

Stigmatization of China by American Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: During COVID-19, American media stigmatized China's anti-epidemic policies and measures. This paper uses case studies and textual analysis to reveal the stigmatization of China by American mainstream media, social media, and politicians' speech. It also analyzes the reasons from both external and internal aspects. In response to these reasons, this paper proposes corresponding destigmatization measures in order to reshape China's international image, improve international communication capacity, and form an international discourse that matches China's comprehensive strength.

Keywords: stigmatization, Covid-19, American media, destigmatization, international communications

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the Internet and popularity of mobile communication devices, citizens of various countries around the world have been able to learn about other countries' related information through various websites and software. In the era of the information explosion, however, media still occupy a very important position in the process of communication due to the wide range and timeliness of the information they possess. The official media, in particular, with their long-accumulated authority and reputation, not only play an important role in informing the public of the specifics of the incidents but also have a greater impact on public opinion.

In the field of news communication, journalists take objective facts as the origin of news and pursue the principle of truthfulness as the life of news. In China, media coverage always adheres to the principle of truthfulness, while keeping in mind fairness and objectivity, so that the information reaches the audience successfully and quickly while maintaining the right of the audience to think for themselves and look at it objectively. However, looking at the media coverage of China in Europe and the United States in recent years, there are widespread distortions, smears, and disinformation, publishing and spreading information that does not correspond to the actual situation in China and disregarding the principle of truthfulness. Wang (2022) has pointed out that since the 1990s, there has been a succession of international stigmatization of China, and stigmatization often occurs in issues involving China.

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic began to spread wildly around the world. The epidemic presents a special media environment: the media has created a public arena for multiple voices, with numerous subjects from different countries and fields, such as government departments, experts and scholars, international organizations, etc., all vying for the stage. In this war without smoke, China has launched a tenacious campaign against the epidemic. According to practical journalistic principles, the U.S. media should present China's actions objectively and truthfully, even if they do not praise what China is doing. But in contrast, the U.S. media began to accuse China of various policies and epidemic prevention measures and to "pick on" China at the beginning of the epidemic. They even spread rumors that the virus originated in Wuhan by calling it the "Wuhan virus". In the three years since 2020, the U.S. media has maintained an almost exaggerated focus on China, with 4,523 reports on CNN's website for "COVID-19" and "China" as of Dec. 1, 2022.

The purpose of studying the stigmatization of China by the American media is to better destigmatize, improve China's international communication ability, reshape China's international image, enhance China's international discourse, and create a good communication environment and conditions for China to better develop and grow, to realize the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and to build a rich, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful socialist modern power.

2. Literature Review

Foreign media reports are not only an important window for domestic audiences to understand other countries but also the main front for the construction of the foreign national image and the field of public opinion on international issues (Guo & Qu, 2022). In order to improve the construction of international communication capacity, Chinese scholars began to study foreign media reports. Many studies have found that

foreign media reports do not have objective behaviors toward China and carry out a series of “stigmatization” operations on China.

2.1 Studies on Foreign Media Reports on China

According to Lin and Xu (2020), the studies on foreign media coverage of China that have emerged in recent years can be divided into four categories: first, studies on the English translation of Chinese discourse in foreign media reports; second, studies on foreign media reports of major initiatives of the Chinese government; third, studies on the construction and changes in China’s international image in foreign media reports, and fourth, studies on China’s hot issues in foreign media reports.

Guo and Qu (2022) find that, overall, research on China-related coverage in foreign media between 2000 and 2020 is mainly based on the perspectives of communication, psychology, and linguistics. The primary sources of information are American and British mainstream media (e.g., *New York Times*, *the Guardian*), and the research methods are usually based on “critical discourse analysis”, “content analysis”, “corpus”, “frame theory”, etc. The research topics are focused on “national image”, “international communication”, “community of human destiny”, “reporting tendencies”, and “ideology”, etc. The goal of the research is to explore the construction of China’s national image discourse in the eyes of foreign media. In general, some foreign media present a neutral and objective stance in international reporting, but there are still many media that are biased in their reporting.

In other countries, there are also a great deal of analyses of foreign media coverage. For example, Berkowitz (1992), after studying the American media and the national situation, suggests that the content of the media is linked to politics and politicians, and the main purpose is to protect the interests of the ruling class.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, scholars actively turned their attention to foreign media coverage of China’s fight against the epidemic during the pandemic. Foreign scholars have analyzed the U.S. media during the pandemic and found plenty of political overtones and political tendencies are still present in it (Hart, Chinn & Soroka, 2020). Chinese scholars have found that the Western mainstream media, represented by the U.S. media, still find it hard to take off their “tinted glasses” while paying attention to China’s efforts against the epidemic and continue to use research and judgment from a negative perspective, and some individual media even take on the role of “stigma” the main force, leave no stone unturned to distort China’s image (Lin, 2020).

