

Media representations of China amid COVID-19: A corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis

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Abstract

Although there has been an increasing number of studies investigating media representations of the COVID-19 outbreak around the world, less international attention has been given to Chinese media outlets' coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak than that of their western counterparts. This study employs corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis to investigate how China is linguistically represented in a state-run English-language news media. The analysis reveals that China is respectively represented as a victim, a fighter, and a cooperative/supportive country with ideological implications for global solidarity and humanitarianism. This study sheds light on the effective use of discursive strategies in promoting international cooperation and building a national image amid a global health crisis. The value of using corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis to examine national image is also highlighted.

Keywords: corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, COVID-19, discourse-historical approach, media representations, national image

Introduction

In December 2019, a cluster of cases of pneumonia, later officially named as Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), was reported in Wuhan, one of the most populous cities in Central China (Huang et al., 2020). On 30 January 2020, a total of 7818 confirmed cases were reported in 19 countries across the world, and thus the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) accepted the advice of the Emergency Committee of WHO and declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (WHO, 2020). In June, after nearly four months of the fight against the contagious disease, Wuhan, the epicentre of China's coronavirus outbreak, reported no new cases, indicating that China has managed to curtail the spread of the disease. However, nearly three years have passed, and in recent days, the number of infections in certain Chinese cities has risen dramatically (Yu, 2022a). China employed the Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy to mount a strong defence against the virus; in contrast, some western countries have chosen to relax their rules and coexist with COVID-19 (Capano et al., 2020).

The pandemic has influenced the world in negative ways culturally, financially, and socially (Naeem and Bhatti, 2020). For example, people were asked to observe social distancing rules, and the service industry suffered from extremely low business for months (Venkatesh and Edirappuli, 2020). Moreover, the infodemic (i.e. a plethora of fake news and misinformation in the media) may spread more quickly and cause problems during the pandemic period because of increased digitisation, including an increase in social media and internet use. Furthermore, China, the country where the virus was first detected, received serious political attacks (Yu, 2022b). Some politicians even claimed that China, together with the WHO, should hold responsibility for the losses caused by the pandemic (Santos and Gatter, 2020). Cases of Sinophobia and xenophobia escalated in virtually all corners of the world (Siu and Chun, 2020). Based on a 14-country Pew Research Center survey, Silver et al. (2020) show that rocketing distrust against China across many developed countries has undermined the national image of the world's most populous nation and second-largest economy.

A rising number of studies have investigated how the COVID-19 outbreak has been reported in the media globally. However, Chinese media outlets' coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak has garnered less international attention than that of their western counterparts, despite greater media attention. This study aims to fill this niche by answering the following research questions using a corpus approach:

1. How is China linguistically represented in Xinhua News Agency?
2. What are the ideological implications of the linguistic representations in Xinhua News Agency?

Literature review

According to Nimmo and Savage (1976), an image refers to a human perceived mental picture or idea with attributes projected by an item, activity, or person. This definition highlights the fact that an image is more of a mental or internal representation rather than physical or external substance. Therefore, the images of a nation refer to the attributes that senders projected and receivers perceived about a nation (Lee, 2002). These two images are intertwined in that the projected image is what people would like the audience or readers to perceive and accept, and the perceived image can help evaluate the effectiveness of the publicity work and its influence on the target community (Manheim and Albritton, 1983). In the context of the COVID-19 international health crisis, projecting a positive national image to the international audience appears to be critical for China as it is the country where the novel coronavirus was first detected. To shift public opinion of China as the virus's spreader, China adopted comparatively strict policies, such as the 'Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy', to combat the pandemic with the goal of strengthening China's reputation as a responsible state which prioritises people's health and safety.

Media can be one of the best channels for countries to shape their national images. In the time of digitalisation and globalisation, people are highly connected thanks to the development of digital technologies. Theoretically, we can reach anyone anytime, anywhere, with the help of the media. As for national images, people around the world know about other nations through various kinds of media rather than travelling or visiting them, especially when international travelling was restricted. What is presented in the media may largely moderate the impression of the audience on a nation. Therefore, this study investigates the media representations of China during COVID-19.

