Discoursal Conflicts: Reports on China's Handling of Covid-19 among Chinese and Western Media Representations

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Abstract: This research addresses how western main media and Chinese main media report China's handling of Covid-19 differently. By employing corpus software like Sketch Engine and AntConc, this paper attempts to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze Western and Chinese mainstream news outlets' reports on China's response to Covid-19 through online Coronavirus Corpus and self-designed Western mainstream media and Chinese mainstream media corpora covering NYT, FT, Xinhua News, China Daily, Global Times, etc. from January to December 2020. Results reveal that English language media including mainstream news outlets in US and UK employs strong discriminatory dictions ideologically and frequently and they are different in report focus compared with Chinese media. And Chinese media maintain strong confidence in the path and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Such differences in news reports are highly related to the decisions, measures, and effects of the UK, the US and Chinese governments' different ways of handling Covid-19.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has ravaged the world from 2020 to 2022, as the large part of world was forced into waves of different levels of lockdowns and quarantines. During the pandemic, the vulnerability was particularly higher in some regions with limited access to vaccination and extreme consumption of local medical resources [17]. Under this grand and grave circumstance, the pandemic has prompted a global rise of nationalism in all aspects, particularly in the West where anti-China politicians and news outlets blamed China's early misstep in handling the outbreak of the pandemic while deny any responsibilities of their own administerial dysfunctions and civil unrest and social divisiveness over pandemic restriction and quarantine policies in the early stage of Covid pandemic [4,25]. On the other hand, China's consistent denial of taking any blame from the West widens the political and ideological gulf between the West and China. This sharp contention on the pandemic stretches from the political and diplomatic arena to media and social discourses in China and the West. Take media discourse as the example, the spread of disinformation at different levels has exacerbated the spread of the pandemic and shook off the civic confidence on how to effectively prevent the virus, such as how 'hoax theory' by right-leaning media misinformed Americans that Covid-19 is a Chinese plot to harm US economy [22]. Since the western media, particularly mainstream outlets from the the

US and UK hold dominant influence in global media discourse [16], to fully understand how international media cover China's response to Covid-19 and how China's media narrative its response to Covid-19 abroad is an important task and is regarded as an important battlefield as to China's soft power in global stage [13]. This research attempts to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze the linguistic features of Western and Chinese mainstream news outlets' reports on China's response to Covid-19 through online Coronavirus Corpus and self-designed Western mainstream media and Chinese mainstream media corpora.

2. Review on the international media coverage on China's handling of Covid-19

Research in international academia and media reports revealed that global reactions towards China's handling of the Covid-19 divide with mixed attitudes. On one hand, some appreciated China's efforts in containing the spread of Covid-19 by adopting the unprecedented draconian lockdown and quarantine policy or isolation policy [3], and even set China as a model in responding to Covid-19, even though China bore huge costs and GDP loss sine Covid-19 with GDP declined by -6.8% in the first quarter of 2020 [1]. For example, Lazarus et al., (2020) surveyed that the highest public perception and satisfaction to government responses to COVID-19 is China out of 19 major countries. The last episode of the Economist in 2020 surprisingly extoled how Chinese scientists shared with global scientists the genome of Covid-19 that was sequenced by them within weeks after the outbreak [26]. This showed China's determination for a global coordinated effort to fight pandemics through international cooperation. By contrast, research in Pew research center shows that over 60% of people in developed countries were frustrated and pessimistic towards the economic outlook of their own countries [21].

On the other hand, more media strongly criticized China's early handling of Covid-19 and perceived their later altruism as diplomatic opportunism and propaganda [4,11]. Interestingly, some strict policies to respond to Covid-19 that once were strongly criticized by the West such as confinement or lockdown of Wuhan city were implemented and proved to have a positive effect in cutting the virus infection chains across communities in the early stage of the pandemic [2]. However, when the coronavirus rampaged into the northern hemisphere, the newly affected cases soared in Europe and North America as their governments failed to take precautious steps when China was fighting hard against the deadly virus. Western media take a hardline stance when covering China's Covid-19 issues, and politicize the pandemic to some extent, such as increasingly employing prejudiced words like 'China Virus' 'Wuhan Virus' [12,19]. One striking example of such deep bias and the sense of superiority from the West is the article China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia published in The Wallstreet Journal on Feb 4th, 2020 [20]. Ironically, the fantasies of China's economic collapse and social unrest due to the pandemic by this author fell into reality in the US whose affected number and death toll have been leading the globe ever since.

