asia-Pacific neighbours, messaging on China's human rights situation is aimed at Western audiences. The Chinese government possesses sizable confidence in its ability to use foreign-language media outlets such as *CGTN*, the *China Daily*, *Global Times*, or the *People's Daily*. The main motivation is to "shape the global conversation about China" paired with the belief "that the Chinese must explain themselves and their behavior to an international audience that allegedly misunderstands them" (Rawnsley, 2015: 274). China views its public diplomacy capability and its power to influence foreign audiences as a corrective to a distorted, Western-dominated global media landscape.

During crises that threaten China's national security and/or CCP legitimacy, it is especially important for the leadership to stay on top of circulating information and to actively shape the discourse. The objective of crisis communication is to control the information flow and to limit the amount and duration of negative media coverage (Coombs and Holladay, 2015: 500). Since the CCP lacks legitimisation through elections, its primary sources of legitimacy are effective governance, political stability, and economic prosperity. Crises, especially man-made crises that are exacerbated through mistakes by the government, present a challenge and potentially a threat to the legitimacy of the CCP. In the past, the Chinese leadership treated crisis communication with vigilance and prohibited reporting on it. But in today's digitalised and commercialised media environment, the CCP is aware that complete cover-ups are impossible and instead seeks to be ahead of the news cycle and proactively communicate the government's role in managing the crisis (Repnikova, 2017: 2–3).

Whereas crisis communication mainly concentrates on information control in a domestic context, the concept of perception management is useful to understand the mechanism by which China seeks to communicate with foreign audiences. The US Department of Defense defines perception management as:

> Actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning as well as to intelligence systems and leaders at all levels to influence official estimates, ultimately resulting in foreign behaviours and official actions favorable to the originator's objectives (US DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 2003, cited in Combelles Siegel, 2005: 118).

Notably, perception management includes the dissemination of information, factual or fabricated, and the manipulation of media to influence foreign audiences. Its operational advantage is that it does not require the infiltration of foreign governments or civilian

organisations but instead relies on open, uncensored traditional and social media environments (Ernst and Lee, 2021: 172).

Chinese Communication in Prior Crises

Several past crises forced China to conduct crisis communication and proactively shape the discourse at home and abroad. Particularly instructive for the present study was China's reaction to the SARS outbreak in the summer of 2003. In the beginning, the response to the SARS outbreak was slow, partially because of China's decentralised public health system, in which hospitals receive funding and "owe allegiance" to the local rather than the central government in Beijing. As a result, the central government in Beijing was slow to recognise the seriousness of the SARS epidemic, and little action was taken in the early months of 2003 to contain it (Schwartz and Evans, 2007: 200). The first reaction by the CCP was to maintain full control of society and all publicly available information. This however led to domestic and international criticism (d'Hooghe, 2005: 102).

Once SARS had been listed as a notifiable disease on 8 April 2003, China officially declared a "People's War" on SARS, activating a sizable crisis communication campaign to inform the public. This included daily press conferences, educational programs, folk songs, banners, and advertisements on buses to educate and motivate the public to take protective measures (Ahmad et al., 2009: 41). The Chinese leadership also learned from the initial backlash by domestic and international audiences and disclosed information early on when SARS re-occurred in April 2004 (d'Hooghe, 2005: 102).

Another example was the floods in Beijing in 2012. Initially, official and commercial media deployed various strategies to positively shape public opinion and implement official directives. This was accomplished by an emphasis on the government's successful crisis management and citizens' heroic deeds. China's crisis communication is highly institutionalised, but also flexible. Such flexibility, Repnikova (2017: 14) notes, appears "to be the only sensible strategy for constructing an image of official effectiveness in the aftermath of disasters […]." It is the CCP leadership's preferred course of action to strictly censor information, play down crises, and only permit coverage when and to the extent that the crisis has been successfully solved (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2020: 64). But the CCP has learned that in an environment of commercial and social media, it is impossible to censor everything and that it serves its interests better to instead set the agenda, shape discourses, and proactively control the flow of information.

The *People's Daily's* Coverage of the Pandemic in English and Chinese

The *People's Daily* is published in multiple languages in print and online. The English edition is comparable to the Chinese in scope, quantity, and variety. Often, the English edition follows the news coverage of the Chinese original, either by providing translated

or re-elaborated articles. By reading and comparing both editions of the *People's Daily* it is possible to draw a comprehensive map of the discourses for April 2020 and, at the same time, identify discourses that exclusively target an international audience.

