

China's Anti-pandemic Image in the German Mainstream Media—Chinese Scholars' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: *With the help of corpus-assisted content analysis, this paper analyses the content and sentiment towards China of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Süddeutsche Zeitung's reports on China's fight against the pandemic in 2021. The study found that the two German media were generally objective in presenting the development of the pandemic, but had mixed feelings about the anti-pandemic policy and the effectiveness of the domestic vaccine, and even discredited China's domestic and foreign affairs from the Western perspective. The negative stereotypes based on foreign cultures, the differences between the Chinese and German political systems, and the power to shape the discourse on international issues are the reasons why the German media have shaped and disseminated the image of China's fight against the pandemic in such a way. The image-building dynamics from the perspective of otherness can help optimize China's anti-pandemic image and improve the strategy of three-dimensional communication and precise dissemination of the country's comprehensive image through objective reporting, expanding the foreign communication matrix and incubating cultural intermediaries.*

KEYWORDS: *China-related reports, Covid-19 pandemic, German media, national image.*

I. Introduction

As China's global influence grows and its political and economic leadership becomes more prominent, the international media, especially the U.S. and Western media, are paying closer attention to the COVID-19 pandemic in China. While the foreign media's report on China is not without the purpose of understanding China's dynamics and disseminating objective facts, the mainstream media, led by the U.S. and the West, are more interested in influencing their own strategic behaviors and governmental decisions by virtue of their "fourth power" ("Vierte Gewalt", [1]), specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the specific case of China, this is manifested in the shaping of a "westernized" image of China and the construction and solidification of unfriendly perceptions of China. As a leader of the European media, German media not only has a strong voice in Europe, but also has a strong influence on international public opinion [2]. In recent years, the proportion of China reports in German mainstream media has increased significantly, and the path of deconstruction and shaping of China's image by German media has become rich with the diversification of China's influence, and the resulting image of China will be adjusted according to the specific period and field, and will give rise to a new medium and micro level from the macroscopic image of a great power.

From the perspective of time, the German media in the 19th and 20th centuries showed a clear dichotomy between the glorification of China and the "demonization" of China [3]. In the 21st century, the polarization of the German media's coverage of China has diminished, but a more complex and ambivalent mentality has emerged - while affirming China's economic development achievements, they also point their fingers at China's internal affairs from time to time; in recent years, the international public opinion environment towards China has become more and more severe, and the "China Threat Theory" has become louder and louder, and the overall tone of the German media's opinion on China has become more negative [2]. However, the "de-risking" tone towards China by the mainstream stance of the German political sector has triggered some dissatisfaction and concern in the German economic spheres, which has led to a certain degree of tearing in the perception of the German public towards China. As far as the field is concerned, the image of China presented involves economic, political, cultural, social, technological and other dimensions. In view of the attraction of foreign cultures and the cooperation between China and Germany in many fields, it is difficult for the German media to comment on many "sub-images" in a consistently biased and negative tone. It can be

seen that a specific period and field influence the motive, path and even stance of the German media in shaping their image of China. If the dynamics of German media's reporting the multidimensional path of image dissemination and its audience's reception can be flexibly and timely grasped, it will help to disseminate objective and truthful stories about China, and make breakthroughs in improving international perceptions of China.

In the existing literature, scholars outside of china have primarily focused on the macro-level examination of China's public diplomacy construction, foreign communication strategies, the dynamics of soft power, as well as the relationship between China's image, its foreign policy orientation, and its international standing. There has been a relative lack of attention given to the media perspective of China's image, and the research period tends to be outdated, mainly concentrated between the late 20th century and around 2010. In contrast, Chinese scholars have shown greater interest in how the media reflects China's image. Specifically, in terms of German media's coverage of China and the characteristics of the image of China it reflects, the analysis typically encompasses three levels: macro, meso, and micro. Firstly, the macro level of China's or Chinese image. For example, Liu Lingshan [4] analyses the macro-level Chinese image characteristics of foreign media reports, taking the German newspaper *Die Zeit* as an example, while Wang Shiyao and Zhang Yanyang [5], and Zhou Haixia [6] pay attention to the mainstream media's portrayal of the country's image or the image of the Chinese people in specific domains (e.g., the economy, the arts, etc.). Second, the discourse construction process and characteristics of China-related reports. Chen Kefei etc. [7], Xing Xiaoyi [8] and Xu Yongbin [9] either explore the process of discourse construction by the media under specific issues and hotspots with the help of structuration theory, or analyse the discourse characteristics of related reports from the perspective of critical discourse around the "Chinese keywords". Thirdly, research on the content and narrative characteristics of China-related reports on specific issues, and accordingly propose narrative strategies for China's global image communication. The above three types of studies are often based on reports from specific newspapers or specific areas, and take a longer period of time as the observation period to summarise the characteristics of China's image and its changes.

On the whole, however, the existing literature of Chinese scholars is small and slowly updated, and the research focuses on summarising the texts of German media reports, and stays at the "what" level of public opinion characteristics and discourse construction, with little examination of the motives, reporting contexts, and their social effects, thus less attention paid to the "why" level. Although some scholars have explained the "how" level such as strategies and suggestions for improvement, they are often based on theoretical guidance derived from the content of the text, and seldom consider media motives from the perspective of the shaper. There is thus a lack of reflection and practical advice on "self-modelling" against the perspective of "other-modelling". In this regard, it may be useful to examine the motives of German media's coverage of China and the paths they take in shaping China's image in the context of more specific issues, and then to come up with targeted suggestions for optimising communication strategies. The question that needs to be addressed is whether there is a consistent tone in the mainstream German media's portrayal of China in a given context. What factors may determine this uniform or different tone of perception of China? From which dimensions is the image of China constructed and communicated to the outside world relatively more objective and generally acceptable to foreign audiences? On this basis, is it possible to choose a more effective strategy for self-created China's image by taking advantage of the dynamic perspective of other creator's reports?

The solution to the above problems needs to be based on a representative issue field, time frame, and reporting sources. In terms of field, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a multi-dimensional space for China's image to be constructed, and the related reports around the sub-topics of "prevention and control policies", "vaccine research and development" and "pandemic development" can be related to multiple sub-images of China in politics, economy, science and technology, and society, and cover different age groups. Around the sub-topics of "prevention and control policy", "vaccine research and development" and "development of the pandemic", the related reports can be related to various sub-images of China, such as politics, economy, science and technology and society, and cover different age groups. In addition, the pandemic itself has spatial and temporal attributes, so if we focus on the spread of the pandemic and the crisis management phase in Europe, it would be more appropriate to focus on the year 2021, which is also a time dimension that is less considered in the current studies. Finally, in order to select representative China-related reports, it is necessary to choose mainstream media in Germany as the source.

To sum up the recognition of mainstream media by different organizations, circulation, influence, audience size, journalists' leadership and media reprints are often regarded as important indicators for evaluating mainstream media. Although different organizations have different focuses in rating mainstream media, collectively, *Der Spiegel*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Bild* and *Die Zeit* are among the most popular media in Germany, while *Der Spiegel*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (abbreviation *SZ*), and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (abbreviation *FAZ*) are perennially among the top three in terms of influence [10][11]. In comparison, Chinese scholars have conducted more adequate studies related to *Der Spiegel's* China-related reports, with the next largest number of studies on *FAZ* and fewer on *SZ*. While *FAZ* and *SZ* are not only both daily newspapers, they also have strong complementarities in terms of their commenting tone and issue setting: *FAZ* tends to be more conservative in style, focusing on political and economic issues, while *SZ* is generally balanced in tone and pays more attention to the political and cultural dimensions [12]. Analysing the China-related reports of the two media outlets with complementary styles and different focuses on the same field can help to draw general patterns and controllable variables of German media's China-related reports. Therefore, it is more urgent and necessary to analyse the two media's China-related reports from the perspective of otherness, and then come up with countermeasures to optimise the image. The corpus-based content analysis method can help us to easily and efficiently deconstruct the content of the reports and the characteristics of China's image reflected in the reports.