2.2 Studies on Stigma

Stigmatization is an ancient phenomenon with a very long history and has frequently attracted academic attention in recent years. Scholars have focused much of their research on stigmatization in disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, history, and anthropology. Different disciplines have also provided numerous different answers to the conceptual definition of stigmatization, mechanisms of generation, and paths to destigmatization, providing multiple perspectives for understanding the phenomenon of stigmatization. However, there is also a clear difference between the research paths of stigmatization in different disciplines, and a gap between the goals and effectiveness of destigmatization, which highlights the shortcomings of established theory and practice. Therefore, it is important to further understand stigma, the definition of it, and the research related to it (Guo, 2015).

The semantics of the concept of stigma has not been established clearly in Western literature. However, most scholars agree that the word “stigma” originated in ancient Greece and refers to a totemic mark. It is believed that the original meaning of stigma was to mark those who serve God with a hot iron, with religious connotations. Later, it was transformed to refer to the marking of slaves or criminals by pricking or branding their bodies to mark their social rank and inferior status, which had a derogatory connotation.

Social psychology first introduced the concept of stigma to analyze the situation of those who are not socially accepted but did not clearly define it. Subsequently, the use of this term gradually expanded to become a symbol for deviations from the norm.

Stigma was first conceptualized by the famous American sociologist Goffman in his book in 1963, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Although many researchers believe that Goffman does not provide a clear definition, he equates stigma with a “dishonorable” characteristic that makes an individual different from the norm (e.g., somatic deformity, mental illness, deviant behavior, etc.). “Transgression” refers to non-compliance with an established set of norms accepted by the vast majority of people in a community or society. When the behavior of an individual or group is perceived as deviant, the actor is labeled as a “deviant”. Goffman’s seminal conceptual elaboration of stigma has had a profound impact on subsequent studies of stigmatization in numerous disciplines. Subsequently, scholars from various disciplines have studied stigma in greater depth, and the concept of stigma has gradually developed and added richer connotations with the evolution of the times.

2.3 Studies on the Stigmatization of China

Wang (2022) believes that since the 1990s, China has been actively assuming its international responsibilities and obligations and has been more actively integrated into the regional and global political and economic systems than ever before. However, since the 1990s, there have been waves of stigmatization of China in the international community, such as the “China collapse theory”, “China threat theory”, and the stigmatization of China-related issues has been incessant. Throughout the years, the wave of stigmatization of China was a product of the Western media, which has caused serious damage to China’s international image.

Foreign scholars have identified the existence of stigmatization on social media platforms and have argued that this is inextricably linked to politics. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Budhwani and Sun (2020) use a quantitative study to analyze the data on the stigmatization of coronaviruses such as “Chinese viruses” on Twitter, and they find that the frequency of use of the term on Twitter increased significantly after the US president mentioned “Chinese viruses”.

In response to the reports of stigmatization, Chinese scholars have also conducted detailed studies. For example, Pu (2021) uses a theoretical and case-based approach to analyze stigmatization in risk events, using the New York Times reports as an example. He concludes that in a report, a stigma exists in two ways—in the headline, and the body content. The New York Times appears to present factual news stories, but in reality, it is reporting on specific geographic areas, and the bias in the report misleads the audience easily.

Guo and Qu (2022) point out that, according to the China Image Survey released by the Pew Research Center in recent years, the number of respondents who hold a negative impression of China is at an all-time high in major developed countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States due to foreign media coverage of China. This is really an extremely negative phenomenon for the development of China and the construction of its international image.

Cheng et al. (2020) argue that stigmatization is determined by the cultural background, political stance, and information channels of Western media. There are large differences in communication channels between China and foreign countries; cultural differences still exist; and foreign groups have an inherent ideological bias against China.

China is now playing a significant role in the international arena and has contributed a lot of Chinese solutions and Chinese wisdom to promote the development of the world. Therefore, China should not allow the media in Europe and the United States to distort and smear it. Taking the initiative, stirring up the mud, and breaking down the rumors are the actions that China must take in the face of all kinds of false reports.