A growing number of studies have investigated the media representations of the COVID-19 outbreak around the world. For instance, employing multiple computer-assisted content analytic approaches, Hart et al. (2020) investigated how politicised and polarised COVID-19 news was presented in American newspapers and on network television from March to May

2020. They discover that while scientists and politicians were presented equally in television news, politicians were more commonly included in newspaper coverage. Likewise, using the topic detection method, Krawczyk et al. (2021) examined the front pages of 172 top internet news sources about the COVID-19-related content across 11 western nations in 2020. They find that about 25.3% of all front-page internet news pieces were COVID-19-related, and not all of the COVID-19 coverage was highly polarised. Similarly, with comparative content analysis, Gabore (2020) examined how COVID-19 prevention in Africa is reported and framed differently in Western and Chinese news media. His findings suggest that while Chinese media coverage of the events is unusually positive, Western media coverage is not primarily negative.

Even with increased media coverage, Chinese media outlets' coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in China has received less international attention than that of their western counterparts. It is, however, important to investigate how the power games are played out in the pandemic narratives from the Chinese news media's perspective, especially with an insider view, because it helps the general public and researchers to understand how such an unprecedented pandemic has been managed in China over the past 3 years. With the use of a corpus-assisted critical approach as the model for discourse analysis in this study, sociopolitical concepts such as ideology, national images, and their relationship with language can be fully investigated. Hence, this study aims to use corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Baker et al., 2008; Partington, 2004) to analyse how China is linguistically represented in the state-run English-language news media, which will be introduced in the method section below.

Method

Data collection

To analyse the influence of COVID-19 on China's national image, we compiled a corpus to investigate the semantic prosody on the term 'China' during the COVID-19 public health crisis. We adopted Factiva – an online global news search engine – to create purposive samples of news reports about the image of China released by Xinhua News Agency (XNA). Via Factiva, we used the keywords 'COVID-19 AND China' to generate a dataset with 8895 pieces of English-language news (2,897,699 words), among which the earliest one was

released on 11 February 2020, and the last one was reported on 19 November 2021 (the date when the data were collected).

The reason why XNA was selected as the source of data was that it is one of China's most influential state-sponsored news outlets, and its target readership includes international and domestic well-educated elites such as diplomats, journalists, and representatives of international organisations (Guo and Huang, 2002). Its journalists are trained to report in the Western style to cater to the preferences of Western readers and make every effort to counteract any negligent misrepresentations of China made by Western media. Hence, XNA was allowed more editorial flexibility compared with other Chinese-language news outlets due to their distinct target readership, though they are both run by the Chinese government. Its editorial flexibility allows it to gear towards Western-style journalism and professionalism to attract a global readership. This could serve the purpose of this study to examine how the state-run news media reports the COVID-19 outbreak and build China's national image to the global audience.

Analytical framework and procedures

The ever-advancing computational techniques enable linguistic research to increase the data collection scale. Thus, corpus linguistics (CL) has emerged. CL introduces computational technologies to help researchers quantitatively investigate large sets of empirical data. When CL methods are adopted to build and analyse corpus with CDA frameworks, the methodology can be named as corpus-assisted CDA (Baker et al., 2008; Partington, 2004). Corpus-assisted CDA can arguably reduce researchers' bias based on their ideological agendas and defuse the 'cherry-picking' charges (Widdowson, 2000).

However, Baker (2012) indicates that we ought to be careful in overstating the ability of CL to reduce researcher bias. Although corpus techniques can improve CDA by enabling analysts to consider a significantly larger quantity of data, enabling them to make more confident statements based on the presence of quantitative patterns, his study (Baker, 2012) has shown that the interpretation and evaluation of quantitative patterns are still likely to be prone to human bias. Baker (2012) indicates:

CDA practitioners view their political commitment (the 'explicit position') as a strength rather than a problem. Taking a post-structuralist stance, it could be argued that bias is unavoidable when conducting social research, and the aim for neutral objectivity is in itself a 'stance'. (p. 225)

Regarding researchers' ideological agendas and specific sociopolitical concepts in this study, we were guided by China's dominant diplomatic concept, 'building a community with a shared future for mankind', and its vision in global health governance, 'building a global community of health for all' (Chan and Yu, 2023; Yu, 2022a; Yu and Tay, 2022).