II. Content Analysis and the Perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis

Content Analysis (CA), which originated in the 1920s, is a relatively mature research method in the field of communication studies and is widely used in interdisciplinary fields. It is a research technique that describes objectively, systematically, and quantitatively the apparent content of communication [13]. Since then, content analysis methods based on specific corpus and computer technologies have become more popular, mainly due to the faster and more systematic corpus collection capabilities of corpus technologies and richer analytical tools. Take the DiVoMiner platform as an example: in terms of corpus collection, after determining the media sources to be examined, the platform can collect all the eligible corpora within a specific time period by setting keywords, thus taking into account the comprehensiveness and relevance of the corpus. In terms of analysis tools, the DiVoMiner platform covers not only conventional categories such as word frequency, indexing, collocation and keyword distribution, but also in-depth analyses such as sentiment analysis and credibility testing, the principle of which lies in the refraction of words and sentences from the data of conventional categories to the judgement and evaluation of segments and chapters. As a result, the corpus-based content analysis method is conducive to weakening the researcher's arbitrariness in selecting analysis materials and the one-sidedness in interpreting texts, and providing a solid data foundation for the research [14].

Corpus can obtain the most comprehensive amount of eligible corpus in the shortest time, however, it only stays at the linguistic level in the field of regular categories and in-depth analyses; and the process of mechanized measurement based on the original meaning of words and phrases pays too much attention to the role of keywords, ignores or belittles the discourse and chapter context, and lacks the examination of the specific cultural and social stage in which the text is located, thus making it difficult to come up with a discourse that conforms to the reality of the society. In fact, language needs to be interpreted by means of discourse in order to reproduce the relationship between discourse and social structure [15], which can be achieved by the model for discourse analysis (see Fig.1). The three-step analysis model is typical for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which on the one hand starts from the internal original discourse of the text and analyses the levels and fields of discourse practice from the perspective of the communication process, and on the other hand also pays attention to the picture of the external social practice under the influence of different factors such as politics, economy and culture, and observes the influence of discourse practice in the framework of social practice. In this way, this paper can firstly obtain first-hand report corpus by means of corpus, then refer to the three inter-related process of discourse analysis, firstly analyze the content of media discourse practice at the text level, then based on the data of discourse text, interpret and explain the effectiveness of discourse practice at the level of social practice, dig out the power and interaction behind it, and come up with the possible elements affecting the shaping of the country's image. Finally, on the basis of the above reflection from the perspective of "other-shaper", image improvement strategies that are scientific, effective and operable would be proposed.

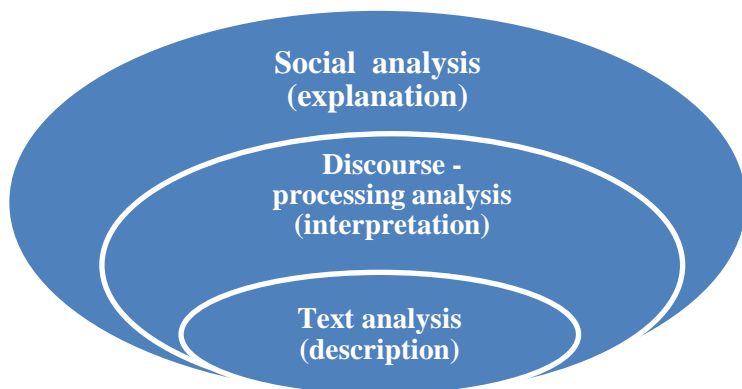


Figure 1 Three-step model of CDA

III. The deconstruction of discourse content in German media reports on the COVID-19 pandemic in China

3.1 Number of reports and category design

In order to deconstruct the content of the reports in a targeted way, this paper builds a corpus of reports on the “COVID-19 pandemic in China” from *FAZ* and *SZ*, in which 49 key reports on China were obtained by manual screening with the search terms of "China", "Corona", "Pandemie" and "Epidemie", and the search period was from January to December 2021, and the number of reports on China was 49 by hand. It is worth noting that both media outlets in general provided continuous monthly coverage (see Table 1), while the *FAZ*, also a national daily, was more frequent and balanced; *SZ*'s coverage was more focused in May, which may be related to the fact that WHO validated the Sinovac-CoronaVac COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use in May 2021.

Table 1 Volume of reports from FAZ and SZ on the COVID-19 pandemic in China 2021

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	total
FAZ	2	3	4	3	1	2	4	3	2	1	4	2	31
SZ	1	0	1	1	6	2	1	2	2	0	1	1	18

On this basis, the DiVoMiner platform can statistically code the corpus in the database with respect to categories such as field, keyword, and word frequency. Relying on the natural attributes of the text and the keywords captured in the database, the related reports of the two media can be categorized into the three dimensions of “pandemic and prevention politics”, “COVID-19 vaccine”, and “tracing the COVID-19-origin”. Among them, the number of reports on “pandemic and prevention politics” was nearly half, while the remaining two fields were almost equally divided (see Fig. 2). This difference in the proportion of coverage may be related to the relatively rapid development of the pandemic (policy), which has resulted in the urgent need to follow up on the data and information in the process of change.

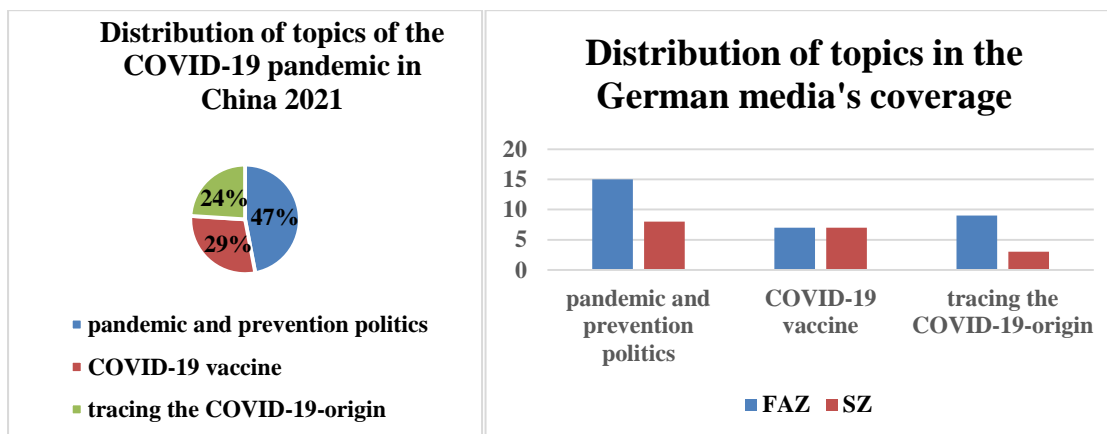


Figure 2 Distribution of topics in the German media's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in China 2021 (left: total percentage; right: sub-percentage)

After taking a look at the number of reports and their proportion on the field level, the distribution of keywords makes it possible to see the core content of the reports at a glance. With the help of Python to generate word frequency and frequency tables of sub words, and then eliminating invalid words such as articles, pronouns, prepositions, etc., and merging the same words with different singular and plural forms, the 49 reports generated a word cloud map of the total number of words (see Fig. 3) and keyword statistics tables of the three subfields (see Table 2). As far as the distribution of word categories in the word cloud map is concerned, "Corona", "vaccine", "virus", "outbreak" "government" "data" "test" "policy" "rule" "people" "labs", and other factual terms characterizing the basic situation of the outbreak/vaccine, as well as "China" "Europe" "Beijing" "Wuhan" "Germany" "Italy" "USA" "city" "country", etc., and finally "crisis" "problem" and a few nouns with emotional overtones and a few adjectives such as "new" "obvious" "chinese" "worldwide", etc. And according to Table 2, it can be seen that the keyword distribution characteristics of the three subfields are closer to the word class distribution characteristics of the overall word cloud map. Thus, based on the keyword categories and word frequency distribution, the preliminary hypothesis can be drawn that German media reports on the China pandemic are mainly objective in presenting the facts, followed by subjective characterization, and the tone of the reports is generally neutral.