The media play a crucial part in any social event but their role in a pandemic is controversial in that media may divide public conceptions and even ideology in pandemic situations [6]. This is also evidenced by the research [14] that the collective attention of the public is much more influenced by media coverage rather than pandemic progression. Big data (corpus-driven) application is important for analyzing the spread of information in media and social networks like Facebook, Twitter, or WeChat. In terms of the news report about Covid-19, the corpus method is optimized for analyzing the characteristics of Covid-19 reports, such as features of FOX reports about Covid-19 [7] and war-related language in some media [27,28]. As literature reveals, though much attention has been given to China's response to Covid-19 in the Western media, analyses about its characteristics at the linguistic level are relatively scant in academia. Nor is the analysis on how China's official and mainstream Chinese media covered China's response to Covid-19 to foreign readers, such as the

English version of People's Daily, Xinhua News, China Daily, etc, though they reported extensively and domestically. To this end, this research attempts to address these two research questions: 1. How do western media report and perceive China's handling of COVID-19 based on a corpus-driven method? 2. What are the differences in the coverage of China's response to COVID-19 among Chinese and Western mainstream media representations? Based on a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis, we hypothesize that the pandemic has exacerbated the ever-worsening distrust between China and the West, in the representation of the western media.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research method and research instruments

To address the research questions, this study adopts both quantitative and qualitative methods by combining corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis. The quantitative part includes collecting the data from Google Trends, online 'Coronavirus Corpus', and two self-designed media corpora. Specifically, corpus software and tools like Sketch Engine, AntConc, and Wmatrix4 were employed to examine the frequency, concordance collocates, and keyness analysis of 'China virus' 'Wuhan virus' and 'authoritarian' 'totalitarian' in online corpus and self-designed corpus in combination with analysis from google trends. The qualitative part locates certain specific articles from the corpora for further in-depth analysis to supplement quantitative analysis.

3.2 Data collection

For this study, Online Coronavirus Corpus' is a super-size online corpus with 700 million words from newspapers and magazines in 20 different English-speaking countries. This free corpus provides enough and general data for our research purpose. For the self-designed corpora, we collect 450 related reports in the Factiva database by searching 'Coronavirus', 'Covid-19', 'China', 'Chinese' from the mainstream US and UK newspapers from Jan 2020 to Dec 2020, including NYT, WSP, WSJ, USA Today, CNN, FOX, Guardian, and FT to create a mini corpus (Western Media corpus) consisting of 653,731 words. The chosen media outlets are the mainstream media in the US and UK from the right to left wings. The Chinese mainstream media corpus (Chinese Media corpus) consists of 180 reports with 163,883 words from the mainstream news outlets at China's national level (no mentions from local levels due to the fact that few local outlets offer English news reports) including Xinhua News (English edition), China Daily (English edition), Global Times (English edition) in the Factiva database during the same period. The timeline of the data stretched from 20 Jan 2020 to Dec 2020 to cover the nearly entire one-year span of the Covid-19.The third tool we employ in this paper is google trends, which shows the changes of linguistic characteristics at lexical and phrasal levels.

4. Research findings and discussion

4.1 Noun collocates of China virus and Wuhan Virus

By searching noun collocates related to 'China' and 'Wuhan' in online Coronavirus Corpus, virus is listed as one of the most frequent collocates with relatively moderate MI (MI=5.35/6.4), which shows that collocation of China virus and Wuhan virus is not very strong and stable collocation but rather highly frequent in the corpus (Table 1 and 2). Other epidemic related to collocates with China and Wuhan includes coronavirus, ban, lab, laboratory, hospital, outbreak, virology, etc. From google trends, we can see that both 'China virus' and 'Wuhan virus' are

saliently employed from Jan 2020 to Feb 2020 to show that western media were hugely concerned with the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China (Figure 1). This result is also found in the self-designed corpus (Western Media) (Figure 2), as China and Wuhan are very significant collocations as modifiers of virus in the mainstream newspaper corpus. Other high frequent and salient Verb-Object collocates with China in Western Media corpus include blame, accuse, resist, counter, confront, punish, contain, challenge (Figure 2). Verbal semantics shows that how the verbs relate to the senses of events in the sentence [15, 18]. The above Verb-Object collocates in WM corpus indicate a negative and combative affectedness of the internal semantics of events.

