From Crisis to Calm: Xinhua News Agency's Strategic Framing of the COVID-19 Pandemic Across Two Key Stages in China

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Abstract

Starting from December 2022, China abandoned its previous "zero-COVID" policy, marking the end of three long years of COVID-19 era. Soon after, this policy shift caused the peak of infections nationwide, triggering a new health crisis. The authorities, who once successfully navigated the state from normalcy to crisis in the face of the initial health crisis of 2020, now faced a new challenge and encouraged the public to stay calm. This study combines qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze Xinhua News Agency's news reports to explore how the Chinese authorities rationalized this policy shift to maintain legitimacy. I employ framing theory to analyze both the initial stage from January to April 2020 and the relaxation stage from December 2022 to February 2023 to dissect how they strategically framed the problems to guide public action during these two periods. My research results indicate that the authorities constructed the war image of humanity against the virus in the initial stage using tools like war metaphors and counter-conspiracy theories, which formed a simplistic good versus evil binary value judgment. In the relaxation stage, the authorities strategically constructed an image of sacrificing small costs for larger benefits, employing the scientific narratives to categorize people into different risk groups and then rationalized the policy shift for each group. I also found that in both policy shifts, the authorities retained the consistent value of prioritizing the safety of people's lives and used the contrast with the experiences of other countries to reinforce national pride, consolidating the legitimacy of the ruling party. This paper provides empirical insights for constructing strategic framing and shifting framing during crisis moments.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In December 2019, cases of pneumonia with unknown causes were reported in Wuhan, China, which drew attention from local healthcare workers and the government. In that month, Chinese authorities detected a novel virus strain, which was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) as the first case of COVID-19. Due to its high contagiousness and primarily respiratory droplet transmission, COVID-19 quickly caused an outbreak in Wuhan and soon spread worldwide, leading to its classification as a pandemic. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020, p. 157).

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to countries worldwide, with China being no exception. As of November 2023, China has reported 121,798 COVID-19 related deaths (World Health Organization, 2023). The large-scale outbreak presents big challenges to China, a one-party system with a vast population. Several incidents, including the rapid spread of the virus, the silencing of "whistleblower" Dr. Li Wenliang from Wuhan, the corruption at the Wuhan Red Cross (Li et al., 2021, p. 661), and early chaos in response to the pandemic (Mei, 2020, p. 317), have caused public dissatisfaction. Particularly, the death of Dr. Li Wenliang due to COVID-19 infection pushed criticism of the government to an all-time high (Li et al., 2021, p. 658; Mutua & Ong' ong'a, 2020, p. 5；Zhang et al., 2020, p.7). It also sparked widespread fear and unease (Shi et al., 2022, p. 5), making the already challenging crisis management even more challenging. However, despite much criticism and skepticism in the early stages, studies have found that over time, Chinese citizens have shown a high level of compliance with pandemic policies, a strong willingness to be vaccinated, and a positive view of the pandemic (Lazarus et al., 2021, p. 225; Wang et al., 2020, p.1; Zhao et al., 2020, p. 9; Zhong et al., 2020, p. 1750). This high level of compliance may be partially influenced by the political environment and policy pressure in China, but all of this is inseparable from the importance of the media. The media plays a significant role in shaping the government's policies, influencing the public's trust in

the government. This trust is a key factor in determining their level of compliance with the measures (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020, p. 16).

Therefore, the high compliance of the Chinese public with pandemic-related policies, as well as the strong willingness to be vaccinated, indicates that the Chinese authorities have strategically communicated with the public, maintaining or even increasing the public's trust in the government. It is claimed that the increase in citizens' trust in the nation during times of crisis is due to the rally-around-the-flag effect, where team members become more united than ever, showing greater support for their leaders (Johansson et al., 2021, p. 322). However, the Chinese people's trust in the government has not declined with the stabilization of pandemic data. In 2020, the Chinese public's trust in the government was 82% (Edelman, 2021, p. 44), and by 2021, it had risen to 91%, reaching a ten-year high (Edelman, 2022, p. 24).

Maintaining this level of trust is not an easy task for China. Since Wuhan's outbreak, China announced its lockdown on January 23, 2020 (Hubei Provincial People's Government, 2020, January 23), and had long implemented a zero-COVID policy after this. As the world's second-largest economy with a massive population, people have surprisingly maintained their trust in the government while adhering to strict lockdown policies. This indicates successful communication between the government and the public regarding COVID-19 policies. Recently, there has been a new shift in China's policy. On December 7, 2022, China announced it would abandon its long-standing zero-COVID policy (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022, December 7). After implementing the new policy, the number of infections surged, leading to a new public health crisis (The Lancet Regional Health-Western Pacific, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023, p. 112), posing new communication challenges for the Chinese authorities.

In times of crisis, effective communication between Chinese authorities and the public is crucial, including during the first peak of the pandemic in early 2020 and the infection peak after the pandemic policy change in 2022. The situation becomes uncertain during times of crisis (Zhang et al., 2020, p.1), making authoritarian

governments become vulnerable during these times, needing a series of information control measures to guide public opinion and avoid blame to restore and maintain legitimacy (Xia et al., 2022, p. 256).

To achieve this, the strategic communication is indispensable. Strategic communication involves the concept of framing in the field of communication. Framing theory describes the act of highlighting specific facets of a subject while de-emphasizing others, thereby shaping the interpretation and understanding of that subject (Entman, 1993). In crisis situations, strategic use of framing can shape the public's understanding of events, guide public emotions, and influence public behavior (Xia et al., 2022, p. 258; Zhang, 2022, p. 185). More importantly, successful strategic framing can help governments maintain public trust during times of crisis, ensure the legitimacy of political power, and facilitate the implementation of relevant policies (Xia et al., 2022, p. 258). Given my interest, Entman's framing theory is very suitable for my research. Entman (1993) pointed out how problem definition, causality, moral evaluation, and treatments interact to create a complete interpretation of the event (p. 52). Therefore, this theory can help me dissect the efforts of the Chinese authorities to maintain legitimacy during times of crisis and study the communication style China uses to shape public perceptions during times of crisis.