Shi and Tong (2020) suggest that, in the face of increasingly frequent transnational crises, China should establish a public diplomacy and strategic communication mechanism that matches the global risk society as soon as possible. For example, it should leverage the role of digital media and take advantage of the Internet to build China’s image. Zhao and Yu (2022) also suggest that while maintaining communication with the West, China needs to persist in its struggle to “break” stigmatization, and needs to take advantage of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic occasions to more actively and skillfully set the agenda against stigmatization and actively strengthen its international discourse.

3. Stigmatization of China during the Pandemic

At the beginning of 2020, Covid-19 began to spread wildly around the world. Since January 3, China has begun to report information about the outbreak and China’s measures to prevent and control the outbreak to the United States, and to inform the World Health Organization and neighboring countries of information about the pandemic. On January 30, 2020, the WHO classified Covid-19 as a public health emergency of international concern; and on March 11, the WHO declared that the pandemic had become a global pandemic.

But when the epidemic was spreading and the Chinese people were working together to fight it, many Americans had a negative attitude toward China, saying that China has not done a good job in dealing with the coronavirus, and some even believed that China was mainly responsible for the outbreak and spread of the pandemic. Some even said that it was China’s initial mishandling of the Wuhan outbreak that led to the subsequent outbreak and difficulties in controlling it.

As a recognized Western power, the U.S. has always had a great power of discourse and dominant position in the field of international information dissemination, so the U.S. media’s coverage of China’s issues largely affects China’s image in the international arena as well. How did the U.S. media report on China during the global outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic? How did the multiple actors involved use the “invisible hand” to influence and shape each other, jointly constructing the agenda of stigmatizing China and influencing China’s image in the international arena? These are all questions we should take into account.

3.1 Stigmatization in Mainstream Media

Mainstream media is an important way to disseminate information in a country and one of the most important windows for the public to get information and understand the situation, and because it has a longer history, it has accumulated a certain authority and can have a greater impact on the public's perception. At the same time, as a socialization mechanism, media interact with each other to build a pseudo-environment that influences people's perceptions and impressions of the subject of the report and society in various ways.

The most famous mainstream media in the United States include *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, CNN, etc. Based on the timing of the outbreak and spread of the epidemic, as well as statistical and textual analysis of the volume and topics of coverage, it is found that the current U.S. mainstream media coverage of the Covid-19 involving China has gone through four main stages:

3.1.1 Early Outbreak (Late 2019 to January 31, 2020)

Cases of the coronavirus were first diagnosed in Wuhan, and a large outbreak developed in a short period of time, causing the initial outbreak in China. At this time, the mainstream media in the U.S. also reported on the outbreak promptly, but due to the uncertainty of the disease and the lack of information, the number of reports was relatively small and the coverage was relatively objective and unbiased. The Wall Street Journal even believes that the Chinese government appears to be acting more quickly to relieve concerns.

3.1.2 High Incidence of the Epidemic in China (February 1-26, 2020)

The period of a high incidence in China is a time of more serious stigmatization in the U.S. media, where the media attitude changed from its earlier objectivity and began to bash and denigrate China. The following are relevant stigmatizing reports from The Wall Street Journal.

On February 3, 2020, the online edition of *The Wall Street Journal* published a coverage titled "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia". The report reads, in the wake of the outbreak, the Chinese government is facing difficulties in both controlling the epidemic and in economic development.

From the title, the term "the Sick Man of Asia" was first used by *The North China Daily News*. The phrase is intended to show the tragic situation of China's internal and external troubles and weakness in the modern era and to satirize the fact that in that era, both the physical and mental health of Chinese people were fragile as if they were sick. At the same time, it connotes that Chinese people are rigid in their thinking and China is closed and backward. The term "the Sick Man of Asia" is a derogatory term used by foreigners for the Chinese.

However, that once-troubled nation has established a socialist state under the People's Democratic Dictatorship under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, and through education in patriotism, collectivism, socialism, and Marxism, has enabled the people to establish and adhere to a correct view of history, the nation, and the state, and has developed into the second largest economy in the world. Nowadays, Chinese people are in good health and the country is flourishing. The Chinese people have been refreshed both physically and mentally, and have long since shaken off the stereotype of being "the sick man of Asia". However, at a time when China is facing a serious epidemic crisis, *The Wall Street Journal* used "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia" as the headline of its news report, deliberately discrediting China's image and trying to make the world public think that China is still backward and closed, which shows its sinister intentions.

