



## ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEXTUAL FACTORS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINA'S NATIONAL IMAGE IN THE GERMAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### ABSTRACT

National image is a clear information perception of a country in the international community, reflecting a country's international influence and comprehensive national power. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the dramatic changes in the international order and landscape. As a result, there is a widespread perception in the West that the current international order has not only encountered serious challenges from emerging powers but has also led to confusion in the perception of globalisation within the West. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the breadth and depth of attention paid to "China" in the German mainstream media have continued to rise.

This study will further investigate how the image of China is constructed in cross-cultural media communication, based on the national image of China in German mainstream media coverage of China during the COVID-19 Pandemic and ideological analysis of the discursive contexts in which it is produced.

This paper is basically structured as a review of the traditions and rules of the German press, an analysis of the operational characteristics of the German press industry under the COVID-19 pandemic, the social impact of German media coverage on China, and an analysis of this news production mechanism, followed by an analysis of the game between the Chinese and Western value systems and discourse power displayed by the German media during the COVID-19 pandemic, an analysis of the value orientation of the German media towards the construction of China's national image. This is followed by an academic exploration of the background and public opinion effects of the "China Phobia".

This paper also examines the changes in the social structure of Germany as a result of the pandemic, Sino-German and Sino-European relations in the context of the Sino-American conflict, and the evolution of a sense of "sovereign Europe" and the current international order.

**KEYWORDS :** COVID-19 Pandemic , German Mainstream Media, Dynamic National Image of China

National image is a clear information perception of a country in the international community, an important part of the country's cultural soft power, reflecting a country's international influence and comprehensive national power. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the breadth and depth of attention paid to "China" in the German mainstream media have continued to rise.

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### 1. Analysis of the characteristics of the German media industry that influence the order of discourse transmission

#### 1.1 The characteristics of the German media industry

The world's first weekly and daily newspapers appeared in modern Germany, with the first weekly newspapers appearing in 1609 in Straßburg and Wolfenbüttel and the first daily newspaper in 1650 in Leipzig.

Today Germany is still a country with a high dependence on print media. Germany is the fifth-largest newspaper market globally, after China, India, Japan and the USA. According to the Federal Association of Newspaper Publishers, newspapers - print and digital - reach three-quarters of the German-speaking population every day.

Influenced by history, culture and reality, the German media has developed several common identities: firstly, it emphasises the media's position as a free reporter and its social responsibility to monitor the government; secondly, it has a unique media pattern in which both newspapers and journals are given equal importance, even "press over newspaper"; and thirdly, it has a preference for investigative reporting and a more critical approach to writing.

In Germany, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of broadcasting and freedom of information are guaranteed. By Article 5(1) of the Basic Law. The press concept includes all printed material suitable for dissemination, including radio (radio, television), regardless of circulation, audience level or number. The entire process of production and distribution is protected, as well as the news product itself. Therefore, freedom of the press also means freedom to determine the orientation, content, and form of the news product; at the same time, informers of news tips are protected, and editorial confidentiality is guaranteed.

Unlike freedom of expression, freedom of the press in Germany includes the protection of the expression of opinion itself and implies

institutional guarantees for the preservation of freedom of the press in Germany.

Publishers, editors and journalists have a huge responsibility to society. They provide information, promote the formation of opinions and freedom of expression and expose grievances. The code of journalistic ethics under which they work is the Press Act, the observance of which is monitored by the German Press Council. As a result, "freedom of the press in the West" is also a "freedom of interpretation" within a specific context and rules.

The government and political parties in Germany are forced to stay mainly out of the news editing process. In individual cases, even top politicians need to win over journalists and publishers. Conversely, publishers are, to varying degrees, subject to the constraints of the market, depending on their financial resources. As a result, newspapers and magazines are fast becoming obsolete commodities. Advertising revenues determine the financial resources of publishers; subscriptions are in the background.

