



THE DYNAMIC IMAGE OF CHINA PRESENTED IN GERMAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA REPORTS --THE CHINA-RELATED REPORTS OF GERMAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA FROM JANUARY 2020 TO JANUARY 2021 WERE USED AS EXAMPLES

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ABSTRACT The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began to spread globally in early 2020, has attracted a great deal of attention from global society on the world's politics, economy, public security and global development. The mass media played an important role in promoting it, making international relations and the construction of national images during COVID-19 pandemic an important and urgent issue of national interest in the international political arena. During this period, China also became the 'centre of public opinion'.

As the most influential country in the European Union, Germany's foreign policy and the China policy under its presidency has attracted a great deal of global attention. While Sino-German cooperation remained at a 'high level' during the pandemic, Germany also sought to position itself between the great powers of China and the US. Therefore, the image of China presented by the German mainstream media in their coverage of China during the COVID-19 pandemic, their positions, the constraints behind them, and their development trends are worthy of attention and study by academics.

This study attempts to research the generation of Chinese images in the German mainstream media, including both an analysis of "Germany" and a reflection on "China", and to investigate what cognitive models and knowledge structures the German mainstream media use in their discourse construction, how they use their discursive power, and what kind of Chinese national image they construct.

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

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has been spreading globally since the beginning of 2020, has had a significant impact on the world politics, economy, security and global development, attracting a great deal of attention from the global media and accelerating the evolution of the international order. During the outbreak, the media played a multi-faceted role in conveying information, constructing understanding, and shaping public opinion. Therefore, researching China-related reports of the German mainstream media's during the outbreak, studying their views and values on China issues, it helps us, on the one hand, understand how the Western media used their power to construct people's cognition of the world through discourse; On the other hand, it helps us to deepen our understanding of German society and order, and thus to reflect on China's strategy in its national image "self-branding".

1. Research Content

This study uses 1,870 China-related stories from the German mainstream media *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt* from 1 January 2020 to 31 January 2021 to build a corpus of China-related news reports from five German mainstream media during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020-2021). The corpus was built based on 1870 China-related articles from 31 January. The corpus was firstly analysed in terms of its structure by quantifying the number of coverages, genre, length, author, source, page, topic, industry, region and key figures. Secondly, the corpus is analysed in detail, i.e. firstly, the dynamic image of China presented by each media is analysed in terms of content analysis, and then the ideology of the discursive stance of the discourse is analysed. Then, based on the findings of the five media, the collective symbolism of the overall discourse is explored: who, in what way and with what kind of China-image is portrayed in the German mainstream media.

2. Research Findings

2.1 Who shaped the image of China in the German mainstream media's coverage of China during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The five German mainstream media in this thesis include *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Germany's most significant national daily severe newspaper in terms of circulation; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the most widely known German media abroad; *Der Spiegel*, the most significant weekly news magazin in Germany and Europe; and *Die Zeit*, Germany's largest weekly severe newspaper, all of which have been rated as "leading German-language media" in surveys of German journalists over the years. These are joined by *Die Welt*, a severe daily newspaper with a global circulation in more than 130 countries. The five media are headquartered in Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and Frankfurt, all of which are important European cities and are politically, economically and culturally representative. Furthermore, the five media were found to have different styles and political positions, representing social liberalism, conservative liberalism and civic conservatism, and reaching an audience of well-educated people, political and social decision-makers, opinion leaders, medium-sized business owners, and self-employed and particularly wealthy people.

According to the results of a statistical survey of a total of 1,870 news articles in the "Corpus of China-related reports in five German mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021)" and the basic information of their sources, the five German media in this study were mainly written by our journalists. In addition, eight German journalists from these five media located in China and provided timely and relatively objective reporting.

