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Article

Changes in the UK leading media's portrayal of China during the COVID-19 pandemic and the special military operation



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Abstract. The aim of the present study is to trace changes in the construction of the image of China in the British media during two crisis periods: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian military operation. Each period encompasses a panic (escalation) phase and a recovery (stagnation) phase. Using data from the Factiva database, 70,356 articles published in four British media outlets were analyzed: *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror*. The methodological basis of the study constitute the dependency theory and the agenda setting theory. At the instrumental level, frame analysis, sentiment analysis and keyword analysis were used. Following the initial panic reaction to the COVID pandemic, China's image has been restored through favorable media coverage. Negative reporting surged initially but waned as the pandemic subsided. China's neutral stance on the Russian military operation had a limited impact on media reporting. The image experienced a brief setback before rebounding. The short-term media attention during the escalation was accompanied by explicitly negative evaluations, whereas the stagnation phase coverage might be said to have rather improved China's image. It is concluded that although both crisis periods had a certain impact on the construction of the image of China, the British media in the discourse continue to adhere to the tendencies of accusing China of violating human rights, as well as paying special attention and criticizing domestic politics. These results are consistent with the tendencies revealed in other studies before the pandemic.

Keywords: China, British media, image, COVID-19, frame, sentiment, keywords, human rights

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Научная статья

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Изменения в изображении Китая ведущими СМИ Великобритании во время пандемии COVID-19 и специальной военной операции

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Аннотация. Цель представляемого исследования – проследить изменения в конструировании образа Китая в британских медиа в течение двух кризисных периодов: пандемии COVID-19 и специальной военной операции. Каждый период включает фазу паники (эскалации) и фазу восстановления (стагнации). Используя данные базы Factiva, было проанализировано 70 356 статей четырех СМИ: *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian* и *The Daily Mirror*. Методологическая основа исследования – теория зависимости и теория повестки дня. На инструментальном уровне применялся фрейм-анализ, сентимент-анализ и анализ ключевых слов. После первоначальной панической реакции на пандемию с преобладанием негативной тональности в дискурсе имидж Китая был восстановлен за счет благоприятного освещения в СМИ. Первоначально количество негативных репортажей резко возросло, но затем снизилось по мере того, как пандемия пошла на убыль. Нейтральная позиция Китая в отношении российской военной операции оказала ограниченное влияние на тональность дискурса СМИ. Кратковременное внимание СМИ во время эскалации сопровождалось эксплицитными негативными оценками, в то время как освещение во время фазы стагнации оказало, скорее, положительное влияние на имидж Китая. Результаты показывают, что, хотя оба кризисных периода оказали определенное влияние на конструирование имиджа Китая, британские СМИ продолжают придерживаться в дискурсе тенденций, выявленных в допандемийный период, а именно уделять особое внимание нарушению прав человека, а также вопросам внутренней политики.

Ключевые слова: Китай, британские СМИ, имидж, COVID-19, фрейм, тональность, ключевые слова, права человека



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Since the end of 2019, with the start of the COVID-pandemic, the media discourse from all over the world challenged the positive image of China (the government as well as the nation).

First, “guided by the fear and uncertainty the media triggered xenophobic reactions and behaviors such as discrimination, hate crimes, and harassment against Chinese individuals at the outset of the pandemic” [1, p. 30].

Then, in 2022 when the Russian military operation in Ukraine started, the neutral position maintained by the Chinese drew attention of Western media and led to bias and ambiguous judgement.

Both crises – the start of the pandemic and the Russian military operation – triggered the increased media consumption [2]. To resolve ambiguities and find reasonable explanations for what was going on, people were consuming information in many forms. Some turned to the mass media and social networks, reading, watching videos, or consuming any other form of messages to clarify the situation. A much higher dependency on the media made them play a crucial role not only in defining the risks [3], but also generating more knowledge about the crisis, shaping certain emotions [4] as well as defining the significance and priority of events constructed in the social imagination [5]. Thus, the effect of the information broadcast became more noticeable with increased coverage of the same topic in different media [6].

Taking the above points into consideration it could be hypothesized that the attitudes towards China disseminated by the media during the two crisis events could have added some negative attributes to the constructed image of China in the audiences' minds.

The aim of the paper is to trace the changes in British media representations of China caused by two events with Chinese direct and indirect involvement – the COVID pandemic and Russian special military operation respectively.

According to statistics¹ British media, including The Guardian and The Times, are traced to the leading global English-language news websites.

¹ Various sources (for example, Available at: www.statista.com/statistics/381569/leading-news-and-media-sites-usa-by-share-of-visits/, Available at: prlab.co/blog/50-leading-media-outlets-for-news-coverage-in-2024/) and according to AI.