Figure 3 Word cloud of German media reports on the pandemic in China

Table 2 Distribution of keywords by field for reports on the pandemic (English vision)

Topic/Field	Keywords
1 Pandemic and prevention politics	China; virus; pandemic; outbreak; transmission; Wuhan; infection; Delta; Omicron; new cases; measures; policy; isolation; block; management
2 COVID-19 vaccine	vaccine; vaccination; Effectiveness; Sinovac; Sinopharm; Pfizer; AstraZeneca; Emergency Approval; Vaccine Passport
3 Tracing the COVID-19-origin	Laboratory; Traceability; Wuhan; Tedros; WHO; Experts

However, the above hypotheses have to be verified with the help of further CA. On the one hand, comments and speculations are often interspersed in the main content of the reports and occupy a small space, so it is not easy for the core words to be included in the list of keywords; on the other hand, the expression of emotional colors does not only rely on explicitly expressed words, but also some power and social relations are hidden in the discourse text and specific spatial and temporal contexts, so it is difficult for computer corpora, which are good at capturing words and phrases, to capture the contextualized discourse practices. Therefore, in this paper, we will analyze the content of German media reports on China and the social power relations behind them from the discourse text and social practice levels, so as to verify the reasonableness of the preliminary hypothesis based on the corpus, and to more accurately grasp the German media's perceptions of China in a specific field. As shown in Table 2, *FAZ* and *SZ* pay different attention to different topics, so the following section will compare and deconstruct the similarities and differences between the two newspaper in terms of the content of their reports and their emotional tone.

3.2 Deconstruction of the reports from *FAZ* on the Covid-19-pandemic in China

3.2.1 Covid-19 Pandemic and Prevention Politics

FAZ has 15 reports on the dynamics of the pandemic, the highest proportion among the three fields, with most of the reports focusing on the dynamics of the pandemic and a few on the relevant pandemic prevention policies and their implementation. Specifically, on the one hand, the *FAZ* paid more attention to the development or implementation of the pandemic and related policies in the country and region. For example, the report in June “Ein rotes Sternchen für jeden Geimpften” (Every Vaccinationist Has a Little Red Star) detailed the specific ways Tianjin encourages its citizens to get vaccinated, such as through the mouths of students in schools, guiding their family members to actively get vaccinated; and the report in November “Chinesen sollen sich Vorräte für den täglichen Bedarf anlegen” (Chinese should stock up on supplies for their daily needs) reported the Ministry of Commerce's call on residents to stock up on emergency supplies in a timely manner. On the other hand, *FAZ*'s hotspot and dynamic orientation was evident, but there was little sustained tracking of the progress of the outbreak in the same region, such as a report in July “Über 200 Corona-Infizierte nach Flughafen-Ausbruch in China” (China's Airport Outbreak Leads to More Than 200 Infected with Coronavirus), which reported on new cases of Covid-19 infections at the Nanjing Airport and the spread of the Delta-strain in the rest of the country; and the report in September “Corona-Welle in China weitet sich aus” (Round of Covid-19 Epidemic Spreading Through China), reported on outbreaks in cities such as Putian, Xiamen and other cities, but said nothing about previous movements to slow the outbreak in other cities.

Although the *FAZ* was selective in its focus on outbreak developments, the overall content was relatively objective. In contrast, reports on anti-pandemic policies took on a more negative tone, such as “China: Quarantänehotel ohne Fenster” (China: Quarantine hotels with no windows), “Positiver Test in Peking ist eine ‘Horrorvorstellung’” (Positive cases in Beijing is a ‘horrific picture’), and “Nah dran an der Impfpflicht” (Nearly mandatory vaccination), which were not shy about blaming China's anti-pandemic policies on Western standards of human rights. The reports, without taking into account China's basic national conditions, such as its large population and the pressure on its healthcare system, criticized the government's reaction to the emergence of positive cases as “overreaction”; When it comes to measures such as “hotel quarantine” and “encouraging vaccination” for people at risk, some journalists have also presented themselves as the so-called “victims” without conducting any actual research and frequently voiced their dissatisfaction and doubts in order to arouse readers' concern and empathy. Meanwhile, a few reports, such as “Mit chinesischer Härte gegen Corona” (Fighting the Pandemic with Chinese Seriousness), affirmed or partially acknowledged the effectiveness of China's anti-pandemic measures. The report noted that through measures such as large-scale nucleic acid testing, isolation of (suspected) infected cases, tracking of close contacts, and restrictions on entry and exit, China's outbreak is largely under control and is also showing better development than many other countries.

Overall, the *FAZ* has maintained a steady, real-time focus on the outbreak in China in 2021, but in terms of reporting content, the *FAZ* is more inclined to capture “flashpoints” and developments that are likely to attract special attention from its audience than to track the progress of similar events on a consistent basis. In the process of information transmission by communicators, intentionally or unintentionally, some hotspot events

will highlight the government's inaction or inaction in a specific situation, as well as the social groups' regular powerlessness and inability to know what to do in the face of emergencies, which may bring the audience a more pronounced emotional fluctuations in the reading experience. Therefore, although the emotional tone of the main body of the FAZ's coverage tended to be neutral, there were also a few negative and positive reports (see Fig. 4). The neutral emotional tone is mainly due to the focus on the objective content of the report, such as the dynamics of China's pandemic and anti-pandemic measures, while the few negative reports stemmed from unwarranted questions about the authenticity of the number of infected cases, as well as from the Western human rights perspective, which deluded the effectiveness of China's unique anti-pandemic policies and discredited the implementation of China's anti-pandemic measures as lacking respect for people's basic rights.