In addition, the media mentioned above also use information from the world's leading news agencies, including DPA, Reuters, AP, AFP, German sports news agency sid and Xinhua News Agency, with DPA and Reuters being the most used. The Associated Press, Reuters and AFP are also among the world's top four news agencies, which are highly influential in disseminating international information and enjoy an important international reputation. China issues transcend national boundaries and cover all aspects of international relations; international news agencies, therefore, provide an essential source of information on China issues for the rest of the world's media.

An analysis of the sources of quoted reports from other media in the China-related reports of the five German mainstream print media in this study shows that the most quoted media is the New York Times, followed by the Financial Times, indicating that these media are more open to information when covering China issues. Agence France-Presse, Reuters, Associated Press and Agence France-Presse were also the main sources of re-cited information. For the citation of Chinese media sources, the German media used Xinhua News Agency most often, followed by the Global Times. Since the first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Chinese city Wuhan, the Hubei Daily and the Yangtze Daily, the local government newspaper of Hubei Province and Wuhan, were also cited as sources. In the international arena of public opinion on China-related issues, the authoritative releases of the official position of the Chinese government, the policies and measures issued by the Chinese government, and the relevant policy interpretations provided by Xinhua News Agency, the Global Times and China Daily have provided sources and voices from China for international media coverages on China, opening up the Chinese perspective and becoming an important source of news for international media reporting on Chinese issues. Admittedly, compared to the influence and penetration of Western news agencies and media on China-related issues in the international media, the Chinese media has been significantly weakened.

Western news agencies and the British and American mainstream media are the main channels for inter-media citation of the German mainstream media's China-related stories, controlling the sources of the media network. These five German media outlets construct their China reports mainly from a Western perspective and an obvious political dimension, presenting the discourse between Western and Chinese sources on China-related issues and constructing international opinion on China issues. However, the Chinese media is still weak in terms of influence and penetration in international information

dissemination and news reporting and in the face of stereotypes constructed by Western governments and media, such as "virus tracing", "mask diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy", the power of Chinese discourse and Chinese narratives to communicate abroad still needs to be further strengthened.

Ten percent of the China-related stories in this study were in the genre of interviews. The interviewees include government officials and political figures, representatives of the economic sector and business leaders, cultural scholars, scientists and representatives of civil society organisations; they are indirectly involved as sources in the process of constructing the meaning of China-related stories in the German mainstream media and participate in the production and dissemination of China's national image. An analysis of the content of the interviews reveals that nearly 70% of the interviewees have a positive perception of China's measures, efforts and effectiveness in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, thus showing that the higher the social status and education level, the more positive the perception of China's performance in the pandemic.

2.2 What cognitive patterns, knowledge structures and tendencies of discourse are revealed by the Chinese coverage in the German mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Based on the structural and detailed analysis of the five German mainstream media, there are several key points when the number of China-related stories per month fluctuates for each media outlet, in the form of "peaks". For example, the highest peaks in coverage were in January and February 2020, when the outbreak was most severe in China, followed by January 2021 and July 2020, the first anniversary of the notification of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is thus clear that the trend of the pandemic and the link between Germany and the discursive events in China's internal affairs and diplomacy determine the level of attention paid to China by the German media.

In terms of the analysis of reporting genres, the German media reports on China in this study focus on both their timeliness and their tendency to export their views and positions. Many China-related reports are in the form of in-depth background reports and opinion commentaries. The analysis of the positioning of the five German mainstream media and their audiences in the previous section shows that the German audience with an excellent educational background, high social status and income level is not only satisfied with being informed about events and information but also expects an in-depth opinion input on China issues. This is how the German mainstream media translates media discourse into power for knowledge export and cognitive construction. An analysis of the coverage pages shows that the five German media presented in this study focused on the 'Politics' and 'Economics' sections, reflecting the importance that the German mainstream media attached to China issues. In addition, the German media during this period tended to use news stories (as experienced by journalists in China) to present the state of China during the pandemic and highlight the ideological aspects of news events with in-depth background analysis.