Thus, the constructed representation disseminated by these publishers should be accounted as highly influential.

Based on the systematic review of the research on British media reports on China before the COVID pandemic, it seems highly relevant to answer the following research questions:

1. Has an overall tendency in presenting China (country, government, people) changed since the beginning of the pandemic? Has there been a surge in negative reporting and then a decline as the pandemic faded?
2. Did China's neutral position towards the Russian military operation affect media reports?
3. Has the main foci of the media in reporting changed due to the events under study?

The portrayal of China in British media before 2020

In order to answer the posed research questions it seems urgent to review the literature on China's image constructed by the British media before the COVID pandemic.

Analyzing British media, Zhang [7] reveals China's evolving role and significance to the UK throughout history. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, British quality publications have increased their coverage of China, indicating a rising interest in China from the Western world [7, p. 40]. Among the 14 categories of China-related topics, economic, trade, finance, and business have garnered the most attention.

However, according to Seib & Powers [8], the BBC showed bias in its reporting of China's human and political rights record. The study demonstrated that China's depiction in the media as a menace to international stability and order is persistent. In half of their stories, the media fails to depict China as a supportive player on the global stage.

The BBC's coverage was also scrutinized in Azmat Khan's [9] research. It was revealed that out of 87 stories, involving conflicts with China's involvement, only ten featured quotes from victims or participants. The US-China trade war, China's involvement in the South China Sea, the Uyghur issue, and the Baloch resistance against the CPEC, were among the sources of conflict. Most of the stories focused on commercial conflicts. The BBC



reported on the views of American and Chinese officials without exploring the perspectives of the general public or business community. In disputes like Xinjiang, the BBC did not include any local member or government figure in its coverage. Although the BBC often reports China's leading positions in genetic engineering, AI, IT, and space exploration, it labels them as threats to global peace or as opposition to the US.

While Sparks asserts that British newspapers' depiction of China was maliciously distorted due to Cold War ideology [10, p. 347–348], the reality is far more intricate. He argues that it was a common belief that because of the 'legacy of the Cold War and Western anti-communism' ideology in Western society, British newspapers' coverage of China was 'a systematically, and maliciously, distorted account of Chinese realities' [Ibid.]; but the situation is a lot more complicated than this. Sparks emphasizes the variation among British newspapers in their China coverage due to differences in content, readership, and perspectives [10, p. 350].

Qingning Wang's [11] analyzed 4 main British newspapers: The Guardian, The Mirror, The Sun and The Times and their coverage of China between 2017 and 2018. The Sun's strategy as a popular tabloid with primarily entertainment-based content is consistent with its coverage of sports and entertainment in China. Furthermore, the newspaper reported on China's economic might as robust, steady, and encouraging, and, more significantly, presented it as a promising trading partner for post-Brexit.

The Times showed a comprehensive coverage on China's economic situation and trade negotiations between the UK and China following Brexit. Despite having similar political goals, The Sun and The Times exhibit more complex and incisive coverage.

The Daily Mirror primarily concentrated on sports and entertainment coverage. Despite differing political viewpoints, The Sun and The Daily Mirror presented similar reports on China's economic power through their coverage of China's expensive football players.

All in all, it can be concluded that left-wing media critically examined China's human rights and democratic practices. The Chinese government's behavior, policies, and treatment of ethnic minorities are issues that were reported on. Media reporting on China focused increasingly on its internal affairs and human rights issues.

Conservative media outlets prioritized China's economy, technology, and global standing. They reported on China's economic growth, investments

and trade relationships. Media outlets are increasingly focusing on China's role in global affairs and geopolitics.

Some mainstream media strive for neutrality and comprehensively cover all aspects of China, from politics to economy and culture. To cater to varying reader requirements, they offer more extensive and impartial details.

Methodology

The study relies on the dependency theory, as espoused by Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur [12], which asserts minimal media impact on thought, emotion and action. The crisis necessitates an increased demand for information to resolve ambiguities, answer questions, and form attitudes. Hubner [3] posits that the media shapes how individuals perceive their unfamiliar risks during crises.

The Agenda-Setting Theory [5] was also taken into account as it holds that key frames and prioritized topics in the media shape the significance and prominence of events in the public's mind.

The concept of national image in the media is understood in terms of Manheim & Albritton [13], as incorporating two dimensions: visibility (the total amount of media coverage that a country receives from the media) and valence (whether a country is portrayed unfavorably or favorably in the media).

