

# A Diachronic Study on the Transformation of China's Image Under the COVID-19 : a Critical Discourse Analysis of Diplomatic Q&A\*

Xianlin Han

School of Information Science,  
Beijing Language and Culture University,  
Beijing, CHINA  
lustre\_1@126.com

Huizhou Zhao(corresponding author)

School of Information Science,  
Beijing Language and Culture University,  
Beijing, CHINA  
zhaohuizhou@blcu.edu.cn

**Abstract**—Based on the critical discourse analysis viewpoint, this article examines the influence of the pandemic on "China" using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis methodologies on the text corpus of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson's response to the press. The emotional influence of the epidemic on "China" and the evolution of China's national image over time in the setting of the COVID-19 are discovered in the study. The influence of the epidemic on China's image shifted over time, from no correlation to a negative correlation, then back to no connection, reflecting to some part the positive transformation in China's national image in the international community during the long-term struggle against the epidemic.

**Keywords**—Critical Discourse Analysis, national image, text mining, Diplomatic Discourse Power

## I INTRODUCTION

China's comprehensive national strength has expanded in recent years, and it has begun to play a more active role in the global economy, politics, culture, and military. China has always sought peaceful development, but not only are some countries and media still stuck in the Cold War mindset, trashing China's image, but even outsiders are misinformed about China to varied degrees. As a result, telling China's story correctly, cultivating the image of a responsible and responsible power, and allowing the world to understand and appreciate China is not just a matter of China's personal interests, but also has a significant impact on world peace and prosperity. Diplomatic discourse has become a new perspective in the study of diplomatic issues since the 18th Party Congress [1], as the Chinese government has placed a premium on the diplomatic discourse of major countries with Chinese features. With the changing global situation in recent years, as well as a series of major events involving China, such as Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement), it is worthwhile to examine China's national image before and after

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diplomatic events, as well as how it has changed over time. Diplomacy, as one of the formal avenues of communication between a country and the world community, is critical to the country's image. This paper uses a three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis to discuss the impact of the epidemic on the sentiment scores of questions and answers about "China" in the diplomatic corpus at different time periods since COVID-19, and discusses the impact of the epidemic on the questions and answers about "China" in the diplomatic corpus. Starting with the three-dimensional technique of critical discourse analysis, the paper also explores changes in the ideology and image of the state underlying the corpus. This research aims to present a visual and evidence-based depiction of the shifting image of the state in the context of the pandemic, as well as examine the social and political causes for it, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

## II BACKGROUND OVERVIEW

### A. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims to reveal the dialectical relationship between language, power and ideology through the analysis of surface linguistic forms [2]. Initial CDA studies lacked objectivity [3]. Stubbs argues that it is positive and feasible to incorporate quantitative and qualitative analysis of the corpus into critical discourse analysis, and that the complementarity and compatibility between the two makes it possible to reproduce the full picture of discourse from both the macro and micro perspectives [4]. It can be said that the corpus-based critical discourse analysis has broken through the limitations of the small number of texts and the strong subjectivity of traditional research, and has therefore become a new trend in discourse analysis.

Over the last two decades, an increasing number of international researchers have used corpus technology to conduct critical discourse analysis. To investigate the inner meaning of conversation, these studies look at the frequency of words, index lines, subject headers, collocations, and word clusters in texts, as well as lexical patterns and grammatical structures.

Baker's empirical study of the portrayal of Muslims in the British media found a negative attitude towards Muslims and a growing anti-Muslim complex in the British media since 9·11 [5]. McEnery collected a wide range of English and Chinese coverage of the London Olympics, analysing whether hosting the Games had a positive or negative impact on the UK's national reputation through collocations and subject headings [6]. Kim built a corpus of texts from mainstream US media, such as *CNN*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*, and analysed the discursive construction of the image of North Korea in the US media through collocations, index lines and phrase patterns [7].