In this study, I explore how new policies are rationalized. In order to carefully study the rationalization of new policies, I choose to compare the framing of the new policy stage with the previous framing strategy, to answer what the transition is and to explore how it happened. To answer this question, I focus on two key stages in China during COVID-19. The first stage is the outbreak in Wuhan in January 2020, and the second stage is the nationwide outbreak in December 2022. In this study, I named the first stage "the initial stage" and the second stage "the relaxation stage" to ease reading. These two stages represent the two crisis moments of the pandemic outbreak in China, and these two stages implement completely different policy measures. I choose to conduct a comparative study of the initial stage from January 2020 to April 2020, instead of the latest dynamic zeroing stage before the zero COVID policy was canceled,

such as "scientific precision, dynamic zeroing" stage (Qiao, 2022, May 6). This choice is because the outbreak in the initial stage is the most severe. The dense and complete frames laid out by the authorities during this stage establish a concept for the public on how to understand COVID and strict prevention and control measures. At the same time, the strict blockade policy implemented in this stage is the zero-COVID policy implemented for nearly 3 years afterwards. That is to say, the public perception constructed by the authorities during the initial stage continued until before the zero-COVID policy was revised in December 2022. Therefore, exploring the framing strategy during the initial stage can serve as a good contrast to the new stage policy in December 2022, further helping to explore China's efforts to rationalize this shift.

Information dissemination is done through the media. There are both government-controlled media and market-oriented commercial media in China (Chen & Xu, 2021, p. 153). Since my research interest focuses on the construction of information by the authorities, I prefer to focus on Chinese official media as my research object to explore China's framing strategies during a crisis.

In this study, I choose to focus on Xinhua News Agency as my research object, given its unique role and influence in China's media landscape. As a state-controlled official news agency, Xinhua not only reflects the Chinese government's priorities and messaging strategies in response to the outbreaks, but it also plays a pivotal role in shaping the domestic media landscape (Pan, 2009, p. 806). While policy news on the government's official website may serve a similar purpose, it tends to be more formal, less varied, and harder to locate elements, making Xinhua News Agency a more compelling and accessible subject for analysis.

Scholars have conducted investigations into China's framing strategies during the COVID period, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. They commonly identified the widespread use of war metaphors in China (Gui, 2021; Wang et al., 2023, p. 8; Xia et al., p. 255; Yang & Chen, 2020, p. 89). Under the extensive use of war metaphors, scholars then discovered the hero frame. They found that Chinese authorities portrayed medical and police personnel as heroes (Xia et al., p. 256).

Researchers also noted that after effectively controlling the pandemic, China adopted a contrast frame, comparing successful China with other countries that failed (Xia et al., p. 261; Yang & Chen, 2020, p. 89). Under this comparison, nationalist sentiment rose (Wang & Tao, 2021, p. 544; Yang & Chen, 2020, p. 89; Zhang & Xu, 2023, p. 176). These scholars conducted detailed studies on the frames used by China in the initial stages, but they mostly focused on what the frames were, rather than how these frames created meaning. Specifically, it wasn't just China using war metaphors; other countries around the world also used war metaphors in the early stages of the pandemic, but not as effectively as China (Semino, 2021, p. 51; Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 7). Similarly, other countries also likened medical personnel to heroes, but again, not as effectively as China (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 8). Therefore, although there are many studies on the relevant frames in the initial stages, there is a lack of research on how these frames were introduced and functioned. I can use Entman's theory to research and fill this gap in the literature.

Compared to the more substantial number studies on the early stages, there are relatively few studies on what kind of framing strategy China used during the relaxation stage. In the relaxation stage, with the cancellation of the zero-COVID policy, China experienced a new peak of infections. From December 8, 2022 to January 12, 2023, a total of 59,938 COVID-related deaths occurred in hospitals (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 112), and the peak number of COVID hospitalizations nationwide reached 1.625 million on January 5, 2023 (Ge, 2023, p. 226). This crisis was caused by the policy change, so the authorities must adopt a strategic framing to rationalize the policy change to avoid accusations and maintain the legitimacy of the regime (Xia et al., 2022, p. 256). Current research on media framing strategies during the relaxation stage is very limited, and there is no study on how the authorities rationalize the policy transition. Therefore, my research can fill this void.

To achieve my research objectives, I use both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to study news reports from Xinhua News Agency during both stages. Employing Entman's (1993) framing theory, I identify the problem definition, causal

interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations for each stage. By exploring the overall problem construction in both stages, I further discuss how the authorities rationalized the transition of society from a state of crisis back to normalcy. My research can further enrich the understanding of the communication style of Chinese authorities and the strategies of policy transition.

1.2 COVID-19 Policy

To effectively examine the Chinese government's shift of framing strategies, it is essential to first understand the specific policies the government aimed for citizens to comply with and how these policies deeply impacted daily life during the pandemic. Gaining a thorough understanding of the measures implemented will not only shed light on the background of the pandemic in China but also enhance the overall significance of this research by demonstrating the interplay between policy measures and framing strategies. Since before December 2022, China had been implementing the zero-COVID policy. I then use this as a time point to briefly introduce the policy during the two stages.

1.2.1 COVID Policy before December 2022

The zero-COVID policy is an approach adopted by the Chinese government to handle COVID-19. It focuses on identifying and isolating every case in the virus transmission chain through various measures, including contact tracing, mass testing, border quarantine, and lockdowns. Implemented from January 2020 to December 2022, zero-COVID aims to eliminate the spread of the virus in specific areas and resume normal social and economic activities (Liu et al., 2020; Qiao, 2022, May 6).

The zero-COVID policy successfully controlled the spread of the virus during the initial stage with strict control measures, making China the first country to successfully control the pandemic (Liu et al., 2020, p. 4). This policy can quickly identify that China's infection rate remains at a low level, which has reduced a large number of infections and deaths even in the face of the highly contagious Omicron variant (Zhai, 2023, p. 870). However, maintaining zero-COVID and the long-term quarantine required to pay high social and economic costs has been criticized as an unsustainable policy (Rigby & Mason, 2022, May 10). The health code program that the zero-COVID

policy requires every citizen to install on their mobile phones also faces controversy over infringing on citizens' privacy (Liu et al., 2020, p. 3). Despite the controversy, China has been unwavering. From January 2020 to December 2022, zero-COVID has been China's core policy for controlling COVID-19.

1.2.2 COVID Policy after December 2022

On December 7, 2022, the Chinese government introduced the "New Ten Requirements" policy, signaling abandon the zero-COVID policy. This new policy eliminated mandatory centralized isolation. Large-scale nucleic acid testing for all people was also discontinued, with testing now focused on specific locations such as primary and secondary schools and nursing homes. Furthermore, the policy stipulated that temporary closures and large-scale lockdowns based on community units should no longer be implemented. Cross-regional migrants were no longer required to present negative nucleic acid certificates and health codes, allowing for greater freedom of movement (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022, December 7).

In January 2023, the Chinese government fully canceled COVID-19 measures, ceased testing, and stopped updating data related to the virus. The term "COVID-19 pneumonia" was changed to "COVID-19 infection" (Xinhua News Agency, 2022, December 27), marking that the Chinese authorities no longer regard COVID as a threat that can cause a serious public health crisis.

