



# The identity China has shaped in the fight against COVID-19: A comparative discourse study

Rongcheng Pan<sup>a,\*</sup>, Huiwen Yao<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Foreign Studies, China University of Mining and Technology, Xuzhou, 221116, China

<sup>b</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Suqian University, Suqian, 223800, China

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## ABSTRACT

By conducting a comparative discourse analysis of the news reports in *China Daily* and news releases by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of China on COVID-19 prevention and control, this paper aims to reveal the identity China has shaped in the fight against COVID-19. Epidemic-related news materials were firstly collected on the official websites of *China Daily* and the MFA of China, and then the representative news items were selected as the research corpus according to the principles of relevance and representativeness. The methods of critical discourse analysis and comparative study were adopted to analyze the selected news items. It was found that the epidemic-related news reports in *China Daily* have constructed the national identity of a responsible power for China from the perspective of fighting the epidemic and maintaining domestic and international public health security, and this national identity is consistent with the one publicized to the international community through diplomatic channels.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on China and the world. The Chinese government has adopted various measures to prevent and control the spread of the disease, including self-protection, mobility control, resource allocation, professional health care, and disinfection. These measures have proven to be efficient in fighting the outbreak, not only in China but also in other parts of the world. As an international health emergency, since the outbreak of COVID-19, the anti-epidemic performance of China has attracted worldwide attention. The role China plays in COVID-19 prevention and control has provided a new perspective for people all over the world to evaluate China and for the construction of China's national identity in the field of public health.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate various aspects of China's response to the pandemic. Chan & Yu examined the concept of 'A global community of health for all' in China's global health governance from a linguistic perspective and found that the Chinese news media attempted to formulate positive discourses to legitimize the concept [1]. Yang & Chen adopted a discourse-historical approach to analyze Chinese official discourse in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak and found that, by a polarizing discursive construction of positive "self" and negative "others," the globalist and nationalist arguments have been closely intertwined to reinforce the legitimacy of the ruling party and the international reputation of China [2]. The study by Yu et al. reveals that China is respectively represented as a victim, a fighter, and a cooperative/supportive country with ideological implications for global solidarity and humanitarianism [3]. In brief, these studies shed light on various aspects of China's response to the COVID-19

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [3872@cumt.edu.cn](mailto:3872@cumt.edu.cn) (R. Pan).

pandemic, including media representations, discourse, and national identification, and highlight the importance of discourse in promoting official ideologies, projecting China's national image, and improving China's international relations amid a global health crisis.

However, few studies have conducted a comparative study on the identity shaped by news media and that by the government departments of China. *China Daily* (English version), as the largest and most influential English medium from China, has conducted a comprehensive report on China's anti-epidemic work, which offers great possibility for readers at home and abroad to interpret the national identity China has constructed by interpreting the news items about COVID-19. Therefore, this study, taking the news reports on China's COVID-19 control and prevention in *China Daily* as the research materials and the news releases by the MFA of China as the reference materials, aims to explore the national identity of China constructed by the two different discourse subjects from the perspective of public health. To be specific, three questions will be addressed:

- (1) What kind of national identity have the news reports about COVID-19 in *China Daily* constructed for China?
- (2) What kind of national identity has the MFA of China publicized to the outside world in terms of COVID-19 control and prevention?
- (3) What are the similarities and differences between the national identity shaped by *China Daily* and that by the MFA of China?

## 2. Literature review

This part aims to firstly define national identity, then summarize available research on the national identity of China and finally review previous research on the discursive construction of China's national identity.

### 2.1. National identity

Some scholars hold that national identity refers to the role of a country relative to the international community, which is based on the self-setting of national image and characteristics recognized by the international community and changes with the change in the interactive styles between countries [3,4]. This is the basic view of constructivism on national identity, on the basis of which scholars have reinterpreted and redefined national identity. Ashizawa [6] believes that national identity, like personal identity, is not only a descriptive feature of a country, but also a social and relational concept that reflects the existence or identity of other countries in some way.

However, within the framework of constructivism, the academic expressions of the concept of national identity are not exactly the same although they all share some commonalities. The first viewpoint is to return to the origin of the identity, answering the basic question of 'who or what the actor (country) is' [7,8]. The second is to focus on the relationship attribute of identity and the participation from the perspective of others in the interaction, making it not only a question of 'who or what I think I am', but also a question of 'who or what others think I am' [9,10]. The third one emphasizes the role of identity, regards identity as the antecedent that dominates the country's diplomatic acts, and argues that the formation of common ideas in communication is the result of self-identification with others [11,12].

This study adopts the definition of national identity from the third viewpoint of constructivism for its emphasis on the construction of national identity in the interaction between different nations, which is more applicable to the present situation of international relations.