Judging from the words used in the text, stigmas are mostly expressed in words that seem neutral but actually have an implied negative or evaluative meaning, for example, the first sentence in the body of the story "The mighty Chinese juggernaut has been humbled this week, apparently by a species-hopping bat virus." According to the Oxford Dictionary, "juggernaut" means "a large and powerful force or institution that cannot be controlled". The Wall Street Journal here compares China to "a powerful institution that cannot be controlled", as a metaphor for China being difficult to be "controlled". China's development and rise will pose a threat to the world. In addition, the word "humble" as a verb means "to easily defeat an opponent", implying the weakness of China's power by the new virus. The danger of Covid-19 is well known, but this report only describes it as "a species-hopping bat virus". This is in stark contrast to the preceding "mighty Chinese juggernaut" and "humble", which are used to satirize China's seemingly strong but unbearable power. This is an intentional derogatory act against China.

In addition, in order to give the story more "credibility", the author openly interspersed his news report with many subjective judgments that were not officially authorized by China. For example, "There are signs that Chinese authorities are still trying to conceal the true scale of the problem" and "The Wuhan government was secretive and self-serving." Not only are these sentences unsubstantiated, but they also completely negate the hard work of the Chinese and Wuhan governments in fighting the epidemic. The use of such negative words as "secretive and self-serving" has directly damaged the image of Wuhan and the Chinese government. These phrases and sentences are easy to overlook if you don't look deeper, but it is these easily overlooked and

unverified negative messages that have gathered with each other and caused serious damage to China's anti-epidemic actions and image.

In general, although "the sick man of Asia" is not mentioned in the text of the report, and the main purpose is to warn the global economy about the impact of Covid-19, both the headline and the words and sentences used in the text of the report are stigmatizing China and Wuhan.

3.1.3 Period of Global Spread of the Epidemic (February 26 to March 22, 2020)

On February 25, 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned that "a global epidemic is unavoidable" after data showed that the number of new cases of pneumonia reported outside of China exceeded the number reported inside China for the first time. Infections have skyrocketed in several countries around the world. On March 11, the WHO declared that the Newcastle pneumonia outbreak had "pandemic" characteristics. During this time, the U.S. was busy dealing with its epidemic, panic about the epidemic pervaded media coverage, the volume of epidemic-related coverage increased dramatically, and the focus of coverage gradually shifted to the home country, with a gradual decrease in China-related coverage and much of them were positive.

3.1.4 Overseas Incidence of Epidemics (March 23, 2020 to April 12, 2020)

On March 23, the WHO announced the launch of the "SOLIDARITY" trial to call on more countries conducting large studies to join together to develop drugs that can fight COVID-19 therapy to save more lives. But at this time, the global belief in "solidarity" was in jeopardy. To deflect the tensions of the domestic public and the harsh criticism of the opposition parties, the U.S. media tried to shift the blame for the epidemic to the Chinese government, and media opinion shifted from affirmation and praise to denial and criticism of China's fight against the epidemic.

Taking *The New York Times* as an example, a search of its coverage corpus on "China" reveals a large number of negative reports. Based on a brief analysis of the content of *The New York Times* reports, we can find that the attitudes and positions reflected in the reports can be divided into the following two aspects (Ge, 2020).

One is to deliberately associate the coronavirus with China, calling it "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus", implying the danger of China to the world by equating the virus with China. At the same time, it denigrated China and fabricated that China would use the coronavirus crisis to become a global leader. It also infinitely amplified the major impact of the virus on the world, blaming the spread of the epidemic on China's mishandling of the situation.

The second is to label China's isolation measures as "human rights violations" and attack the actions of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government. After the outbreak of Covid-19, Wuhan took anti-epidemic measures to close the city for control, and many provinces and municipalities initiated Level I responses to public health emergencies to stop the further spread of the virus to the maximum extent possible and contain the spread of the epidemic. *The New York Times*, however, believes that the "Lockdown of Wuhan" restricts and sacrifices the freedom and rights of the people, and takes the opportunity to accuse the Chinese government of dictatorship and autocracy, smearing China as one of the most unequal countries in the world.

Throughout the whole situation, both the lockdown of Wuhan and the closure and control of the provinces are the protection of the life and safety of the Chinese people and the embodiment of the people's supremacy. *The New York Times*' reckless false accusations and disinformation are not fundamentally motivated by concern for human health and the epidemic, but by turning the coronavirus into a "political virus" and using it to stigmatize and suppress China, which is a serious violation of journalistic professionalism and should be condemned.

In general, the U.S. mainstream media's attitude toward China in the four phases of Covid-19 has taken a roundabout and multiple reversals of "affirmative-negative-affirmative-negative", during which China's national image has also taken a series of twists and turns, presenting a different appearance in the U.S. media reports. However, as the Chinese saying goes, "A good word warms you, but a bad word hurts you", the stigmatization of China by the U.S. mainstream media has caused damage to China's international image and endangered China's national interests.