The *People's Daily* English Coverage on COVID-19 in April 2020

The review of the top-of-the-page articles of the *People's Daily* online English edition during April 2020 shows five overarching discourses concerning the pandemic (see Table 1). The discourses can be titled as follows:

1. China's cooperation with other countries and international organisations.
2. China's international aid to other countries.
3. China's domestic success against the pandemic.
4. China's rebuttal of Western scepticism regarding humanitarian aid and virus origins.
5. China's positive responsibility during the pandemic.

The first discourse highlights China's involvement and cooperation with countries and international organisations. China's commitment to global cooperation is emphasised in its alignment and concurrence with statements from regional and international organisations such as the UN, WHO (7, 13, 16, 24, and 28 April), and ASEAN + 3 (14, 15, and 20 April), as well as with regions such as Europe (7 and 19 April) and Africa (7 and 26 April). Bilateral cooperation is also remarked upon, both at the state level and with the scientific community (1, 5, 19, 22, and 29 April). The articles underline the common enemy as the coronavirus, which can only be defeated by a "global war" (7 April) with global cooperation and solidarity (5, 7, and 11 April) and battles and victories (7 and 15 April) against the virus.

The second discourse develops the first discourse further, informing the reader how China has helped other countries manage the pandemic. Eleven articles mention China's willingness and capacity to help countries around the world, providing humanitarian aid and medical supplies (1, 5, 7, 12, 13, 15, 19, 20, 26, 27, and 30 April). These articles cover China's sharing of its experience and expertise in handling the pandemic with the rest of the world (5, 7, 11, 20, and 30 April), providing details on the number of countries it is working with (5, 7, 13, and 27 April), and the quantity of medical supplies given to the international community (1, 15, 19, and 20 April).

The third discourse revolves around China's efforts and eventual successful management of COVID-19. Six articles mention China's ability to help other countries while controlling the pandemic domestically (5, 7, 9, 11, 20, and 30 April) and "meeting domestic demands" (5 April), despite concerns about the global economy's adverse impact on China's economic well-being (9 April). China attributes its success in containing the pandemic to its "respect for life" or "life-first principle" (6, 11, 17, 28, and 30 April), hailing the work of community workers (10 April), as well as the sacrifices made by martyrs of the pandemic (3, 4, 6, 16, and 30 April). This is especially illustrated

Table 1. Distribution of Key Discourses Across Articles in English and Chinese in April 2020.

	Total		Days in April on which the discourse was observed
English	**30**	**100%**	
International cooperation	13	43.33%	1, 5, 7, 13, 16, 14, 15, 19, 20, 22, 26, 28, 29
International aid	12	40.00%	1, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, 20, 26, 27, 30
Domestic success	13	43.33%	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 20, 28, 30
Rebuttal of Western scepticism	14	46.67%	1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 17, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30
Responsibility	16	53.33%	1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 27, 28, 30
Chinese	**15**	**100%**	
Reliability and transparency	2	13.33%	3, 7
Domestic success	4	26.67%	3, 9, 19, 25
Capacity to deal with Covid	7	46.67%	5, 13, 17, 21, 23, 27, 29
International aid	2	13.33%	11, 15
Rebuttal of Western scepticism	1	6.67%	23

on 4 April, when the *People's Daily* paid tribute to the contribution of national martyrs and victims in the fight against the pandemic by turning the front page of the English edition into greyscale, as was the case in the Chinese print edition on 5 April.

The fourth discourse comprises China's rebuttals of Western scepticism and disinformation. The discourse can be seen on 7 days (1, 5, 6, 13, 22, 28, and 30 April) where articles rebuke Western countries, politicians, and media for calling China's foreign assistance geopolitical. Such a criticism is reprimanded as being factually untrue, distracting from the "common enemy" that is the virus (1, 17, 21, 25, 27, and 29 April). The US is given particular attention; the *People's Daily* responds by pointing out rising infection numbers in the US (2 April) and refutes the usage of terms such as the "Wuhan virus" and allegations that the virus was fabricated in a laboratory in Wuhan (6, 21, 22, 24, and 28 April).