Chinese study in this field, on the other hand, is relatively new. In 2010, Qian Yufang examined the construction of *The Sun's* discourse on terrorism before and after 9·11, social change in the discourse of the government's work report, and changes in the construction of low-carbon discourse in the British mainstream media over time [8]. Using discourse analysis as a theoretical lens, Shao Bin and Hui Zhiming studied the attitude of Western media discourse towards the "Chinese Dream" through a corpus of collocation networks and index line analysis [9]. Li Na and Zhang Qi dissect the image of Chinese women constructed by Western media based on a corpus-critical discourse analysis perspective [10].

#### B. National image and diplomatic discourse

National image is a country's cultural soft power, an important part of comprehensive national power, is the general evaluation and determination given by the public at home and abroad to the country itself, its behavior and its composition, and to a certain extent reflects the state of comprehensive national power and international status of the country [11]. A good national image can win the country a broader scope for international cooperation and development. The image of a country has its own logic of operation [12]. It is a dynamic and constructible long-term strategic process, generally characterised by material ontogeny, subjectivity and communication media [13]. The communication-mediated nature of a country's image means that communication and dissemination, as a way for a country to interact externally, is closely linked to the country's image, and there can be no international image without international communication.

Diplomacy, as the official channel for the state to spread its voice and communicate with the outside world, has a special and important status. Diplomatic discourse belongs to the political discourse of institutional discourse, and refers to the language and discourse used by the subject of diplomacy to express its international strategy and foreign policy in a certain historical period [14].

Previous studies on national image have mostly used the media's newspapers as the object of study, for example, Hu Xiaobin compared *China Daily* and the *New York Times* to study the construction of China's national image by Chinese and foreign media under the epidemic [15]. Liu Jingxuan analyses the discursive representation and meaning construction of China's national image in the Western media's coverage of the Beijing Winter Olympics, using the discourses of the Western media (*BBC*, *CNN*, *Daily Mail* and *Yahoo*) as a

corpus [16]. Jia analyses the reasons for the formation of the image of the Chinese state in the Spanish media, taking into account the reports of *El País*, *Le Monde* and *ABC* on the Chinese Communist Party during the 18th National Congress [17].

This article is based on a transcript of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson's statements during a question-and-answer session, a sort of diplomatic discourse. Unlike traditional news media's one-sided reports, the spokesperson's question-and-answer session includes not only the worldwide community's "questions" regarding China-related events, but also the Chinese official's "answers," reflecting both Chinese and foreign perspectives and attitudes. This is a good technique to look at China's image in the world community objectively and avoid the problem of biased analysis caused by a single source of information.

### III RESEARCH METHODS

#### A. Corpus collection

This article compiles the Chinese corpus of the Spokesman's Statement section on the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official website from March 16, 2018 to September 30, 2021, totaling 990 texts, 3.05 million words, and 5.97 megabytes.

#### B. Corpus processing

1) *Calculation of the correlation between text sentiment scores and the impact of the epidemic*

a) *Treatment of emotional scores:* In this work, each document's sentiment score is calculated as the average sentiment score of each word inside the document, i.e. the sum of all word sentiment scores divided by the total number of words. Because each diplomatic corpus document has a different number of words, taking the average can more precisely reflect the sentiment ratings in the text.

b) *Select an emotional polarity values dictionary:* A appropriate list of sentiment polarity values must be utilized to quantify the sentiment scores of contexts involving Chinese phrases such as "China" and "Chinese side," and I chose the BosonNLP Sentiment Dictionary, which contains 114767 words that were generated automatically from millions of emotion annotated data from microblogs, news, forums, and other data sources. The polarity of the words is separated into positive and negative categories, with polarity values ranging from plus or minus 6. For example, 肺病 (lung disease) - 5.23415259142, 葬身 (burial) -2.31168270359, 喜报 (happy news) 3.03301490396. The dictionary's lexical coverage in the diplomatic corpus utilized in this paper is 82.8705 percent.

c) *Treatment of negative words:* Because negation can modify the sentiment attitude of a sentence, this paper changes the sentiment score of the next word to the opposite number when negation occurs.