To operationalise the proposed research, we adopted semantic prosody as the analytical unit to evaluate the sentiments depicting China in the news discourses in the Chinese official news outlets. Semantic prosody, also known as discourse prosody, refers to 'a feature which extends over more than one unit in a linear string' (Stubbs, 2001: 65) or 'a consistent aura of meaning with which a word is imbued by its collocates' (Louw, 1993: 157). Hunston (2007) further suggest that the meaning of a lexicon does not derive from itself but rather from the words it collocates with, and the connotation of a word should be assessed within context. In order to quantify the linguistic patterns of discourse prosodies on the term 'China', we used collocation and concordance techniques. These patterns were then further subjected to qualitative interpretations and explanations informed by Wodak's (2015) discourse-historical approach (DHA), a CDA approach/perspective, in order to reveal any underlying ideologies. DHA can serve as a springboard for further research into other aspects of society by looking into linguistic patterns (Wodak, 2015).

The major characteristic of Wodak's (2015) DHA is that it makes an effort to include existing knowledge of historical sources as well as the social and political environment in which discursive 'events' are situated. Discursive strategies are defined as 'a more or less intentional plan of practices 4 Media International Australia 0(0) (including discursive practices), adopted in order to achieve a particular social, political, psychological, or linguistic goal. Discursive strategies are located at different levels of linguistic organisation and complexity' (Wodak, 2015: 12). Four discursive strategies in DHA were found to be predominant in the adopted concordance analysis. They are the strategies of argumentation (argumentation themes or fallacies), intensification/mitigation (intensifying or minimising the degree of arguments), nomination (denoting the category/status/title of a group/person), and predication (actions/attributes of a group/person) (Wodak, 2015). In the argumentation strategy, the topoi of authority, history, and numbers (Wodak, 2015) were found to legitimise the argument.

Data analysis is divided into two steps. First, frequent collocates (i.e. recurring words near the searched term 'China') were generated using Wordsmith 6.0 (Scott, 2013). The span was set

as five words both on the left and right of the searched term – ‘China’ – and other settings were the same as those in Scott (2013). The minimum frequency for words to be assessed was 100 as these words were the most dominant collocates, constituting 71.6% of all the generated frequent collocates. We only studied lexical words (i.e. adjectives, adverbs, lexical verbs, and nouns) related to China’s national image and disregarded grammatical words such as prepositions and conjunctions. This is because ‘lexical words are the main carriers of information and contribute more to the semantic construction and communication’ (Lam, 2018: 200). Second, after the frequent collocates were obtained, we then moved on to evaluate the semantic prosodies on ‘China’ using concordance analysis, where we analysed the concordance lines of these frequent collocates as informed by Wodak’s (2015) DHA mentioned above. Subsequently, different types of semantic prosodies were quantified and summarised to unveil their interplay and how they contributed to the discourses and sentiments surrounding China’s national image in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. To demonstrate how data analysis was conducted, below is an example of the ‘emphasis on cooperation’ discourse prosody and its contribution to the cooperation discourse:

‘China also pledged to provide Chinese vaccines to African and other developing countries on a priority basis when they become available for deployment,’ he said, adding that China will always work with African countries to promote the China-Africa community with a shared future. (Editorial, 2020d)

In this example, the frequent collocate COMMUNITY has appeared 263 times in the corpus, and nearly half of them (128) co-occur with hyphenated compound words that join China with another country together. This collocational pattern expresses the idea that despite people’s nationality, they all live in one place, the earth as a whole. This supports China’s claim to supply African and other developing countries with Chinese vaccines. Verbal phrases, ‘pledged to provide’, ‘always work with’, and ‘promote the China-Africa community with a shared future’, show China’s emphasis on cooperation, fulfilling the function of predication. Therefore, this instance was coded by analysts as the prosody – ‘emphasis on cooperation’.

Results

The analysis reveals that China is respectively represented as a victim, a fighter, and a cooperative/ supportive country in XNA. These dominant representations have ideological implications for global solidarity and humanitarianism. Here, the term ‘ideological implications’ means the way that discourse is infused with values, viewpoints, agendas, etc. (Fairclough, 1995). That is, depending on the goals of sociopolitical actors, discourse accomplishes/performs ideological work intentionally or unintentionally. ‘Global solidarity’ refers to people’s responsibility around the world to help those who are victims of injustice and to address the underlying issues that cause these injustices (Scholz, 2008); ‘humanitarianism’ indicates the altruistic attitude of helping others (Dorman, 2020). China’s announcement of its vaccine as ‘a global public good’ for other underdeveloped countries (Cohen, 2020) is a typical example of global solidarity and humanitarian deeds, and further detailed analysis of each dominant representation and its ideological implications will be discussed in the following sections. The searched term – ‘China’ – is bolded, and its frequent collocates are italicised in the examples.