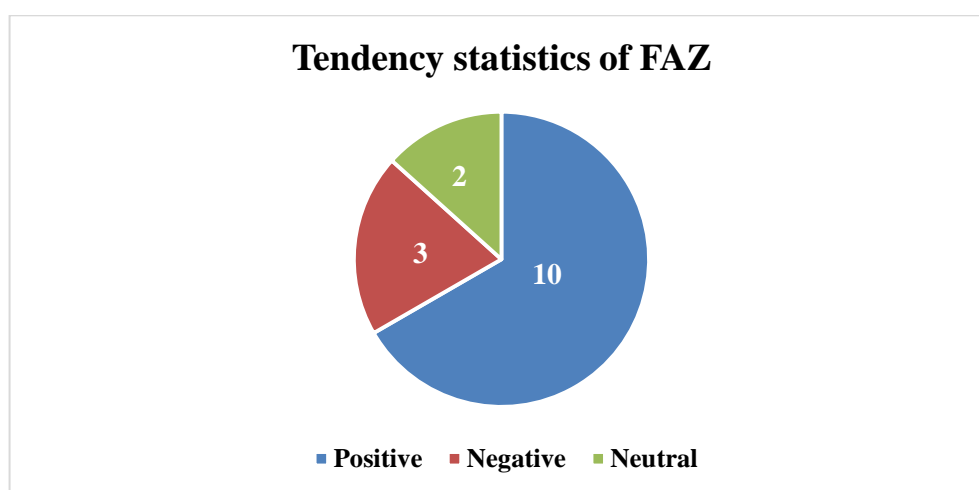


Figure 4 Tendency statistics of FAZ's coverage on the pandemic and prevention politics

3.2.2 COVID-19 Vaccines

There were seven reports on the COVID-19 Vaccine, of which the reports on vaccine research and development and vaccination strategies were generally more objective, and were basically able to provide a factual account of China's vaccination strategies, the combination of vaccine promotion and digital technology, and the handling of a few related cases of violation of the law. For example, the article "Teils gefälschte Impfstoffe in China vertrieben" (Partly counterfeit vaccines distributed in China) points out that police in many places have cracked down on a large-scale case of fake COVID-19 vaccines, and the suspects in the relevant cases have been arrested in accordance with the law; and the article "China macht mit digitalem Impfpass Druck" (China Vigorously Promotes Digital Vaccination Certificates) briefly introduces the application and promotion of WeChat mini program for "International Travel Health Certificates" in China.

At the same time, however, the FAZ's reports failed to present a comprehensive and objective picture of the international travel health certificates' attempts to go abroad, and some of the reports even made a big deal out of it, discrediting China's legitimate efforts to promote the internationalisation of the COVID-19 vaccine. According to the relevant regulations, some foreigners who have received Chinese vaccines can obtain visa facilities to come to China, which is supposed to be an incentive to promote Chinese vaccines to go abroad and increase the international vaccination rate of domestic vaccines, but the report "Peking wirbt für seinen globalen Corona-Impfpass" (China promotes its COVID-19 vaccine passport) politicised the regulation and interpreted it as "Erpressungsmethode" (coercive measures) "Warum Indonesien zuerst die Jungen impft" (Why Indonesia Lets Young People Vaccinate First) accuses China of "vaccine diplomacy" and fears that it is "expanding its geopolitical influence" in Indonesia, despite the fact that China, in line with the concept of a community of shared human destiny, has been supplying domestically produced vaccines to the rest of the world, especially to developing countries in need of vaccines, without political conditions. In addition, "Wie Russland und China europäische Impfstoffe schlechtmachen" (How China and Russia are discrediting Europe's vaccines) claims that China and Russia are "trying to disinform and discredit public opinion about Western-produced vaccines and vaccination strategies", given the international competition between the countries' COVID-19 vaccines.

Overall, the *FAZ*'s coverage of the vaccine issue presents a more complex perception of China and paints a more negative image of China's fight against vaccines (see Fig. 5). In terms of vaccination strategies and digital progress in related fields, the German media's "long-distance" coverage is slightly skeptical, but the overall tone is unbiased; and in terms of the international promotion of vaccines, the *FAZ* occasionally takes a "zero-sum game" and "geopolitical" stance, intentionally China's international cooperation for mutual assistance misinterpreted as "vaccine diplomacy", it is difficult to conceal the German media and even the European "China's Threat Theory" hidden worries between the lines.

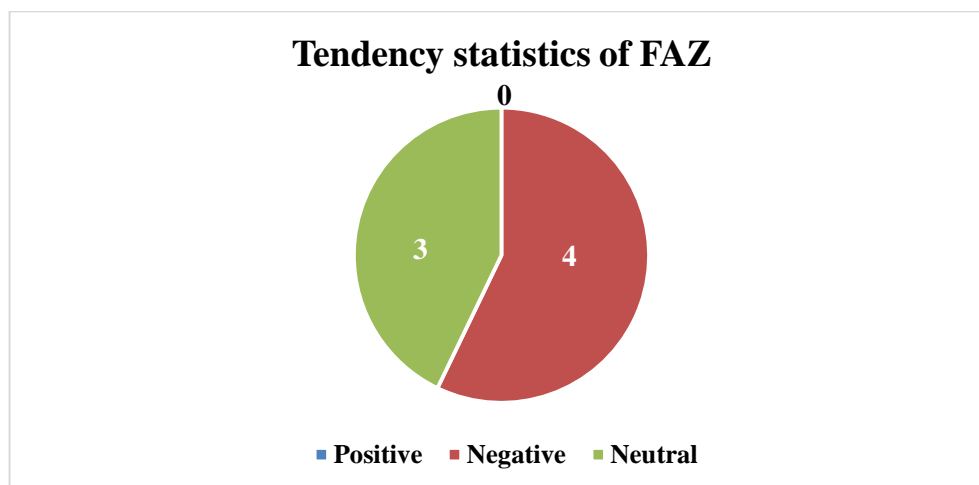


Figure 5 Tendency statistics of *FAZ*'s coverage on the Covid-19 vaccine

3.2.3 Tracing the Covid-19-origin

On 30 March 2021, the WHO released its first report on the origin of the Coronavirus, clearly stating that it was "extremely unlikely" that the virus could be transmitted to humans through the laboratory. Taking this as a point in time, the tone of the nine reports on tracing the Covid-19-origin in the *FAZ* also changed.

Prior to the release of the first WHO traceability results, most scientists and WHO experts had denied the "leakage theory" of the Wuhan laboratory that had been circulated earlier by the United States, and this position was faithfully reported in the *FAZ*. However, the report, entitled "Kein Corona-Freispruch für China" (No Corona Acquittal for China), took a different turn and accused China unjustifiably in terms of its attitude towards the traceability work: "Even though it is highly unlikely that the virus leaked out of the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, China has not shown the attitude of cooperation with the investigation that it should have had right from the start". After the release of the WHO study, the negative tone of the *FAZ*'s related report evolved from questioning China's attitude towards the investigation to questioning and even criticizing the traceability results themselves. Attempts such as "China sieht keinen Grund für neue WHO-Mission" (China sees no reason to allow WHO to conduct a second phase of traceability investigation) attempted to confuse the public by quoting out of context China's opposition to the traceability of the virus, while ignoring the "politicized" interpretation of traceability in the US and the West. The report "An den Ursprung der Corona- Pandemie" (Tracing the Covid-19-origin) states that "the WHO investigation is largely a farce, that they cannot conduct a real investigation in a free and unsupervised manner, and that China cannot absolve itself of the results of this investigation".

Of the many reports, only the article "Trump verlangt Billionen-Reparationen von China wegen Corona" (Trump Demands China Pay Ten Trillion Dollars in Compensation for Covid-19-epidemic) presents a more neutral position. The article pointed out that some U.S. politicians, in order to shirk the responsibility for their own countries' failure to fight the pandemic, used the "Theorie Chinas Verantwortung" (China's responsibility theory) as a "shield", claiming that China should provide a certain amount of compensation for countries affected by the pandemic, and provide compensation for the relevant countries' efforts to fight the pandemic. The report also pointed out that the source of the virus is still unknown. The report also pointed out that the source of the virus is still controversial, and no conclusions can be drawn.

It can be seen that most reports on tracing the Covid-19-origin have centred on the Wuhan laboratory incident and the WHO traceability results, with some questionable comments and statements often ignoring the facts or lacking in actual research. Compared to the other two fields, reports on the traceability of the outbreak showed more obvious “politicised” manipulation, with nearly 90% of the negative reports following British and American arguments and blaming the Chinese government for nothing (see Fig. 6).

