https://doi.org/10.37420/j.cer.2024.114

Challenges of and Innovative Strategies for Telling China's Story under the New Situation: A Perspective Based on COVID-19 and Corpus-Assisted Analysis

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Abstract:
Effectively narrating China's story and constructing a discourse system for Chinese-style modernization are essential requirements of the era for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional framework and the text analysis software AntConc 4.2.4 to examine 2,092 COVID-19-related reports on China published by five major media outlets in New Zealand, South Africa, and Thailand from December 2019 to August 2024. By comparing the attitudes and variations in media coverage of China before and after the pandemic, the research offers innovative strategies for better narrating China's story and advancing the development of an international discourse system aligned with Chinese-style modernization.

Keywords:
Effectively narrating China's story, Discourse system, Corpus analysis, COVID-19

1. Introduction

An international discourse system serves as an external representation of a nation's comprehensive national strength and a critical indicator of its soft power. With the sustained growth of China's socio-economic development and overall national capabilities, the country has increasingly emphasized the strategic role of shaping international public opinion. By adhering to foundational principles while fostering innovation, China seeks to leverage the transformative opportunities afforded by technological advancements to reform global communication paradigms. The aim is to construct a distinctive international discourse system aligned with the principles of Chinese-style modernization, securing international discourse power commensurate with its national strength and enhancing its global stature and influence.

2. Current Challenges in Telling China's Story

In recent years, China has achieved significant progress in international communication. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed several areas for improvement in building an international discourse sys-

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tem, fostering strategic partnerships, developing professional teams, and refining communication strategies.

2.1. Absence of a Comprehensive International Discourse System

The global discourse landscape remains characterized by the dominance of Western narratives, with Western ideologies and the English language maintaining a privileged position[1]. China is currently at a pivotal stage in its pursuit of national rejuvenation, marked by rapid advancements across political, economic, cultural, and technological domains. However, breaking through entrenched historical barriers to secure a narrative power commensurate with its comprehensive national strength remains a formidable challenge. At present, China has yet to establish a systematic, multi-dimensional, and diversified international discourse system[2]. Its international voice remains relatively isolated and reactive, making it susceptible to distortion and defamation by Western politicians and media.

2.2. Need for a Network of Neutral Strategic Partners

Countries in Europe, North America, and Japan often align with the United States due to shared ideologies and values, readily accepting its leadership and agenda. This alignment frequently results in distorted narratives about China under the guise of free speech, denying the successes of China's reform and development while discrediting its model and path. As the largest developing country and the world’s second-largest economy, China should leverage its foundational international relations to unite emerging economies and developing nations. Through mutual respect and factual storytelling, these countries can be guided to adopt a balanced perspective on China's path, model, and experiences, offering support at critical moments to amplify China’s voice.

2.3. Lack of High-Caliber International Communication Talent and Teams

Effectively narrating China’s story and enhancing its international discourse power requires a substantial pool of highly skilled professionals with strong political awareness, foreign language proficiency, and expertise in areas such as journalism, video production, new media communication, cross-cultural interaction, and media operations. Despite having a vast media workforce, China faces a shortage of top-tier talent and professional teams specializing in international communication[3]. Additionally, globally influential Chinese media institutions remain few in number. This lack of resources hinders China's ability to respond swiftly to unexpected "black swan" and "gray rhino" events, seizing the high ground in international discourse to protect its image as a peaceful, responsible global power.

2.4. Need for Improved Channels and Strategies in International Communication

In the age of digitalization and multimedia, the rise of modern technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, and blockchain has reshaped the global communication landscape. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook have revolutionized how information is disseminated. China must capitalize on the opportunities offered by digital technologies to advance differentiated, targeted communication strategies tailored to specific countries. This includes fostering diversified, multidimensional communication, integrating new technologies, and utilizing data visualization in news reporting. Expanding international communication channels will help China build a broader circle of influence in global public opinion.