China as a victim

China was represented as a victim, especially when the pandemic was first detected in Wuhan. Three discourse prosodies, including ‘victim’ (#1), ‘other countries’ assistance’ (#2), and ‘politicisation’ (#3), are intertwined with one another contributing to this victim discourse (Table 1). This discourse highlights that China is a victim of the pandemic, and other countries tried to rescue China from the crisis. It advocates not to politicise the pandemic and attack China as it is a victim (see Examples 1–7).

1. China is also a victim of this deadly invisible enemy. How can China be responsible for this outbreak?’ he said, pointing out that some U.S. politicians used the lawsuits to seek political interests (Penh, 2020).

2. China reported 889 new confirmed cases of novel coronavirus infection and 118 deaths on Thursday from 31 provincial-level regions and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Editorial, 2020j).

3. Macron noted that France has provided a batch of medical supplies to China and stands ready to provide more assistance (Editorial, 2020b).

4. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stressed that the international community must continue to cooperate at this difficult and uncertain time, adding that his country is always ready to provide assistance to China (Editorial, 2020l).

5. Some U.S. politicians have recently alleged that China should be held accountable and compensate other countries for the COVID-19 pandemic. Such ludicrous and groundless accusations are merely an attempt by them to shift blame to China and distract from their own inadequate response (Editorial, 2020h).

6. However, politicians of some countries turned a blind eye to the study and kept spreading the anti-China political virus, Liu said. Those politicians from the beginning have politicised the pandemic, stigmatised China with terms such as ‘Wuhan virus’, and weaponised origin tracing to bash China, Liu said, adding that a few have even peddled the so-called lab leak theory (Editorial, 2021a).

Table 1. Discourse prosodies on the term ‘China’.

#	Discourse prosodies (3 items)	Example of collocates	Freq.
1	China is a victim (9 items)	CASE, CONFIRM, HIT, INCREASE, LATEST, LOCAL, NUMBER, OUTBREAK, SPREAD	2, 287
2	Many countries assisted China (10 items)	AID, ASSISTANCE, DONATION, GRATITUDE, HELP, MEDICAL, PROVIDE, RECEIVE, SUPPLY, SUPPORT	1474
3	Politicisation of the pandemic makes it worse (3 items)	ACCOUNTABLE, POLITICAL, VIRUS	385
		Total	4146

7. Xi expressed China’s deep gratitude for the care and sympathies as well as the considerable help and support the South Korean government and society have offered to China since the COVID-19 outbreak (Editorial, 2020a).

The victim discourse casts China in the role of a victim, which is evidenced by the ‘victim’ (#1) discourse prosody. Frequent collocates such as OUTBREAK, HIT, and SPREAD are used to express the occurrence of the pandemic. XNA ‘humanised’ COVID-19 in its use of the WAR metaphor ‘enemy’, representing it as someone who needs to be attacked, making it

more tangible and hateful to humankind (Example 1). The phrase ‘a victim of this deadly invisible enemy’ positions China as a nation that was hurt by the pandemic. Both the labels ‘enemy’ and ‘victim’ serve as a nomination strategy to distinguish between the out-group (COVID-19) and the in-group (humankind), the evil and the good, so as to build solidarity globally and evoke empathy from the in-group members (Nartey, 2019). By categorising COVID-19 as the out-group (Example 1), it helps to bridge international borders/boundaries and integrate the in-group members into one shared geographical space with ideological implications for global solidarity. Yu (2022a) suggests that the use of metaphors is a common practice in journalism when reporting the news about COVID-19 to heighten the emotional intensity of humankind. Collocates such as CASE, CONFIRM, INCREASE, LATEST, LOCAL, and NUMBER are used to report the latest number of locally diagnosed patients (Example 2). Statistics such as ‘889’, ‘118’, and ‘31’ are used to amplify the danger of COVID-19 and its casualties via the topos of numbers.