From the above policies, we can see that the change of the zero-COVID policy has a huge impact on the daily life of Chinese citizens. The original intention of zero-COVID is to control the public health crisis, and its termination has caused another new crisis. Therefore, China needs to strategically rationalize this change. Carefully designed frame strategies not only help the public understand the reasons behind these changes but also help build trust in policies.

1.3 Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

1) How did the government frame the problem during the initial stage?

2) How did the government frame the problem during the relaxation stage?

3) How did the government rationalize the policy shift?

1.4 Outline

This thesis is divided into five chapters, namely Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, and Conclusion. Starting from the Literature Review, at the beginning of each chapter, I first introduce the reason for the existence of that chapter and outline its contents, to establish a clear understanding for the reader. Each chapter has its own task. We are currently in the Introduction chapter, so I briefly introduce the general content of each chapter in this thesis to facilitate the reader's subsequent reading.

This subsection is located in Chapter 1, the Introduction, where I establish my research interest through introducing the background knowledge of COVID in China, propose research questions, and briefly explain the importance and necessity of my study. In Chapter 2, the Literature Review, I start with theoretical insights and empirical findings, reviewing the literature in the current related research field, and identifying the existing research gaps. Moreover, by reviewing the literature, I further expound on the importance and necessity of my research. In Chapter 3, I introduce my research methods, elaborating on my sample selection and how I integrate qualitative and quantitative analysis, further demonstrating the credibility and validity of my study. In Chapter 4, I present my research findings. In this chapter, I conduct a detailed analysis of the samples and answer my research questions. In Chapter 5, I examine my research findings from a broader perspective. Specifically, starting with China's culture and history, I delve into the implications of my research findings, deepening the understanding of my research results. And I propose directions for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

In this chapter, I conduct a detailed review of the relevant research, identifying the current research gaps. This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, I review framing theory and clarify why I choose Entman's framing theory as my guiding theory. In the second section, I review empirical studies related to COVID and framing

theory, which provide empirical insights for my research and further demonstrate its importance and necessity. In the third section, I review empirical studies related to COVID and framing specific to China, identifying current research gaps. In the fourth section, I review China's media landscape and the history of Xinhua News Agency, demonstrating the rationality and limitations of my research target selection. In the fifth section, I summarize this chapter and show how I will fill these research gaps.

2.1 Framing Theory

In this section, I review theories related to framing, establishing a theoretical foundation for my study. This section is divided into two subsections. In the first subsection, I review the theories of framing, laying the theoretical groundwork for my research. In the second subsection, I explain why I choose Entman's framing theory as my guiding theory.

2.1.1 Framing Theory Overview

Theories of media framing can be traced back to the early 20th century. From the early 20th century to the end of the 1930s, wartime propaganda during World War I made researchers and policymakers realize the strong impact of media information on public attitudes, prompting early understandings in academia of how media information influences public concepts (Scheufele, 1999, p. 105).

The experiment by Tversky and Kahneman (1981) demonstrated the impact of framing on people's perceptions. They discovered that the irrationality in human perception and decision-making allows different presentations of the same problem to alter people's final decisions. They hypothesized a scenario where a group of 600 people faced the risk of an infectious disease. Given the choice between Plan A, which would save 200 people, and Plan B, which had a one-third probability of saving all 600 but a two-thirds probability of saving none, 72% of respondents chose Plan A. This reflected a tendency to avoid risk when faced with gains. However, when the same problem was framed in terms of losses, with Plan C resulting in 400 deaths and Plan D having a one-third probability of no deaths and a two-thirds probability of 600 deaths, 78% chose Plan D. This indicated a tendency to take risks when dealing with losses (p. 1). This irrationality in human decision-making underscores the importance of media

framing.

Framing involves selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality to promote a particular definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for an issue in communication texts (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In media communication, it is impossible to consider all information and perspectives. The media emphasizes certain specifics while excluding others (Entman, 1993, p. 52), inviting audiences to understand issues in a particular way. Tversky and Kahneman's experiment (1981) showed that simply by emphasizing different aspects of the same issue, people's decisions can be influenced. This tendency, contrary to rational choice, is due to the guidance of problem representation (p. 1). Framing can provide a specific explanation for an issue, thereby excluding other possible interpretations for the information receiver (Entman, 1993, p. 54). In other words, when information is presented emphasizing certain aspects, people tend to think from these specific perspectives first, rather than considering other angles. This particular perspective, embodied in the frame, increases the salience of specific information, making it easier for the recipient to notice, remember, and interpret (Entman, 1993, p. 53).

Consciously increasing the salience of specific information can make a frame more effective. This increase in salience is inseparable from specific cultural contexts. Entman (1993) indicates that frames in the communication process have at least four locations: the communicator, text, recipient, and culture (p. 52). Thus, culture is an essential component of framing.

Culture itself is a reservoir of frames, representing the social experiences of the majority (Entman, 1993, p. 53). When the information in a text aligns with the beliefs and experiences of most people, it gains higher salience, making it easier for people to interpret and remember (p. 53). This salience is manifested through the use of certain keywords, common phrases, stereotypical images, and the presence or absence of themes that reinforce certain aspects of things (p. 52). When a frame uses text or images that are highly prominent in a particular culture, it gains more power from the culture, produces stronger cultural resonance, presents greater stimuli to the recipients, more

easily evokes their emotions, and thus makes the majority of recipients evoke similar thoughts and feelings (Entman, 2003, p. 417). For instance, a photo of Osama bin Laden can resonate culturally among Americans, unconsciously recalling the burning World Trade Center, thereby eliciting negative emotions (p. 418). This indicates that salient content within a frame can stimulate people's feelings in a way that is similar to automatic and unconscious, leading them to specific personal interpretations of events (p. 419).

This concept is similar to that of individual frame. Individual frame, contrasting with media frame, represents how people's information processing and interpretation are influenced by previous structures of meaning (Druckman, 2001, p. 106). Media frame, on the other hand, is when the media organizes interpretations with a central idea for a series of events or provides narratives that stimulate specific thoughts (Scheufele, 1999, p. 106). The interpretations provided by the media are selective, with a tendency to focus on certain aspects of events. Individuals, based on their experiences, selectively accept information that interests them (Druckman, 2001, p. 105). This selectivity reflects an individual preference for information, which to some extent is predictable. People from the same cultural background tend to have consistent preferences for information. That is, cultural differences not only lead to different interpretations but can also lead to similar interpretations of certain matters. The predictability of personal interpretation offers media an opportunity. In this context, the media is no longer just a simple transmitter of information, even though this process inevitably decides that the media is selective and cannot include all information and perspectives. However, the predictable nature of individual interpretations allows the media to frame information based on an anticipated audience interpretation, gradually guiding audience viewpoints, and then adjusting their framing strategies based on audience feedback, thus selectively constructing information for dissemination. In this process of interaction between individuals and media, the media gradually deepens its understanding of the audience and continuously updates its framing strategies to ultimately guide audience perceptions (Druckman, 2001). In this sense, the media has become a constructor of

social reality (Druckman, 2001; Scheufele, 1999).