The final and most dominant discourse explores responsibilities during the pandemic, and what it means to act "responsibly" during a crisis. Several articles highlight the responsibility that individuals, countries, and organisations have in responding to the pandemic, from local community workers (10 April) to actions taken by China and international organisations (1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 16, 19, 28, and 30 April) to control the pandemic. It is worth noting that "blame" is only discussed in the context of it hindering efforts to combat the pandemic (6, 18, 20, and 26 April). This provides contrast to the US, which claims China is responsible for the outbreak to the extent that it should compensate the US and other countries (6, 21, and 27 April). In addition, the *People's Daily* also draws attention to the US's "irresponsible" remarks on the origins of the virus (22 April).

The People's Daily Chinese Coverage of COVID-19 in April 2020

Moving to the Chinese edition of the *People's Daily*, we find similar and overlapping news coverage, but with nuanced differences in focus. Overall, the review of articles on the first pages of the *People's Daily* shows the prevalence of the following five key discourses for April 2020 (see Table 1):

1. Reliability and transparency of the Chinese public health system.
2. China's domestic success in managing the virus.
3. China's capacity to deal with the pandemic.
4. China's international aid to other countries.
5. China's rebuttal of Western scepticism and disinformation.

The first discourse highlights the authenticity of the public health data published by the Chinese authorities. Two of the articles analysed in this review (3 and 7 April) reported that the open, transparent, and accurate sharing of information (公开透明、实事求是发布信息, *gongkai touming, shishiqiushi fabu xinxi*) is of key importance to the Chinese government. This discourse strongly refutes the claims that Chinese authorities had withheld data on the outbreak at the initial stages of the pandemic, thus delaying public health measures.

The second discourse remarks on China's achievements in managing the pandemic. Four articles (3, 9, 19, and 25 April) reported that whereas the pandemic continues to spread on an international level, the positive trend in the prevention and control of the pandemic in China has been further consolidated. Furthermore, economic and social operations were gradually normalising in China, whereas the risk of economic downturn in the rest of the world was intensifying. All four articles state that the actual strategy against the pandemic is to prevent "imported" cases (防范疫情跨境输入, *fangfan yiqing kuajing shuru*), to minimise the mortality rate, and to maximise the admission and cure rate.

The third discourse explains what the elements of China's success are. Seven articles (5, 13, 17, 21, 23, 27, and 29 April) praised the engagement and dedication of the Chinese government and the communist party during the fight against the pandemic. For instance, on 5 April 2020, the whole first page of the newspaper was printed in greyscale, similar to the English online edition the day before, to mourn the martyrs and compatriots including medical staff, cadres, and community or social workers who lost their lives during the fight against the pandemic. The *People's Daily* highlighted that the army's forward team of experts has provided guidance to hospitals on prevention, control, and medical treatment and has largely contributed to China's success. On 21 April, the *People's Daily* applauded the accomplishment of the establishment of two makeshift hospitals for the COVID-19 treatment within ten days and referred to it as "the Chinese speed in the race with the pandemic" (与疫情赛跑的"中国速度" *yu yiqing saipao de "Zhongguo sudu"*).

In addition to its domestic success, China is also presented as a country committed to managing the pandemic at an international level. The fourth discourse emerging from the articles analysed in this study highlights Beijing's willingness to share information with the international community. In two articles (11 and 15 April), the *People's Daily* reported that China has a strong interest in providing other countries (South Korea, Japan, ASEAN, and Argentina) with emergency supplies and sharing its experience in pandemic prevention and control as well as its medical and diagnostic protocols. Moreover, the Chinese government appealed to share information for the development of vaccines (加强经验交流和信息共享、开展药物、疫苗研发合作、推进防控机制化, *jiaqiang jingyan jiaoliu he xinxi gongxiang, kaizhan yaowu, yimiao yanfa hezuo, tuijin fangkong jizhi hua*).

Finally, the last discourse identified is a rebuttal of the speculations on the origin of the virus that has proliferated on social media platforms. On 23 April, the *People's Daily* announced that, according to the WHO, the COVID-19 virus was not the result of artificial intervention or creation in a laboratory. The newspaper criticised the irresponsibility of foreign and social media platforms for spreading the wrong message that China is responsible for the pandemic. The *People's Daily* emphasised that the virus does not have a nationality and does not discriminate between races and that China is as much a victim of the pandemic as any country in the world (病毒没有国界、疫情不分种族、中国和世界各国一样、都是疫情的受害者, *bingdu meiyou guojie, yiqing bu fen zhongzu, zhongguo he shijie geguo yiyang, dou shi yiqing de shouhai zhe*).