When COVID-19 was only detected in China, many countries volunteered to help and provide firm support to China, indicating global solidarity and humanitarianism, which is evidenced by the ‘other countries’ assistance’ (#2) discourse prosody, based on frequent collocates such as AID, ASSISTANCE, and DONATION. XNA drew on the voices of world leaders such as France’s President Emmanuel Macron and Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who volunteered to provide assistance to China (Examples 3–4). Verbal phrases such as ‘provide assistance’, ‘stands ready’, and ‘cooperate’ are attributed to France and Canada, realising the function of predication (Examples 3–4). The deontic modal ‘must’ intensifies the obligation of the international community to cooperate, serving as an intensification strategy (Example 4). The fact that these world leaders come from the West shows that both the East and the West share the common value of humanitarianism to help each other in need. China received their support and expressed its gratitude to them, which is expressed by frequent collocates such as GRATITUDE and RECEIVE. For instance, in Example 7, the verbal phrase ‘expressed China’s deep gratitude’ shows China’s gratitude towards South Korea, one of the countries which offered assistance, care, and support to China when COVID-19 first occurred, fulfilling the function of predication. The victim discourse denounces any politicisation of the pandemic, which is like victim-blaming making the pandemic situation of millions of people dying worse (Abbas, 2022) and, consequently, hurting the victim, China, without mercy. It is evidenced by the ‘politicisation’ (#3) discourse prosody, based on frequent collocates such as ACCOUNTABLE, POLITICAL, and VIRUS.

For instance, the frequent collocate ACCOUNTABLE shows that being accountable is a kind of action that China is expected to undertake. Similarly, the ethical wrongdoings of some politicians, such as ‘politicised the pandemic’, ‘stigmatised China’, ‘weaponised origin tracing to bash China’, and ‘peddled the so-called lab leak theory’ are depicted by XNA to manifest these politicians’ politicisation of the pandemic and imply that they deviate from the moral norms, realising the function of predication (Examples 5–6). Other words used to describe their actions, such as ‘alleged’ and ‘accusations’, imply that their argument stated as a fact is without proof (Example 5). The adjectives ‘ludicrous and groundless’ clearly manifest this point (Example 5). XNA also used the ‘anti-China political virus’ to characterise the nature of the politicians’ certain actions, amplifying the danger of their actions in attacking China, reflected in the frequent collocates POLITICAL and VIRUS (Example 6). While XNA represented China as a victim at the beginning of the outbreak, it implied that those who attacked China without sympathy were accompaniments of the out-group COVID-19, suggesting that they abandoned global solidarity and humanitarian values. In response to foreign hostility, XNA claimed that the politicians’ purpose is to shift their citizens’ attention from their leaders’ incapability in containing the pandemic to blaming China, which is illustrated by phrases such as ‘distract from their own inadequate response’, ‘shift blame to China’, and ‘seek political interests’ (Examples 1 and 5).

China as a fighter

Three discourse prosodies, including ‘action on tackling COVID-19’ (#4), ‘recovering the economy’ (#5), and ‘priority’ (#6), are intertwined with one another contributing to the fighter discourse (Table 2). China was represented as a fighter against the pandemic, highlighting that China took measures to minimise its impact on humankind and economy and prioritised people’s safety and health (see Examples 8–13).

8. Kuwait is pleased to see the progress in China’s fight against COVID-19, believing that China is able to win a complete victory, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said on Thursday (Editorial, 2020k).

9. Pronkina Olga has lived in China for many years, working as a Russian expert at the Gansu University of Political Science and Law. She appreciates the efficient and orderly COVID-19 control and prevention work of the Chinese government. ‘Chinese government has taken the most decisive and active prevention and control measures and effectively contained the epidemic. These measures have not only helped China recover its economy quickly, but also

made an important contribution to world public health,’ said Pronkina Olga (Editorial, 2021b).

10. Xi pointed out that the Chinese nation has experienced many ordeals in its history, but has never been overwhelmed, and that the impact of the epidemic on China’s economy is temporary and the fundamentals of China’s long-term sound economic growth remain unchanged (Editorial, 2020g).

Table 2. Discourse prosodies on the term ‘China’

#	Discourse prosodies (3 items)	Example of collocates	Freq.
4	Action on tackling COVID-19 (20 items)	ACHIEVEMENT, APPROVE, BATTLE, CONFIDENCE, CONTAIN, CONTROL, EFFECTIVE, EFFORT, FIGHT, HOSPITAL, ISSUE, LAUNCH, MEASURE, POSITIVE, PREVENTION, PROGRESS, RESPONSE, STRONG, SUCCESS, VACCINATION	5307
5	China tried to recover its economy (24 items)	BUSINESS, COMMERCE, COMPANY, ECONOMIC, ENTERPRISE, EXPAND, EXPORT, GOODS, GROWTH, IMPORT, INVESTMENT, LARGEST, MANUFACTURE, MARKET, OUTPUT, POLICY, PRODUCT, PRODUCTION, RECOVER, RECOVERY, RESUMPTION, SALES, SECOND, SERVICE	5207
6	China prioritised people’s safety and health (2 items)	PEOPLE’S, TOP	187
		Total	10,701

11. Since the outbreak, China has always prioritised its people’s safety and health, given full play to its institutional advantages, mobilised the entire country, and adopted the most comprehensive, rigorous, and thorough prevention and control measures, Xi said (Gao, 2020).