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) provided a case study on media's construction of social reality. They found that the discourse on nuclear power changed significantly from the post-World War II period to the late 20th century, influenced by media framing. They examined how the media affected people's perceptions through various symbols (p. 3), using a toolkit including metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, etc., to interpretatively package issues (p. 24), thereby constructing a comprehensive frame. Their research showed that under media influence, people's attitudes towards nuclear power shifted from initial ambivalence to clear opposition and concern. Moreover, public support for nuclear power decreased when in the media spotlight and rebounded when the media focus shifted away (p. 31). This demonstrates that media framing not only report reality but more importantly, construct social reality, further influencing public opinion and policy-making.

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) further explored the diversity and complexity of media frame choices. They studied the prevalence of five common news frames: responsibility attribution, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality (p. 93). Each frame shapes events by emphasizing the salience of specific information to guide public understanding. The responsibility attribution frame focuses on who should be responsible for events (p. 96), the conflict frame emphasizes opposition and conflict within events, the human interest frame concerns individual stories and emotional experiences (p. 95), the economic consequences frame focuses on the economic outcomes and impacts of events, and the morality frame explores moral principles (p. 96). They found that different types of media and media styles affect the choice of frames. For example, sensationalist media often use the human interest frame, while serious media more frequently use responsibility and conflict frames (p. 93). Their research demonstrated the variety in media's frame choices and provided a practical tool for identifying the types of frames used in news media through these five common frames.

Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) frame focuses on which aspects of events the

media tends to use to maintain public interest. The five frames they used represent common frame types in the media. These frames are identified from the perspective of story themes and are also fixed and unchanging. This is different from Entman's framing theory. Entman (1993) suggests that framing involves problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and remedy suggestions (p. 52). The problem definition in a frame determines what the causal agent is doing and usually assesses the cost and benefits of the issue based on common cultural values. The causal interpretation in a frame identifies the cause of the issue. The moral evaluation in a frame assesses the causal factors and their impacts. The remedy suggestions in the frame provides reasonable solutions for the issue and predicts its potential impacts (p. 52). These four elements together construct the dominant meaning of an issue (p. 52).

2.1.2 Reasons for Choosing Entman's Framing Theory

Under my research question, there are two transitions: the first is the initial stage transition from normal to crisis state, and the second is the transition back to normal from the crisis state. Although I am more focused on rationalizing the second transition, both transitions involve an overall understanding of the stage framing. I need to not only understand which mainstream frames are used within the stage but also explore from a more open perspective how various types of information within the stage are interconnected to construct meaning.

Therefore, studying which fixed frame types are used within the stage and what the media focuses more on does not meet my research needs (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Entman's (1993) theory provides me with a more open approach, allowing me to analyze the construction of the overall event's meaning from the four elements of each stage, and to more intricately compare how policy shifts are rationalized. This theory allows me to not only explore which information is prominent but also observe how specific problem definitions, interpretations, moral evaluations, and remedy suggestions within each stage influence and interconnect with each other.

Entman (1993) also indicates that it is challenging to interpret events using information that contradicts the dominant meaning once it has been established (p. 56). This concept aligns with my research objective, which is to understand how the Chinese

authorities rationalized the policy shift after nearly three years of implementing the zero COVID policy.

Additionally, Entman's (1993) theory reserves a significant place for cultural factors, which is precisely what my research requires. Considering the consistently high trust rate among Chinese citizens, I assume that cultural factors are indispensable in the policy implementation process. The space Entman's theory allocates for cultural factors provides me with the opportunity to interpret policy shifts on a deeper level.

In summary, I chose Entman's framing theory as the guiding theory for my research.

2.2 Framing and COVID-19: A Global Perspective

After reviewing framing theory, this section explores the types of frames used by the media during COVID-19. This section's research provides empirical experience for the application of framing theory during the COVID period. This section is divided into four subsections. In the first subsection, I discuss the frames used by the media during COVID, and this part of empirical research indicates that indeed the media adopted various frames during the pandemic, and these frames were adjusted as the objective situation changed. This proves the necessity of studying the different stages of frames in China. In the second subsection, I explore the impact of different frames on the public, providing empirical insights that the frames adopted by the media during COVID indeed influenced public behavior, highlighting the importance of studying the frames of Chinese media. In the third subsection, I discuss how different cultural backgrounds influence framing, supporting the empirical understanding that one cannot speculate on China's situation from a Western perspective. In the fourth subsection, I discuss the responsibility and significance of the media in the spread of COVID, showing that during COVID, the media not only affected citizens' compliance with health measures but also influenced the overall political environment and social dynamics, underscoring the importance of studying media frames in detail. From these four aspects, I aim to explore the empirical experience of framing during COVID to better support my research.

2.2.1 COVID-19 Framing Varieties

COVID spread globally in a short time, leading to large-scale lockdowns worldwide. Unlike previous pandemics such as H1N1 and SARS, the global lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic triggered economic stagnation and widespread social panic (Woods et al., 2020). To rationalize policies responding to the pandemic, different framing strategies were adopted in the early stages of the outbreak by countries. Germany's Merkel, starting from democratic values (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 5), encouraged citizens to take initiative in complying with policies. Merkel encouraged people not only for themselves but also for the nation, trying to use democratic values to unite the people (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 6) and inspire a sense of responsibility. Italy's president praised groups such as doctors and police officers for their efforts against the pandemic, suggesting that individual sacrifices are minor compared to these groups. The Italian president emphasized national pride (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 6), stirring patriotic emotions to promote unity. Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez used war metaphors, emphasizing heroism. He likened the virus to an enemy, encouraging people to unite and fight together to defeat the enemy (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 8). Although the specific expressions differ, these three European countries in rationalizing public health policies all attempt to evoke the public's sense of responsibility, emphasize national identity, and also grant individuals a subjective position, encouraging everyone to be the core force in restricting the virus (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 1). They all try to inspire citizens to take protective measures by evoking subjectivity such as emotions through history and culture. Unlike these European countries, Nordic country adopted an uncertain communication style. Denmark's leaders emphasized that due to unprecedented unknowns, the government might make mistakes (Sørensen & Evensen, 2023, p. 5). Danish leaders indicated that decisions cannot be made solely based on limited scientific knowledge during this crisis, and political judgment at such times is reasonable (Sørensen & Evensen, 2023, p. 6). This candidness sets Denmark apart from other European countries' communication methods, reflecting the Danish government's effort to maintain transparency and a distinctive communication

approach during the crisis. The Danish government's way of rationalizing public health measures is to construct the urgency of the crisis by describing the rapid deterioration of the situation in other European countries (Sørensen & Evensen, 2023, p. 6). Unlike some European countries, which focus on arousing subjective emotions, Denmark tends to provide an objective situation of the pandemic.

