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A Study on the Construction of China's Image in Bangladesh's Prothom Alo Reports on China's Epidemic (Postprint)

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Date: 2023-07-23T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

In the era of globalized communication, news media serve as the window through which people understand the world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign media coverage of the epidemic in China constructed a distinct image of China. To enhance understanding of the strategies employed by other countries' media in constructing China's image and to strengthen comprehension of Bangladesh and other countries in the field of international communication, this paper examines the construction of China's image in Bangladesh's Prothom Alo newspaper's coverage of the China-related epidemic from the perspective of framing theory. Through stratified sampling and content analysis, it is revealed that Prothom Alo exhibits varying reporting emphases and attitudes across different stages of the epidemic. Furthermore, the reports predominantly focus on political issues and tend toward negativity, with the majority of sources being Western media. In light of these findings, this paper identifies the underlying problems related to Western media, Bangladesh, and China that are reflected in these news reports, and proposes corresponding recommendations.

Full Text

Preamble

A Study on the Construction of China's Image in Bangladesh's Prothom Alo Reporting on China's COVID-19 Epidemic

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Abstract: In the era of globalized communication, news media serve as windows through which people understand the world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign media reporting on the epidemic in China created divergent images of the nation. To enhance understanding of other countries' media strategies in constructing China's image and to strengthen comprehension of Bangladesh and other third-party nations in the field of international communication, this paper examines the construction of China's image in Bangladesh's Prothom Alo newspaper through the lens of framing theory. Through stratified sampling and content analysis, the study reveals that Prothom Alo exhibited different reporting emphases and attitudes across various stages of the epidemic. Furthermore, the reports primarily focused on political issues and tended toward negativity, with most content sourced from Western media. In response, this paper identifies problems existing within Western media, Bangladesh, and China that are reflected in these reports, and proposes corresponding recommendations.

Keywords: Bangladesh Prothom Alo; COVID-19; Frame theory; Image of China; Reporting tendency

1 Introduction

From late 2019 to 2023, the COVID-19 pandemic remained a constant global concern, affecting the survival and development of all humanity. As the "initial outbreak site," China inevitably became the "center of public opinion" in worldwide epidemic reporting. Influenced by ideological, political, and economic factors, foreign media created distinct images of China in their epidemic coverage.

We have observed that in a world with an unbalanced information order, where information sources are monopolized by major news agencies such as Reuters, Agence France-Presse, and the Associated Press, many third-country media—shaped by the Western discourse system—offer one-sided interpretations of China's image. As a Belt and Road partner country, Bangladesh has established friendly and cooperative relations with China across various fields. However, its most popular newspaper, Prothom Alo, still "politicized the virus" in its coverage of China-related epidemic issues, focusing on Sino-U.S. relations and the political crisis surrounding the zero-COVID policy. Simultaneously, it emphasized that COVID-19 intensified both domestic and international economic contradictions, as well as social crises such as casualties and rural problems, ultimately constructing a negative image of China. In the political domain, China was portrayed as lacking freedom of speech with a government deficient in transparency and credibility. Economically, China was depicted as endangering domestic and foreign economies. Socially, the epidemic in China was presented as threatening people's lives and degrading quality of life. In light of this, we question: How exactly does Prothom Alo construct China's image, and what are the reasons behind this construction?

2.1 Literature Review: Construction of China's National Image in China-Related Epidemic Reports

China's national image construction has attracted scholarly attention both domestically and internationally. Foreign scholar Michael Barr, in *Nation Branding as Nation Building*, examines the relationship between China's national brand and nation-building, demonstrating how China's Image Campaign reveals the internal and external dimensions of national soft power, including its role in constructing China's national image. Guided by framing and cultivation theories, foreign scholars Whyke Thomas William, Chen Zhen Troy, and Lopez Mugica Joaquin analyze how user-generated content about national image affects social media users' perceptions of reality in their study of cultural dissemination and national image construction in Chinese influencer Li Ziqi's vlogs and their impact on international viewer perceptions on YouTube.

Domestic scholar Bai Tingting examined *China Daily's* construction of China's national image against the COVID-19 backdrop in her research on *China Daily's* discourse on the pandemic. Domestic scholar Cao Qian studied China's national image construction from a narratological perspective in her research on documentaries. In another domestic study, Yan Lulu investigated the construction of China's national image in popular Chinese textbooks.