The rise of the Internet has provided a more limited outlet for traditional print media. Modern technology has made it possible to disseminate information and knowledge at a relatively low economic cost, significantly reducing printing and shipping costs. For media audiences, the question of "what information they want" and "what information they want" has become a complex proposition.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany in March 2020 put an end to more than a decade of economic recovery in Germany, which led to the country's worst economic downturn since the Second World War. From a news perspective, German newspapers could gain more than 3 million additional readers per week in 2020.

In 2020, German newspaper publishers generated 10% of their revenues through digital products, realising €785 million in digital revenues. Moreover, E-newspaper circulation exceeded the two million mark for the first time, doubling sales in four years. This shows that the need for access to information and knowledge is higher in times of pandemics than in previous periods.

#### 1.2 Analysis of the production mechanism of German media reports on China

In Public Opinion, Lippmann proposes the term "Pseudo Environment", which refers to the reality that is selected, chosen and processed by the media and reproduced in front of the audience. In selecting and processing reality, journalists are bound to make subjective judgements, and the finished product can easily be biased and deviate from the principle of objective truthfulness in journalism if they are not careful. In this study, it was found that German journalists

tended to report on negative issues related to China.

The German mainstream media covered in this study have a traditional political orientation that emphasises freedom, human rights, equality and democracy; when analysing the content of the reports in the context of the pandemic, it is clear that many reports focus on social issues such as "ordinary Chinese people lose their jobs because of the pandemic", "the inequality between rich and poor in China increases". The reports are focused on social issues. "Political correctness" seems to regulate the "boundaries" and "degrees" of news reporting. Thus, by reporting on the negative image of China's fight against the pandemic, the German media is highlighting its political stance and claims.

This situation leads to the possibility of power and manipulation and also places a huge responsibility on the journalists who report. In serious foreign-related reporting, media audiences rely more on the reliability of the information provided by resident journalists than in other areas of reporting. Of course, in the age of globalised mobility, the information advantage that foreign journalists have over their recipients on the ground has become minimal, given the expanding international communication networks. In many cases, however, German media audiences can still not critically judge news reports such as those concerning China based on personal experience.

### 1.3. The game of Chinese and Western discourse in the German media during the COVID-19 pandemic

In Western societies, including Germany, the media is the "fourth power" and the legislature, the judiciary and the executive. In current international politics, the media is an important force in the construction of international discourse. The pandemic is not only a struggle between man and nature and a game of international discourse between China and the West: the West uses the media to negatively deconstruct the discourse of China, while China reconstructs its own discourse and image through positive and timely reporting and propaganda.

An important part of a country's cultural soft power is its international discourse. International discourse is not only "the power of a country to 'speak' in the world," but also "the effectiveness and power of 'speaking'". "The core of which is the national ideological discourse. At present, the international discourse field has become an important battleground for countries to safeguard their rights and interests, compete for legitimate interests and enhance their comprehensive strength. Having a solid international discourse helps to express a country's own demands better, defend its power, and even change the will of other countries and the direction of international development. Thus, the media's participation in the construction of international discourse is both a communication act and a political act.

In the period of the pandemic, the Western media, including the German media, lent their media dominance to a discursive reconstruction of China, reporting from a relatively stereotypical perspective that shifted the media audience from concern about the virus to questioning and attacking China, clearly demonstrating the ideological character of the German and Western media.

## 2. Analysis of Chinese and German Cultural Values in the Construction of China's National Image

The construction and evaluation of a national image is a two-way process. Germany, as a European country, constructs an alienated image of China based on value judgements based on civilisational patterns and cultural differences. In terms of the model of civilisation, Chinese civilisation is different from Western civilisation, and this difference is often magnified by European countries to the extent that they see Chinese civilisation as the antithesis of European civilisation, creating an alienated image of China. On the other hand, European countries see modern European civilisation as a 'universal value' and a 'universal norm', and Chinese civilisation is seen as a heterogeneous civilisation, fundamentally different from European civilisation.