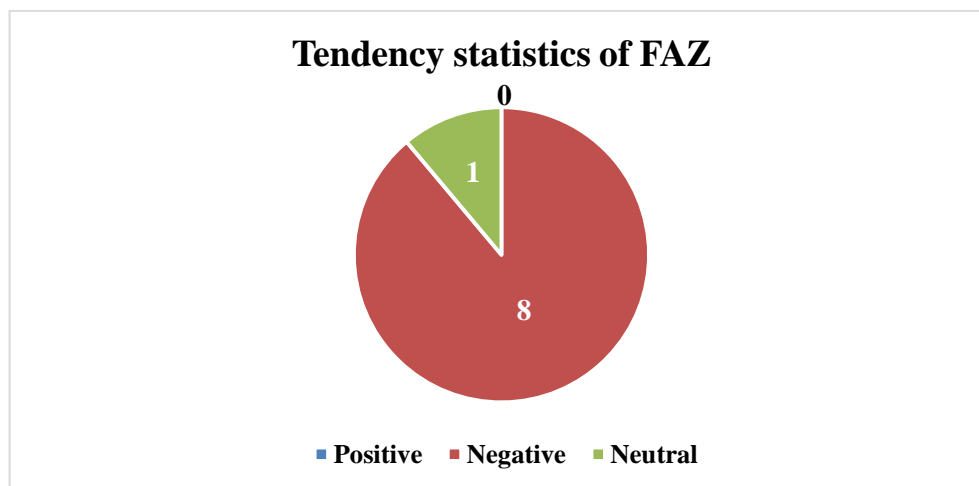


Figure 6 Tendency statistics of *FAZ*'s coverage on tracing the Covid-19-origin

3.3 Deconstruction of the reports from *SZ* on the on the Covid-19-pandemic in China

3.3.1 Covid-19 Pandemic and Prevention Politics

Similarly to the *FAZ*, the eight news articles of the *SZ* on the pandemic and prevention politics also focus on capturing the new facts of the pandemic, such as “local outbreaks” and “increasing number of cases”. However, unlike the *FAZ*, some of the *SZ*'s reports also pay attention to and analyze relevant social hotspots and the impact of anti-pandemic measures, and many of them are positive about China's anti-pandemic policies. Reports such as “China verzeichnet die meisten Neuinfektionen seit Monaten”(New infections in China hit new high in months) and “China bestraft mehr als 30 Funktionäre wegen Corona-Ausbruch” (China punishes more than 30 officials over Covid-19-epidemic) point out that the pandemic in China has been largely under control since 2020, and that even if there are localised outbreaks (e.g. the Guangzhou outbreak in May 2021), they will soon subside again; and that the good rhythm is thanks to China's strict anti-pandemic measures, especially the “Null-Covid-Politik” (Dynamic Zeroing Policy). The report “Chinas Wirtschaft wächst - trotz Corona” (China grows despite the Covid-19) notes that China's anti-pandemic strategy has had significant results, with economists forecasting a better recovery outlook for 2021, with stronger annual growth rates.

At the same time, a few reports have either taken a negative view of the development of the pandemic in China, deliberately exaggerated the adverse impact of the pandemic, or quoted unsubstantiated opinions and statements as supporting evidence, and denied the achievements and effectiveness of China's anti-pandemic measures on the basis of Western standards such as “human rights” and “democracy”. The report also cites unsubstantiated opinions and statements as supporting evidence. “162 Infektionen an einem Tag: China meldet höchste Coronazahl des Jahres” (The 162 Cases a Day: China Reports Most New Confirmed Cases of the Year) points out that the more contagious delta strain has brought many areas back to peak infection as the July 2021 Nanjing airport outbreak spreads. “China erschwert Arbeit für Korrespondenten” (China Makes Journalists' Work More Difficult) cites a so-called “report” issued by the NGO Foreign Correspondents in China (FCCC) that says China has “weaponized” visas under the pretext of pandemic prevention and control and imposed strict entry restrictions on foreign journalists, while monitoring the work of those who have already entered the country. The report clearly distorts the facts without verification - in fact, the organization, which is mostly made up of journalists with a clear bias against China, does not yet have legitimacy, making it difficult to take an objective stance in the report. The so-called “report”, in which legitimate anti-pandemic measures are smeared as restrictions on journalists, is typically “preconceived” and “unsubstantiated” [16].

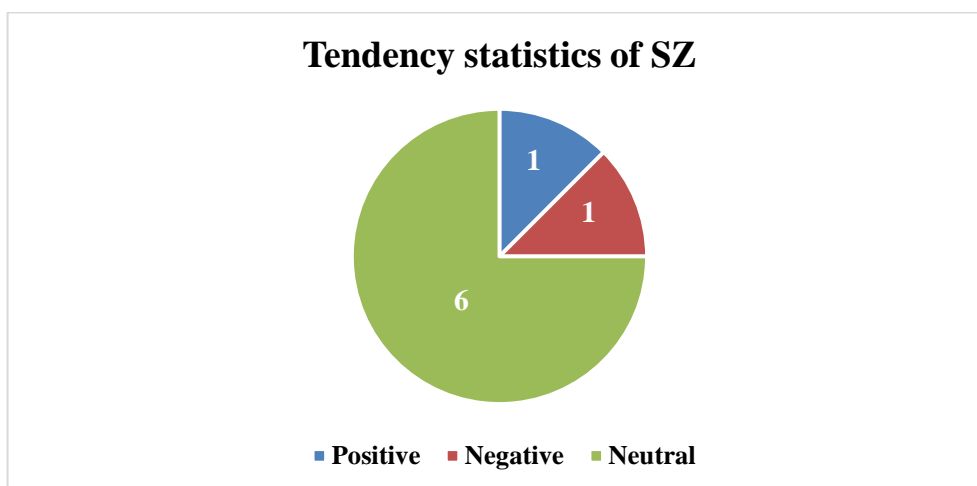


Figure 7 Tendency statistics of SZ's coverage on the pandemic and prevention politics

Overall, although the *SZ* has only half the number of related stories as the *FAZ*, is more characterized by its emotional tone and no less rich in terms of its positions. In addition, *SZ* favored objective and neutral reporting in the majority (see Fig. 7), except for its relatively pronounced degree of emotional polarization and its more distinctive stance in both positive and negative evaluations.

3.3.2 Covid-19 Vaccine

Among the seven reports on China's Covid-19 vaccine in the *SZ*, the tone of the reports on China's active participation in vaccine research and development and international co-operation on vaccine supply was generally objective, which is different from the *FAZ*. For example, "WHO erteilt Sinopharm-Impfstoff Notfallzulassung" (WHO Approves Emergency Use of Sinopharm Vaccines) and "China will 550 Millionen Impfdosen an COVAX liefern" (China Supplies 550 Million Doses of Vaccines to COVAX) said that Sinovac-vaccines have been included in the WHO emergency use list since 7 May and entered the vaccine pool of the COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access), which will contribute more to the prevention and control of pandemics in developing countries. This will contribute more to the prevention and control of the pandemic in developing countries. In addition, some reports on the effectiveness and international recognition of China's vaccines, as well as China's domestic vaccination situation, also show respect for the basic facts. For example, although "Infektionswelle trotz hoher Impftrate auf den Seychellen" (Seychelles sees wave of infections despite high vaccination rate) focuses on Seychelles' good vaccination situation and the development of the outbreak, it also mentions that the President of the country recognizes the effectiveness of China's vaccines. At the same time, individual journalists have selectively quoted facts that have yet to be verified, thus misleading readers to a certain extent. For example, "China knackt die Milliarden-Marke bei Corona-Impfungen" (China breaks the billion mark for coronavirus vaccinations) pointed out that the results of a study by the University of Hong Kong questioned whether the Sinovac COVID-19 Vaccine could prevent the more infectious variant.