Few foreign scholars have specifically studied reporting on China's epidemic. Among domestic scholars, Liu Dingjia's corpus-based diachronic analysis of American media reports related to China during the COVID-19 outbreak employs corpus-based usage fluctuation analysis to discuss the relationship between diachronic discourse evolution and politics, society, and ideology. Wu Weihua's study "*Anti-Intellectualism, Information Epidemic and 'Post-Truth' Collusion—U.S. Media Coverage of the China-Related Epidemic*" interprets the connotation from the differentiation of the health communication field to the construction of news discourse, from post-McCarthy syndrome to the epidemic of misinformation driven by anti-intellectualism and the post-truth collusion in American news production, summarizing the characteristics and trends of U.S. media reports on China-related epidemic issues. In Ning Zhenjiang and He Xiaojing's transitive analysis of headlines in Spanish mainstream media *El Pais'* China-related reports, they found that *El Pais* was positive about China's pandemic measures but cautious about China's assistance to other countries.

However, Chinese and foreign scholars have conducted limited research on how media in Southeast Asia, Asia, and Africa construct China's national image. There is also a shortage of studies that simultaneously consider both "China epidemic reporting" and "China image construction."

2.2 Literature Review: Frame Theory

The concept of "frame" was first proposed by American sociologist Goffman in 1974. In 1993, Taiwanese researcher Professor Zang Guoren first applied frame

analysis to news report texts, after which framing theory attracted considerable attention from scholars both domestically and internationally.

Foreign scholars Zulfiqar Kanwal, Farid Huma, Luqman Uzair, Ilyas Kausar, and Bashir Ulfat utilized three-dimensional framework theory to identify motivational factors influencing dental students' and interns' choice of postgraduate specialty in their pilot study. Foreign scholars Bullock Olivia M. and Shulman Hillary C. applied framing theory to design more effective health messages about tanning behavior among college women by testing a series of framework theory models. Foreign scholar Horrie Chris combined framing theory with the media industry in his case study of news agency output and the framing of television news crisis output during 9/11, testing the effectiveness of existing framing theory work during the news "processing" stage of crisis and disaster discussions.

The vast majority of domestic scholars analyze media news reports through framing theory. Among them, Li Jianwei and Fu Shengkai's comparative analysis of central and local media reports on natural disasters from a framing theory perspective—using *People's Daily* and *Henan Daily's* coverage of the Henan rainstorm as an example—represents a notable study that summarized the framework characteristics of central and local media reports on natural disasters.

However, these studies did not examine the phenomenon of China's national image construction in China-related epidemic reports from the perspective of framing theory and therefore did not address how such construction occurs or the reasons behind it.

2.3 Research Questions

Based on framing theory, this paper adopts scholar Zang Guoren's three-level analysis method to examine the quantity, themes, content, tone, and information sources of Prothom Alo's China-related epidemic reports across different periods. The study attempts to answer: How do these reports construct China's image? What kind of image of China has been constructed? And what are the reasons behind this construction?

3 Research Methodology

This paper employs content analysis to address the above questions.

3.1 Sampling Method

The research subject of this study is the Bangladeshi press. First, we selected Prothom Alo, a daily newspaper in Bangladesh, as a representative sample due to its status as the most popular newspaper in the country and its consequent strong representativeness and influence.

Second, because of the large total sample size and monthly data variations, we adopted stratified sampling to select all reports related to China's epidemic in Prothom Alo from February 12, 2020, to January 26, 2023 (1,080 days total). February 12, 2020, marks the day the World Health Organization named COVID-19, making it a feasible starting date for the sample.

Three sample groups (three time periods) were established based on 360-day intervals: February 12, 2020, to February 5, 2021; February 6, 2021, to January 31, 2022; and February 1, 2022, to January 26, 2023. The number of China-related epidemic reports in these three groups was 272, 79, and 75, respectively, with proportions of 63.85%, 18.54%, and 17.61%. The total sample size was set at 50 reports, with the number of samples in each period calculated according to these ratios: 32, 9, and 9, respectively.