• *Handling the impact of the epidemic:* The more often the word "epidemic" is used, the more concerned the international community is about the new epidemic in China;

thus, the frequency of the word "epidemic" is employed as an indicator of the epidemic's impact.

d) *Correlation test:* Using the *scipy* package in Python, the average sentiment score of each document and the frequency of occurrence of the epidemic phrases were evaluated for correlation over time.

2) *Calculation of significant keywords of "China" in each time period*

This article pulls sentences containing the words “疫  
情”(epidemic) and “中国”(China) from the corpus of the Foreign Ministry spokesperson's Q&A to construct a new corpus in order to undertake a critical discourse analysis of COVID-19 and China's national image from the textual dimension. After grouping the corpus according to time, The corpus analysis tool *Sketch Engine* was used to analyze the significant collocations of the word “中国”(China) in each group of the corpus, in order to expose the key collocation

structures and significant collocations of the word "China" in the context of the epidemic at different time periods. In the context of the pandemic, the corpus analysis tool *Sketch Engine* was utilized to analyze the distinctive collocations in each corpus to disclose the primary collocation structures and sentiment tendency of the significant collocations.

IV. RESULTS OF CORPUS PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

A. Presentation of corpus processing results

1) Changes in the correlation between text sentiment scores and the impact of the epidemic over time

The average sentiment scores of the 990 diplomatic corpus papers, as well as the frequency of their epidemic terms, were determined following the processing techniques mentioned above. Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 illustrate some of the data, which were drawn from the Python *plotly* function library.