Related reports with a distinctly negative tone also questioned the effectiveness of the Covid-19 vaccine while hyping up "vaccine diplomacy". For example, "Zweifel an chinesischen Impfstoffen" (Doubts about China's Vaccines) claims that the "basis" for the doubts is "China's vaccine protection rate is not high", as stated by the Director of the CCDPC (Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention) Gao Fu at the National Vaccine and Health Conference on April 10th, yet Gao himself has now made it clear that this statement is "is a complete misunderstanding". In addition to quoting out of context and making sweeping generalizations, some journalists are also accustomed to fabricating facts, speculating on hotspots in order to pander to audiences, and even using "headline-party" conclusions to mislead readers, such as "4. Pekings Impfstoffe auf dem Prüfstand" (China's Vaccines Under Scrutiny), which claims that the effectiveness of Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine is not as good as Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines, and that it is doubtful whether China's vaccines can pass the WHO's scrutiny; and China's "vaccine diplomacy" towards developing countries may affect the vaccination process in China itself.

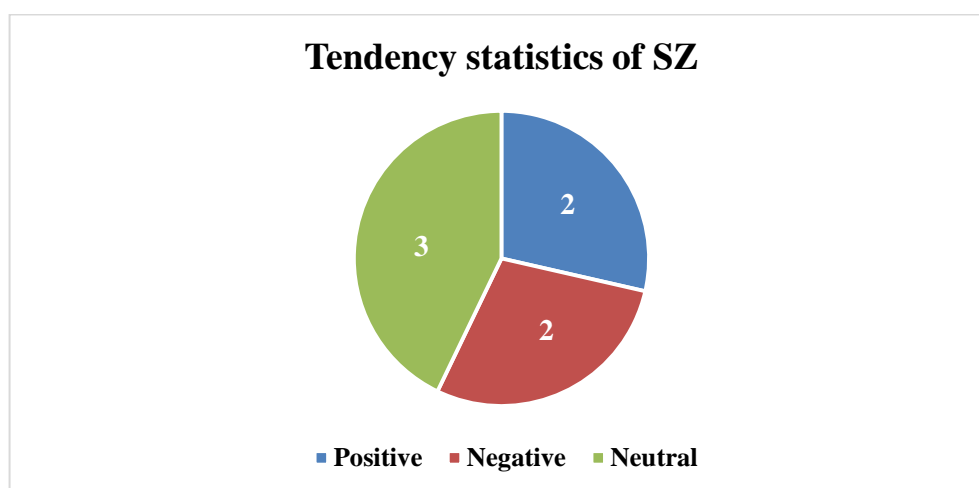


Figure 8 Tendency statistics of SZ's coverage on the COVID-19 Vaccines

Overall, the SZ's coverage of the COVID-19 vaccines was mixed, with a strong and diverse emotional tone, and a roughly "three-pronged" ratio of positive, neutral and negative coverage. Among the positive reports, the main focus was on the positive contribution made by our domestic vaccine to the fight against the pandemic in developing countries and the world, while negative comments focused on the questioning or even denial of the effectiveness of the vaccine, as well as the impact of "vaccine diplomacy". Reports on the vaccination coverage are generally more objective because they are based on factual data.

3.3.3 Tracing the Covid-19-origin

SZ's reports on tracing the Covid-19-origin in China were few in number but focused on the investigation of the Wuhan laboratory incident. However, the reports were not objective and factual, and even added a lot of malicious speculation and unfounded accusations, and the emotional tone of the reports tended to be negative.

Two reports in May, "Labormitarbeiter in Wuhan könnten schon früher infiziert worden sein" (Wuhan Lab Workers May Have Been Infected Earlier) and "Die heikle These vom Laborunfall" (The Tricky Thesis of the Laboratory Accident) insisted on the premise of "Labor-Leck-Theorie", which suspects that pathogens leaked from and infected people at the P4 lab in Wuhan and blames China for the global outbreak of the disease. In contrast, "WHO-Chef Tedros kritisiert China und bringt Sanktionen ins Gespräch" (WHO chief Tedros criticises China and mentions sanctions) selectively quotes WHO Director-General Tedros, claiming that he blames China for refusing to disclose the raw data on early transmission in Wuhan and would threaten China's co-operation with sanctions, among other things.

In terms of the three dimensions of Covid-19 pandemic and prevention politics, COVID-19 vaccines and tracing the Covid-19-origin, the reports related to China's fight against the pandemic in the FAZ and the SZ showed a differentiated distribution of tendencies (see Fig. 9). The two German media paid real-time attention to the local outbreaks in China, but on the one hand, they failed to avoid the clichéd reporting of "politicization" of China's anti-pandemic strategy, and on the other hand, they believed that even if China's pandemic prevention and control situation could be stabilized and basically maintained, it is closely related to China's "totalitarian" tradition and "collectivist" culture. On the issue of the COVID-19 vaccines and the tracing of the Covid-19-origin, the two German media are used to questioning the effectiveness of the vaccine through tinted glasses with different ideologies, and are highly alert to China's use of the so-called "power vacuum" to promote "vaccine diplomacy" to enhance the country's image and expand its geo-political influence. The two German media are highly wary of China using the so-called "power vacuum" to promote "vaccine diplomacy" to enhance its national image and expand its geopolitical influence. From this point of view, the "image of China's fight against the pandemic" presented by the two German media have more in common, that is, the overall tone of the reports is neutral and negative, and selective reporting and subjective speculation cannot be avoided. Among them, the reports on the pandemic and prevention developments are generally more objective,

the reports on tracing of the Covid-19-origin are the most negative, and are also the common “fire point” for the two German media to smear China’s image, while their attitudes towards the “Covid-19-vaccine” are more complicated.

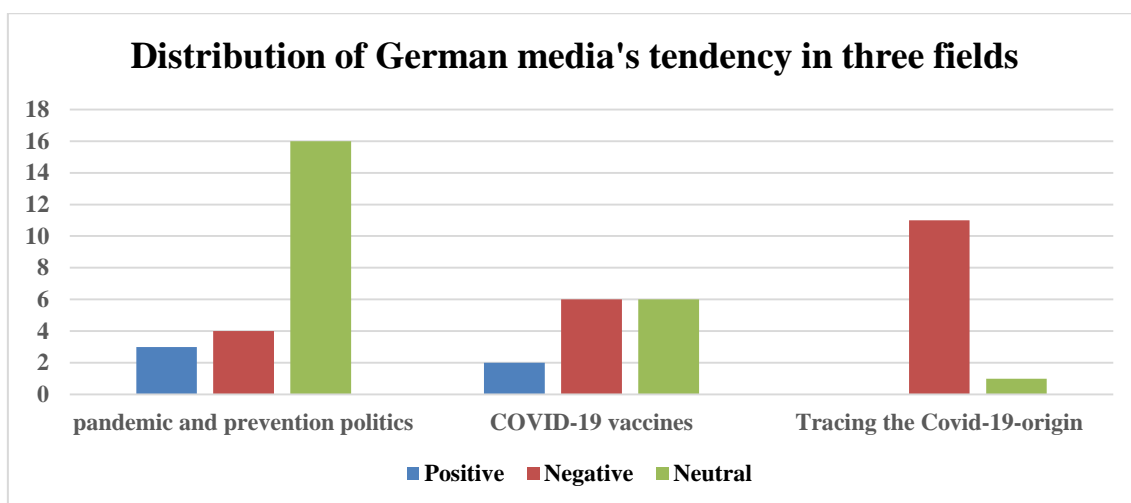


Figure 9 Distribution of German media’s tendency to the report on Covid-19-pandemic in China in three fields