3.2 Hypothesis Development

Based on the research questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Bangladesh's Prothom Alo reports on the epidemic primarily focus on political themes.

H2: As the epidemic phase changes, the focus of Prothom Alo's reporting shifts accordingly.

H3: Prothom Alo's reporting on China's epidemic is predominantly negative in tone.

H4: As the epidemic phase changes, the tone of Prothom Alo's reporting on the epidemic changes.

To test these hypotheses, this study employed content analysis on the sampled population.

3.3 Coding Scheme

In this study, variable X represents different stages of the epidemic: February 12, 2020, to February 5, 2021; February 6, 2021, to January 31, 2022; and February 1, 2022, to January 26, 2023. Variable Y represents news sources at each stage, categorized as Agence France-Presse, Bangladeshi media, or Chinese media such as Xinhua. It can also be reduced to whether the media politically constructs an image of China that lacks freedom of expression, policy transparency, or credibility; economically constructs an image of China that harms domestic and foreign economies; or socially constructs an image of China where people's lives are threatened and quality of life is declining. Alternatively, variable Y can represent the reporting tone at each stage as positive, negative, or neutral.

4 Results

This study employed content analysis to examine three stages of Prothom Alo's China-related epidemic reports, comparing them across dimensions of informa-

tion sources, news categories, reporting attitudes and tendencies, and specific content.

4.1 Political Themes Dominate Prothom Alo's Epidemic Reporting

Among Prothom Alo's epidemic reports, political topics constitute the largest category. In the first stage, news categories were relatively concentrated, with single-topic reports related to diseases and politics accounting for the highest proportions at 34.4% each. Economics ranked third at 15.6%. Therefore, during the COVID-19 period, foreign attention on China focused on both the epidemic itself and political issues. In the second stage, news category concentration remained pronounced, with disease-related and political single topics again accounting for the highest proportion at 44.4% each. The economic topic, which ranked third in the first stage, did not appear in the sample, and only one report addressed social topics. This indicates that in the second phase of the pandemic, foreign attention to China concentrated on political issues in addition to the epidemic itself.

In the third stage, Prothom Alo's news categories became more concentrated yet comprehensive. Disease-related topics decreased significantly, with no disease-related topics appearing in the sample. News topics beyond the disease itself exhibited more comprehensive and balanced characteristics. Reports with political themes still accounted for the highest proportion, with 44.4% featuring political and social themes, 11.1% featuring political and economic themes, and 22.2% featuring single political themes. Although the proportion of economic and social topics increased compared to the previous two stages, single-topic economic and social reports accounted for only 11.1% each.

This fully reflects the political nature of international communication. As a Commonwealth country, Bangladesh is heavily influenced by Western discourse. To protect their own political interests, media focus on selecting political-themed news and politicizing the coronavirus when reporting on China's epidemic.

4.2 Prothom Alo's Reporting Focus Changes with Epidemic Phases

As the coronavirus situation evolved, so did Prothom Alo's reporting focus. On one hand, the data analysis above reveals that beyond the main reporting topics, the proportions of economic, social, and disease topics themselves constantly shifted. The proportion of disease-themed reports was particularly notable. In the first and second stages, disease-related topics matched political topics in frequency, while no disease topics appeared in the third-stage sample. This indicates that since 2022, countries have conducted more in-depth virus research and vaccination has become more widespread. China had achieved stable epidemic conditions and gradual return to normal production and life. Consequently, fear and attention toward the disease itself decreased, resulting in reduced media coverage.

On the other hand, when we further coded reports on political, economic, and

social topics, we found that specific content within each topic category also changed. Among the 15 politically-themed news items in the first stage, nine addressed “lack of democracy,” “policy opacity,” and “restriction of freedom of speech”—closely aligning with Western stereotypes of China and common topics criticized by Western media regarding Chinese political parties. In addition to commentary on China’s epidemic policy and situation, six other news items addressed Sino-foreign relations, including commentary from China, the United States, Japan, India, and other nations. This not only reflects the signature conspiracy theories of the West but also demonstrates that as the world’s second-largest economy, China’s comprehensive national strength and international status continue to improve, making diplomatic issues represented by Sino-U.S. relations a persistent international focus. In the second and third stages, political issues concentrated on epidemic policy. Among the four reports selected in the second stage, two focused on China’s epidemic policy, one addressed “China criticizes Bangladesh’s vaccine policy,” and one concerned international cooperation. In the third stage, the “zero-COVID policy” accounted for 57.1% of political topics, representing the most concerning political issue in reporting.