The research covers two periods: the COVID pandemic (2020–2022) and the Russian military operation (2022–2024). Each period is split into 2 phases: the initial phase of panic (escalation) and recovery (stagnation).

The publications of four major British newspapers were scrutinized: The Times, The Sun, The Guardian and The Daily mirror.

After removing the duplicates, 70,356 articles were collected from online database Factiva (<https://www.dowjones.com/professional/factiva/>): 32,891 from The Times; 8,311 from The Sun; 23,831 from The Guardian and 5,323 from The Daily Mirror for the COVID-pandemic period 01.01.2020 – 24.02.2022 and the special military operation period 24.02.2022 – 31.12.2023.

The implemented analytic research procedure relied on the methodologies proposed by Huang, Leung [14] and Fan, Zhang [15].

At the macro-level, based on the topics of the reports provided by Factiva (Fig. 1) six types of frames were identified:

1) Reporting frame. Report events, describe or explain the government decisions, etc.



2) Conflict frame. Reflect individual, group, organization or nation attitudes against the Chinese policy.

3) Economy frame. Report the influence of Chinese economy, production, construction, infrastructure etc.

4) Great power frame. Reflect the relationship between China and other great powers.

5) Leadership frame. Report on the government's actions and the statements issued.

6) Development frame. Reflect the willingness and necessity of cooperation with China.

Secondly, at the micro-level, sentiment analysis was conducted to reveal the following attitudes:

– Positive. The tone is generally optimistic. For example, the following keywords in the reports were used: 'hope, cooperation, support, effective, win-win'.

– Neutral. Here, no obvious political position or attitude was revealed.

– Negative. The negative attitude is disseminated with the keywords such as "threat, concern, pressure, doubt".

Along with the sentiment analysis, the keywords (statistics provided by Factiva) were also taken into account.

Thus, by accomplishing all the stages of the research procedure, we managed to examine the frequency of the related news and identify whether they gave a positive, neutral or negative attitude towards China and determine the major focus.

Results

Firstly, it seemed crucial to obtain data concerning the frequency of reports split into periods. The results are presented in Fig. 1.

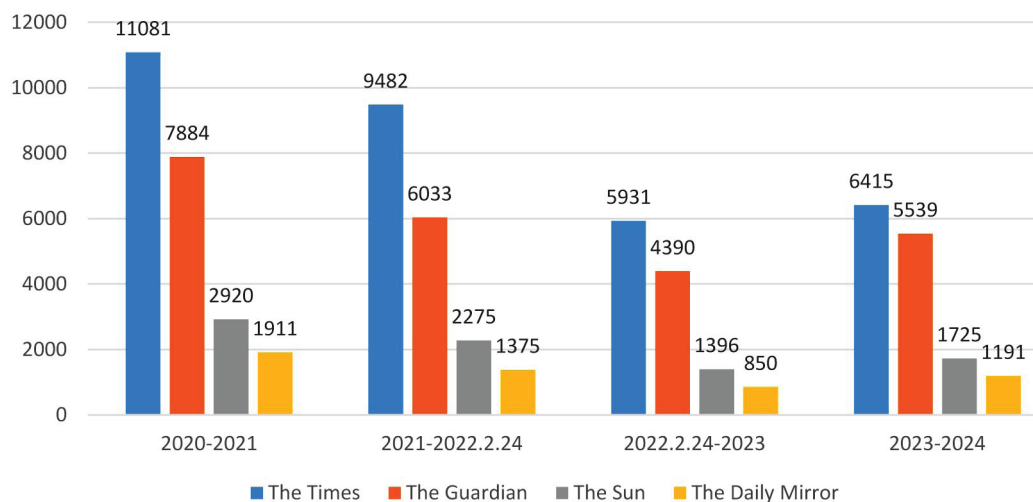


Fig. 1. Reports on China in four British newspapers (color online)

During the COVID pandemic, the decline in coverage is observed in all the newspapers. As the pandemic progressed it gets back to the average pre-pandemic report rate according to the data provided by Factiva. As China and the Chinese were the main news hook, the number of reports increased significantly compared to the period of the Russian military operation. In this case the Chinese were indirectly involved and thus the number of mentions did not skyrocket at the beginning, although continued to increase as the conflict progressed. Generally, we can hypothesize that the Russian military operation did not produce any significant influence on China's international image.