3.2 Stigmatization in Social Media

In addition to the stigmatization of China by the U.S. mainstream media during the epidemic, social media simultaneously interacted and cooperated with the mainstream media to intensify the smears and discrediting of China.

During the epidemic, social media was an important channel for people in various countries to exchange information and for one country to learn about another country. Twitter (Now it is renamed "X") is a mainstream international social media, and in the United States, politicians like Barack Obama and Donald Trump, and business tycoons like Bill Gates are all eager to tweet and deliver their messages. Foreign journalism and communication studies have also conducted a variety of studies and interpretations of Twitter.

But not all of those who communicate on Twitter are users who exist in real life; there are also many social bots. Social bots are clusters of social media accounts on social media that are controlled by automated algorithmic programs set up by human manipulators. In general, social bots can disguise themselves as real users on social media by simulating human states and behaviors and interacting with other ordinary users in a purposeful and organized manner to achieve the manipulator's intentions and influence the audience. In recent years, due to the rapid development and application of information technology such as natural language processing and cloud computing, social bots can better imitate the communication of ordinary users and are widely available on social platforms.

During this epidemic, the main topics of social bots' rhetorics and content posted on Twitter were of two types: First, political and conspiracy topics. The main theme emphasized in this issue is that China is responsible for the epidemic and that this type of social bot holds a strong distrust and negative attitude towards China. Bot posts in this category include direct rebuke of China as being responsible for the pandemic, such as a tweet by the bot @goldnstuffore on January 22, 2020, which directly stated "China must say sorry to India for the virus and conflict". There are also bots widely spreading conspiracy theories and spreading rumors. For example, many social bots posted tweets at different time about the Chinese government misrepresenting the true number of deaths from New Crown Pneumonia, claiming that the actual number of deaths far exceeded the official figures. Some bots even posted pictures of army vehicles driving on the streets of Wuhan on the day of the "lockdown", trying to fabricate the conflict between the army and the people and the ruthlessness of the government, but it was later identified that the picture was not taken in Wuhan, nor was it taken after the outbreak of the epidemic.

Second, human rights issues. This category is mainly concerned with the government's disregard for human rights. Among the human rights issues, the main focus of social bots' China-related tweets is the tragic situation of people in the affected areas and the negative treatment of the local government against the epidemic. For example, the bot @domainshome100 tweeted "No respect for any living being #China you disgust me!" on January 16, 2020. These social bots aim to build a stigma against China by stigmatizing it as an "illiberal" country that deprives the masses of their rights.

As a public health event of global public concern, the image of Covid-19 in the public perception is mainly influenced by official statements, information released by mainstream media, and information obtained by the public on social media. The presence of social bots has had a great impact on the public opinion and interfered with it. For example, during the epidemic, there were many unfriendly comments about the Chinese people on Twitter, such as "Chinese people should not come to Japan". This makes it more difficult to shape China's international image and seriously hinders the public's correct perception of China's image.

3.3 Stigmatization in Political Speeches

In addition to the mainstream media as well as social media, the U.S. government and politicians also frequently attacked China during the epidemic, resulting in the stigmatization of China.

As we all know, in recent years, the relationship between China and the United States has been complicated by twists and turns. Since Trump took office, the U.S. government has put forward the concept of "America First" and take a unilateral populist route to contain and suppress China on all fronts.

On March 17, 2020, former U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted that the U.S. would fully support industries affected by the "China virus". This tweet was once pushed into the hot seat. With global netizens still unaware of the exact source of the virus, such a tweet was tantamount to taking advantage of the fire and misdirecting the general public in an attempt to make global netizens blame China for the outbreak. In such a situation, China can only fight back through diplomatic conferences, newspaper news, etc. Compared to Twitter, which has a wide distribution range, China's official information has little power to spread and cannot achieve a better propaganda effect. It is difficult for people in the U.S. and around the world to get first-hand information about the epidemic in China, and they can only passively accept the distorted reports of the U.S. media.

If the Trump administration's strategy toward China is a "whole-of-government" strategy, then since the outbreak of Covid-19, the Trump administration has attempted to mobilize the entire United States and the world, including not only governments but also the people, to create a full-scale anti-China wave. With the cooperation of the media, government, and politicians, the United States has now formed a strong atmosphere of public opinion against China. This is a heavy blow and damages to China's image building, which is even more detrimental to China's development.