With the establishment, development, and abolition of the “zero-COVID policy,” other countries’ media commentary on China’s epidemic policy shifted from criticizing the policy as sweeping and contrary to global trends to highlighting political crises and restricted freedom of speech following the policy’s abolition.

Additionally, the proportion of Western media reports on Chinese social topics in the third stage increased significantly compared to the first two stages, with specific content also changing. As a major national event in the third stage, Western media reported on the Winter Olympics’ progress under the epidemic’s shadow. Furthermore, attention shifted from cities to rural areas, covering issues such as panic buying in supermarkets and public protests triggered by sudden changes in epidemic policy—highly consistent with Western media’s thinking inertia, highlighting social contradictions in China after the abolition of the “zero-COVID policy.” Moreover, linking environmental pollution—a globally sensitive topic—with the epidemic represents a common Western method of blurred vision.

The specific content of economic themes did not change significantly. Economic reports across all three stages focused on China’s economic downturn during the epidemic or the impact on China’s foreign trade, even extending to economic impacts on Asia and the world. For example, reports addressed issues of “harming exports and mobile phone supply.”

4.3 Prothom Alo’s Epidemic Reporting on China Is Predominantly Negative and Originates from Western Media

Analysis of attitudes toward China in the reports reveals that among the 32 articles sampled in the first period, half were negative and half neutral. Cross-

analysis of attitudes toward China and information sources in Prothom Alo's reports shows that among the 16 reports with negative attitudes toward China, 12 originated from AFP and three from Reuters. Among neutral reports, seven came from Reuters. In the second stage, of nine total samples, most were neutral (88.9%). The single negative report came from Agence France-Presse and was politically themed, criticizing China's opaque epidemic policy. In the third period, all nine samples were negative, and all originated from AFP and other Western media.

This demonstrates that Prothom Alo's reporting on China's epidemic is primarily negative and mostly sourced from Western media represented by Agence France-Presse. In the face of ideological conflicts and national interest disputes between China and foreign countries, Western media construct a negative image of China with biased agendas to safeguard their national image and divert domestic contradictions, violating principles of objectivity and balance in journalism. Moreover, by exploiting global discourse power, they deeply influence media in other countries such as Bangladesh under the pretext of information free flow, damaging China's subjective national image among overseas audiences.

4.4 Prothom Alo's Reporting Tendency Changes with Epidemic Phases

At different stages of epidemic evolution, Prothom Alo's reporting tone changed. The study found that the first phase's tone was half negative and half neutral. Cross-analysis of reporting tendency and news categories showed that the majority of disease-related report samples were neutral (11 reports). Among the 16 samples with negative attitudes, political themes accounted for the highest proportion (eight articles, or 50%). For example, reports claimed that the Communist Party of China restricts citizens' freedom of speech or that the Chinese People's Congress is merely decorative. Additionally, some negative reports addressed economic themes, highlighting that China's epidemic caused significant damage to both the Chinese and global economies.

Most second-stage reports were neutral, indicating that during this period, as the global epidemic spread, China adopted the normal "zero-COVID" policy with good epidemic control results. Media coverage related to China decreased significantly, with topics focusing on the disease itself or epidemic policy, resulting in predominantly neutral attitudes.

Third-stage coverage was entirely negative. This shows that at this stage, with China's improved epidemic situation creating strong contrast with Western epidemic management, Western media hoped to shift local population dissatisfaction with epidemic control through negative publicity about China. Furthermore, since late 2022, when China canceled the "zero-COVID" policy, Western media highlighted contradictions such as media narrative crises and public protests following China's policy change to construct a negative image of China.

4.5 Construction of China's Image Through Negative Word Usage

In all collected samples, negative words in reports were classified, and word frequency statistical analysis revealed five main categories: shadow of the epidemic, indoctrination, public protest, public negative emotion, and economic decline, contraction, and interruption. Negative words indicating economic decline, contraction, and interruption had the highest frequency (91 occurrences), constructing an image of China where the epidemic damaged both domestic and foreign economic development. For example, in first-stage reports on economic issues from AFP and other Western media, terms such as “fall,” “drop,” “contract,” and “recession” were frequently used when describing harm to Gulf economies or export trade from China's epidemic.