### 2.2. Research on the national identity of China

On September 15, 2020, Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies (ACCWS) released *2019 China National Image Global Survey*. This survey, spanning over June to September in 2019, covered citizens of 22 countries in different regions of the world. A total of 11,000 samples were collected from each country. According to the report, the overall goodwill of overseas respondents towards China continued to rise in 2019, especially in overseas developing countries, which increased to 7.2 out of 10, showing a continuous upward trend [13]. Among them, the two prominent impressions of China's national image by overseas respondents are 'a big eastern country with a long history and full of charm' and 'contributor to global development' 10, and they are full of expectations for China's status as a 'responsible power' [13]. In a word, in the global sample survey, the respondents' comments on China's achievements in economy, science and technology, culture and so on are generally positive. Therefore, the external communication effect of China's national identity is relatively successful. The interviewees' positive comments reflect the others' high recognition of Chinese national identity, which provides a realistic basis for the study of China's national identity from the perspective of self-construction. Of course, whether the national image of China shown in this survey is consistent with the one shaped by news reports on anti-epidemic performance in *China Daily* remains to be verified.

There exists research depicting China as a responsible major power from the perspective of identity transformation. Wang [14] believes that the status of 'responsible power' is in line with China's current national conditions, and only when China takes the initiative to assume more international responsibilities can it safeguard and expand China's national interests. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the relationship between China and the international community has undergone a process of continuous adjustment and dramatic change. China's national identity has changed from a revolutionary country to a liberal country and then to a present state, which has had a great impact on China's development. The interaction between China and the international community has taken on the look of mutual cooperation and interdependence, and the characteristics of a 'responsible power' has

gradually emerged in the involvement of China in the international affairs [4]. To be specific, in terms of identity and international cooperation, Xia [5] proposed that identity is conducive to promoting cooperation between countries, and China and the United States can promote cooperation by strengthening identity; with regard to national identity and international organizations, Wang & Wang [15] stressed that China must enhance its awareness of 'consistency of power and responsibility'. The status of a responsible major power requires China to actively express itself, and only by actively expressing its voice in international organizations can China make use of the strength of international organizations to seek greater national interests and at the same time make use of China's power to contribute to the development of international organizations. Besides, Wu et al. [16] conducted a statistical analysis of the discursive construction of China's status as a responsible major power by Chinese leaders, foreign ambassadors, foreign ministry spokespersons of China, as well as international mainstream media, which has innovated the global communication strategy of national image by analyzing the construction and deconstruction of internal national identity constructed by Chinese discourse and external national image shaped by international public opinions.

Overseas scholars have also paid attention to the role and status of China in the international community. Foot [17], and Nolan [18] hold that in the context of globalization, the relationship between countries is getting increasingly close, and the standard for identification between countries has changed from maintaining the order of the international system to respecting common interests, attaching importance to interdependence and maintaining international mechanisms. In this context, they argue that China is actively integrating into the world, but if China does not change its status quo in terms of sovereignty, human rights and governance, it will be very difficult for it to obtain the recognition of other countries [18].

In brief, previous research has largely interpreted the role and status of China in terms of international relations, foreign policies and international public opinions, which fails to either prospectively cover or pertinently analyze the role China plays in the field of public health under the background of COVID-19.

### 2.3. Research on the discursive construction of China's national identity

Since the middle of the 20th century, discourse research has gradually expanded from ontological discourse research to many fields of social science such as linguistics, sociology and political science. Currently, with the global integration in the economic, political and cultural fields, discourse has become one of the important media of global dialogue. Under this background, the construction of a national discourse system has gradually become a national strategy of China, and China's national discourse system has also become a part of the global discourse system, which is not only an academic innovation category with Chinese characteristics, but also a new category of political theory, with national strategic attributes [19].

Scholars have interpreted the national discourse in detail from different angles. Chen explained the national discourse from the perspective of national communication. He believes that national discourse is a concrete form of the implementation of national discourse rights, a form of national communication phenomenon, and a national communication behavior for the purpose of disseminating national information, constructing national identity and solving international and domestic problems [20]. From the perspective of language strategy, Wen points out that national discourse is a language action undertaken by an individual or institution to serve national interests [21]. These language acts, which express the national will, national spirit and cultural essence, are the concrete embodiment of the national discourse system, and are the indicators to measure the national discourse competence. Yang [22] offered two interpretations of national discourse from the perspective of international relations: one is the discourse text that carries the concept, intention, value and emotion of a country, and the other is the national actions with significance derived from discourse, which together constitute the national discourse of a country.

With regard to national discourse competence, Chen [20] believes that its connotation mainly includes two aspects, one is the ability of the national discourse subject to construct or understand the national discourse, and the other is the ability of the national discourse subject to perform the role of national discourse. Wen [23] found that national discourse competence is also known as 'National Language Performance', of which the discourse competence of national leaders is a key constituent. In general, the higher the levels of national leaders are, the more important their discourse skills become and the greater influence they exert at home and abroad [23].