Comparing Both Editions and Identifying Discourses Exclusive to the English Edition

Comparing the English and Chinese editions, we observe that there are significant overlaps and congruencies in content, albeit with some nuances. In particular, the three discourses of "international aid to other countries," "domestic success in managing the virus," and "rebuttal of Western scepticism and disinformation" are observable in both languages. The English edition focuses on the role of China in international cooperation and China's responsible management during the pandemic. These two focus areas were less prevalent in Chinese articles. Chinese articles, meanwhile, rather stress the reliability and transparency of China's public health system and emphasise China's state capacity to manage the pandemic. Another observation is that if one compares the tone and style of both editions beyond the content, the Chinese version appears mostly informative, where the objective is to educate the Chinese audience on what China's leaders do to fight the pandemic. The Chinese version has a sober writing style, appears authoritative, and sets the agenda, rather than being reactionary and defensive. In contrast, the English version is reactionary and appears to be in the thick of the global information war; it never provides just information, but always also has an angle, argues a point, or defends China's position in response to an accusation.

Analysis of Observations

In this section, we employ NLP toolkits and discourse analysis to identify discourses targeting international audiences. Using NLP, it is possible to identify recurring themes in the *People's Daily* via the selection of keywords, semantic patterns, and co-occurrences of words. These discourses were then analysed in detail and contextualised with a view to China's efforts to change international discourses on China's role in the pandemic, as well as to support additional foreign policy objectives.

Table 2 shows the most frequent words (excluding stopwords) in the English corpus, divided by category. In the "Time and Locations" category, the most recurrent geographic areas are China, Europe, and Africa. Coincidentally, France is the country with the most occurrences after China. This is the case because several articles in the *People's Daily* utilise statements from French officials and scientists to provide third-party support to

Table 2. Most Frequent English Words by Categories.

Time and locations:	Public health:	Economy and logistics:	Crisis management:	Cooperation and solidarity:
328 China	185 covid	32 economic	59 control	84 cooperation
119 Countries	121 virus	30 work	58 fight	34 support
107 Chinese	111 pandemic	21 workers	48 efforts	30 assistance
98 International	109 health	17 freight	26 response	27 solidarity
85 Global	88 medical	17 economy	24 crisis	27 help
82 April	68 epidemic	17 train	20 battle	21 mankind
71 Country	47 coronavirus	**Politics and society:**	17 fighting	33 experts
68 World	47 disease	70 people	**People and organisations:**	**Science and information:**
68 Wuhan	45 outbreak	58 public	67 Xinhua	22 experience
31 March	44 prevention	27 united	66 Xi	22 information
30 Beijing	36 measures	21 meeting	27 government	21 research
29 Foreign	34 cases	21 team	27 leaders	21 science
29 Province	34 lives	20 summit	21 organizations	21 university
28 Central	30 supplies	19 nations	21 secretary	17 data
28 Hubei	24 novel	19 political	20 organization	17 scientific
28 Time	24 spread	19 security	17 ASEAN	16 photo
26 Future	22 life	18 national	17 party	15 media
24 First	22 confirmed		17 state	
22 Europe	16 patients		17 states	
20 Africa	16 treatment		16 director	
20 City	15 deaths		15 minister	
17 East			33 president	
17 Regional				
15 French				

Note: Data is provided in the online supplemental materials (see Annex I). The frequency distribution was obtained via AntConc. Stopwords were removed using Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK). Categories were assigned manually.

the work of the WHO (e.g. *People's Daily Online*, 13 April 2020) or debunk the claim that COVID-19 originated from a lab in Wuhan (e.g. *People's Daily Online*, 21 April 2020).

As can be seen in the "Time and Locations" and "People and Organisations" categories, the *People's Daily* makes recurrent use of foreign media and public figures in its articles. For example, positive statements from the WHO and foreign officials are cited as evidence of the goodwill of China (*People's Daily Online*, 24 April 2020). The recurrent use of third-party sources is evidence of a reactive crisis communication strategy (Figure 1).

Turning to the category "Politics and Society," we find the word "security" mentioned nineteen times (see Table 2). Yet, it is noteworthy that the articles of the *People's Daily* do not frame COVID-19 as a threat to national security, but rather as a trans-national security problem. As Table 3 shows, China is concerned first and foremost with "global public health security," an expression that is used to refer to international surveillance and control mechanisms of public health (*People's Daily Online*, 7 April 2020). Overall, it appears that Chinese policymakers have intentionally avoided securitising the pandemic (in a "traditional security" sense) and instead framed it as an international public health problem.