Even within the European continent, the framing strategies of different countries are not the same. When we turn our attention to the American continent, the differences in framing strategies are even more apparent. In the early stages of the pandemic, US President Trump referred to the virus as the "Chinese virus," "Wuhan virus." This reflects the US leader's intention to politicize the public health crisis (Song & Choi, 2023, p. 199).

Different framing strategies are not only reflected between countries but also within different stages in the same country. Italian media initially used the containment frame, and as the virus developed, the focus of Italian media shifted to the science frame (Ophir et al., 2021, p. 167). Similar situations have occurred in other regions. In the early stages in Canada, media reports focused mainly on the situation of the pandemic in China, and as domestic cases increased, the media shifted more to the negative economic and social impacts brought by the pandemic locally (Poirier et al., 2020, p. 367). In the Southern Hemisphere in Australia, the early stage media focus was on the economic negative impacts caused by the pandemic-induced border closures, and later as local cases increased, the media paid more attention to the balance between public health response measures and economic issues (Thomas et al., 2020, pp. 5- 9).

These dynamic frame changes show that frames are not static. At different stages of the pandemic, the focus of media content is different. This provides empirical experience for my study of different stages of framing strategies employed by Xinhua News Agency, that is, framing strategies must be different at different stages of the pandemic.

The content of this subsection shows that there are differences in framing COVID strategies between different countries, and some differences between countries are even

significant. This provides empirical experience for studying China, a one-party Asian country, where the framing strategies adopted in such a political and cultural context managing a massive population will be different. Moreover, the differences in framing strategies are not only reflected between different countries but even within different stages of the pandemic in the same country. This provides empirical experience for my study of the framing strategies in two different stages in China.

2.2.2 Public Reactions to COVID-19 Framing

Framing is prevalent during COVID. The media uses framing to shape people's perceptions, thereby influencing their actions. Different frames have different impacts on people's behaviors. In Italy, in areas that emphasized the social problems and economic crises brought by the pandemic, people's compliance with public health measures was lower. In contrast, areas that emphasized the severity of the disease saw more people willing to stay at home and follow recommended measures (Ophir et al., 2021, p. 168). The U.S. government's politicization of the public health crisis influenced Americans' adherence to public health measures (Song & Choi, 2023, p. 199), with Americans showing reluctance to wear masks and a low willingness to vaccinate even during the peak of the pandemic (Burki, 2020, p. 1240). These studies indicate that COVID framing can effectively influence the public's compliance with pandemic-related policies.

The impact of framing is also reflected in people's news preferences. On Twitter, users prefer content that emphasizes the positive role of individuals and groups in responding to the crisis (Park et al., 2020). At the same time, the strategy of combining the treatment of the virus with war metaphors has brought anxiety to some of the users on Twitter (Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020, p. 5), making infected patients more likely to feel despair and has been criticized in Western countries (Semino, 2021, p. 50). This indicates that in times of crisis, people's psychology tends more towards positive news content to alleviate anxiety.

The above empirical studies show the importance of the media emphasizing the health losses brought by the virus while providing positive news to soothe public sentiment during a crisis, such a combination may be necessary. The content of this

subsection provides empirical experience on how framing during COVID influences people's behavioral choices. This indicates that China's high willingness to vaccinate and its initial-stage successful control of the pandemic are inseparable from the media's conscious guidance. It is necessary to study how the media influences people to adapt from a normal state of life to a state of crisis and then back to normalcy.

2.2.3 Diverse Media Framing Strategies

Different media platforms adopt different framing strategies. Media entities have varying editorial policies and ideological leanings. Moreover, factors such as media ownership, sources of funding, the target audience, and socio-cultural differences all influence the framing strategies used by the media. During the early stages of the pandemic, BBC, Al-Jazeera, CNN, and People's Daily each adopted different strategies. Al-Jazeera's economic consequences frame accounted for half of its reporting frames, while CNN focused on the human-interest frame (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020, p. 4), reflecting CNN's emotionally appealing reporting style. People's Daily paid attention to issues of responsibility attribution (p. 4), reflecting its role as a state-run media outlet mirroring government views, while BBC's reporting showed a balanced attention across various frames (p. 4), in line with its public service broadcasting ethos.

Different political cultures and social norms also affect media framing choices. In South Korea, journalists define their role as watchdogs and are more inclined to intervene in government policies (Chen, 2022, p. 4260). In the United States, journalists also see themselves as watchdogs but consider their audience as consumers, reflecting greater inclusiveness (p. 4260).

Even within the same country, different target audience groups can lead media to adopt various frames. Canada's English-language media focused mainly on social impacts, while French-language media concentrated on economic crises and aiding Canadians abroad (Poirier et al., 2020, p. 368). This shows the impact of the audience and culture on media strategies.

This subsection indicates that different media select different news frames based on their own editorial policies, ideological leanings, ownership, and target audiences. This provides further empirical evidence for my study, indicating that a deep examination of

the framing strategies of specific media entities like Xinhua News Agency is very valuable. This not only helps understand how Xinhua shapes and disseminates information but also reveals its potential influence and intentions.

2.2.4 Media's Role in COVID-19 Spread

The media plays an important role in the spread of COVID, not only affecting the public's perception of the virus but also having a more profound impact on the political environment and social dynamics. During COVID, the prevalence of conspiracy theories led to heightened racial discrimination (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020, p. 5). The "Chinese virus" narrative promoted by the Trump administration exacerbated discrimination against Asians in the United States and intensified social division (Song & Choi, 2023, p. 199). Conservative American media, by viewing China as "the other", constructed a sense of unity against China, reflecting the political competition between the United States and China and American nationalism (Chung et al., 2021, p. 747). Within the EU, nationalist conflicts also intensified during the COVID period (Woods et al., 2020). This shows the impact of media framing strategies on identity.

The content of this subsection underscores the necessity of meticulously researching media framing strategies. The media not only transmits information but can also shape people's identities during this critical challenge, bringing influence to the broader political landscape.