Based on the above discussion, we can summarize that the national discourse as a kind of political speech acts with the state as the core and for the purpose of serving the national interests. As the first country to fight against COVID-19, since 2019, China has become the focus of many international media reports [24], and China's every move in COVID-19 prevention and control has been paid attention to. As a kind of media discourse, news reporting is an important channel to highlight the national will and construct national identity. To some extent, the choice and use of language in news discourse determine the construction of national image, and different media have shaped different images for China in the public health field based on diverse news report discourse. It should be noted that China's anti-epidemic performance is a special representation of its national image in the international community, the attributes of which are the same as those of the national identity. As one of China's mainstream official media, *China Daily* is a window for the world to understand China and an important way to construct China's national identity and spread China's national image to the outside world. The news reports on COVID-19 in *China Daily* may have a great impact on the construction and dissemination of China's national identity in the field of public health, which deserves an exploration.

### 3. Materials and methods

#### 3.1. Research materials

Reports in *China Daily*, the official national news medium, can not only reflect the attitudes and positions of China towards relevant issues, but also play an important role in the construction of China's identity. *China Daily's* description of China's anti-epidemic conducts is an important window for people all over the world to understand China, and provides a new perspective for China's identity construction in the field of public health, which makes it plausible to figure out the national identity constructed by *China Daily* by analyzing its news reports on COVID-19. And the MFA of China, as the most important official diplomatic channel, plays a crucial role in promoting China's image to the international community in the context of COVID-19 by publicizing anti-epidemic policies and actions taken by Chinese government.

Hence, with the official website of *China Daily* as the retrieval source and "COVID-19" and "China" as the key words, a total of 1502 pieces of news reports spanning from December 1, 2019 to December 31, 2022 were collected. In addition, 148 pieces of news releases containing the key words of "China" and "COVID-19" were collected as reference materials from the official website of the MFA of China. Based on the principles of relevance, representativeness, and analytical convenience, 27 pieces of news reports (36,012 words, 35,756 tokens) from *China Daily* (NRCD) and 25 pieces of news releases (13,115 words, 13,286 tokens) from the MFA of China (NRMFA) were determined as the materials for critical discourse analysis. Of the selected materials, nine items from *China Daily* and four items from the MFA were exemplified for detailed analysis due to typicality.

#### 3.2. Research methods

Based on the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA), discourse is not a simple description or reflection of reality, but a kind of in-depth social practice to maintain or subvert power through involvement or intervention in a certain social process [25–28]. Therefore, CDA not only emphasizes the analysis of discourse strategies, but also advocates an in-depth study of the reasons for its formation, that is, the social and cultural background. Cognitive form becomes common sense through the process of naturalization, while CDA reveals the relationship between discourse, power and ideology through de-naturalized language form analysis, and deeply excavates the construction of reality and possible hidden prejudices.

According to Fairclough, CDA involves three levels of analysis: textual analysis, discourse practice analysis, and social practice analysis. Textual analysis focuses on the language and linguistic features used in discourse; discourse practice analysis examines the practices, techniques, and strategies that are used to produce and interpret discourse; social practice analysis considers the broader social context in which discourse occurs, including power relations and social norms [25]. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of CDA provides a robust and nuanced approach to analyzing news reports that accounts for linguistic features, social practices, and broader social contexts, which enables a critical reflection on power relations, audience perspectives, and their connections to real-world events.

Therefore, this article, based on the three-dimensional framework of CDA, taking the selected news items from *China Daily* and news releases from the official website of the MFA of China as the research materials, conducted a comparative study on the national identity constructed by different discourse subjects. First of all, an analysis was conducted on the overall situation of the news reports in *China Daily* and the news releases by MFA on the epidemic. Secondly, the linguistic features of *China Daily's* news coverage and MFA's news releases were analyzed with the assistance of AntConc (version 4.1.3). For one thing, different themes of discourse in NRCD and NRMFA were categorized based on Wordlist analysis of high-frequency words related to China's national identity (lexical words of the first 100 hits); for another, KWIC (Key Word in Context) analyses were conducted to identify the frequent collocates of the searched term "China" within a given context, which may help to determine the wording strategies of the two discourse subjects when describing China. Thirdly, the typical news items and news releases on COVID-19 control and prevention were exemplified for detailed analysis, aiming to reveal the techniques, strategies and social contexts used to construct the national identity of China. Finally, the national identity shaped by *China Daily* and MFA were compared.