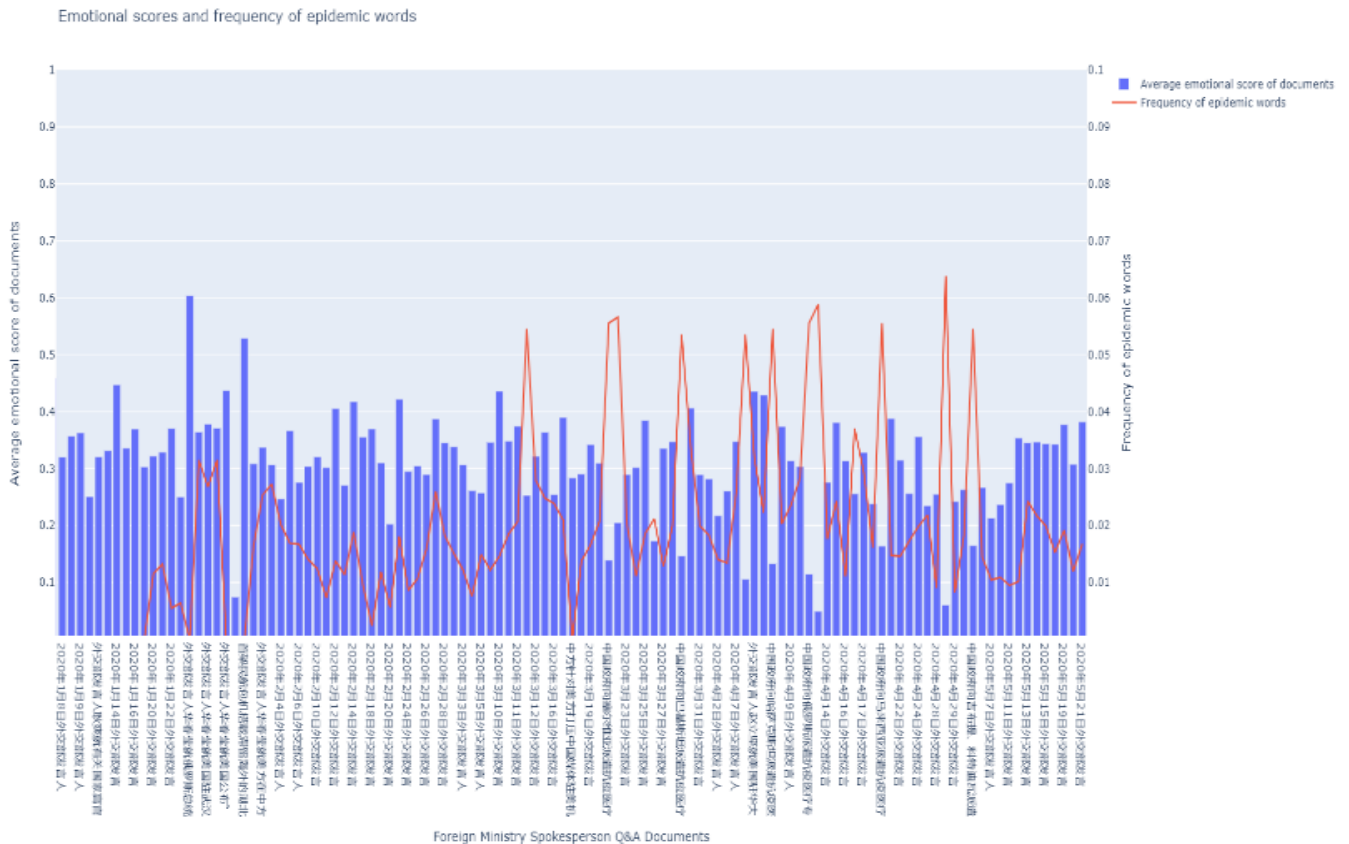


Fig. 1. 2019.09.17-2020.05.20 Sentiment scores and epidemic word frequencies in the diplomatic corpus

For simplicity of observation, Table 1 shows a correlation test between sentiment scores and epidemic word frequency for 5 time periods from January 2020 to September 2021, with groups at two-month intervals from January to August 2020, and one group from September 2020 to September 2021.

2) *Significant collocation words in different time periods*

Following the selection of sentences in the corpus that had both "epidemic" and "China," six sets of sentences were chosen

from every two months from January to October 20, and one set from November 20 to September 21. The top 10 terms with the greatest collocation scores for each collocation structure were chosen from the top 5 most significant collocation structures.

D. B. Analysis of the results of the corpus processing

A three-dimensional discourse model is frequently used in critical discourse analysis: textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice analysis. The following is an

examination of China's image change utilizing a three-dimensional discourse model for diplomatic Q&A texts from

various time periods, as well as a correlation between emotion ratings and the frequency of epidemic phrases.