To this day, Eurocentrism continues to exist in a superior position in Sino-German, Sino-European and China-Western exchanges, and the stereotypes created by this perspective constrain the way people see things. The differences in values between China and Germany have also seriously affected the political mutual trust between the two countries.

According to the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the idea of a "different perspective", whereby each individual acts because they want to reduce the difference between their wishes and reality, applies equally to states and people. Frank Sieren, a German media

personality, cites this theory when discussing China, where Sieren writes that many Germans believe that whatever is good for the Germans themselves will also be good for China. But the way China is governed is quite different from Germany.

## 3. Analysis of the Background Factors and Influence of the "China Phobia" in German society and the media

### 3.1 Contextual factors of the "China phobia" in German society and media during the pandemic period

There is still a large gap between the levels of economic and social development in China and Germany. After more than 200 years of industrialisation, Germany has entered the post-industrial era, while China is still in the process of industrialisation and modernisation and is under tremendous pressure to restructure and transform its economy. Although China was generally seen in the German media during this period as a world-leading superpower alongside the United States, the "Chinese model" was still not recognised.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020, has presented Germany with both internal and external challenges. In the face of repeated outbreaks and the relatively slow introduction of the vaccine, the health care system is under pressure despite the tighter preventive and control measures. Moreover, the multiple effects of the pandemic have led to an overlap of old and new conflicts in Germany.

Firstly, the spread and recurrence of the pandemic have had a profound and widespread impact on the German economy, with fragmentation and fracturing of industrial chains in many European countries, including Germany. Secondly, the pandemic has disrupted the political and policy design of the German-led EU, which had launched a series of top-level plans and strategies for industrial development and geopolitics before the pandemic in 2020, the year in which the German presidency of the EU was set to take off. However, the sudden onset of the pandemic and its negative impact forced the EU to adjust its policies and further reduced its resources and capacity to implement its strategies and plans, thus magnifying the gap between the EU's political will and its actual capacity. Once again, the spread of the pandemic in Europe has revealed a general lack of authority, decision-making and action on the part of European governments, which are not performing as well as they should in terms of distributing goods and controlling people at borders, which has led to the decline of the neoliberal ideology that has long prevailed in the Western world. In addition, there is a general sense of burnout among the German population regarding the continuation of the pandemic and the switching back and forth of measures to prevent the pandemic, which has led to an intensification of social tensions. The growing insecurity in the population's minds has led to an increase in populist and xenophobic rhetoric, thus leading to a further rise in right-wing populist thinking in Europe. Germany, which has benefited from the Chinese economy during the pandemic, has positively assessed the Chinese economy. However, due to the strong interdependence of the German and Chinese economies, the Indo-Pacific Strategy Guidelines launched by the German government show that Germany wants to reduce its dependence on China gradually.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, political and economic relations between the two countries have also suffered greatly. Moreover, the differences in values between Germany and China have exacerbated the misconceptions of the German public about China. During this period, the German mainstream media focused on China as a priority country, covering many topics and areas. However, the stereotypes that were amplified by the media, influenced by Western ideologies and interests, affected the German public's perception of China's image as a country.

In summary, China's growth has been faster and more resilient than the West could have imagined. And this growth is systemic, i.e. the homogeneity of state and society, the resonance of politics and economy, and the interconnection of individuals and groups. The fact that China does not need to develop according to Western designs, but is perfectly capable of following its own will and trajectory, has brought a strong conceptual and empirical shock to Europe. The competitive economic advantage that China is building up is also beginning to be seen as a product of its political system. This change is breaking with the deep-rooted European stereotype that "only Western democracy can promote economic prosperity".

In contrast, the European region has been devastated by the eurozone debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and the pandemic crisis's impact. The strong sense of imbalance has caused European populations to

question long-held values and the institutions they have embraced. This situation has also made it easier to place Sino-European relations in a competitive and confrontational logic.