An analysis of the topics and sectors of the coverage shows that the five German mainstream media outlets in this study focus on trade and investment development, international relations and national security, government and public administration, and health and medical care. The industries most frequently covered are the automotive industry, the transport, storage and logistics industry, the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry, the electronics, information and technology industry, and the production and processing industry, which is an accurate reflection of the areas in which Germany cooperates most with China. This shows that in the context of the pandemic, economic trade and international relations are the focus of the German mainstream media coverage of China, which is in line with one of the most striking features of Sino-German relations, namely that China is Germany's most important trading partner and that China's economic recovery and growth have become a major boon for the German economy in the period of the pandemic.

The statistics of countries and regions appearing alongside China in the reports can, to a certain extent, indicate some potential connection between China and these countries or regions and thus serve as a reference for the presentation of the country's image. The countries with the highest degree of association with China in the China-related reports in this study are Germany, the United States and India. Thus, Sino-German (European) relations, Sino-US relations and Sino-Indian relations have become important contexts for constructing China's national image in the German mainstream print media's China-related reports.

The Sino-German relations in this study's China-related reports show several types of cooperation and dependence, institutional competition, contradiction and confrontation, and "choosing sides". It can be seen that Sino-German relations faced challenges and uncertainties during this period.

Finally, from the analysis of "high-frequency phrases" in China-related reports, the study found five categories of phrases that appear most frequently: descriptions of China's current power or status, descriptions of China's growing power and rise, descriptions of China as a threat to Germany and other countries, descriptions of other countries confronting China, and descriptions of China's negative image. The study found that the negatively oriented descriptions carry a clear position and emotional bias on the part of the discourse maker and imply a stereotypical image of China on the part of the discourse constructor. These high-frequency words reveal that the German mainstream media tries to portray a China-Image of "powerful" and "still growing", "with many problems that are in opposition to Western values" and "threatening".

2.3 What kind of dynamic image of China is presented in the German mainstream media's coverage of China during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Based on structural analysis of the discourse of China-related reports, detailed analysis, and analysis of the overall social discourse, this study systematically concludes the constructive features of China's image in the China-related reports of five German mainstream media. In the period discussed in this study, i.e. from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020 to the first anniversary of the outbreak in January 2021, the image of the Chinese state in the reports of the German mainstream print media shows dynamic changes in phases. This leads to a summary of the trends with standard features in the five German mainstream media over the 13 months. From a chronological perspective, the dynamic trends can be divided into eight stages.

The first phase, from 1 January to mid-January 2020, before the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: the German mainstream press presents an image of an ambitious Chinese economy facing many challenges and difficulties.

The second phase, the outbreak in China from mid-January to the end of February 2020: in the German mainstream press, China itself is being hit hard by the pandemic; the "unprecedented" and strict "Lockdown" to combat the virus; the stagnation of the Chinese economy due to the pandemic predominantly affects the global economy; at the same time, the international fear of the spread of the virus leads to misunderstandings and discrimination against the Chinese (Asian) population. The stagnation of the Chinese economy as a result of the pandemic has primarily affected the global economy; simultaneously, the international fear of the spread of the virus has led to misunderstanding and discrimination against the Chinese (Asians).

The third phase, the outbreak of the pandemic in European countries, including Germany, from March to April 2020: according to the German mainstream press, China has been able to contain the pandemic internally and send medical supplies and experts to European countries with severe pandemics, a move that has been recognised by international public opinion. As a result, the German media began to discuss whether the "Chinese system" behind China's effective model of fighting the pandemic was superior to the "Western system" behind the European model that had lost out in the pandemic. During this discussion, the official Chinese data on the pandemic were repeatedly "questioned" by the German media. On the other hand, the impact of the Chinese supply chain affected by the pandemic on the German economy became more and more evident, which led to fears in the German media about the "collapse of the Chinese economy" and "Germany's over-dependence on China", a sentiment that also characterised this period.