Table 1 Most frequent noun collocates of 'China'

noun collocates	frequency	MI
sea	3739	11.45
virus	1529	5.35
morning	1502	7.98
post	1391	7.68
AI	521	8.9
policy	385	5.71
market	368	4.47
business	360	4.26
trade	333	6.11
report	325	4.62
association	289	6.03
travel	269	4.49
journal	214	6.47
bank	211	4.63
news	208	3.22
law	202	5.22
group	193	4.02
ban	181	5.39
flights	179	5.63
city	170	3.06

Table 2 Most frequent noun collocates of 'Wuhan'

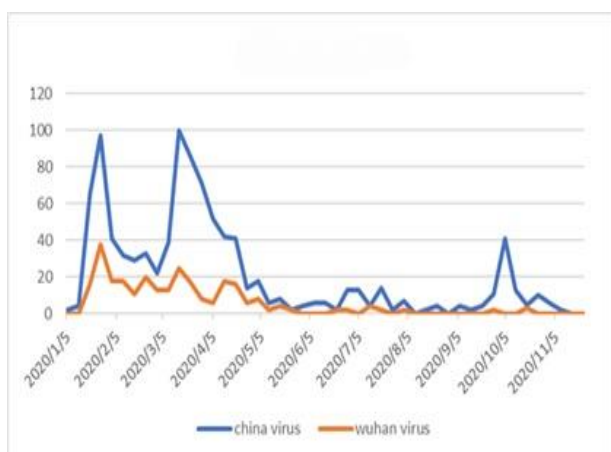| noun collocates	frequency	MI
coronavirus	2056	5.29
city	2005	7.32
virus	1959	6.4
institute	1361	9.47
virology	1188	12.21
china	832	5.83
lab	629	9.23
university	560	6.45
outbreak	493	5.26
province	434	7.16
market	355	5.11
residents	321	5.85
hubei	300	8.01
hospital	287	7.7
authorities	222	5.7
laboratory	217	7.95
police	201	3.88
area	186	4.75
officials	155	5.25
region	148	4.16

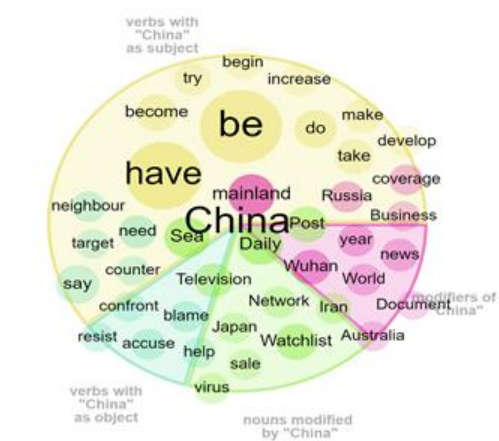Figure 1 'China Virus' 'Wuhan Virus' in Google Trends

Figure 2 Types of collocates of 'virus' in WM

The above findings from corpora demonstrate that the western media are getting increasingly strongly prejudiced and biased when reporting China and its handling with Covid-19. For example, the second peak of these two terms appeared from about March 5th, 2020 to April 5th, 2020 when the virus ferociously spread in North America and Europe while China was on the way to containing the virus. The second peak contrasted with the previous one for its discoursal turn from

purely geographic and medical terms to politicizing the Covid-19 by blaming China, accompanying wide anti-China and anti-Asian sentiments [12, 23]. In this case, 'China virus' is more politically motivated than 'Wuhan virus' which may be related to the original place of virus, as the former is more salient in the last eleven months (Figure 1). The highly frequent collocates of discriminatory terminology of Covid-19, which relates to Wuhan and China reflects how Western societies conceptualize the pandemic when their governments fail to contain the pandemic. For example, former U.S. President Donald Trump repetitively refers to Covid-19 as 'China virus' under many circumstances to draw support from his vote bases as his own administration's chaotic response fails to contain the pandemic [24]. This politicalizing pandemic by politicians and media has been echoed in western society. A series of studies in Pew research center have shown a consistent increase of unfavorable attitudes of average Americans towards China from 66% in April 2020, to 73% in July 2020 and 78% in Oct 2020 [8, 9, 10].