4. Causes for the Stigmatization of China

We are aware of the stigmatization of China in the U.S. media and understand the consequences of this stigmatization. why does this stigmatization occur? There are both external and internal reasons.

4.1 External Reasons

At present, the basic pattern of “U.S.-U.K. monopoly, strong in the West and weak in the East” in the global press remains unchanged. From a historical perspective, from the early colonial expansion to the end of World War II, the flow of information in the international communication field has been characterized by the diffusion from the center to the periphery of European and American powers such as Britain, the United States, and France, and from developed countries to developing countries. International information flow has long been a “one-way street”.

From the perspective of resources, the developed capitalist countries have used their advantages in language, channels, and technical means to establish several global media with wide influence, such as BBC, The Reuters, The Associated Press, CNN, *The New York Times*, etc., which spread their news products and values around the world, influencing and regulating the views of the world audience on an issue, an event or even a country.

From the perspective of political construction, Europe and the United States, especially the United States, cannot tolerate other countries, especially countries with ideological differences like China, challenging their hegemony, systems, and models. In short, nowadays the West, especially the United States, still holds the power of international public opinion and dominates the international public opinion arena. Moreover, in addition to having the conditions to be able to stigmatize China, the United States also has ample motivation to stigmatize China.

4.1.1 Great Power Confrontation

Since the 18th Party Congress was held, China’s national strength has increased significantly, and the gap between its economic output and strength and that of the United States has gradually narrowed, and it has even made great progress in some important fields of science and technology, surpassing the current level of the United States.

However, in the face of the sudden arrival of the epidemic, neither China nor the United States is fully prepared and complete to respond. At this point, as the two largest economies in the world, the different approaches to the epidemic will inevitably lead to comparisons and debates at the international level.

At a time when the pandemic is having a serious impact on the United States, the U.S. media habitually places the topic under the framework of the U.S.-China confrontation.

One of the main concerns of the U.S. media is whether the outbreak will affect the U.S. dominance over the world. They argue that Covid-19 has become a global event that will have far-reaching effects on world health and security in the short term; and in the long term, it will affect geopolitics and the global position of the United States.

In the fight against the epidemic, the U.S. government has been ineffective in responding to the epidemic, ignoring the lives of the American people and attempting to reduce the impact of the virus through “herd immunity”, in stark contrast to the strong emphasis placed by China. In terms of supplies to fight the epidemic, such as essential items like masks and respirators, China is able to not only meet its own needs but assist other countries, making the self-conscious United States even more nervous and worried. To divert the attention of the U.S. domestic public and attacks on the government, as well as to help the U.S. government consolidate social consensus and find excuses for its poor response to the epidemic, the U.S. government and media have stigmatized China.

4.1.2 Racism

Racism is a word that cannot be avoided in the U.S. media coverage of pneumonia. In his book *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman defines racism as “the culturally sanctioned belief, unrelated to intent, that whites defend their superiority by dominating racial minorities” (cited in Wang, 2021). During the epidemic, some U.S. media used racist and racially charged language to report on it, attempting to tie the source of Covid-19 closely to China and isolate the Chinese from the general, normal community. According to Ji (2020), this is a consistent reporting technique used by the Western media, represented by the US, to “criminalize” developing countries in a strong metaphorical way, as evidenced by a series of Western media reports on the Yellow Scourge, AIDS, Ebola, etc. In the coverage of Covid-19, the U.S. media used several metaphors to frame racism, such as “mask diplomacy” and “the sick man of Asia”.

4.2 Internal Reasons

In addition to the international communication pattern and the U.S. intentions, China itself has shortcomings and deficiencies in dealing with stigmatization, and Chinese media are often at a disadvantage, finding it difficult to escape the dilemma of “not being able to say what is reasonable”, and “not being able to spread the word”. The main problems that China currently has are as follows.

4.2.1 Lack of the Core Capacity of International Communication and International First-Class Media

In June 2009, the Chinese government clearly proposed to incorporate the international communication capacity building of key media into the overall national economic and social development plan. Since then, China’s international discourse and influence have been significantly enhanced.

Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, *China Daily* and many other mainstream media have adopted advanced technology and means of communication and actively embraced new media, achieving promising results. However, there are still some gaps between China’s key flagship media and the international first-class media, specifically a single narrative subject, insufficient in-depth reporting, lack of resource sharing and linkage among various media platforms, uneven program standards, and weak interaction between social media platforms and fans.