At the same time, there are also some differences in the emotional tone of the two German media (see Fig. 10). Nearly half of the reports in the relatively right-leaning and more conservative *FAZ* were negative news with obvious subjective speculation, while the proportion of such reports in *SZ* was slightly lower (33.33%), and the difference in the distribution of reports with different emotional tones was relatively small. However, the *SZ* is relatively aggressive in its discourse, especially in its negative reports on China, where it is used to make “accusations” from the mouths of so-called “experts” or politicians, and lacks analyses and judgments backed up by research and facts, which may be appropriate. On the other hand, the *FAZ* is less likely to cite unsupported material and is written in a relatively plain language, which makes it more convincing to the rational group of German readers.

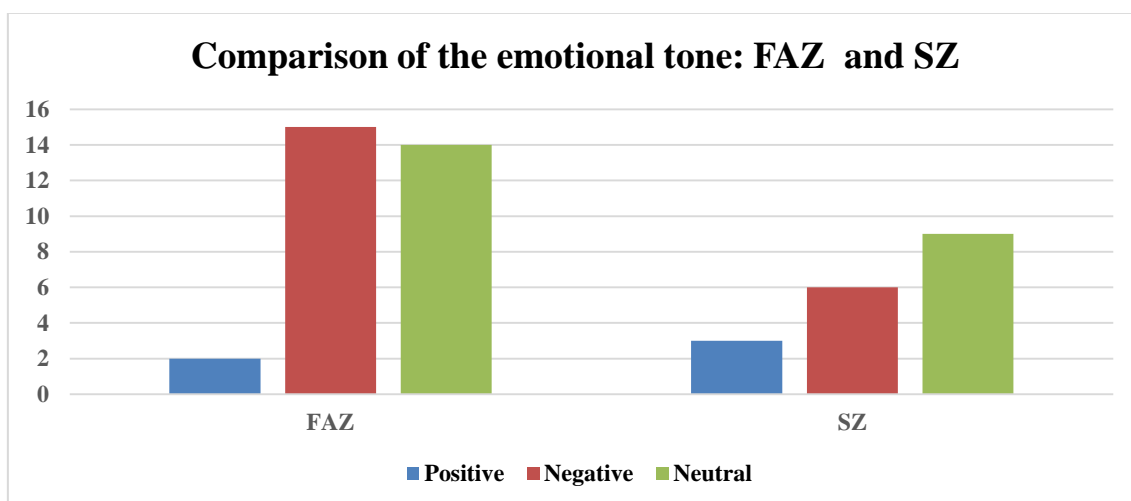


Figure 10 Comparison of the emotional tone of the two German media reports

IV. Explanation of the social significance of the German media's reports on the pandemic in China

4.1 Theoretical Foundations: International communication and soft power

The image of China shaped by the German media is related to the media's political spectrum orientation, but also inseparable from the international communication environment and global media ecology. And today's international communication has long ceased to be a simple transnational flow of information, but rather an exchange of information between governments [17]. As a result, international communication is an arena of comprehensive strength between countries and regions, capable of producing strong political, economic and cultural impacts [18]. Therefore, if we want to explore the deeper motivation of the German media in shaping China's image with a specific path or tone, we cannot avoid examining the ecology of information dissemination from the dimensions of national power and international relations.

Among the many schools of international relations theory, the theory of the soft power based on three elements inherits the tradition of state relations research, and based on the urgency of constructing an international communication narrative system, it can provide realistic theoretical guidance for the shaping and dissemination of a country's image. This is because a country's soft power resources will be transformed into reasonable and legitimate hard power in multiple fields such as international politics, economy, and military by consolidating the foundation of public opinion [19], thus enhancing the country's image; and a positive country image is conducive to the maintenance of the country's prestige, the effective mastery of the right of international discourse, and the promotion of the development of politics, economy, and culture, thus enhancing the soft power [20]. It can be seen that the theory of soft power and the construction of national image complement each other.

As an important component of comprehensive national power, "soft power" means that "if a country will achieve the desired results in international politics, it is because other countries appreciate its values, emulate its case, and hope to achieve its level of openness and prosperity -- and (therefore) are willing to follow it" [21]. Specifically, a country's "culture (influence), political values, and its foreign policy" constitute the three elements of soft power [22]. Given that the global media ecology is also a cross-cultural behavior based on the combination of cognitive, emotional and value logics [23], it is feasible to analyze the behavioral dynamics of the German media in shaping and communicating the country's image, which can be either the country's own image or the image of another country, by applying the three elements of soft power that include similar factors. According to the theory of soft power, no matter whether the target of analysis is the country or other countries, the media's goal is to enhance the image of the country and countries close to the elements of the country's soft power, and at the same time, with the help of biased reports, exaggerated propaganda or false information, make the readers have a distance from the countries with a low degree of overlap of the elements of the country's soft power, so as to weaken or even discredit the image of the country that differs from the country's soft power.

4.2 The Motivation of German Media in Constructing China's Anti-pandemic Image

Under the new global media ecology, the China-related reporting strategies and discourses of German mainstream media are also affected by the three elements of soft power, resulting in the phenomena of selective reporting, politicized interpretation and false narratives. The three elements of soft power are foreign cultural awareness, political values and the ability to shape international rules and issues.

First of all, German mainstream media are accustomed to taking the model of Western thought and civilization as a benchmark, and are indifferent to societies and cultures different from this kind, or even hold a critical and negative attitude [24]. It is not difficult to see from the relevant reports that the German mainstream media can hardly get rid of the negative stereotypes of China. Arguments such as "the concession of individual interests under collectivism" and "the sense of social responsibility advocated by Confucian culture" are an examination of other countries' cultures using their own culture as a reference system. However, it is not conducive to intercultural awareness and understanding to simply set a tone without discussing what Confucian culture is. Individual reports do not even take into account the national situation and the actual situation, but judge without evaluating, accusing China's anti-pandemic measures of being "too strict", reacting "too aggressively" to positive cases, and failing to achieve "basic respect" for human rights.

Second, the German media, either explicitly or implicitly authorized by the government, have highlighted or even intentionally exaggerated the differences between China and Germany in terms of political systems and values. Mass media reports are based under the political framework and are influenced and constrained by

ideology [25]. This limitation is further amplified by the comprehension bias brought about by the ideological differences between China and Germany, which leads to the German media's tendency to emphasize the differences between the two countries' political systems and development paths, and to place China in the framework of "othering" and associate it with "authoritarianism" and "totalitarianism". As the antithesis of the spirit of modern rationality, the Other is seen as heretical, associated with ignorance, chaos, evil, filth, etc., a view that serves to justify and defend the values of "us" (meaning "the West") [26]. This view serves to justify and defend "our" (meaning "Western") values [27], further solidifying the prejudice that only Western countries are "liberal democracies". Specifically, such behavior is reflected in the German media's repeated delusion that China's efforts to help others by providing vaccines are "vaccine diplomacy", and its "selective blindness" to vaccine donations to developing countries by Western countries, including Germany.