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3. Research Design

3.1. Research Corpus

This study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional framework and the Factiva database to retrieve articles containing "China" as a keyword. The dataset includes reports from two South African media outlets (The Cape Times and The Mercury), two New Zealand outlets (The New Zealand Herald and Radio New Zealand), and one Thai outlet (The Bangkok Post), spanning the period from December 27, 2019, to August 25, 2024. The topics focus on "COVID-19" and "epidemic outbreak." After deduplication and excluding irrelevant reports, a self-built corpus was created (see Table 1). The themes across the three countries are similar, with consistent timeframes, comparable volumes of documents, and character counts, ensuring strong comparability.

Table 1: Corpus Information

Country	Source	Article Number		Type Number
South Africa	*The Cape Times*	375	Total 743	384457
	The Mercury	368		
New Zealand	*The New Zealand Herald*	370	Total 709	465144
	Radio New Zealand	339		
Thailand	*The Bangkok Post*	640		424187

3.2. Research Methodology

Using AntConc 4.2.4 as the analytical tool, this study examines high-frequency content words, selecting December 7, 2022 (when the "10 New Measures" policy was implemented), as a key point for analysis. The study performs the following steps:

1. Analyzes the textual representation of attitudes toward China’s COVID-19 response.

2. Explores discourse practices, focusing on text production, dissemination, and reception across the five media outlets.

3. Examines the social practices behind the reports to understand the relationship between media narratives and socio-cultural contexts, identifying similarities, differences, and ideological factors in the construction of China’s image..

4.Research Process and Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

High-frequency words serve as indicators of the focal issues or concerns of the discourse’s subject, directly

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contributing to the construction of the subject's image. This study involves the analysis of the top 15 high-frequency content words, as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Top 15 High-Frequency Words in Three English Media Outlets (Prior to "10 New Measures")

	Thailand		*South Africa*		*New Zealand*	
Rank	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words
1	china	2758/0.71	china	3878/1.08	china	3359/0.77
2	thailand	1630/0.42	covid	1993/0.55	new zealand	2590/0.59
3	covid	1569/0.40	south africa	1580/0.44	coronavirus	2251/0.51
4	chinese	1529/0.39	people	1322/0.37	people	1774/0.40
5	coronavirus	1166/0.30	virus	1295/0.36	covid	1763/0.40
6	government	1032/0.26	countries	1227/0.34	virus	1527/0.35
7	virus	1021/0.26	health	1184/0.33	health	1510/0.34
8	people	988/0.25	coronavirus	1177/0.33	chinese	1219/0.28
9	health	986/0.25	global	1138/0.32	wuhan	1018/0.23
10	thai	954/0.24	chinese	1130/0.31	government	1005/0.23
11	baht	939/0.24	pandemic	976/0.27	outbreak	947/0.22
12	billion	786/0.20	outbreak	784/0.22	travel	766/0.17
13	economic	764/0.20	african	729/0.20	country	670/0.15
14	countries	729/0.19	economic	728/0.20	countries	645/0.15
15	global	668/0.17	international	659/0.18	percent	591/0.13

Table 3: Top 15 High-Frequency Words in Three English Media Outlets (Following "10 New Measures")

	Thailand		*South Africa*		*New Zealand*	
Rank	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words	Content words	Frequency/ Frequency per 100 words
1	china	292/1.02	china	460/1.83	china	449/1.43
2	covid	261/0.91	covid	299/1.19	covid	343/1.09
3	chinese	258/0.9	people	109/0.43	new zealand	205/0.65
4	thailand	166/0.58	chinese	105/0.42	chinese	138/0.44
5	tourists	152/0.53	beijing	102/0.41	health	115/0.37
6	tourism	115/0.4	health	93/0.37	people	108/0.34
7	health	89/0.31	economy	73/0.29	travellers	92/0.29
8	travel	80/0.28	infections	63/0.25	testing	87/0.28
9	travellers	77/0.27	virus	62/0.25	government	74/0.24
10	international	69/0.24	economic	61/0.24	country	67/0.21
11	visitors	67/0.23	policy	60/0.24	percent	64/0.20
12	government	66/0.23	epidemic	59/0.23	market	59/0.19
13	phuket	66/0.23	restrictions	59/0.23	travel	59/0.19
14	public	65/0.23	measures	58/0.23	countries	56/0.18
15	thai	65/0.23	pandemic	58/0.23	restrictions	54/0.17

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Before the implementation of the "10 New Measures" policy, the term "China" consistently ranked as the most frequently used term in the reports of the three countries' media, followed by "Covid" and "Coronavirus," along with the respective names of the countries. This pattern reflects the media's significant attention to the outbreak and spread of the pandemic in China. Additionally, terms such as "People," "Health," and "Economic" were prevalent in the high-frequency word lists, indicating a central focus on public health and the socio-economic implications of the crisis.