Second, negative words implying Chinese people's dissatisfaction with China's epidemic policies appeared 41 times, including “fear,” “mistrust,” and “worry.” The term “protest” appeared 29 times, mostly in the context of “protest,” intending to highlight problems of Chinese government credibility deficits and epidemic policies contrary to popular will. The state “indoctrinated” the public with policies or ideas eight times. For example, in a report about the political cost of China's “zero-COVID” policy, the phrase “spoon-fed to the public” appeared, aiming to build an image of an authoritarian and undemocratic Chinese government. These findings demonstrate that Western media primarily construct China's external image from economic and political perspectives.

5 Conclusion

Through content analysis, this article examined the construction of China's image in Bangladesh's Prothom Alo reporting on China's epidemic, attempting to answer the mechanisms, content, and reasons behind the newspaper's construction of China's image. The results confirm all four hypotheses.

First, the newspaper focused on political issues across three different phases of the coronavirus pandemic. In the first phase, political issues and disease-related issues were the focus. The second phase concentrated on disease-related topics. In the third phase, the focus remained on political issues, with disease-related topics absent. Further coding of reports on political, economic, and social issues reveals that democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech are common political issues; economic recession is a common domestic and international economic issue; and popular protest is a common social issue.

Second, the newspaper's coverage across three different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic was predominantly negative in tone. In the first stage, half the reports were negative and half neutral. Most second-stage reports were neutral. Third-stage coverage was entirely negative. Beyond confirming the hypotheses, we also find that Prothom Alo's information sources are primarily Western media represented by AFP, with most holding negative attitudes.

Therefore, this study finds that Prothom Alo constructs an image of China that

lacks political freedom of speech and policy transparency, endangers domestic and international economies, and threatens people's lives while degrading quality of life.

Regarding Western countries, due to ideological differences between China and the West and conflicts of national interest, Western media—under stereotypical cognitive models of China—politicize the virus to divert domestic epidemic contradictions and maintain their international status. They stigmatize and demonize China's image with a negative framework and biased agenda, which will continue to harm China's national image under a "snowball effect." Therefore, Western media workers should adhere to principles of objectivity, neutrality, truthfulness, and fairness in international communication work, remain loyal to the overall truth of news, and change stereotypes of China. Next, they should correctly understand the concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind" to conform to the trend of development of the times. To promote world peace and development, actively shouldering corresponding international responsibilities is necessary.

For Bangladesh, due to the imbalance of the world information order and Western control of discourse power, Bangladeshi media are deeply influenced by Western discourse and consequently construct a more negative image of China. According to Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, if Bangladesh and other less-developed countries wish to escape the "center—semi-periphery—periphery" world pattern and build an independent discourse system, they must actively explore their own development paths while learning from developed countries' development models. Only by improving comprehensive national strength in economic, political, and cultural fields can they enhance their international discourse power.

For China, its discursive communication power does not match its comprehensive national strength level. Despite the global situation of "rising East and declining West," China still lacks international communication influence, resulting in "other-narration" replacing "self-narration" and making it difficult to rectify its own name. In the future, under the guidance of the global concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind," China should vigorously build an external publicity flagship matrix composed of traditional mainstream media, new media, and overseas internet enterprises. It should construct a multi-dimensional communication pattern to enhance discourse influence and communication power. Meanwhile, China should actively innovate its content system, enrich communication forms, and promote "cultural transformation" in communication. It should strive to overcome the "cultural iceberg," enhance the appeal of Chinese culture, and build a respectable, lovely, and credible image of China.

Nevertheless, due to the large sample size and language translation difficulties, this study did not analyze the reporting framework from perspectives of rhetorical devices, language symbols, and news pictures. Future scholars should pay greater attention to the use of introduction, rhetoric, and language symbols

when studying China's image construction in epidemic reports through framing theory. Additionally, scholars can expand research on the communication effects of overseas media reports on China-related epidemics on foreign audiences through audience surveys.

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