Finally, a certain degree of "news hegemony" affects the objectivity and fairness of national image dissemination. The imbalance in global resource allocation and power structure has shaken the rules and order of global information dissemination. As one of the developed countries in the West that holds the power of international discourse, Germany will not give up the way to dominate international public opinion through the media. In view of the German mainstream media's difficulty in agreeing with the independence and rationality of China's diplomatic concepts, and its unwillingness, difficulty, and lack of empathy for the concepts of mutual understanding and win-win cooperation, most of the news related to the topic of "tracing the Covid-19-origin" ignored the facts, and either directly or indirectly supported and spread conspiracies such as the "leakage of the coronavirus in the Wuhan laboratory" and so on. Facts such as the efficiency of China's response to the pandemic and the scientific, open and transparent nature of the information were often ignored or neglected by the media, resulting in the spread of misleading information about China's national image more rapidly and widely than the truth [28].

V. Conclusion

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* are both famous German dailies with a relatively neutral reporting stance, and the reports on the Covid-19-pandemic in China can be regarded as a microcosm of the image of China's resistance to the pandemic from the German and even the European point of view. The image of China's resistance to the pandemic shaped by the mainstream media in Germany 2021 was predominantly neutral and negative, which reflected the perspective of the main body of German society's public opinion. Under the influence of national interests, the German media are used to self-cultivate the image of China as the Other, so the China-related reports on related issues are not absolutely neutral and objective. In order to break the discourse monopoly of the Western mainstream media, it is necessary to continue to extend the realistic path of shaping the real national public health image and to improve the integration strategy of three-dimensional communication of the comprehensive national image. To this end, this study, on the one hand, adopts corpus content analysis to classify and compare the two German media's China-related reports on the Corona-pandemic at the discourse level; on the other hand, it conducts a social perspective analysis on the basis of discourse data, focusing on exploring the social relations behind the reports and the potential motives affecting the shaping of a country's image, so as to put forward a coping strategy that combines truthfulness, scientificity, flexibility, efficiency, and practicability.

5.1 Emphasis on Data: Objective Reporting on the Source

The German media's coverage of "pandemic development and politics" is relatively pragmatic and focuses on hard facts. The data, locations and preventive measures in the news reports are biased towards the empirical facts of the pandemic, naturally filtering out the subjective stance and tendency of the German media and news practitioners, and effectively reaching the German audience with the real information, which is not likely to cause resentment. The idea of relying on data and emphasizing facts can also be used to build China's image in the fields of health and international anti-pandemic cooperation. For example, the use of third-party surveys, news agency surveys, and journalists' own research to show China's support for developing countries and international organizations not only meets the audience's fragmented reading habits and cognitive characteristics in the post-truth era, but also helps to reduce the political interpretation and subjective attack of the German media on China's foreign aid. This is not only in line with the audience's fragmented reading habits and cognitive characteristics in the post-truth era, but also conducive to reducing the German media's politicized

interpretation of China's foreign aid and subjective denunciation, thus conveying the real image, eliminating cognitive parochialism and enhancing the effectiveness of communication.

5.2 Multi-dimensional Approach: Expanding the Matrix of Foreign Communication

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, China's prevention and control of the pandemic has been generally efficient. People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and CGTN have used multilingual communication channels to release data on the pandemic both internally and externally, and to respond to concerns with timely and detailed data, so that the foreign media can be informed of China's pandemic dynamics, research and development of the Covid-19-vaccine, and the information of China's society during the pandemic, which is conducive to the German media's understanding and thus to objectively portraying and spreading China's image. The positive publicity of China's anti-pandemic image by Chinese mainstream media has begun to bear fruit. In the future, it is advisable to make further use of major overseas social media platforms to convey the real story of China's anti-pandemic process to German audiences through multimodal forms of text, pictures and videos in Multilanguage.

It should be noted that vertical screen short video streaming media has increasingly become the first news portal for domestic and overseas audiences. The short video platform represented by Tik Tok continues to gain popularity in Europe, and is constantly favored and loved by young people for its "short, flat and fast" attributes. As a result, the news facts driven by traditional social media data will be more likely to be responded to by the German youth audience with the advancement of medical video secondary creation of micro-drama, rendering of exemplary anti-pandemic models, and the real reaction of the people in the prevention of pandemics and the picking of winds, forming a three-dimensional dissemination matrix of authenticity and interest in parallel, and multidimensionality of graphic, text, video, and audio. In addition, emerging media technology has become a key factor in influencing audience responsiveness to the shaping of smart media, with AR interactive news, short video directing, and MR smart news pushing all reshaping the news industry ecology to a certain extent. Therefore, while improving the efficiency of existing social media and ensuring the effective communication of objective news facts, we must pay attention to the new impact of generative AI on news content production and media platforms, adapt to the change, and lay out a plan early, especially focusing on the GPT Store, and cultivating the resonance and mutual construction relationship between intelligent content and media platforms, so as to make use of the intelligent media matrix to form the synergy of channels and lead the public opinion. This will enable us to use the smart media matrix to form channel synergy, lead public opinion, and optimize news dissemination effects by linking news events with audience perception.

5.3 Strengthening the foundation: incubating cultural intermediaries

Cultural barriers are an important reason for the German media's prejudice against China's fight against the pandemic. To achieve effective cross-cultural communication, Chinese media need to make use of the folk perspective, find forms that are more pleasing to German audiences, and use the pro-people nature of folk communicators' works to subconsciously bridge the cultural gap. For example, the Chinese traditional food videos and German daily science videos released by Li Ziqi, a Chinese media personality, and "Leo in China", a German media personality, have gained considerable traffic, effectively playing the role of a bridge between Chinese and foreign folk communication.

As the most active, vivid, recognizable and non-stereotypical link in international communication, cultural intermediaries play an important role in eliminating noise and increasing effectiveness. To this end, it is first of all advisable to strengthen the linkage of social media platforms in order to create a cumulative effect. Social media is still a powerful force in the international communication arena, but smart media is gradually becoming a transformative force in reshaping content and the media environment. Therefore, while incubating on Facebook and X platforms, we should pay attention to the multimodal content of Reel Short, Tik Tok and other platforms, especially the role of related graphic content as a source of corpus and corpus labelling in overseas big language models such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude, so as to enhance the exposure and influence of relevant opinion leaders in multiple ways. Secondly, we should focus on the role of German self-publishers or MCN (Multi-Channel Network) organizations, by inviting German opinion leader-style self-publishers or MCN, PUGC (Professional User Generated Content) to China to go on a local field trip, and present objective and real Chinese stories and Chinese contexts, so as to create content that meets the acceptance habits of German audiences and unites Chinese characteristics, and enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of China's anti-pandemic story. Finally, we can optimize algorithmic recommendations and iterate user profiles to form precise

communication effects. Clarifying the characteristics of young German audiences, especially the media usage habits, cognitive acceptance characteristics and content evaluation methods of Generation Z, is an important part of the work of accurately disseminating China's national image. To this end, media institutions, experts, scholars and technology companies should work together to form a comprehensive driving force and a new growth point for international communication: the media should clarify the characteristics of the audience and adjust the content structure and narrative discourse system; scholars should focus on combining the news production model and audience behavior surveys to sum up the corresponding experience; technology companies should be committed to iterating intelligent recommendation algorithms, and upgrading the product functions in order to attract young German users. Based on the "traffic thinking", the three parties should use innovative products to break through the platform limitations of the West, form a circle of influence based on the youth group, and enhance the intuition of precise communication in the circle, the effectiveness of group communication and the integration of international communication.

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