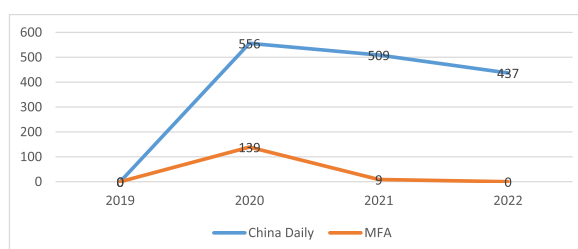


Fig. 1. News reports in *China Daily* and news releases by MFA on COVID-19 in China.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Overall situation

As Fig. 1 indicates, both the news reports by *China Daily* and news releases by MFA on COVID-19 in China are on a downward trend from the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019 to December 2022, and the peak value both come in 2020.

In contrast, the decline in news releases by MFA is much sharper since 2020, even dropping to zero in 2022. It suggests that the two discourse subjects, *China Daily* and MFA, both played an active role in publicizing China's anti-epidemic conducts in the first year after the outbreak of the COVID-19. At this critical moment, it is conducive to freeing China from doubts about the epidemic both domestically and internationally by vigorously promoting positive and effective COVID-19 control and prevention measures taken by Chinese government. Whereas, as the epidemic stabilizes, the attention to COVID-19 gradually weakens and turns to more important issues.

### 4.2. Results of textual analysis

#### 4.2.1. Themes related to the fight against COVID-19 in NRDC and NRMFA

As shown in Table 1, the themes on COVID-19 covered by *China Daily* news reports and MFA news releases are quite similar, but differ in focus and emphasis.

#### 4.2.2. Frequent collocates of "China"

In order to reveal the wording strategies adopted by *China Daily* news reports and MFA news releases when describing China's anti-epidemic performance, with the first word on the left and the first and second words on the right as the sort options, the frequent collocates of "China" were generated by KWIC analysis. It was found that in the news reports of *China Daily*, disregarding such functional words as "of", "and", "in", "the", "a", "that" and "'s", "China" often appears together with "COVID", "epidemic", "outbreak", "prevention", "response", "control", "development", "situation", "Chinese", "country/countries", "CDC", "foreign", "university", etc. in the first 100 hits (Fig. 2a). However, in the news releases by MFA, without considering the aforementioned functional words, "China" frequently coexists with "Africa", "WHO", "cooperation", "Arab", "countries", "community", "global", "health", "support", etc. in the first 100 hits (Fig. 2b).

The research findings suggest that *China Daily* news reports and MFA news releases have different wording strategies when describing China's anti-epidemic performance. *China Daily* focuses more on the specific details of anti-epidemic work, such as response to the outbreak of the epidemic, control and prevention of the epidemic, anti-epidemic data released by Centers for Disease Control

**Table 1**  
Themes involving COVID-19 in news reports from *China Daily* and news releases from MFA.

Discourse subjects	Themes	Key words and expressions
<i>China Daily</i>	China's COVID-19 response and prevention measures	contain, fight, boost, approve, widen, high-tech methods, herd immunity, vaccine, emergency use, COVID-19 testing, action, choices, COVID-19 booster shots, COVID-19 drug, feasible,
	economic measures to mitigate fallout from COVID-19	dampen, recover, credit expansions, positivity, recovery
	positive outcomes and recovery from China's COVID-19 response	inspire, speak for, end, recover, right thing, effective
	China's international cooperation on epidemic response	share, provide, call for, offer, international solidarity, supplies
	criticism and political issues related to COVID-19 response	sit out, political manipulation, groundless
The MFA of China	China's capacity to handle COVID-19 cases	eighth edition of diagnostic and therapeutic protocols, vaccine progress, significant capacity
	China's global leadership in COVID-19 response	chair, five "firsts", in a timely manner, important
	China's contributions to the global fight against COVID-19	curb, donate, contribute, support, proper and necessary measures, notable results
	international cooperation and assistance in fighting COVID-19	implement, advancing, prepared, sharing information, international cooperation, solidarity, common development, consensus, source tracing, joint fight, joint mission, assistance, committed, joint statement, ready
	building a community of common health for mankind in the fight against COVID-19	China-Arab community with a shared future, China-Africa friendship, a community with a shared future

*China Daily* news reports primarily focus on China's domestic response to the pandemic, as well as its international cooperation and solidarity with other countries in the fight against COVID-19. They cover topics such as effective prevention measures, economic measures to mitigate fallout, sharing experiences and knowledge with other countries, positive outcomes and recovery, and criticism and political issues related to the pandemic response. On the other hand, MFA news releases emphasize China's global leadership and contributions to the fight against COVID-19, highlighting China's capacity to handle the pandemic, international cooperation and assistance, and the goal of building a community of common health for mankind. While both sources cover topics related to China's domestic and international response to the pandemic, MFA news releases tend to emphasize China's role as a global leader in the fight against COVID-19.