The trans-national dimension of the pandemic is recurrent across articles as it is often written that the virus "knows no races" and "respects no borders" (e.g. *People's Daily Online*, 16 April 2020). Linked to this internationalist perspective, we identify discourses on cooperation and solidarity. Here, China is portrayed as a benign actor, willing to provide "assistance" and "support" to the "international community" and alleviate "mankind" from the plague of COVID-19 (see also Tables 2 and 3). As proof of solidarity, multiple articles reference the provision of "medical supplies" to other countries that were delivered by Chinese state-owned companies. Coincidentally, the delivery of pandemic aid also serves to showcase Chinese infrastructure projects linked to the BRI. For

Table 3. Most Frequent Ngrams.

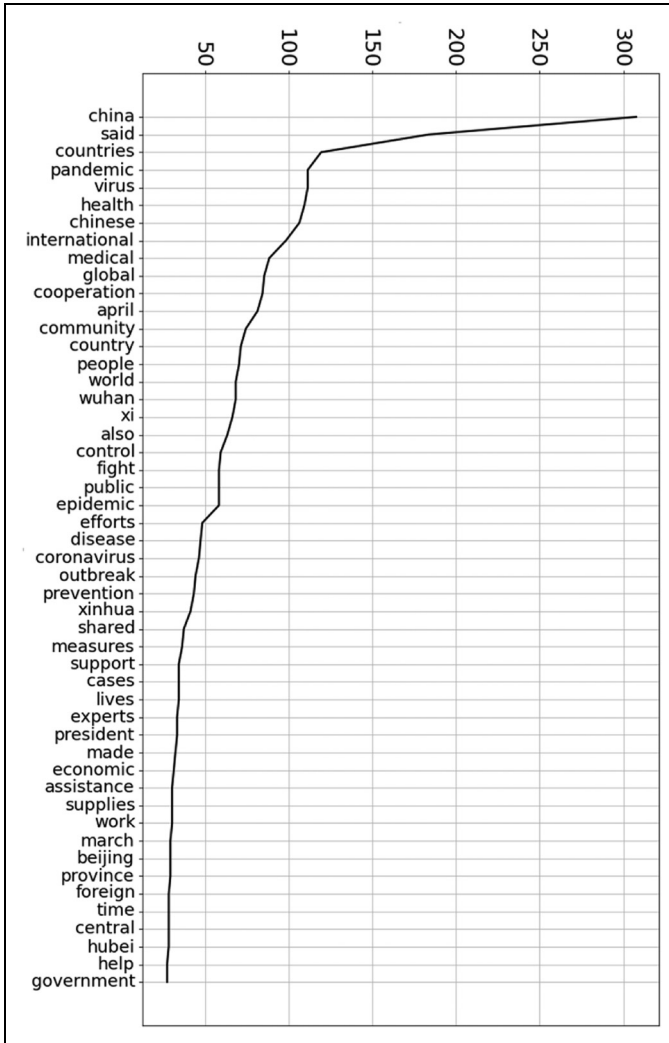|			
45 public health	18 confirmed cases	15 **control measures**	11 Communist Party
26 prevention control	18 global public	14 **Xi Jinping**	11 party china
24 **medical supplies**	17 said china	14 world health	10 people daily
24 int. community	16 across country	14 **Xi said**	10 around world
22 novel coronavirus	16 Hubei province	13 **community workers**	10 **solidarity cooperation**
21 **shared future**	16 Chinese medical	13 medical experts	10 East Asia
20 int. cooperation	15 Xinhua April	12 **President Xi**	9 China Hubei
20 apt countries	15 United States	12 **health security**	9 **future mankind**
19 community shared	15 April Xinhua	12 health organization	9 leaders summit
19 epidemic prevention	15 int. organizations	11 Beijing April	9 **joint efforts**

Figure 1. Frequency distribution of top 50 words.

instance, medical supplies are said to be delivered to Europe by freight trains that "rumbled across the Eurasian continent" via new BRI routes (*People's Daily Online*, 19 April 2020).

The discourse on solidarity and cooperation is also linked to the discourse on Chinese successful crisis management. Various articles remark that China was the first country to have an effective "response" to the pandemic. Thanks to the "effort" of the Chinese people, who were "fighting" and "battling" the virus, China was able to "control" the

spread of the virus domestically and give "precious time for the world to prepare" (*People's Daily Online*, 6 April 2020). Time, which many countries are accused of having wasted (*People's Daily Online*, 1 April 2020).