2.3 Framing and COVID-19 in China: A Focused Analysis

In this section, I specifically explore the use of framing strategies by Chinese media during COVID. By focusing on the framing strategies in the particular context of China, this section provides empirical experience for my study, identifying current research gaps. This section is divided into four subsections. In the first subsection, I examine the framing strategies adopted by the media and analyze their characteristics. This allows me to identify China's unique framing methods in a broader context and understand the tools China uses to maintain legitimacy. In the second subsection, I explore the impact of China's framing strategies on citizens' perceptions. The empirical evidence in this part validates the significance and necessity of my research. In the third subsection, I discuss the impact of China's framing strategies from a global cooperation perspective.

This subsection's empirical experience reveals the subtle political dynamics of China in the COVID event, allowing me to gain insight into how China constructs its international image in this event. In the fourth subsection, through summarization, I clarify the existing research gaps.

2.3.1 Media Framing in China During COVID-19

China is the first country to detect the virus and implement corresponding public health measures. On January 23, 2020, Wuhan announced a lockdown (Hubei Provincial People's Government, 2020, January 23). A "war" ensued in China. In the early stages of the pandemic, China used a wide range of war metaphors. The media likened the virus to an enemy, hospitals to battlefields, support for the pandemic areas as going to the front lines, supplies as ammunition, and medical personnel as heroes in combat (Gui, 2021; Wang et al., 2023, p. 8).

Although the use of war metaphors is widespread, their definition varies subtly by region. In Macau, China, the traditional mainstream Macao Daily used war metaphors extensively during the COVID-19 period from January to August 2020 (Wang et al., 2023, p. 3). In Macao Daily, war metaphors were categorized into various types, such as protracted war, defensive war, counter-attack war, and war without smoke. The subjects of the war were also diverse. In Macao Daily, this war was both a battle for reserve supplies and against the economic enemy of the gambling and tourism industry (pp. 4-7).

Xinwen Lianbo, representing Beijing's official stance, also heavily utilized war metaphors (Gui, 2021, p. 968). Xinwen Lianbo, a mainstream Chinese TV media affiliated with China's national broadcasting organization, is responsible for producing daily news nationwide. Between January 20, 2020, and March 22, 2020, the portrayal of the war in Xinwen Lianbo evolved, initially being defensive to prevent further spread of the pandemic. From February 3-9, 2020, the pandemic was defined by Xi Jinping as a total war, implying that the pandemic had escalated into a people's war involving social, economic, and livelihood issues (p. 968).

These studies show that the scale and form of warfare differ by region. In mainland, the definition of war is more severe and on a larger scale than in the Macau Special

Administrative Region. Additionally, in mainland, terms like "weapons" were used under the war metaphor (Gui, 2021, p. 968), whereas in Macau, the war was more about material supplies and economic impacts, much softer in comparison. However, ultimately, regardless of the type of war, the early stages aimed to create a wartime state throughout society, strengthening public compliance with pandemic measures.

Under the use of war metaphors, the hero frame naturally emerged. A study on seven different Chinese media outlets (People's Daily, Global Times, The Paper, Caixin, Caijing Magazine, Southern Weekly, and Sanlian Life Weekly) found (Xia et al., 2022, p. 263) that Chinese media widely used the heroism frame to highlight the sacrifices made by medical personnel in pandemic areas to save others in need. Chinese media reported a series of touching stories about frontline medical personnel sacrificing themselves to save those in need, establishing them as heroic figures in the fight against the virus, thereby evoking positive hope in people (p. 256).

After China's "heroes" successfully controlled the spread of the pandemic, new infections within China dropped to zero. Meanwhile, Western countries were unable to effectively control the outbreak. At this point, Chinese media adopted a contrast frame (Xia et al., 2022, p. 255; Yang & Chen, 2020, p. 89), comparing their success with the failure of Western countries. Under this comparison, the United States was portrayed as a negative "other", while China was the positive "self" (Yang & Chen, 2021, p. 89). This image construction bears similarities to the early stage construction of China as an imagined enemy by the United States (Chung et al., 2021, p. 747), with both countries having political intentions, seeking to strengthen national unity through the construction of the "other". However, the U.S.' construction of the Chinese "other" carried more accusations, while China's construction of the "other" was based on the performance differences between the two countries, evoking national pride and reflecting Chinese nationalism.

In the early stages, scholars employed various methods for their research. Their primary objective was to explore which frames the Chinese media used during certain periods. To identify the types of frames, their main research approach involved building

a corpus for study, using Structural Topic Model (STM) methods (Xia et al., 2022, p. 256), observing co-occurring words (Wang et al., 2023, p. 3), and corpus analysis (Gui, 2021, p. 968).

While scholars observed the frames used by the media in the early stages, there is currently no research on the relaxation phase.

2.3.2 Public Perception Impact

In the initial stage, citizens were dissatisfied with the government's concealment and corruption (Li et al., 2021, p. 658; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020, p. 5; Zhang et al., 2020, p.7). After medical expert Zhong Nanshan confirmed the human-to-human transmission of the virus on January 20, 2020, the fear among Wuhan's citizens rapidly escalated, peaking on January 21. However, fear gradually declined afterward (Shi et al., 2022, p. 4). At the same time, positive emotions continued to rise, reaching even higher levels than before the pandemic (p. 4). This reflects the effectiveness of the media's framing strategy in influencing the perceptions of citizens.

Additionally, on April 4, 2020, China held a national moment of silence with the sounding of air raid sirens to mourn those who had died from COVID-19 and those who had sacrificed their lives during the pandemic (Xinhua News Agency, 2020, April 4). On this day, a surge in grief was observed nationwide (Shi et al., 2022, p. 4). This indicates that the public's emotions are largely aligned with those of the authorities, suggesting that the media indeed influences public sentiment.

Beyond influencing citizens' emotions, media also significantly impact people's perceptions regarding pandemic measures. In a survey covering respondents from 19 countries, nearly 90% of Chinese participants expressed willingness to get vaccinated, the highest among the countries surveyed (Lazarus et al., 2021, p. 225). This finding is corroborated by other researchers. In a survey of 2058 Chinese participants, 91.3% indicated they would get vaccinated once a vaccine was available (Wang et al., 2020, p. 1). In contrast, during the H1N1 influenza period in China, even among medical staff, the vaccination rate was only 25% (Wang et al., 2020, p. 2). Such high willingness to get vaccinated during COVID demonstrates the tangible impact of media framing strategies. This validates the value of studying China's framing strategies during

COVID, revealing how framing strategies complement public health policies to guide public actions.