12. China has given its top priority to ensure the safety and health of the Chinese people and has created a window of opportunity for other countries to intensify preparedness (Li and Liu, 2020).

13. China has put people’s life safety and health first, decisively launched an all-out war against the pandemic, and adopted ‘hard core’ prevention and control measures that are the most comprehensive, stringent, and thorough, which have effectively blocked the chain of virus transmission (Editorial, 2021e).

China’s efforts were highlighted in XNA, which are evidenced by the ‘action on tackling COVID-19’ (#4) discourse prosody, based on frequent collocates such as CONTROL,

EFFORT, and MEASURE. The handling of the pandemic is represented in a WAR frame, with metaphors such as ‘fight’ and ‘victory’ (Example 8). In Example 9, phrases such as ‘the efficient and orderly COVID-19 control and prevention work’, ‘the most decisive and active prevention and control measures’, and ‘effectively contained the epidemic’ are attributed to China, realising the function of predication (Example 9). The belief and confidence in China’s efforts and capability in handling the pandemic were quoted from other authorities outside China, evidenced by frequent collocates such as CONFIDENCE. For instance, in Example 8, XNA quoted ‘Kuwait’, who believed that China would win this war. The position titles (e.g. ‘Kuwaiti Foreign Minister’) and full names (e.g. ‘Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah’) can validate his saying via the topos of authority.

Another prominent discourse prosody that shows China’s efforts in recovering its economy is the ‘recovering the economy’ (#5) one, based on frequent collocates such as BUSINESS, COMPANY, and RECOVERY. Frequent collocates such as RECOVER and RECOVERY were used to illustrate China’s efforts in reviving its economy by taking various measures (Example 9). China’s actions in Example 9 explained why China recovered its economy so quickly. The full name of the speaker (‘Pronkina Olga’), as well as her position title and institution name (‘a Russian expert at the Gansu University of Political Science and Law’), can strengthen the illocutionary force via the topos of authority. Frequent collocates such as LARGEST and SECOND highlight that China is the second-largest economy in the world, and COVID-19 will not change its status. Here, XNA reported what Xi Jinping said about the preferred course of action for other countries is to have faith in China’s economic recovery and continue to collaborate with it (Example 10).

Frequent collocates such as ECONOMIC and GROWTH highlight China’s robust economy (Example 10). The adjective ‘temporary’ in Example 10 describes the impact of COVID-19 on China only lasts for a limited time, realising the mitigation function. XNA also used a topos of history via Xi’s saying to highlight what China has gone through in the past and its incredible perseverance (Example 10). This topos was built on the premise that China could persist and thrive with economic growth even in hard historical times, such as Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward (Kwan and Chow, 1995). Through a reductionist mechanism using the topos of history as teacher, the historical hard times were naturally projected onto the present pandemic period. Because history has taught us a lesson, and therefore, specific action should be performed, like fighting the pandemic, thereby contributing to the fighter discourse.

China's top priority in fighting the pandemic war is people's safety and health, which is evidenced by the 'priority' (#6) discourse prosody, based on the two frequent collocates PEOPLE'S and TOP. China's priority of people's 'safety and health' is emphasised repeatedly in the news reportage (Examples 11–13), though they are not seen and being used as frequent collocates. This is because SAFETY has only occurred 54 times (the minimum frequency for words to be assessed was 100), and HEALTH mostly occurs in proper nouns (e.g. 'the National Health Commission of China') within the span (five words both on the left and right of the searched term – 'China') (Example 13), which were disregarded for analysis.