Xi Jinping assumes a central role in the *People's Daily*'s discourses on China's COVID-19 response (see Tables 2 and 3). The bigram "Xi said" is particularly instructive to understand the role of Xi in the management of the COVID-19 crisis. Xi is often mentioned in the context of international cooperation and diplomacy but rarely associated with the ground-level management of the pandemic. For example, during a visit to Wuhan, Xi was reported giving general policy guidelines on the management of the pandemic while, at the same time, delegating to local party committees and governments' pandemic prevention measures (*People's Daily Online*, 9 April 2020).

From mid-April, the *People's Daily* news coverage shifted from domestic events to the unfolding of the pandemic abroad (*People's Daily Online*, 9 April 2020). From hereafter, Xi is portrayed as a benign international leader working with foreign countries to find a solution to the pandemic. In one article, he is reported calling for greater cooperation and information sharing among G20 leaders and WHO officials (*People's Daily Online*, 7 April 2020). In another, he is described as a cosmopolitan figure who, while caring for the Chinese citizens, is also deeply concerned about "mankind" and "protecting life" of all citizens on earth (*People's Daily Online*, 8 April 2020).

Turning to Figures 2 and 3, it is possible to summarise and visualise the news coverage of the *People's Daily* via word co-occurrence networks. Figure 2 shows the co-occurrences of words among titles from the thirty English articles analysed by this study. The image shows three clusters of titles, all connected by the word "covid." One cluster, composed of "life," "humanity," and "respect," includes three articles that are connected by their rebuttal of Western critiques of Chinese public health management. These articles criticise Western politicians for politicising the crisis and engaging in China "bashing." According to the *People's Daily*, China has a deep respect for life, which is smeared by "racist and xenophobic" westerners that are "hyping up the abuse of
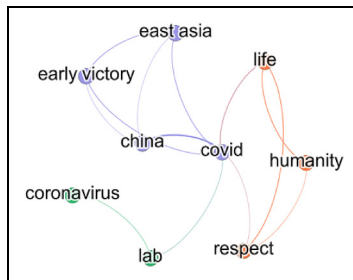

Figure 2. Words Co-occurrence Among English titles.
Note: Data is provided in the online supplemental materials (see Annex I). The co-occurrence data were processed with Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) and VosViewer. The visualisation was made with Gephi.
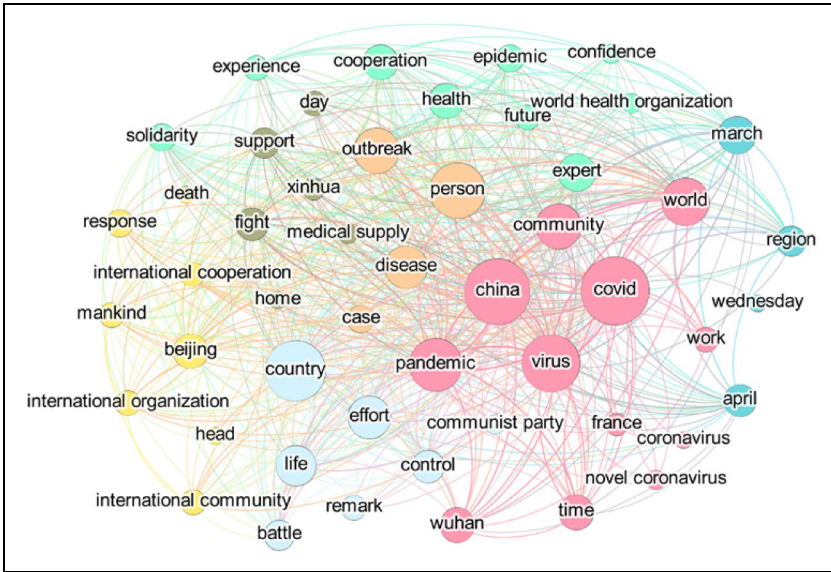
Figure 3. Words Co-occurrence Among English Articles.
Note: Data is provided in the online supplemental materials (see Annex I). The co-occurrence data were processed with Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) and VosViewer. The visualisation was made with Gephi.

human rights rhetoric but turn a deaf ear to the pandemic information China shared at the beginning, wasting the precious time that China has earned" (People's Daily Online, 6, 11, and 17 April).