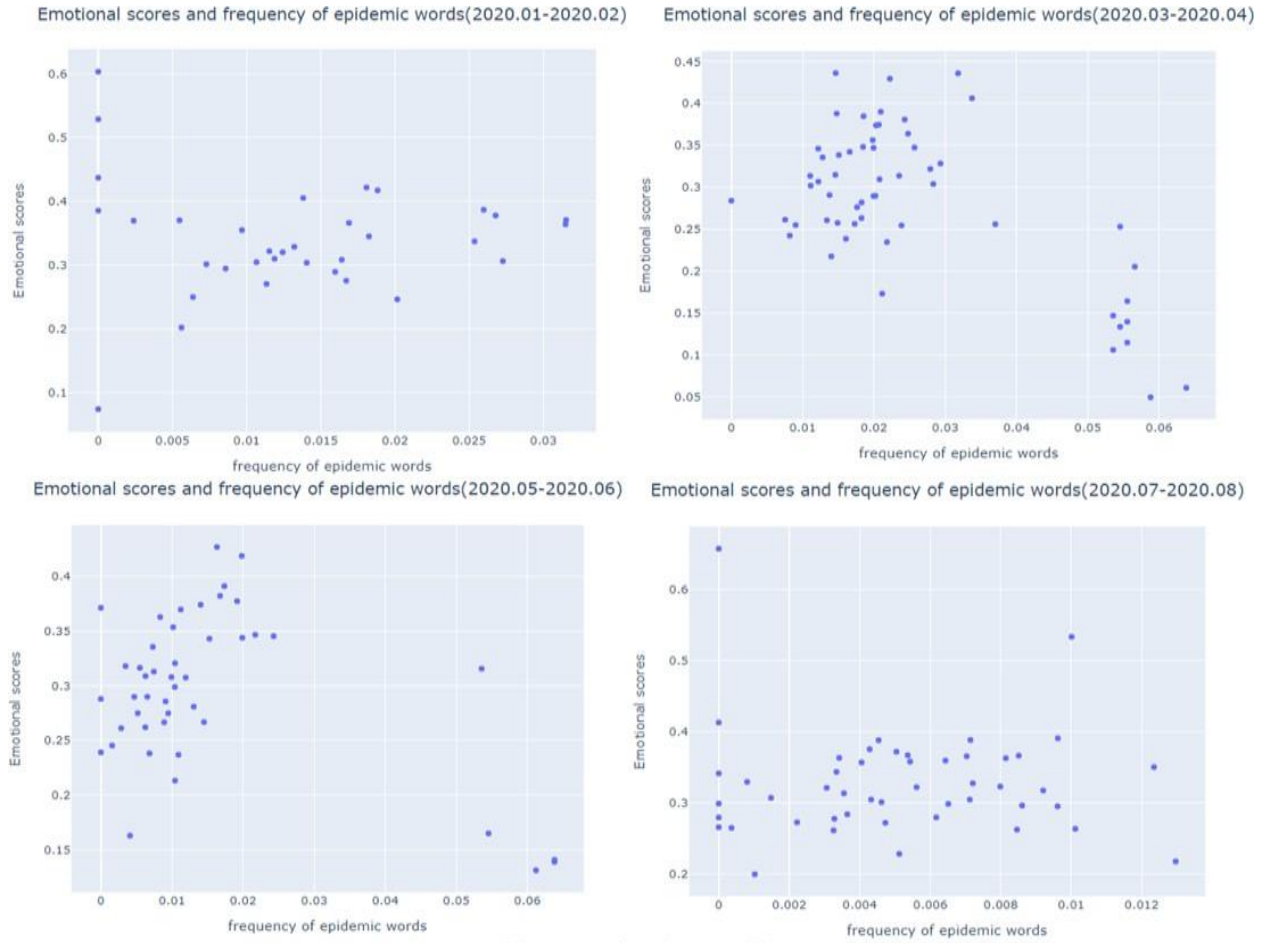


Fig. 2. 2020.01-2020.08 Scatterplot of sentiment scores and epidemic word frequencies

TABLE I. CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN SENTIMENT SCORES AND FREQUENCY OF EPIDEMIC WORDS AT DIFFERENT PERIODS

Period	Pearson correlation coefficient	T value of t-test	P value of t-test	Number of files
2020.01-2020.02	-0.039	-20.971	6.808e-31	34
2020.03-2020.04	-0.625	-21.167	6.005e-41	57
2020.05-2020.06	-0.421	-25.316	3.590e-42	45
2020.07-2020.08	-0.013	-29.794	1.120e-49	48
2020.09-2021.09	0.134	-62.202	3.118e-268	310

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TABLE II. SIGNIFICANT COLLOCATIONS FOR "CHINA" IN JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2020

Period	and/or		Modifies		Object of		Indirect-Object		Subject of	
20.01-20.02	东盟	13.67	人民	12.53	抗击	10.98	支持	12.29	加油	12.41
	印尼	11.54	政府	12.32	支持	10.98	反对	11.77	打气	11.3
	中国	10.82	经济	11.34	表达	10.13	表达	11.58	驻	11.3
	洛钦	10.75	公民	10.36	反对	10.04	返回	10.3	处于	11.19
	德国	10.41	人	9.33	攻击	10.02	导致	10.3	缺席	10.41
			境内	9.32	报道	9.48	协助	10.3	要求	10.41
			抗疫	9.28	实施	9.44	支援	10.3	参与	10.19
			国内	9.26	声援	9.44	体现	10.3	会	10.07
			疫情	9.07	帮助	9.44	报道	10.3	防控	10
			共产党	8.93	支援	9.44	建议	10.3	抗击	9.78