In addition, it is undeniable that because access to overseas platforms is not yet open, the voice of the private sector is still limited to the outside world. For example, during the epidemic, it was difficult for the Chinese people to speak out for China on overseas social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to promote the real situation in China. In general, there is still a long way to go before the official, private, and elite discourse circles resonate at the same frequency.

4.2.2 Lack of Precise Understanding of the American Audience

The audience is always the final point and destination of communication, and audience feedback is an important test of the China’s success and effectiveness of communication. However, during the epidemic, most of communication only addressed the Chinese audience, ignoring the needs of Western countries such as the United States and even global audiences.

Overseas audiences are used to receiving news that is “entertaining” and “de-serious”, and are curious about exciting scenes. However, China’s current affairs reports are more serious, with a certain sense of “propaganda”, mostly starting from grand narratives, and the Chinese storytelling is less vivid. The coverage is not in line with the viewing habits of overseas audiences, resulting in less appeal to overseas audiences, and the effect of de-stigmatization is greatly diminished.

5. Approaches to Destigmatization

The stigmatization of China by the U.S. media has undoubtedly caused serious damage to China’s international image. Since the reform and opening up, China has been making important contributions to the promotion of common development in the world. During the epidemic, China also shouldered the mission and responsibility of a great nation, valued the lives of people around the world, fought bravely against the epidemic, and made every effort to develop vaccines. Under such circumstances, China cannot and should not be stigmatized. The topic of how to destigmatize is crucial at this moment.

5.1 Top-Level Design

To achieve effective destigmatization, it boils down to improving China’s international communication capacity. The first step in building and improving international communication capacity is to do a good job in top-level design.

On May 31, 2021, Xi Jinping stressed that “We must strengthen top-level design and research layout, build a strategic communication system with distinctive Chinese characteristics, and focus on improving the influence of international communication, the appeal of Chinese culture, the affinity of China’s image, the persuasive power of Chinese discourse, and the guiding power of international public opinion.”

The persuasive power of discourse refers to the Chinese discourse and narrative system. Xi pointed out that we should accelerate the construction of Chinese discourse and Chinese narrative system, use Chinese theory to explain Chinese practice, use Chinese practice to sublimate Chinese theory. Cultural appeal refers to the promotion of Chinese culture “going out”. The purpose is to explain and promote more excellent culture with Chinese characteristics, embodying the spirit of China and containing Chinese wisdom to the world. Image affinity means focusing on grasping the tone, being both open and confident as well as humble and modest, and striving to create a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China. Public opinion guiding power refers to international communication and international relations. Chinese ideas, Chinese wisdom, and Chinese solutions should be widely publicized.

Another very important point is precise communication, that is, we should adopt precise communication methods close to different regions, different countries, and different groups of audiences, and promote the globalized expression, regionalized expression, and audience expression of China's story and Chinese voice, to enhance the affinity and effectiveness of international communication.

The report of the 20th Party Congress also reiterated the topic of "strengthening international communication capacity and enhancing international communication effectiveness", which shows the importance and necessity of top-level design.

5.2 Cooperation among Multiple Communication Subjects

At present, there is still a long way to go for the official, civil and elite multi-level discourse circles to resonate in the same frequency. Therefore, it is a very important strategy to destigmatize the issue by uniting the voices of multiple communication entities.

First, the mainstream media plays a leading role in destigmatization because of the information and platform advantages it possesses. In response to the inaccurate information sent out by the U.S. mainstream media, we should speak out promptly and stop losing our voices. In the face of inaccurate rumors on overseas social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube, Chinese media and government diplomacy should work together to respond to falsehoods with the truth and crush rumors with facts. For example, when The Wall Street Journal published "China is the real sick man of Asia", which denigrated the Chinese government and the Chinese people's efforts to fight the epidemic, the Chinese media responded in a targeted manner with the truth and concrete data, gaining the approval of most people in the world, occupying the high ground of public opinion and breaking the Western monopoly of international discourse.

In addition to using real, visual data, Chinese media mainstream media should use a variety of discourses to tell the story of China's journey against the epidemic. For example, CGTN's 33-minute English-language news documentary "The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan" has achieved excellent international dissemination results. As the first panoramic documentary showing Wuhan's history of "fighting the epidemic", "The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan" was broadcast on CGTN English channel on February 28, 2020, and was also available on CGTN's website, CGTN App, and CGTN's overseas social media accounts (YouTube, Twitter, Facebook). And its total viewership on these platforms has exceeded 100 million, making it a window for global netizens to learn about the real situation of China's "fight against the epidemic." It has effectively dispelled the slander and disinformation about China in Western media.