Humanitarian actions such as 'prioritised its people's safety and health', 'given full play to its institutional advantages', 'mobilised the entire country', 'adopted the most comprehensive, rigorous and thorough prevention and control measures', and 'created a window of opportunity for other countries to intensify preparedness' are attributed to China, fulfilling the function of predication (Examples 11–12). As Example 13 indicates, China has adopted 'hard core' prevention and control measures', such as the Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy, built several temporary hospitals within a short period of time, and launched different vaccination programs to approve the emergency use of vaccines (Jun and Ji, 2020), to achieve its people-first measures to contain and tackle the pandemic. This prosody has echoes China's value of 'people first and lives first', announced by China's president, Xi Jinping, at the 2021 Global Health Summit (Xi, 2021). Similarly, Chan and Yu (2023) indicate that the value of 'people first and lives first' has reflected a dominant concept of China's global health governance system – 'building a global community of health for all' amid COVID-19.

China as a cooperative and supportive country

China was also represented as a cooperative and supportive country. This occurs at a later stage after China has successfully put the pandemic under control. Three discourse prosodies, including 'China's assistance' (#7), 'emphasis on cooperation' (#8), and 'China's global tracing' (#9), are intertwined with one another contributing to this cooperation discourse (Table 3). This discourse highlights that China is a cooperative and supportive country that assists the international community when they are in need and emphasises cooperation, and actively participates in global tracing (see Examples 14–19).

Table 3. Discourse prosodies on the term 'China'.

#	Discourse prosodies (3 items)	Example of collocates	Freq.
7	China assisted other countries (27 items)	AID, ANNOUNCE, APPRECIATE, ASSISTANCE, BATCH, BILLION, BOOST, COMMIT, COMMITMENT, DONATE, DONATION, DOSE, EQUIPMENT, EXPERT, GRATITUDE, HELP, LEARN, MASK, MEDICAL, MILLION, PROVIDE, RECEIVE, SEND, SUPPLY, SUPPORT, TEAM, VACCINE	8634
8	China emphasises cooperation (16 items)	ACTIVELY, BUILD, COMMUNITY, CONTRIBUTION, COOPERATION, ENHANCE, DEEPEN, FRIENDSHIP, INTERNATIONAL, JOINT, PARTNER, PARTNERSHIP, SHARE, SOLIDARITY, TIE, TOGETHER	5320
9	China is active in global tracing (7 items)	DATA, GLOBAL, INFORMATION, OPEN, RELEASE, SHARE, TIME	1525
		Total	15,479

14. As COVID-19 spreads across the world, China has intensified its international cooperation under the philosophy of building a community with a shared future for mankind (Editorial, 2020f).

15. In his remarks, Xi called on China and Africa to defeat the novel coronavirus with solidarity and cooperation. He said the two sides should work together to build a China-Africa community of health for all and take their comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership to a greater height (Editorial, 2020c).

16. China had sent 29 medical expert teams to 27 countries and offered assistance to 150 countries and four international organisations as of May 31. It also decided to make any China-made COVID-19 vaccine a global public good when it is ready for application (Editorial, 2020i).

17. China will provide 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines for the world and offer 100 million U.S. dollars to COVAX throughout this year, Chinese President Xi Jinping said Thursday in a written message to the first meeting of the international forum on COVID-19 vaccine cooperation (Editorial, 2021c).

18. China on Monday released a detailed timeline of the country's response to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), chronicling the main facts and measures it has taken in the global joint anti-virus efforts (Editorial, 2020e).

19. They appreciated China's active participation in global tracing into the origins of COVID-19 with an open and transparent attitude, expressing belief that such studies should be led by global scientists and medical experts (Editorial, 2021d).