The COVID pandemic (2020–2022.2.24)

Firstly, the COVID pandemic period was scrutinized to reveal the most common frames constructed in the British media. The results obtained for the periods of panic and recovery are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Frames of the COVID pandemic, %

Frames	2020–2021 (panic)	2021–2022.2.24 (recovery)
Reporting frame	41.2	52.6
Conflict frame	64.3	48.1
Economy frame	38.8	42.3
Great power frame	31.1	32.6
Leadership frame	44.7	41.6
Development frame	27.2	53.3



It can be clearly seen that during the recovery phase, the reporting and development frames expanded significantly while the construction of the conflict frame decreased. This tendency shows that once the initial panic dissipated, media got

back to reporting events and developments in China, with an emphasis on China's development initiatives and progress. These results are supported by the sentiment analysis presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Sentiment analysis during the COVID pandemic

Sentiment	2020–2021 (panic)		2021–2022.2.24 (recovery)	
	Volume	Proportion, %	Volume	Proportion, %
Positive	3709	11.8	6488	19.5
Neutral	6285	20.1	7590	22.8
Negative	21 337	68.1	19 276	57.8

However, the examples below demonstrate that within the conflict frame the emphasis is made not on the COVID-pandemic issue, but on other aspects of Chinese policy. The British press has consistently condemned Beijing's policies, regardless of other events:

The Guardian (5.12.2020): *Forced labour is an essential part of the Chinese state's programme to humiliate and destroy ethnic minorities. The parallels with the antebellum south reach to the cotton fields. The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) runs prison factories and its own paramilitary force to keep its captives in line (Принуудительный труд является неотъемлемой частью государственной программы Китая по унижению и уничтожению этнических меньшинств. Параллели с довоенным югом простираются и до хлопковых полей. Синьцзянский производственно-строительный корпус (XPCC) управляет тюремными фабриками и собственными военизированными формированиями, чтобы держать своих заключенных в узде).*

The Guardian (27.09.2021): *China's pledge to limit abortions puts women's bodies under the state's control just as the one-child policy did and could endanger the lives of women seeking abortions (Обещание Китая ограничить аборт ставит женское тело под контроль государства точно так же, как это было в рамках политики "одного ребенка", и может поставить под угрозу жизнь женщин, желающих сделать аборт).*

Because of the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19, the initial phase of panic was characterized by the increased negative coverage. These findings are in line with the results of other studies. For example, Wen et al. [16] reported that certain media labels were discriminatory and deceptive: "China kids should stay at home", "Airports on alert as threat from Chinese virus grows". Ittefaq et al. [17] in their study of The New York Times, The Guardian, and China Daily confirmed that various nicknames such as "the China virus" and "Kung Flu" were employed by the media internationally blaming Chinese for the virus.

As the recovery stage approached, the media shifted its focus to a more perspective-oriented level, resulting in a significant increase in positive news and a noticeable decrease in negative reports. Still, as the examples above from The Guardian demonstrate, the negative attitude is revealed in a large proportion of publications.

As for the keywords, during the panic stage common topics include the outbreak's origins, rapid spread, and worldwide impact. Keywords such as "Global Epidemic," "New Case," and "New Cold War" appear frequently, indicating the feelings of terror and uncertainty in reports about the COVID pandemic. During the recovery phase minor shifts in coverage have been detected. The emphasis switched from the emergency reaction to the outbreak to vaccine development and economic impact (Fig. 2).

wolf pup global epidemic	new case new cold war
new case new cold war	middle-aged man face mask
food market cruise ship	cruise ship human transmission
middle-aged man global economy	new blog global economy
takeover deal worth dual national	takeover deal worth dual national

Fig. 2. Keywords COVID-19



The Russian military operation

China and Russia have been enhancing their strategic partnership as neighboring nations. They have agreed to oppose countries jeopardizing other countries' security and fueling geopolitical tensions unfairly, as this worsens opposition and confrontation, destabilizes international security, and threatens global stability².

When the special operation started, China urged a neutral, impartial response to ongoing events, advocated crisis resolution through dialogue and negotiation, opposed escalating tensions, and aimed to strengthen international agreement and find a means to maintain peace³.

China's position and its refusal to directly condemn the Russian operation did not find support in the Western community. The media's speculations and increased attention could have produced some negative effects on China's image constructed in the media.

As for the frames, it can be seen that the main emphasis during the escalation stage is laid on Chinese relationship with other countries, defining China's stance toward the conflict. However, at the stagnation phase the emphasis shifted towards the routine reporting of the economic achievements (Table 3).

Table 3

Frames of the Russian military operation, %

Frames	2022.2.24–2023 (the initial phase of escalation)	2023–2024 (stagnation)
Reporting frame	27.1	30.1
Conflict frame	18.3	19.1
Economy frame	52.4	58.9
Great power frame	53.5	42.6
Leadership frame	23.7	21.6
Development frame	38.5	33.9

In contrast to the COVID pandemic period, the proportion of publications constructing the conflict frame fell significantly. However, though fewer in number emphatic potential of such reports seem strong enough:

The Times (30.08.2022): *According to allies of Truss, China would be elevated to a similar sta-*

² The State Council. The People's Republic of China. Available at: <http://www.gov.cn> (accessed June 12, 2024).