Furthermore, the increasing number of deaths and suspected cases reveal the significant effects of inadequate healthcare facilities and their functioning. More importantly, this piece of news also demonstrates the commitment of the Chinese government to tackle the crisis by mobilizing a significant workforce to the affected region.

**News item 3:** ‘... bought two N95 masks from ... arrived at Jinyintan Hospital ... Wang drove a total of nearly 30 medical staff ...’

News item 3 reported the story of Wang Yong, a middle-aged courier in Wuhan, who risked infection, starting with solving the travel problem of local medical staff, to the problem of dining, and raising about 100,000 yuan with a self-organized team to buy protective equipment for medical staff.

In this news, Wang Yong was quoted as saying, ‘Everyone is working hard to help medical staff members. I’m just an organizer.’ ‘I am very confident that we can overcome the epidemic. I’ve done what I could and I will not regret it’. These words show the fighting spirit of ordinary people to unite as one to fight the epidemic. The language used here is emotive, and the news draws attention to the personal sacrifice and bravery of the individual, which reinforces the dominant narrative of the heroic courier.

**News item 4:** ‘... Around 88 percent of its gene sequence is identical to a SARS sample collected in 2017 from a cave of Chinese bats that proved to be the source of SARS ...’

News item 4 presents a scientific discourse practice, where the language used is technical and scientific. The use of terms such as ‘gene sequence’ and ‘SARS sample’ indicates that the intended audience is likely to be individuals with a scientific background or interest in the field. The use of percentages also suggests that the information is based on empirical evidence and scientific research. This news also employs a comparative discourse practice, where the genetic similarity between the current COVID-19 virus and the SARS virus is compared. This comparison is used to establish a link between the two viruses and to suggest that the current virus may have originated from the same source as SARS.

The use of scientific language and empirical evidence suggests that the practice is based on a rigorous and systematic approach to understanding the virus, which indicates that Chinese researchers have been working hard to identify the source of virus infection by cultivating, isolating and analyzing the genetic map of microorganisms, in order to further analyze the causes of the outbreak and understand the development of a vaccine for novel coronavirus disease, so as to actively communicate professional medical information with the international community with a scientific attitude.

**News item 5:** ‘... The China CDC should devote every minute to finding the source of the novel virus and its transmission and pathogenic mechanism and accelerate research on vaccines ...’

The use of imperatives such as ‘devote every minute’ and ‘accelerate research’ in News item 5 suggests a sense of urgency and importance in the task at hand. The language used is also directive, indicating that the speaker is making a call to action for the China CDC to prioritize their efforts towards finding the source of the virus and developing vaccines, and the news positions the China CDC as a key actor in providing evidence-based recommendations.

Such a report reflects that the Chinese government attaches great importance to scientific research and the health of the people by detailing the decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the government to speed up the research and development of COVID-19 vaccines and effective drugs in order to improve medical effectiveness and reduce mortality.

**News item 6:** ‘... Wenzhou has witnessed a decrease in the number of new cases of novel coronavirus infection since adopting the measures, down from 50 to around 10 a day ...’

News item 6 presents a local government’s success in reducing the number of new cases of the novel coronavirus infection by adopting containment measures. The language used is factual and informative and does not contain any emotional or subjective expressions.

This news item also uses statistical data to support its claims by stating that the number of new cases has decreased from 50 to around 10 a day since adopting the measures, which helps to provide evidence for the effectiveness of the government’s response in containing the epidemic.

**News item 7:** ‘... offer people who were stranded in Wuhan and facing severe difficulties 3,000 yuan (\$427.8) in cash as emergency allowances ... 69 settlements have been set up around the city and 4,843 people who were stranded have moved in. Also, more than 16 million yuan allowances have been sent to 5,839 people ...’

On March 15, 2020, the news entitled ‘Govt offers financial help to those stranded in Wuhan’ (News item 7) introduced the government’s financial assistance to the stranded people in Wuhan who had no income or economic base, such as providing free accommodation, food and government subsidies, etc., showing the government’s humanistic care for the people to the international community. The language used is formal and technical, using terms such as ‘emergency allowances’ and ‘settlements’ to convey the seriousness of the situation, and statistical data are also used to provide evidence for the effectiveness of the measures taken by the government.

This piece of news is supportive of the government’s actions, emphasizing their efforts to provide emergency support to affected individuals.

**News item 8:** ‘From Jan 20 to 21, a WHO delegation conducted a field visit to Wuhan. On Feb 16, a China-WHO joint expert team with 25 experts, including two from the US, started a nine-day field visit in China ...’

News item 8, which is reported on April 27th, 2020 with the title of ‘China has openly shared scientific information on COVID-19’, reports on the WHO’s field visit to Wuhan and the joint China-WHO expert team’s collaboration.