4.2 Noun collocates of 'authoritarian'

By searching the noun collocates modified by 'authoritarian' (Table 3), we can find that 'China' is ranked the second-highest with relatively moderate MI (MI= 4.96). This shows that the collocate is highly employed in this online corpus. Furthermore, when closely examining the qualitative part of concordance lines of 'authoritarian', we can identify some other noun collocates in the frequency list like government, leader, system, state, ruler, etc., are also highly associated with 'China'. This means that the frequency of 'authoritarian' and 'China' is practically much higher. This is not surprised when we see 'authoritarian' is a highly salient word related to 'China' in google trends in the last eleven months (Figure 3). Slightly different findings are shown in the self-designed corpus that China is not a direct noun collocation with authoritarian (Figure 4), but concordance lines show that China is very significantly salient with authoritarian (Figure 5).

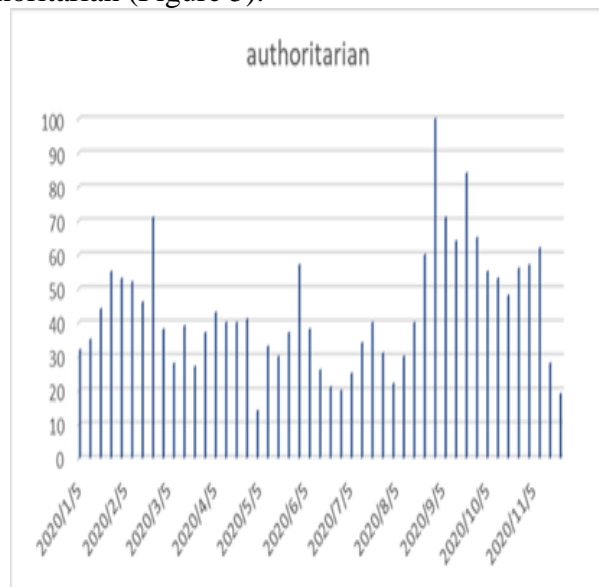| noun collocates	frequency	MI
regimes	435	12.57
china	321	4.96
regime	253	9.82
government	237	3.74
leaders	194	6.51
governments	182	6.52
rule	179	7.69
president	174	4.42
state	161	3.21
leader	136	6.39
states	131	4.26
like	128	3.02
countries	111	4.24
country	99	3.19
system	97	4.49
trump	95	3.88
power	85	5.13
tendencies	82	11.19

Table 3 Noun collocates of 'authoritarian'   Figure 3 Authoritarian in Google Trends

In the discussion of ideological differences between the West and China, 'authoritarian' is the common word frequently employed in academia, politics, and media to distinguish the West from China, even alienate China from ideological and political perspectives [5, 6]. In example [1], the author deliberately distinguishes the west and China as 'WE' and 'THEY' to ideologically portray China as an authoritarian and even Orwellian surveillance state (videoing everyone). Example [2] reveals the representative mindset of some US elites of corresponding Covid-19 with authoritarian

propagandists and further with China's Covid-19 handling.

(1) We have an image in the West of China being authoritarian and they are videoing everyone. They can have access to anything. (The New York Times, Feb 15th, 2021)