2.3.3 Counter-conspiracy Theories

During the pandemic, there were international criticisms of China, primarily manifested in the labeling of the virus as the "Chinese virus" (Yang & Chen, 2020, p. 95). Such conspiracy theories about the virus originating in China exacerbated racial discrimination against Asians (Song & Choi, 2023, p. 199). In response to conspiracy theories about the virus originating from a lab in Wuhan, Chinese media strongly condemned this stigmatization (Wang & Tao, 2021, p. 544; Yang et al., 2020, April 30). Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson questioned the situation at the U.S. Fort Detrick lab, suggesting if lab leaks existed, then the U.S. Fort Detrick lab should be investigated for virus leaks (Cheng et al., 2022, p. 1173). Simultaneously, Xinhua News Agency's English website reported various non-compliant operations in U.S. labs and cited reports from Europe and the U.S. in 2019 of human bodies containing COVID antibodies, suggesting China was just the first to detect the virus (Xinhua News Agency, 2021, November 6), reflecting China's intent to provide an alternate perspective to the international community and challenge the single-source flow of information. This counter-conspiracy narrative influenced domestic audiences. In a survey of 1890 participants, 41.7% believed to varying degrees in the conspiracy theory "The type of Cov-SARS-2 in the United States appeared earlier, indicating that the United States is more likely to be the source of the virus," far higher than the belief in other conspiracy theories (Yang et al., 2021, p. 5).

This empirical research proves the media's success in shaping public opinion. Notably, unlike the United States, China's adoption of counter-conspiracy narratives is a counter-attack against unjust international accusations. This undoubtedly elevated Chinese citizens' nationalism and patriotism, thereby enhancing compliance with a range of public health policies. China's adoption of these narratives reflects the Chinese authorities' firm stance on maintaining their image. However, in the context of my research topic, what's more significant is how this strategy reflects China's style of guiding public opinion in response to Western accusations. The empirical research here

indicates changes in China's social dynamics during the pandemic.

2.3.4 Research Gaps

After conducting a focused literature review, I found that research on China during the pandemic primarily concentrates on the initial stage, with a lack of studies on the policy shift in December 2022.

Furthermore, while scholars have analyzed media content in the initial stage, most have used corpus building (Gui, 2021, p. 968; Wang et al., 2023, p. 3; Xia et al.,2022, p. 256), identifying prevalent frames by analyzing the frequency of terms in media content. While this method analyses the texts within the stage and can determine which frames and tools were used in the initial stage, it cannot observe the overall framing strategies adopted by the media or identify how China constructed an overall image of COVID, transitioning society from a state of normal life to a crisis state of war. For example, how the war metaphor was introduced into the overall understanding of the event, how the hero and contrast frames were used to construct public perceptions. Considering that the trust of the Chinese public in the government reached its highest peak in a decade after the pandemic in 2021 (Edelman, 2022), it is valuable to thoroughly explore how the framing in the early stages was constructed to build this trust.

Additionally, the abolition of pandemic prevention policies in China in December 2022 led to a surge in infection rates (The Lancet Regional Health-Western Pacific, 2023). Therefore, this stage is undoubtedly important, that is, the authorities need to provide a rational explanation to maintain legitimacy and be accepted by the people as much as possible. However, currently, there is no research on China's framing strategies during this phase, nor on how the transition to this new policy was rationalized. Research on this phase can provide deeper insight into China's communication style in policy transitions and offer references for strategic communication in managing public expectations at the national level.

2.4 China's Media Landscape and Xinhua News Agency

This section is divided into two subsections. In the first subsection, I review the overall situation of China's media landscape, providing a macro background for my research.

This part highlights the complexity of the Chinese media system, which helps define the scope and limitations of my study. In the second subsection, focusing on Xinhua News Agency as my research subject, I detail its development and role within the Chinese media system, laying the theoretical groundwork for understanding why Xinhua was chosen for my study. This subsection also provides the basis for understanding how Xinhua's reporting can represent the official stance of the Chinese authorities.

2.4.1 China's Media Landscape

Understanding China's media landscape requires first reviewing its political system, as a country's political structure significantly impacts its media system. Unlike Western multi-party systems, China practices a one-party rule with multi-party participation. China has eight democratic parties that participate in political consultation under the leadership of the ruling Communist Party of China, meaning these participating parties do not engage in political decision-making. In this non-diverse political environment, the media discourse revolves around the positions and viewpoints of the ruling party.

Starting from 2005, to more effectively regulate public opinion, the Chinese authorities integrated journalists into a national occupational certification and licensing system, centralizing the management of press credentials (Zhao, 2011, p. 162). Journalists must pass national assessments and learn official ideology (p. 163) to obtain a state-issued press card. This measure controls the composition of the news team, with the media being described as the ears, eyes, and mouthpiece of the Party. The Chinese media system is highly politicized (p. 161).

Despite the media's oppressive environment, China has developed a market media system that once surpassed party-controlled media. With the economic reforms starting in 1978, market-oriented and commercial media flourished. By 2002, China had 2137 newspapers and 360 television stations (Xin, 2006, p. 53). By the 1990s, the dominance of party newspapers was replaced by commercial newspapers more aligned with people's lives (p. 53), resulting in a media system where state and market coexist (Chen & Xu, 2021, p. 152).

With technological advancements, the internet has brought challenges to the

newspaper industry but empowered the people, promoting vertical and horizontal communication. For instance, during the 2003 SARS outbreak, the Chinese government concealed information for days, denying the existence of the infectious disease. Citizens used SMS services to inform each other, breaking state control over news and playing a crucial role in offline protest activities (Zhao, 2011, p. 161). Notably, this was not an isolated case. During events like the 2011 Wenzhou train collision and the initial stage of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese netizens filled the internet with various criticisms, questions, and praises of the state.

Reviewing the brief history and current state of China's media system, we see that despite being a one-party state with strict control over news, commercial newspapers and diverse media platforms influence varying viewpoints in the public sphere. This indicates the limitations of my study. It cannot represent the diverse attitudes of Chinese citizens towards COVID-19 at different stages. My research focuses on Xinhua News Agency, intending to explore the media framing strategies of Chinese authorities. This choice inherently excludes the diverse opinions on China's internet media and focuses solely on the constructions and intentions of the authorities. Next, I explain why, despite these limitations, I still chose Xinhua News Agency as my research subject and the significance of this choice.

2.4.2 Xinhua News Agency's Development and Role

The predecessor of Xinhua News Agency was the Red China News Agency, established in 1931 in Ruijin, Jiangxi. Its inception was heavily politically motivated (Xin, 2006, p. 47). In the early years of the Communist Party of China, it was responsible for disseminating the Party's governance ideology, aiming to legitimize its position through communication. During the Anti-Japanese War and Civil War, Xinhua's senior officials followed the Party's military route, developing numerous branches (p. 48). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Xinhua became the only legal national news agency (p. 49). Xinhua's history shows its interdependence with the Communist Party. From the early Red China News Agency to the establishment of People's Republic of China, Xinhua has always been an information tool for the Party.