The language used here is diplomatic, and the news positions China as a responsible and cooperative member of the international community by highlighting that even in the face of great challenges, China still attaches importance to information sharing and promotes win-win international sharing.

**News item 9:** ‘... China has been actively providing anti-epidemic supplies to Spain and shared with it without reservation diagnosis and treatment scheme for COVID-19 as well as experience in COVID-19 prevention and control’.

Also, as indicated in News item 9, entitled ‘China to continue helping Spain fight COVID-19 epidemic’ on May 13th, 2020, reports on China’s international cooperation in providing anti-epidemic supplies to Spain. The language used is goodwill and benevolent, emphasizing China’s generosity and solidarity with the global community.

Such news reports have introduced to the international community the information of China’s cooperation with other countries or international organizations in the fight against the epidemic, which will help to promote information sharing, maintain global health security, and actively build the identity of a ‘responsible power’.

Overall, the exemplified news reports on China’s fight against the COVID-19 epidemic reflect the government’s efforts to contain the outbreak and establish a positive image of a conscientious, responsible, cooperative and helpful country.

#### 4.3.2. Analysis of exemplified news releases by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China

As a reference, this study examines the news releases from the MFA of China to explore what kind of national identity has been constructed by the diplomatic department.

News release 1 issued by MFA on 25 February 2020 reports on a regular press conference held by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during which spokesperson Zhao Lijian responded to a question about measures being taken to restrict entry from Japan and South Korea. The discourse in the press conference is primarily concerned with the responsibilities of all countries to protect their nationals’ safety and health, as well as the need to safeguard public health security both regionally and globally.

**New release 1:** ‘... One question was: confirmed cases in Japan and the ROK surged over the past few days, and cases were increasing quite fast in the ROK, in particular. The Chinese embassy in the ROK issued a notice, urging its nationals in the country to better protect themselves. Will China take any special measures to restrict entry from Japan and the ROK? Zhao Lijian responded that in the face of the outbreak, it is the responsibilities of all countries to protect the safety and health of their nationals and to safeguard regional and global public health security. We stand ready to closely communicate and cooperate with Japan, the ROK and other relevant countries, discuss ways to enhance coordinated responses, and take proper and necessary measures together to effectively curb cross-border spread of the virus and protect public health security in the region and beyond.’

This news release employs various rhetorical strategies to convey the message that China is taking the outbreak seriously and is committed to cooperating with other countries to effectively curb its spread. For instance, the spokesperson uses inclusive language, such as “we stand ready,” to emphasize that China is willing to work together with other nations to address the crisis. Additionally, the phrase “proper and necessary measures” implies that China is prepared to take decisive action in response to the outbreak. The overall tone of the discourse is measured and diplomatic, reflecting the spokesperson’s position as a representative of the Chinese government. The language is formal and concise, with little overt emotion or personal bias evident in the response. The spokesperson’s goal appears to be to provide reassurance about China’s commitment to addressing the crisis and promoting public health security.

The discourse in this news release reflects broader social practices and attitudes surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak. The fact that the press conference was held at all indicates the growing concern among governments and public health organizations about the ongoing spread of the virus. The pressing need to address the outbreak has created a sense of urgency and a desire for effective cooperation among nations. Also, the discourse reflects larger social practices related to international relations and global health governance. The emphasis on coordinated responses and the need to safeguard public health security both regionally and globally suggests the importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing public health crises. The discourse also highlights the importance of clear communication and transparency in promoting effective responses to the outbreak. In addition, the discourse reflects broader social attitudes towards China as a global power and its role in addressing the outbreak.

The measured and diplomatic tone of the response suggests a desire to promote China as a responsible actor in the international community, while the emphasis on working together with other nations suggests a desire to avoid a perception of geopolitical competition or dominance.

**New release 2:** ‘WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted on 17 June that the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19 is one of the platforms where China and Africa partner with each other and platforms like this will be important in strengthening solidarity across the globe in the joint response to the disease. ... He pointed out that platforms like the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit will be important in strengthening solidarity across the globe. ... Dr. Tedros stressed that in the first two months, around 85,000 cases were reported, but in the past two months, 6 million cases have been reported. ... Dr. Tedros extended appreciation for all the support China has provided to Africa in its COVID-19 response. ...’

News item 2 is comprised of statements made by WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus during a press conference. Dr. Tedros notes the importance of global solidarity in the fight against COVID-19 and references the Extraordinary China-



Africa Summit as an example of a platform for partnership between China and Africa. He also highlights China's support for Africa during the pandemic, including the sending of medical experts and supplies. The discourse practices used in the news article align with the conventions of formal news reporting, presenting information in an objective, impartial manner, and the speaker's statements are not overly embellished or sensationalized. There is no particular framing or bias evident in the article aside from a general emphasis on the importance of global solidarity in the response to COVID-19.