In The Bangkok Post, the high-frequency word list included terms like "Baht" and "Billion," which are directly tied to Thailand's economy, highlighting the media's emphasis on the pandemic's impact on the national economy. The frequent occurrence of the term "Government" underscores the importance of governmental responses to the public health crisis. In South African media, words such as "Countries," "Global," and "International" were more common, reflecting a concern for the broader global consequences of the pandemic and a focus on international cooperation and global health security. In New Zealand, the term "Wuhan" stood out, signaling a specific focus on the pandemic's origins. Additionally, the term "Travel" appeared only in New Zealand's high-frequency list, underscoring the country’s particular concern with the restrictions on international travel imposed by the pandemic.

Following the introduction of the "10 New Measures" policy, while "China" remained the most frequently used term across the media of the three countries, there were noticeable shifts in the subsequent terms. Thai media, in particular, exhibited a pronounced change, with terms related to the tourism industry—such as "Tourists," "Tourism," "Travel," "Travellers," and "Phuket"—becoming more prominent. This shift indicates the sensitivity of Thailand's tourism sector to changes in China's pandemic control policies and reflects the strong influence of the "10 New Measures" on China's policy landscape.

In South African media, the terms "Policy," "Restrictions," "Measure," "Economic," and "Economy" became more frequent, signaling a shift in focus toward China's specific pandemic measures and their economic consequences. The inclusion of terms like "Infections" and "Deaths" further suggests a heightened concern over the potential negative effects of the "10 New Measures" policy on public health and mortality rates.

In contrast to South African media, New Zealand media shifted its focus from the broader impacts of the pandemic to economic recovery and the resurgence of tourism, while also emphasizing concerns regarding the health and safety of international travel. This transition underscores New Zealand media's attention to the post-pandemic reconstruction of the economy and social order, alongside a continued emphasis on public health and safety considerations.

4.2. Interpretive Analysis

Interpretive practice explores how news outlets convey information through the selection of sources and how this influences audience receptivity to certain viewpoints. Different information sources represent diverse stances and values, and analyzing these sources helps reveal the ideological operations behind the reporting. Thai media demonstrate a certain degree of diversity in their use of information sources. While some reports provide clear data and sources, enhancing transparency and credibility, others are more ambiguous or fail to explicitly identify their sources.

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Similarly, South African media exhibit variability in their sourcing practices. Some reports enhance information transparency and credibility by presenting clear data and multiple perspectives. However, certain reports also feature vague sourcing or lack specific data to support their claims. In contrast, New Zealand media typically utilize specific and precise sources, particularly when quoting statements from corporate or organizational leaders, significantly boosting the credibility and transparency of the reporting. However, even within New Zealand media, some reports discussing social phenomena or market responses lack clear sources or sufficient supporting data.

4.3. Explanatory Analysis

Explanatory Analysis reveals how discourse reflects, reproduces, or challenges social power structures and ideologies. Before and after the implementation of the "10 New Measures," the three countries' media centered their coverage around "China," highlighting its significant role in global public health events and political-economic dynamics. The shift in China's pandemic policies has had a profound global impact, and the heightened attention from these media outlets reflects the transnational challenges posed by China's pandemic situation in the context of globalization, particularly concerning the economy, travel, and health.

Thailand, heavily reliant on tourism, faced significant economic repercussions from the pandemic in China. Thai media emphasized economic-related terminology, underscoring the importance of economic stability. South Africa, as a BRICS member, depends on international cooperation and global markets, with its media focusing on global terms that direct societal attention to the impact of the pandemic on international relations and the economy. In contrast, New Zealand media, following the implementation of the "10 New Measures," shifted focus to economic recovery and the restoration of tourism, highlighting relevant terms and guiding public attention to the post-pandemic economic restart and health safety, demonstrating a strong emphasis on public health and economic development.