TABLE III. SIGNIFICANT COLLOCATE FOR "CHINA" IN MARCH-APRIL 2020

Period	and/or		Modifies		Object of		Indirect-Object		Subject of	
20.03-20.04	非洲	11.99	政府	12.47	抹黑	10.35	指责	11.14	驻	12.71
	东盟	11.34	人民	11.79	包括	10.14	支持	11.06	发生	9.97
	赵立坚	11.26	公民	10.91	指责	9.91	说	10.85	拥有	9.87
	华春莹	11	共产党	9.8	进行	9.8	持有	10.32	援	9.83
	俄罗斯	10.91	企业	9.72	支持	9.48	离开	10.32	采取	9.67
	塞尔维亚	10.75	外交部	9.56	介绍	9.42	认为	10.3	愿	9.63
	美国	10.68	国内	9.5	离开	9.37	让	10.3	是否	9.57
			抗疫	9.49	说	9.34	批评	10.27	继续	9.02
			红十字	9.32	称	9.28	称	10.14	提供	7.75
			疫情	9.31	认为	9.28	介绍	10.11		

1) January 2020 to February 2020

In this time period, the correlation coefficient between text sentiment ratings and the frequency of epidemic words is -0.039, indicating that there is no meaningful association between the two. The significant collocations of "China" in this period, according to textual analysis of critical discourse analysis, are more positive words, such as “支持” (support), “协助” (assist), “支援” (support), “加油” (cheer), “打气” (Cheer up)、帮助 (help), “声援” (solidarity) and so on. Although negative words such as “反对” (oppose) and “攻击” (attack) exist, they do not have the same weight as positive words.

In terms of discourse practice, the quotations at this stage include not only indirect quotations that are common in diplomatic questions and answers, but also direct quotations of slogans of solidarity with China from around the world, such as “中国加油” (Go China), “武汉加油” (Go Wuhan) reflecting international concern and encouragement for the Chinese epidemic. In terms of sources, there are many voices from ordinary people and netizens all across the world, not only comments from politicians.

In terms of social practice, China's economy has been severely harmed by the harsh measures implemented to avoid

the epidemic, which included closing towns to stem the outbreak when people's right to life and health was at stake **in the early stages**. Although there were rare anti-Chinese voices criticizing the anti-epidemic policies in the face of the disease in China, **most people** and political personalities around the world **expressed sympathy** for China and hoped that the epidemic would be finished soon. The use of the epidemic words in diplomatic Q&A texts throughout this time period, as well as the **lack of correlation** between the sentiment scores of the texts, support this conclusion.

2) March to April 2020

With a correlation coefficient of -0.625, the diplomatic quiz mood scores began to exhibit a substantial negative association with the frequency of epidemic phrases over time. From the standpoint of textual analysis, the important collocations of terms associated to "China" during this time period revealed more negative words, such as “抹黑” (smear), “指责” (accusation), and “批评” (criticism), and less positive ones, with only one word, "support." The presence of the word “美国” (the USA) in the and/or collocations during this time period also suggests heightened attention in the outbreak from the United States. In terms of discourse practice, unfavorable attitude quotations **are more frequently obtained from**

### Western government figures at this level, such as US Secretary of State Pompeo and US President Trump.

“蓬佩奥国务卿在采访中还称，由于中方不公开、不透明，美方获得的信息不完善，导致美方应对疫情挑战滞后。”(“In the interview, Secretary Pompeo also said that the US side was lagging behind in responding to the challenges of the epidemic because of the lack of openness and transparency on the Chinese side and the imperfect information available to the US side.”)