This news release is situated within the broader social practice of global public health. The COVID-19 pandemic has had widespread and far-reaching impacts on societies across the world, and the response to the outbreak has required coordinated efforts from numerous organizations and countries. The WHO, as a leading international public health agency, plays a crucial role in coordinating and communicating these efforts. The article also speaks to issues of international relations, particularly in the context of China's engagement with Africa. The Extraordinary China-Africa Summit represents a significant platform for bilateral cooperation between these regions, and Dr. Tedros' comments emphasize the importance of collaboration and partnership in addressing global health challenges like COVID-19. Overall, the social practice surrounding the news involves a complex interplay between public health concerns and international relations. The article highlights the importance of both effective public health strategies and cross-border cooperation in addressing the ongoing pandemic.

**News release 3:** 'The State Council inter-agency task force held a press conference on 19 May on international cooperation and exchanges on COVID-19 response, and answered questions from the press. ... "Information related to COVID-19 has been shared with the WHO and other countries in a timely, swift and transparent manner", said Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Prevention and Control. ... Wu also briefed on China's all-round cooperation with the WHO, ... China has shared its experience in COVID-19 treatment with the world in a timely fashion. ...'

News release 3 is a report of a press conference held by the State Council inter-agency task force on international cooperation and exchanges on COVID-19 response. The discourse of this news release revolves around China's efforts to share its experience in COVID-19 treatment with the world in a timely manner. Here formal and objective language is used to report the press conference. The information is presented in a chronological order, highlighting China's efforts to share its experience and cooperate with the WHO. This news release also cites experts to support China's claim of timely sharing of information and experience.

This news release is a reflection of the social practice of China's COVID-19 response. China's COVID-19 response can be seen as a collective social practice that involves various stakeholders, including the government, healthcare professionals, and the public. The government has played a crucial role in coordinating the response, implementing lockdowns, and providing resources to the healthcare sector. Healthcare professionals have been at the forefront of the response, treating patients, conducting research, and developing new treatments. The public has also played a significant role by following public health guidelines, cooperating with the authorities, and supporting healthcare workers. China's response to the COVID-19 outbreak has been characterized by swift action, strict measures, and extensive testing. China's efforts to share its experience in COVID-19 treatment with WHO and other countries reflected in this news release can be seen as an extension of China's social practice of COVID-19 response, which helps to portray China as a responsible and cooperative country that has been proactive in sharing information with the international community.

**New release 4:** '... A reporter asked about what China had specifically done for the response of the globe, particularly regional countries, to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context that China and the international community looked out for and helped each other through the hard times from the outbreak of the pandemic and China made positive contributions to the global solidarity against COVID-19, as epitomized by China-Singapore cooperation against the pandemic. Wang Yi said, ... Facing the "war without smoke", China has always taken on its responsibilities, cooperated with the international community on all fronts and made "five firsts". First, China has been the first country to share infection information and exchange anti-virus experience with all parties. Second, China has been the first country to provide other countries with large batches of anti-pandemic supplies. Third, China has been the first country to provide developing countries with large-scale vaccine assistance. Fourth, China has been the first country to send medical expert teams to foreign countries. Fifth, China has been the first country to propose the building of a global community of health for all. ...'

News release 4 presents a discourse practice where the Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, answers a question from a reporter about China's role in the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Wang Yi responds by listing "five firsts" that China has achieved in its response to the pandemic, highlighting China's contributions to the global solidarity against COVID-19. The discourse practice is framed in a press conference setting with the presence of a Singaporean Foreign Minister and reporters from various media outlets. The discourse practice is characterized by a formal and informative tone, with Wang Yi's responses emphasizing China's commitment to global cooperation and contributions to the pandemic response. The use of "firsts" in Wang Yi's response serves to frame China's achievements as unique and pioneering. This framing reinforces the idea that China has been at the forefront of global efforts to combat the pandemic and positions China as a leading player in the international community.

The news release presents a social practice where China's global response to the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed in a formal setting. The social practice involves the State Councilor and Foreign Minister of China responding to questions from the press in the presence of a Singaporean Foreign Minister. The article highlights China's efforts to support global solidarity against COVID-19, particularly through its engagement with regional countries like Singapore. The social practice is rooted in a global health crisis, where the COVID-19 pandemic has affected countries worldwide. The discourse highlights China's response to the pandemic and its contributions to the global solidarity effort. The discourse serves to reinforce China's position as a global player with a willingness to engage in international cooperation and support global efforts to combat the pandemic. Overall, the discourse and social practice presented in the News release 4 reflect China's efforts to position itself as a responsible and cooperative global player.