China's humanitarian assistance was reported by XNA, which is evidenced by the 'China's assistance' (#7) discourse prosody, based on frequent collocates such as SUPPORT, DONATE, and ASSISTANCE. Frequent collocates, such as PROVIDE and SEND, have illustrated China's supportive role (Examples 16 and 17). Verbal phrases such as 'sent 29 medical expert teams', 'offered assistance', 'make any China-made COVID-19 vaccine a global public good', 'provide 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines', and 'offer 100 million U.S. dollars' are some of the examples that used as a predication strategy to highlight China's assistance to other countries by sending them medical supplies, vaccines, and expert teams (Examples 16 and 17). Statistics such as '29', '27', '150', '2 billion', and '100 million' are also used to amplify China's assistance to other countries via the topos of numbers (Examples 16 and 16). In addition to assistance, Examples 16 and 17 also highlight China's disagreement on vaccine nationalism, 'a situation where countries push to get first access to a supply of vaccines and potentially hoard key inputs for vaccine production' (Hafner et al., 2020: 3). They echo China's announcement of its vaccine as 'a global public good', emphasising its humanitarian assistance to other underdeveloped countries (Cohen, 2020). Medical and financial assistance to COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access) led by the WHO ensuring global equitable access to vaccines is another highlight of China's humanitarian assistance. XNA highlighted that other countries received China's support and expressed their gratitude to it, manifested by the frequent collocates such as GRATITUDE. In addition to China's humanitarian assistance, its cooperative efforts were highlighted by XNA, indicating global solidarity, which is evidenced by the 'emphasis on cooperation' (#8) discourse prosody, based on frequent collocates such as RELATIONS, FRIENDSHIP, and SOLIDARITY. For instance, China's emphasis on cooperation is manifested by the frequent collocates of China, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, in Example 14. Other similar phrases belonging to the same semantic field of cooperation include 'solidarity and cooperation', 'work together', and 'cooperative partnership' in Examples 14 and 15. Yu and Tay (2022) also indicate that words in this semantic field are the most frequent in the remarks given by China's foreign ministry spokespersons. The cooperative spirit has echoed China's dominant diplomatic concept, 'building a community with a shared future for mankind', and its vision in global health governance, 'building a global community of health for all' (Chan and Yu, 2023; Yu, 2022a; Yu and Tay, 2022), which are emphasised by the frequent collocates BUILD and COMMUNITY in Examples 14, 15, and 18. XNA also reported China's active participation in global tracing into the origins of COVID-19, which is evidenced by the 'China's global tracing' (#9) discourse prosody, based on frequent

collocates such as GLOBAL, INFORMATION, and DATA. For instance, RELEASE and SHARE are frequent collocates that describe China's action in sharing information for global tracing, fulfilling the function of predication (Example 18). The verbal phrase 'released a detailed timeline' in Example 18 is a good example. The adjectives 'open and transparent' similarly serve as a predication strategy to describe China's attitude towards global tracing (Example 19). Example 19 also highlights that 'global scientists and medical experts' should be the ones who are responsible for the global tracing instead of politicians who manipulate it to gain political interests.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has used a corpus-assisted CDA to examine the linguistic representations of China amid a global health crisis and their ideological implications in XNA. The representations of China as a victim, a fighter, and a cooperative/supportive country are found to be predominant, working in tandem to shape the national image of China. These dominant representations have ideological implications for both global solidarity and humanitarianism, intertwined with the wider discursive context.

Regarding the ideological aspect, the media representations of China's national image amid COVID-19 have echoed China's dominant diplomatic concept, 'building a community with a shared future for mankind', and its vision in global health governance, 'building a global community of health for all', highlighting global solidarity and humanitarianism (Chan and Yu, 2023; Yu, 2022a; Yu and Tay, 2022). Despite their differences from the traditional model of nation-state governance that emphasises competition and a zero-sum mentality, China's success in putting the pandemic under control has proven these concepts to be useful. Amid the re-emergence of COVID-19 in some cities, China employed the Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy, which is very different from the Western coexistence approach.

Regarding the discursive context, XNA is a state-run news media that serves to communicate Beijing's message to the world. The projected image is what Beijing would like the audience or readers to perceive and even accept during different periods of time amid a global health crisis when COVID-19 was first detected in China. XNA is one of the best channels for China, along with the spokespersons of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to shape its national image (Yu and Tay, 2022). The main purpose of Chinese English-language newspapers/newsmagazine is for 'foreigners to know about China's policies and study

China's political situation and development trends' (Wang, 2003: 50). XNA has evolved in tandem with its shift in strategic diplomacy from cautious and low-profile to assertive and proactive (Yu and Tay, 2022).

As stated at the outset, little attention has been given to Chinese media outlets' coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak. Different from existing studies, this study has systematically examined the linguistic patterns/tendencies used to describe China's national image in a large COVID-19 news corpus. This study has demonstrated the value of using corpus-assisted CDA to examine media representations of a nation during a global health crisis, and it can arguably defuse the 'cherry-picking' charges based on researchers' agendas (Baker, 2012; Widdowson, 2000). With regard to a limitation of this research, this study has only investigated XNA targeted at international and domestic educated readers. Future research can consider investigating the effectiveness of the publicity work about a country's national image amid COVID-19 and its influence on the target community by conducting experimental research.

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