The few positive quotations are from emerging countries or international organizations like the Council of Arab Ministers of Health, Science magazine, the World Health Organization, and others. For example:

“世界卫生组织总干事谭德塞指出，中国强有力的举措既控制了疫情在中国境内扩散，也阻止了疫情向其他国家蔓延，为世界各国抗击疫情树立了新标杆。”(“WHO Director-General Tan Desai noted that China's strong initiatives have both contained the spread of the epidemic within China and stopped it from spreading to other countries, setting a new benchmark for countries around the world in the fight against the epidemic.”)

In terms of social practice, **the global outbreak** of COVID-19 since March 20 has put a strain on medical resources and posed a threat to people's lives all over the world, so individual Western political figures, such as the US Secretary of State, have stoked public sentiment and launched **numerous accusations and smear** campaigns against China in the context of the trade war between China and the US, in order to cover up their own responsibilities.

#### 3) May to June 2020

With a correlation value of -0.421, there is still a negative link between the diplomatic quiz emotion score and the frequency of pandemic words. There are still more negative terms among the significant collocations with "China" at this level, such as “攻击”(attack), “指责”(blame), and “掩盖”(cover-up), according to text analysis. However, the amount of positive phrases such as “赞赏”(appreciation), “指导”(guidance), and“支持”(assistance) has increased. This Phenomenon reflects the **confrontation** between **two different attitudes**.

In terms of the discursive practice dimension, positive signals primarily come from developing countries and international organizations, such as Pakistan, some African countries, the World Health Organization, and so on, for example:

“中国赴埃塞俄比亚和吉布提抗疫医疗专家组……专家组的敬业精神和专业水平受到非方高度赞扬和肯定。吉布提总理卡米勒 5 月 10 日专门向专家组 12 名成员颁授“6·27 独立日”国家勋章，表彰专家组为吉布提抗疫所作贡献。”(“The dedication and professionalism of the Chinese medical team of experts to fight the epidemic in Ethiopia and Djibouti has been highly praised and

affirmed by the African side. The Prime Minister of Djibouti, Mr. Kamil, on 10 May awarded the 12 members of the team of experts with the National Order of “6·27 Independence Day” in recognition of the team's contribution to the fight against the epidemic in Djibouti.”)

Some Western government figures, such as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, US President Donald Trump, and US State Department spokespersons, continue to be critical.

“美国国务卿蓬佩奥、国务院发言人奥特加斯等人近期密集接受媒体采访，再次声称疫情源头在武汉，称中国去年 12 月就知晓疫情但行动速度不够快，中方的数据不真实，鼓动国际社会对中国进行追责索赔。”(“US Secretary of State Pompeo, State Department spokesman Ortagus and others have recently given intensive media interviews, claiming once again that the source of the epidemic is in Wuhan, saying that China knew about the epidemic last December but did not act fast enough, that China's data is not true, and agitating for the international community to pursue claims against China.”)

From a social standpoint, **China's national image** has **improved** during this period as a result of its **staged success** in fighting the epidemic and actively sharing its experience in preventing and controlling the epidemic and supporting other countries, but there are still **few officers** who continue to **politicize health issues** in order to absolve themselves of responsibility for fighting the epidemic, such as calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" and blaming the Chinese government and the WHO.

#### 4) July to August 2020

With a correlation coefficient of -0.013, there is **no significant correlation** between the diplomatic quiz sentiment scores and the frequency of pandemic terms. New positive words arise among the major collocations associated to "China" throughout this period, such as “贡献”(contribution), “期待”(expectation), “捐资”(donation), and so on, according to textual analysis. Negative words like accusation, slander, and criticism are also present.

Individual officials in nations such as the United States remain the main providers of unfavorable news in the discursive practice dimension, but these negative views are mentioned without mentioning specific facts, rather in broad phrases such as “指责”(accusations) and “批评”(criticism), for example:

“据报道，美国国务卿蓬佩奥 7 月 8 日接受记者采访时，就政治制度、疫情应对等问题指责中国。”(“In an interview with reporters on 8 July, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reportedly blamed China for the political system, the response to the epidemic and other issues.”)