#### 4.3.3. Summary

Based on the above exemplified analysis, the differences in discourse practice and social practice between *China Daily* news reports and MFA news releases in shaping the national identity of China were summarized in Table 2.

#### 4.4. Comparison of discursive construction of national identity between *China Daily* and MFA

As illustrated above, through news agenda setting, choice of discourse themes and strategies, creation of discourse contexts in news reports on COVID-19, at the language level, *China Daily* described policies, measures and actions taken by the Chinese government and people in fighting the epidemic and China's aid to other countries and cooperation with the international organizations; ideologically, it highlighted the leadership of the Chinese government in the fight against the epidemic, the confidence of the Chinese people in overcoming the epidemic, and China's concern for global health security in the face of COVID-19, which magnified the conscientiousness of China to the nation, the nationals and the international community. Most of the reports are neutral and positive, which give prominence to effective measures taken by Chinese governments of different levels, satisfying effects achieved in the battle against the epidemic, the strong leadership of the Chinese government in the fight against the epidemic and the confidence of Chinese people in overcoming the epidemic. In this way, *China Daily* has successfully shaped the Chinese government as a government full of humanitarian concern for its people internally and China as a 'responsible power' that actively safeguards global health security externally.

Additionally, news releases from the official website of the MFA of China manifest that the diplomatic department strives to shape Chinese government as a 'people-oriented' government and China as a responsible power leading the global fight against the epidemic by mutual assistance and international cooperation. In this sense, news reports on COVID-19 in *China Daily* have constructed a national identity for China consistent with that shaped by the MFA of China.

Whereas, it was discovered that *China Daily* and the MFA of China have different perspectives on news coverage. MFA mainly obtains information from government departments and national leaders, while *China Daily* provides a higher proportion of news about the patients and the public. This finding suggests that *China Daily* tends to report the COVID-19 epidemic in a more grounded, populist, and comprehensive manner for the purpose of guiding the public opinions, controlling the initiative of discourse and fulfilling the responsibility of the mass media. Whereas, MFA, as the official diplomatic department, pays more attention to the authoritativeness of information and thus mainly issues news from national leaders, government departments and international organizations.

In this case, it is well worth consideration to coordinate the efforts of such mass media as *China Daily* and official departments as MFA in order to construct the national identity of China in the public health field from multiple perspectives, since effective diplomacy often requires a combination of both public diplomacy and conventional diplomacy, which can complement each other and contribute to achieving a country's goals in a complex and interconnected world.

### 5. Conclusions

By means of critical discourse analysis of news reports about COVID-19 in *China Daily* and news releases by MFA, this paper explores the national identity of China constructed by the news discourse of epidemic prevention and control. News reports from *China Daily* adopted a large number of positive comments to describe China's anti-epidemic performance, which, from the perspective of safeguarding domestic and international public health, shaped China as an advocate, practitioner, collaborator and contributor. Meanwhile the news issued by the MFA of China constructed China as a responsible power which actively fulfilled its commitment to international obligations of epidemic prevention and control. News from the two different sources reported China's anti-epidemic policies and actions from different angles and levels, but the national identities they have shaped are quite consistent.

The epidemic situation is changing all the time, and this paper captures the changing process of the anti-epidemic news report of *China Daily* in the past two years. However, it seems that the pace of the research can never catch up with the changes of the objective facts, so until the completion of the research, we can still see the limitations and shortcomings of this paper. The source of news corpus analyzed in this paper is limited to a single medium, *China Daily*, which may discount the representativeness of research findings, so it

**Table 2**  
Comparison of discourse and social practices between *China Daily* and MFA.

Items	<i>China Daily</i>	MFA
Discursive technique and strategy	formal and specific language, past tense, informative language style, emotive expressions, diplomatic expressions, empirical evidence, imperatives, goodwill and benevolent expressions, statistical information, technical terms, feature story	formal and concise expressions, rhetorical devices, inclusive language, measured and diplomatic tone, formal and informative tone, objective and impartial presentations, chronological order, quotes,
Frame	public health crisis, economic impact, scientific progress, global and national response, human-interest story	public health crisis, press conference, forum, summit, international relation
Source	individuals, <i>China Daily</i> , experts, Xinhua, China's State Council Information Office	MFA, national leaders, the National Health Commission (NHC), WHO, State Council Inter-agency Task Force, the General Administration of Customs
Social context	public health surveillance, health care services, scientific research, epidemic prevention and control, social relief, international cooperation and assistance	COVID-19 outbreak, global public health, China's domestic and global response to COVID-19 pandemic, international cooperation and assistance

is strongly recommended to base future research on news reports from more mainstream media. We will also keep close eye on news updates in major media and collect the corpus in time to renew the research.

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### Author contribution statement

Rongcheng Pan: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Huiwen Yao: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

### Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

### Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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