Second, in addition to China's mainstream media, the role of social media should not be underestimated. At present, there are many users with a large number of followers on social media, and such people are called opinion leaders, whose comments often have a certain influence on public opinion and can have an unexpected effect on destigmatization. For example, Jerry Guo, an American, has a certain number of followers both on Chinese social media such as Bilibili and Weibo, and on YouTube. The importance of Jerry Guo's video is that it allows the American people to know the real China and the Chinese audience to see the real America. Jerry Guo always insisted that the U.S. needs to understand and face China squarely. He made an English video of China's anti-epidemic measures and prevention and control effects and put it on overseas social media, which attracted the attention of a wide range of overseas users. In addition to Jerry Guo, there are many similar foreign friends who are helping China in its foreign propaganda and playing an important role in the process of destigmatization.

In addition, overseas media can also help destigmatize China to a certain extent. China should strengthen its cooperation with international media to achieve the goal of lending its voice, lending its mouth. For example, in an interview with Al Jazeera Qatar, CGTN host Liu Xin introduced President Xi Jinping's visit to a residential area in Beijing to study the prevention and control of the epidemic at the grassroots level. Liu Xin also used a lot of facts to counter the smear campaign and misinterpretation of China's epidemic information by some Western media.

5.3 Usage of Emerging Technologies

With the development and advancement of technology, the presentation of information has become more and more abundant. The proper use of emerging technologies can make the dissemination of information in China more timely and effective, such as 5G technology. The use of 5G technology can achieve high-speed transmission of information. For example, on January 27, 2020, CCTV started to broadcast live 24-hour construction of two hospitals in Thunder Mountain and Vulcan Mountain through 5G slow broadcast. The slow live broadcast realizes the non-physical body "co-presence", and the live accompanying social adapts to the special scenario of staying at home, not only realizing the social extension on top of the real-time information dissemination, but also relieving the anxiety and exile of the masses during the epidemic. There was no

commentary, no captioning, no motion, just images and commentary, allowing the millions of people at home to form what Anderson called an “imaginary community” and fight the epidemic together.

The slow live broadcast of CCTV through emerging technologies played a leading role in mainstream media news coverage of the epidemic and met the information and psychological needs of people in the epidemic, showing a powerful communication power that is important for the destigmatization of China.

6. Conclusion

COVID-19 is a huge test for the world and a disaster for any country. In the face of a natural disaster, countries around the globe should unite as a community of human destiny to fight this epidemic.

Since the discovery of the virus, China has been shouldering the role and mission of a great nation, whether in terms of human, material or financial resources. China has taken out as much as possible to do the best to fight the epidemic, in order to protect the lives and health of every Chinese people and people around the world. However, in this process, the U.S. media and the media of some other Western countries, by virtue of their own communication advantages, have been pointing their fingers at China’s anti-epidemic actions and policies, treating China as a threat, distorting facts and fabricating rumors, and even calling the new coronavirus the “China virus” and spreading false information that the virus originated in China. The stigmatization by the U.S. media has damaged China’s image internationally and has had various negative effects on China.

One of the actions that will have the greatest impact on China’s image is to portray China as an irresponsible country, which will affect China’s credibility, create cracks in the friendly relations China maintains with other countries, and may even create a crisis of confidence and shake relations between countries. At the same time, the U.S. media’s isolation of China hinders the process of international cooperation and makes the whole world suffer. The U.S. media should be condemned for both reason and sense. In the face of this unbridled stigmatization, China cannot sit idly by. The world is now in the midst of an unprecedented change in a century, and China is in a critical period of reform and opening up. How to deal with this epidemic and the stigmatization of other countries during the epidemic is crucial to China’s hard and soft power. In the face of the stigmatization by the U.S. media, the Chinese government media as well as the people should work together to do a better job of disseminating information and spreading the true voice of China.

But from a dialectical point of view, this stigmatization of China by the U.S. media has also made the Chinese government, the media, and scholars realize the problems that currently exist in China’s international communication, the shortcomings of China’s media system, and the importance and necessity of building international communication capacity.

To sum up, at present, Chinese government departments and various media should pay attention to the stigmatization of China by the U.S. media and make a good top-level design. At the same time, we should mobilize all members of society to improve China’s international communication capacity, tell the Chinese story, spread the Chinese voice, and form an international discourse that is commensurate with China’s comprehensive national power. We should demonstrate a comprehensive, realistic and three-dimensional image of China, create a good communication atmosphere and communication conditions for China to realize the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and become a strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist country.

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