Some developing countries, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nepal, continue to be sources of good statements during this time. For instance:

“会议中，中方重申中国疫苗投入使用后，将作为全球公共产品，并提高疫苗在三国的可及性，得到中阿巴三

方的赞赏，并表示继续同中方加强抗疫合作。”(“During the meeting, China reiterated that the Chinese vaccine, when put into use, would serve as a global public product and increase its accessibility in the three countries, which was appreciated by China, Afghanistan and Pakistan, who said they would continue to strengthen cooperation with China in fighting the epidemic.”)

From the standpoint of social practice analysis, China has largely **controlled the internal epidemic** at this stage, and has actively provided experience and material assistance to global epidemic prevention, as well as actively shared the vaccine results, and has seen a greater improvement in its image in the international community, and while some US politicians continue to **blame** China as usual, such untrue and unfavorable voices for epidemic prevention and control are ultimately in the **minority**. This is corroborated by the fact that the **correlation** between text sentiment scores and epidemic word frequency in this time period **shifted from negative to no correlation**.

#### 5) September 2020 to September 2021

Neither the diplomatic question and response sentiment scores nor the frequency of pandemic terms had a significant association throughout this time period, with correlation coefficients of -0.071 from September to October 2020 and 0.213 from November 2020 to September 2021, respectively. The emergence of new positive words in significant collocations, such as “疫苗” (vaccine) and “接种” (vaccination), reflects the significant collocation between China and vaccine during this period, owing to new advances in measures to deal with COVID-19, the availability of vaccines to people, and China's positive attitude toward vaccine development. For instance: .

“中国将努力全年对外提供 20 亿剂疫苗，在向”新冠疫苗实施计划”捐赠1 亿美元基础上，年内再向发展中国家无偿捐赠 1 亿剂疫苗。” (“China will strive to provide 2 billion doses of vaccine to the public throughout the year and donate 100 million doses of vaccine to developing countries free of charge during the year, on top of the \$100 million donated to the New Crown Vaccine Implementation Program.”)

Although individual politicians continue to blame China, China has not only controlled the epidemic at home, but has also actively **offered anti-epidemic forces** around the world, such as sending medical teams to developing countries and assisting with epidemic preventive items such as masks. The **international community** has **recognized and supported China** for its long-term success against the disease due to its boldness and commitment.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This paper collected 990 texts of questions and answers from Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons, and calculated the average sentiment score and epidemic word frequency for each document, then presented them through Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. Afterwards, documents for the period of the COVID-19 between January 2020 and September 2021 were divided into 5 groups by time, and the correlation between sentiment scores

and epidemic word frequency was calculated for each group and stored in Table 1. Then we used the corpus search tool “Sketch Engine” to find the significant collocations of “China” in each group and showed some of them in Table 2 and Table 3. Finally, the correlations and significant collocations were combined with a three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis to explore the transformation of China's image in the international community during the epidemic.

The results obtained from the above processing and analysis of the corpus are generally consistent with the actual situation: China's international image has gone from receiving international sympathy for its initial losses, to being heavily blamed for the global outbreak, then to being supported and appreciated through its own strong anti-epidemic measures and assistance to the international community. The analysis of the impact of the epidemic has allowed us to reflect, in a qualitative and quantitative way, the changes in China's image in the international community over other events. This helped us to better understand our image in the international community, to tell the Chinese story, to better carry out great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics and to enhance China's international discourse.

There are also some shortcomings in this paper, for example, the treatment of negation simply changes the positive and negative sentiment values of the latter word, while in the real context, the effect of negation on the whole sentence is difficult to be reflected in this way, and we will continue to pay attention to the method of how to calculate the sentiment score of the discourse, hoping to make it better.

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