The next cluster, containing the words "East Asia" and "early victory" encapsulates a series of articles that discuss Chinese cooperation with ASEAN + 3 members. These articles remark, using the words of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, that ASEAN + 3 countries are more integrated than ever and share a "common future" post-pandemic (People's Daily Online, 14 April 2020). These remarks resonate with China's official neighbour-hood diplomacy (Xi, 2014: 287–320). Conforming to the concept of "Asia for Asians" (Jia, 2014; Pei, 2014), the People's Daily presents East Asia as a coherent region with China at the forefront that offers an alternative and successful model for coexistence, cooperation, and prosperity. The People's Daily is employed in support of Chinese foreign policy objectives, presenting China as an alternative model of governance, perhaps best summarised under the so-called "Beijing-Consensus," which proposes close economic cooperation and pragmatic solutions to multifarious problems, while refraining from prescribing recommendations and interfering in other countries' internal affairs (Bell 2015; Turin 2010).

Finally, the last cluster of articles focuses on the rebuttal of conspiracy theories over the origins of the virus. Using statements from Western scientists, including Anthony

Fauci, then in his role as a member of the *White House Coronavirus Task Force*, the *People's Daily* seeks to combat disinformation and debunk the idea that the virus was "created in the laboratory" (*People's Daily Online*, 5 and 21 April 2020). On top of rebutting these claims and criticisms of China's actions, some articles also argue that "shifting blame cannot drive the virus away" (*People's Daily Online*, 18 April 2020), proclaiming that "We cannot blame one country or the other, we have to come together to fight this mysterious virus" (*People's Daily Online*, 20 April 2020). The blame is reflected on the US for generating a "political virus" that hinders the global cooperation that China has been pushing for to defeat "the common enemy." It is implied that the US is not acting responsibly to combat the virus, and by extension is therefore helping the virus in its spread. Propping the US as an example of what *not* to do is perhaps made most apparent in the only COVID-19-related headline from April that was not about China —an article reporting the US to be the first country to reach over 200,000 cases (*People's Daily Online*, 2 April 2020).

Moving to Figure 3, we see the co-occurrences of words among articles. The image displays fifty connected words with more than seven occurrences. In this image, occurrences were counted in binary terms, so if one word occurred multiple times within one article, it was counted as one. This allows us to see the most common words across articles rather than within all articles. In this figure, we notice a series of clusters that have already been discussed in this and the previous sections. For instance, in yellow and dark green, we see a cluster on international cooperation, in light green, a cluster on solidarity, and in celeste, a cluster on crisis management (for figures in colour, please refer to the online version of the article).

By looking at the size of nodes representing occurrences, we identify an important keyword that has not been previously discussed: "person," a tokenised word that also includes "personnel." The weight of this word is a stark reminder of the role of individuals in a pandemic, both as vectors of contagion and first responders. The sacrifices but also the deaths of the Chinese people are highlighted in numerous articles, as well as their contribution to maintaining public healthcare services as well as critical infrastructure. Despite the presence of this discourse, the Chinese people are presented as a collective entity and stories featuring the perspectives of individual citizens are missing from the newspaper.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to understand how the CCP sought to employ state-owned media to communicate with foreign audiences during a period of increasingly hostile international news coverage of China. The study analysed forty-five articles retrieved from the *People's Daily,* a state-controlled newspaper that was deemed to be representative of the CCP leadership's position on political and social issues. To isolate discourses that were exclusively targeted at foreign audiences, the English and Chinese editions of the *People's Daily* were compared to identify common and unique discourses between languages.

The result of the qualitative content analysis suggests that both the English and Chinese editions comprise the discourses of "international aid to other countries," "domestic success in managing the virus," and "rebuttal of Western scepticism and disinformation." The Chinese edition further elaborates on the "reliability and transparency of China's public health system" as well as "China's state capacity to manage the pandemic." The English edition exclusively emphasises "China's role in international cooperation to fight COVID-19" as well as China's "responsible management of the outbreak."

Findings show that the Chinese edition is primarily informative, covering the Chinese government's response to the pandemic soberly and authoritatively, even when debunking Western disinformation. On the contrary, the English edition was found to be more reactionary and defensive. This supports our argument that international media's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a threat to the CCP, which in response sought to use foreign-language editions of state-owned media, such as the *People's Daily's* English edition, in an attempt to communicate with foreign audiences and change how China's role in the global pandemic ought to be perceived.