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The People's Republic of China. Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.cn> (accessed June 12, 2024).

tus as Russia, which is defined as an "acute threat" (По мнению союзников Truss, Китай будет поставлен в один ряд с Россией, которая определяется как "экстремальная угроза").

The Daily Mirror (14.09.2023): *In a response to a scathing report from Britain's spy watchdog, the Government conceded that "some Chinese action crosses the line from influence to interference" and more needed to be done to tackle the threat (В ответ на резкий доклад британской разведывательной службы правительство признало, что «некоторые действия Китая переходят грань от влияния к вмешательству», и необходимо сделать больше для устранения угрозы).*

As for the sentiment analysis, the initial phase of escalation was characterized by more unfavorable coverage due to the uncertainty and tensions surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As the situation seemed to stabilize, the media changed the focus to routine and continuous narratives, resulting in a minor rise in positive and neutral reports.

China's economic activity and position in the world economy throughout the conflict may have influenced more positive and impartial coverage, highlighting its importance in global commerce and economic stability (Table 4).

Table 4

Sentiment analysis of reports during the Russian military operation

Sentiment	2022.2.24–2023 (the initial phase of escalation)		2023–2024 (stagnation)	
	Volume	Proportion, %	Volume	Proportion, %
Positive	6718	21.9	6893	23.5
Neutral	9857	32.1	9351	31.9
Negative	14 115	46.0	13 086	44.7

According to Factiva's keyword analysis, the British media paid more attention to Russia and its military actions during the phase of escalation, with China occupying the minor position in the reports. Even the keywords of Chinese-related news show more awareness of the operation itself: "nuclear weapon", "hostile state" "world war", "cyberattack", "foreign agent scheme" (Fig. 3). However, the media's portrayal of China remains polarized. On the one hand, China is praised for its search for peaceful solutions; on the other, there are concerns about China's potential geopolitical motivations.



During the stagnation phase the terms of Russian military operation-related reports revealed a more benign perspective, such as “normal,” “peace,”

“global,” and so on (see Fig. 3). However, China continued to act as a bystander in the operation, with a suspect purpose.

nuclear weapon	normal channel peace plan
hostile state world war	longest railway tunnel
british university	global south nuclear weapon
big cyberattack defence budget	good old friend key freight link
indiscriminate sanction new appeal	new military aid package dear friend
public debate foreign agent scheme	cold war

Fig. 3. Keywords Russian military operation

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to trace the changes in media portrayal of China during two events, which could have produced negative effect on China's image in international community.

Research demonstrates that media portrayals during COVID fueled prejudice against China and contributed to the Western world scapegoating China. The feeling of threat is the reason for anti-Chinese sentiments. Instead of reporting the epidemic objectively, the media adopted a strategy of naming, shaming, blaming, and taming against China due to fear and uncertainty [18].

The Russia-Ukraine conflict led to heightened global tensions. The British media closely followed Russia's military moves in Ukraine while highlighting the geopolitical tensions and China's potential role. Media attention progressively shifted from Russian military operations to peace negotiations, humanitarian crises, and regional implications, with China's role in global communication during the conflict potentially influencing more positive and neutral coverage. The reporting often exaggerated the risks to regional stability and global security. China's diplomatic efforts and potential resolutions to the conflict were also covered, despite criticism of its actions.

Answering the posed research questions it can be concluded that after the initial phase of panic during the COVID pandemic the image of China has recovered due to media coverage. It is to state that there was a surge in negative reporting and then a decline as the pandemic faded.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that China's neutral position towards the Russian military operation affected media reports in a minor way. There was a short-term blow on the image followed by a

recovery. It could be also suggested that the following coverage during the stagnation phase produced a positive effect on the image.

Overall, the analysis shows a definite shift in the British media's coverage and mood towards China in the wake of two significant worldwide events. The early alarm and confusion around the COVID-19 outbreak gave way to a more normalized perception of the situation. Similarly, the intense scrutiny around the Russian military action has subsided, albeit doubt about China's role remains. These findings emphasize the changing character of media narratives in reaction to global events.

However, such topics as Chinese policy, questioning China's democracy and human rights, interfering in China's internal affairs (South China Sea, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, Xinjiang, etc.) are covered by the media and remain stable despite the ongoing events. This tendency discloses the promoted attitudes towards China among population via the influential British media giants.

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