In the fourth phase, from May to June 2020, China gradually returns to regular social order during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pandemic in Germany stabilises: in the German mainstream press, the political aspect of the issue of the traceability of the COVID-19 pandemic virus provoked by the US government is 'held accountable' to China; in this context, China's medical aid to European countries is interpreted by the German media as 'an expansion of international influence through the pandemic'. In this context, the German media interpreted China's medical aid to European countries as an attempt to

"use the pandemic to expand its international influence", which led the German media to "be wary of China's 'pandemic narrative'". On the economic front, the recovery of the Chinese economy has become a significant positive for the German economy.

In the fifth phase, the pandemic levelled off in China and Europe in July and August, and the escalation of the conflict between the US and China in international relations affected the world situation: at the political level, the German mainstream media focused on how Germany and the EU were "taking sides" in the US-China game; the US and the EU imposed "sanctions" on China over the Hong Kong issue. At the economic level, the German media mainly reported on the strong growth of the Chinese economy.

In the sixth Phase, September-October 2020, the second wave of the pandemic in Germany and the second shutdown of social life: the recovery and growth of the Chinese economy from the pandemic are reported in the German mainstream press as the "saviour" of the German market under the second wave of the pandemic and as an essential contribution to the recovery of world trade under the pandemic. The new Indo-Pacific Strategic Approach of the German government in this period repositioned Germany's geopolitical landscape and thus reduced Germany's dependence on China.

In the seventh phase, the cumulative number of COVID-19 pandemic infections in Germany exceeds one million in November-December 2020, and Germany further tightens its pandemic prevention and control measures; China has generally contained the pandemic since the first half of the year, with sporadic local transmission of cases in local areas leading to still stringent prevention measures; the US conducts a presidential election, and Biden is elected as the new US President: in the German mainstream print media, China's anti-pandemic achievements, China's The lunar exploration project and China's first official approval of the COVID-19 pandemic vaccine on the market are notable discursive events. The signing of the China-EU Comprehensive Investment Agreement shows the conflicting or competing relationship between the EU and the US.

In the eighth Phase, the first anniversary of the new pneumonia outbreak in January 2021: In the German mainstream press, China was both the country that effectively contained the outbreak and the only country in the world to achieve positive economic growth during the pandemic; the German mainstream press focused on reflecting on and analysing the 'systemic costs' behind this outcome.

3. CONCLUSION

The study analyses the contextual factors and influences of the "China Phobia" in the German media, based on the discursive order of communication in the German press, the cultural values of China and Germany, and the discursive framework of the "China Phobia" found in the German media. This study found that from January 2020 to January 2021, when the pandemic was spreading worldwide, the German mainstream media reported on China in a comprehensive, multi-faceted, timely and in-depth manner. The images of China presented were both realistic and objective, such as "strong economy" and "leading scientific and technological achievements", and emotionally positive, such as "actively fighting the pandemic" and "responsible power"; negatively evaluated ones, such as "mask diplomacy" and "opaque information". The focus of the German mainstream media on China varied at different stages, but their choice of perspective on China did not change as the "objective reporting model" usually advocates an "objective reflection" of China's performance during the pandemic, the development of the pandemic, and the international exchange dimension. "The process by which the German media constructs the media discourse that shapes knowledge and transmits it to the public is also clearly linked to the impact on Germany of its state of affairs during the Corona crisis, China's economic development, and China's strategic international relations.

Based on a quantitative statistical analysis of the overall discourse of the five German media and a summary of the cross-sectional trends in the content of the German media on China, this study finds that: the image of China in the German media has changed according to the discourse context. The following three contexts are identified as the causes of this change: the discourse based on the dynamics of the pandemic, the discourse based on the dynamics of the global economy, and the discourse based on the dynamics of China's diplomatic relations.

Thus, behind the image of the China created by the German mainstream media, the aspirations and will of the German subject are

reflected, i.e. the national interest of Germany.

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