5. Suggestions for Improving the Multi-Dimensional Approach to Telling the Chinese Story

5.1. Cross-Border Collaboration to Build a China-Centric International Communication System

Currently, most of the academic theories and frameworks in international communication studies are proposed by Western scholars[4], often carrying a strong ideological bias in favor of Western discourse power. Under the guidance of the spirit of building a socialist modernized nation, China's social, economic, and cultural sectors have entered a new historical phase. The academic community should strive to explore new international communication theories, encouraging collaboration across sectors such as media, business, government, and education. By fostering cross-border cooperation and collaborative innovation, China can better guide the international communication practices of its unique modernization. With the advent of the all-media era and the rise of Generation Z, digital empowerment has dramatically transformed international communication, including changes in media, audiences, and forms of communication[5]. Therefore, it is crucial to accelerate the construction of an international communication system that aligns with China's national condi-

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tions and reflects its unique characteristics.

5.2. Promote Cultural Confidence, Integrating Domestic and International Publicity

China's vast territory, beautiful landscapes, rich history, and long-standing cultural heritage are the foundation of its national identity. The Chinese people are hardworking and intelligent, with a vast array of classic stories, revolutionary histories, reform and opening-up tales, and heroic deeds. To effectively tell the Chinese story, it is essential to first cultivate cultural and national confidence internally. This involves actively uncovering cultural heritage, accurately extracting its core spirit, and creatively presenting it in new forms. For example, Chen Lin and Yuan Shi took inspiration from the Sui dynasty's music and dance figurines to choreograph the classical dance Palace Banquet in Tang Dynasty which was successfully selected as one of the top 10 national IPs in 2021. Such classical materials can be included in international publicity resources, showcased at events such as New Year galas hosted by Chinese embassies or large international cultural exchange conferences. A coordinated system for domestic and international publicity should be built, ensuring mutual promotion and collaboration to effectively tell the Chinese story.

5.3. Targeted Strategies to Improve the Efficiency of Telling the Chinese Story

The world comprises 233 countries and regions, each with its own political, economic, cultural, and religious characteristics. Despite these differences, there is a broad consensus among most countries and peoples on issues such as peace, development, and the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity. China has consistently demonstrated its commitment to maintaining the existing international order and promoting regional peace and stability based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. To effectively tell the Chinese story, a comprehensive and targeted strategy is necessary, one that balances commonalities and differences. A tailored approach should be adopted for each country or region—for instance, different strategies could be used for the United States, Russia, the UK, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN countries, and the Middle East. These strategies could combine official guidance with grassroots leadership and civil-society involvement, creating a multi-dimensional, diverse, and integrated international discourse system to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of international communication.

5.4. Leverage Foreign Media Platforms for Alternative Approaches to Telling the Chinese Story

A global survey conducted by the Global Times Public Opinion Survey Center shows that foreign respondents primarily obtain information about China through four channels: 44.4% through internationally renowned media (e.g., BBC, Bloomberg, Times), 39.5% via national television, 27.5% through cultural and commercial activities organized by China in their country, and 12.1% through Chinese media reports in their own countries. To effectively tell the Chinese story, it is not enough for China to merely "go global"; it must also engage with the channels through which foreign audiences access information about China. The chief correspondent of CCTV's North America division, Wang Guan, cleverly exposed the double standards employed by the United States regarding territorial "historical sovereignty" and existing disputed maritime areas during a debate with Reid Weitz, who obtained his PhD in political science from Harvard University, on Russian television. Before China develops international media outlets that can compete with Western media, it

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should take advantage of Western media platforms to present China's story from the perspective of an explorer or debater, often achieving better promotional results.

Funding

This paper is supported by the fund: Jiangxi Province university humanities and social science project, "Research on the Current Situation and Optimization Path of Telling Chinese Stories in the Context of COVID-19——Based on the perspective of corpus analysis", No.: JC20117.

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