### 3.2 Impact of the US-China relationship on Sino-German and Sino-European relations

Since the Trump administration, the traditional "transatlantic alliance" between Europe and the US has been shaken dramatically. The election of Biden to the US presidency at the end of 2020 is good news for Europe. The Biden administration's foreign policy ideas, such as "a renewed focus on alliances", "a return to multilateralism", and "the use of economic and trade tools", are in line with the demands of European countries. The tripartite relationship between China, Europe and the United States has thus become more complex and volatile. The path of "European sovereignty" and "strategic autonomy" advocated by the EU countries is reflected in the strengthening of market protection and the partial departure from "economic dependence" on China. On the other hand, Germany follows the Indo-Pacific strategy proposed by the United States, with the explicit intention of "balancing" Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Changes in the situation in Europe and European and American relations during the pandemic have directly impacted Sino-European and Sino-German relations.

Germany is one of the countries in Europe with the highest economic dependence on China and the highest security dependence on the US. Germany is, therefore the country that feels the tear of the Sino-US game most acutely. For this reason, Germany has tried to raise its own interests and policy objectives to the EU level, which will determine the diplomatic course of Europe in the coming period in an attempt to maintain a dynamic balance between China and the US and to achieve equal benefits.

### 3.3 The sense of "sovereign Europe" and the evolution of the current international order

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the changes in the international order and landscape, leading on the one hand to a perception in the West that the current international order is being challenged by the emerging powers, and on the other hand to dissatisfaction with globalisation within the West, leading some Western countries to take the initiative in challenging the current international order. As a result, the current evolution of the international order is characterised by a trend towards the erosion of liberalism and the gradual strengthening of the role of the nation-state. In addition, the EU's concern about geopolitical games and its strategic dependence on external markets has deepened its sense of "sovereign Europe".

The deep economic dependence between China and Europe and China's pivotal position in the global manufacturing chain has led to the serious impact of the pandemic on the European economy, stimulating claims of industrial sovereignty in Europe, which in turn has driven Europe to seek diversification and localisation of its industrial chain.

Due to institutional and cultural asymmetries, the EU, under the aspiration of "sovereign Europe", has, on the one hand, stressed the importance of maintaining its partnership with China, while on the other hand viewing bilateral economic cooperation and institutional differences from the perspective of competition and conflict, leading to a rise in strategic suspicion towards China, with ideology becoming a constraint on the expansion of bilateral cooperation.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This paper is a study and analysis of the national image of China constructed by the German mainstream media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the background and causes of this construction paradigm.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the dramatic changes in the international order and landscape. As a result, there is a widespread perception in the West that the current international order has not only encountered serious challenges from emerging powers but has also led to confusion in the perception of globalisation within the West and a serious challenge to the current international order.

This paper also analyses the reasons for the persistence of a more negative national image of China in German media and audiences, using the different values of the traditional cultures of China and Germany as another perspective, respectively. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, political and trade relations between the two countries have suffered greatly. Moreover, the differences in values between

Germany and China have exacerbated the misconceptions of the German public about China. Although the mainstream media in Germany focused on China as a priority country during this period, the stereotypical and dogmatic national image of China, which was influenced by ideology and interests, weakened the German public's positive perception of the Chinese state to a large extent, despite the richness of the topics covered and the wide range of areas covered.

China has grown faster and more resiliently than the West could have imagined. Moreover, this growth is characterised by a systemic nature, i.e. the homogeneity of state and society, the resonance of politics and economy, and the interconnection of individuals and groups. China does not need to develop according to Western designs but can move forward of its own will and trajectory, bringing a strong conceptual and empirical shock to Europe. The competitive economic advantage that China is establishing is also beginning to be seen as a product of its political system. This change breaks the deep-rooted European stereotype that "only Western democracy can promote economic prosperity".

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