Using NLP toolkits, we were able to infer several noteworthy communication objectives of the CCP. The observed English articles frequently reference third-party sources, especially foreign media, to persuade foreign audiences. Foreign officials and scientists, for instance, are used repeatedly to debunk the claim that the virus originated from a laboratory in Wuhan. Dominant discourses, such as the one on "China's international aid to other countries" are furthermore employed to support additional Chinese foreign policy objectives, such as the BRI. Similarly, the swift success in combatting the virus not just by China, but other countries in the region, is propped to support China's neighbourhood diplomacy and, by proxy, supporting China's ambitions for regional hegemony.

Xi Jinping assumes an eminent position in the surveyed articles. The automated content analysis shows that the bigram "Xi said" in addition to "Xi Jinping" and "President Xi" is frequent across English articles, usually in the context of international cooperation and diplomacy, but barely in relation to the ground-level management of the pandemic. Numerous articles can be grouped under the discourse of refuting false Western claims and disinformation. These articles further maintain that China has a deep respect for life and that China's image is falsely smeared by racist and xenophobic westerners who ignore the information on the virus that China shared with the international community.

Next to an emphasis on China's suffering under the pandemic, which is common in both languages, numerous English articles emphasise the early victory of China, and the wider East Asian region, against the virus. This resonates with China's official foreign policy of establishing East Asia as a "community of shared destiny," implicitly countering US influence in the region. Especially ASEAN + 3 is frequently mentioned in this regard as a coherent region that offers a successful model for coexistence and cooperation, conforming with Xi's call for an "Asia for Asians."

The US assumes a prominent role, a reference point so to say, in the *People's Daily's* English edition. The US is accused of generating a "political virus," hindering international cooperation in defeating the common enemy of COVID-19. One article goes as far as to present the US as a negative example of how not to react to the pandemic. This corroborates prior studies on the *People's Daily* and other Chinese media that attest to an over-fixation on the US, and a negative bias towards the West in general. Our analysis furthermore confirms prior findings that the *People's Daily* and other Chinese state-owned media predominantly report on successes at home and shortcomings of selected foreign countries, and only report domestic shortcomings that have already been solved or can be blamed on others (cf. Brazys and Dukalskis, 2020; Liu and Yang, 2015). As was the case in prior crises, including the 2003 SARS outbreak, the CCP first attempted to censor information, but soon shifted to a mode of crisis communication, proactively setting the agenda and, where necessary, refuting threatening foreign news coverage.

The above-summarised findings allow a better understanding of how the CCP utilises its state-owned media such as the *People's Daily*, and especially its foreign-language editions, to respond to threatening international news coverage. By April 2020, COVID-19 had emerged into a global crisis with potentially devastating consequences for the CCP's legitimacy. The CCP sought to counter damaging international news coverage by disseminating a positive image of China's role in the pandemic. However, the actual success of China's crisis communication with foreign audiences remains questionable. Despite the *People's Daily* English edition's global reach, it is unlikely that it had been very successful in influencing foreign audiences' perception of China's role in the pandemic, especially in the West, from where hostile coverage of China's handling of the pandemic mainly originated. As stated earlier, the international public's views of China reached historic lows in 2020 (Silver et al., 2020).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing as we write, it is hoped that the present study may serve as an early empirical contribution to future research investigating China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, several limitations should be considered while interpreting our results. Firstly, we focused only on the Chinese and English versions of *People's Daily*. Yet, social media also play an important role in shaping people's perception of contemporary socio-political events. Future research may address China's crisis communication through other Chinese media, such as television and social media, as well as in further language editions of the *People's Daily*. Moreover, we focused on China's reaction to threatening international discourse and its attempt to influence the global perception of China's role in the pandemic through crisis communication, but we were not able to assess the effect of such measures. A considerable portion of the readers of the *People's Daily* English edition likely reside inside the PRC, and the CCP's efforts to counter threatening international news coverage through state-owned media will ultimately be limited despite its sizable propaganda apparatus equipped with substantial funding. Future surveys on the impact and influence of Chinese state-owned media among international audiences may redress this empirical gap.

Lastly, this study followed an explorative approach, descriptively addressing dominant discourses in the *People's Daily's* Chinese and English editions relating to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Additional research may investigate how various discourses in the *People's Daily* have evolved amid contemporary geopolitical dynamics, such as the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration, China's quiet support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or the spring 2022 resurgence of the Omicron variant across China and Beijing's zero-Covid strategy. This may advance our understanding of how the CCP seeks to position itself in the emerging US–China strategic competition and within international organisations.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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