(2) His team echoed the theme, from his secretary of state to his family. "Anyone praising China's 'leadership' in responding that the virus should be scorned for being the authoritarian/communist propagandist that they are," Donald Trump Jr., the president's eldest son, wrote on Twitter on March 26. (The New York Times, April 9th, 2021)
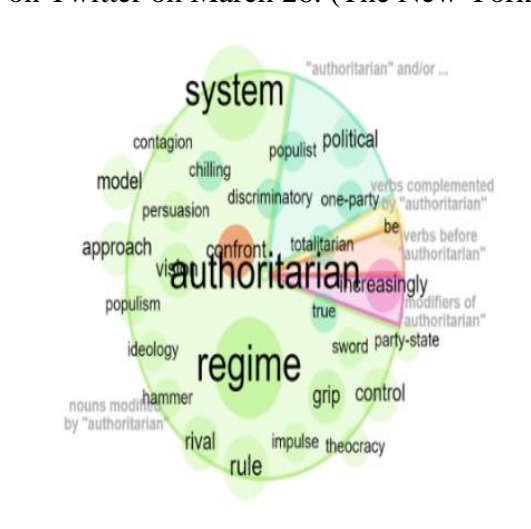

Figure 4 Types of collocates of 'authoritarian'   Figure 5concordance lines of 'authoritarian' in WM

In this sense, the pandemic context has exacerbated western elites' politicalizing the pandemic and labeling China as an authoritarian or totalitarian country. This is coupled with other containing-China strategies. Another striking example is that the Trump administration attempts to decouple the US-China relationship in a fundamental way in political, economic, diplomatic, trade, technological, educational aspects, 'anti-China' becomes new political correctness in the US politics and media. When reporting China's unprecedented lockdown of the entire Wuhan city with over 11 million people, western media criticized the move as the 'camp' against basic human rights. 'Authoritarian' was politicalized in the pandemic to attack China's political and social system by some western politicians and media [28].

4.3 Contrast of two self-designed corpora

From the cross corpora contrast, we can find that China's handling of Covid-19 is of great concern for both WM and CM. However, further examination of two corpora reveals that high frequent nouns collocates with the keywords like China, China's, Chinese in Chinese mainstream corpus are China, cooperation, development, economy, recovery, investment, international, global, economy, trade, market, etc. And the high frequent verbal collocates of these key words in CM are work, aim, boost, show, commit, promote, etc. This highlights that Chinese mainstream media are more concerned with the economic and social recovery, people's lives returning to normal state, or China's efforts for international cooperation against the pandemic as the government successfully contained the pandemic. In contrast, as is discussed before, WM pertains to the political and ideological images of China's handling of Covid-19 with higher noun collocate frequency like government, leader, party, regime, authoritarian, and verb collocates like blame, criticize, not believe, act against, resist, confront, rebuke, protest, warn, threaten, compel, contain, constrain,

reject, provoke, attack, challenge, ignore, etc. (Table 4). The keyness analysis of two corpora provides further details of the contrasting differences of noun collocates in CM relating to economy, trade, global cooperation while WM corresponding to political special term, particularly for US presidential election, etc.

Table 4 Summary of noun collocates of key words China, China's, Chinese in CM/WM corpora

	Noun collocates relating to economy	Noun collocates relating to politics and ideology
CM (Chinese mainstream media corpus)	36%	12%
WM (western mainstream media corpus)	14%	30%

5. Conclusion

By conducting the quantitative and qualitative study, the corpus evidence of this research shows that China's handling of Covid-19 is a great concern for both international and China's domestic media in terms of both large online corpus and small self-designed corpus. Firstly, through searching frequency, concordance, noun collocations, and word sketch in Sketch Engine of 'virus' and 'authoritarian', we can find that increasing use of discriminatory terms and concepts against 'China' is employed in the western media under the grand context of the pandemic and US-China confrontation, which indicates the generally negative trend of language conflict in the western media representation concerning China. This reflects ideologization, politicization, stereotyping when China comes to the focus in western media [29]. Secondly, the narrative of China's mainstream media on international discourse presents the world the tremendous efforts the Chinese government made to successfully curb and contain the further spread of Covid-19 within Chinese mainland at a very high social and economic cost. However, given the dominant position of US and UK media in international discourse, Chinese media have a relatively small audience and less influential voice to break down the long-held stereotype ingrained into the western public by politicians, media, etc. It is also very important to reflect on certain limitations of this mini research for future further research. First, it would be more significant if we can compare western and Chinese media reports about China's Covid-19 handing with the design of well-balanced and representative corpora. Second, the searching methods are limited in this study, and it would be more meaningful if we conduct critical discourse analysis for the qualitative part to specifically subcategorize noun collocates in this research.

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