After its unsuccessful commercial transformation at the end of the 20th century,

Xinhua increasingly relied on Party subsidies (Xin, 2006, p. 60), maintaining its political communication nature similar to its early years. With the rise of the internet, China's party-controlled media actively joined various platforms, gradually dominating user coverage (Chen & Xu, 2021, p. 153). More importantly, in times of crisis, party-controlled media bear the responsibility of guiding public opinion (p. 154). During major events, market media may have some freedom but must align with the party-controlled media's narrative and not cross the red line (p. 162). Therefore, the framing strategies adopted by Xinhua during crises significantly influence China's overall media reporting approach.

Now, understanding that Xinhua sets the tone for other media during crises, what is the significance of studying this mandatory "red line" requirement?

This "red line" is compulsory but aligns with Confucian culture, reflecting Chinese citizens' expectations of the state during crises. Unlike European countries, Confucian culture demands that the state instill common values and cultural awareness among its citizens (Zhao, 2011, p. 151). During crises, the Confucian patriarchal state (Jacques, 2009, p. 103; Zhao, 2011, p. 164) is obligated to convey information to citizens, maintaining social stability. Therefore, while this red line is mandatory, it should be understood from a Chinese perspective as a unique cultural expectation of the state. From this perspective, my research is very meaningful.

My research focuses on the COVID-19 period in China, a time of significant challenges for the country. In this major event, party-controlled media transmit the Party's policies, set the tone for market media, and meet the demands of Confucian culture. Thus, choosing Xinhua News Agency as my research subject can represent the official strategies of the Chinese authorities and understand the framing style of China during crises.

2.5 Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant literature, providing theoretical insights and empirical evidence for my research. Through a literature review, it became apparent that during COVID, media framing was not only widespread but also had a significant impact on public emotions and behaviors. Changes in objective circumstances led to

shifts in media framing strategies. This suggests that studying framing in different stages is meaningful. Framing influenced not only people's perceptions of the pandemic but also reshaped citizens' understanding of other countries during this period, affecting social dynamics. The importance of framing during COVID is evident.

However, current academic understanding of China's framing strategies is limited. Firstly, these studies have focused on the early stages, while China's policies have now undergone thorough changes. Secondly, early research primarily concentrated on the types of frames, with little understanding of the overall construction of information by the authorities. During the pandemic, the Chinese authorities maintained a high trust rate, and the willingness of Chinese citizens to get vaccinated was also very high. This indicates that the lack of relevant research is a regrettable gap that deserves attention and needs to be filled. Research on the overall construction of the initial stage is highly valuable, offering insights into China's strategies and references for how authorities can use media to promote public compliance with public measures.

Research on China's latest relaxation phase is lacking. Studying this phase not only helps understand the style of China's strategic transition but also aids in understanding the national strategy for managing public expectations. Therefore, research on this phase is necessary and is a focus of my study.

I use Entman's theory to conduct a qualitative analysis of texts from both the initial and relaxation phases, supplemented by word frequency analysis. My goal is to understand how framing functions in each phase, rather than just identifying which frames were used. By exploring the framing strategies of both stages, I analyze how two distinctly different policies were rationalized and transitioned. Additionally, an important aspect of my study is discussing the use of these framing strategies from the perspective of national cultural values, further deepening the understanding of strategic transitions in these two stages and revealing changes in social dynamics.

Chapter 3. Methodology

In this chapter, I introduce the specific methods used in my study, primarily based on Entman's framing theory. The first section explains the selection of my research sample. The second section introduces my choice of research methods, the third section discusses the use of NVivo software, and the fourth section addresses the credibility, validity, and limitations of my research methods.

3.1 Selection of Research Sample

Given my primary reliance on qualitative analysis, which heavily depends on background information, the selection of samples directly determines the outcome of my analysis (Patton, 1999, p. 1197). Therefore, I elaborate on my specific sample selection process in this section, including the choice of sampling websites, time periods, keywords, and sampling methods.

3.1.1 Choice of Sampling Website

My research question focuses on the framing strategies adopted by Xinhua News Agency during the initial and relaxation stages of COVID, aiming to explore how these strategies rationalized the policy shift. To gather appropriate samples, I visited the official website of Xinhua News Agency, news.cn. However, I discovered that Xinhua's official website lacked a time-based search function. I then tried the advanced search function on the site, but it only allowed keyword-based searches without specifying a particular time range. The only time-limiting function available is arranged in chronological order. Considering the time elapsed since the initial stage of 2020 at the time of writing this paper, locating early pandemic news would require navigating back to 2020 page by page, consuming a significant amount of time and effort. This difficulty in searching also complicated the text crawling process.

Since Xinhua News Agency is China's official news agency and its reporting reflects national intentions, I turned to the Chinese government website (gov.cn) to efficiently collect my research samples. I found that the government website not only featured many news articles supplied by Xinhua but, importantly, had an advanced search function that allowed selecting specific years and months, making sample selection feasible. Therefore, although my research subject is Xinhua News Agency,

my final research samples were crawled from the Chinese government website (gov.cn).

What's more, on the government website's advanced search function, there is an option to select categories, including "News," which yielded many results sourced from Xinhua News Agency, significantly improving the efficiency of my sample selection.

3.1.2 Selection of Time Periods for Sampling

In this section, I explain my choice of time periods for the initial phase and the relaxation phase.

Time Period Selection for the Initial Stage

My research question centers on the initial and relaxation stages of the pandemic. According to Xinhua's official reporting, the initial stage spans from December 2019 to April 28, 2020 (Xinhua News Agency, 2020, June 7). The relaxation stage begins on December 7, 2022, with no specific end date defined.

In my actual search, I found that the earliest reports on COVID on the Chinese government website were from January 2020. This is because though the virus was identified in late December 2019, it was only officially acknowledged and publicly reported by the government in January 2020. For April 2020, news about the pandemic ceased after April 28, with no reports on the 29th and 30th, allowing me to exclude the last two days of April from my sample. Thus, for the initial stage, I selected the time period from January to April 2020.

Time Period Selection for the Relaxation Stage

The relaxation stage has a definite start date of December 7, 2022 (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022, December 7), but without a confirmed official end date, determining an endpoint is challenging. To make an informed choice, I searched for COVID-related news on the website. I observed that information about COVID became scarce after March 2023. Importantly, news after March did not add new content, indicating saturation of COVID-related information from December 7, 2022, to the end of February 2023. Additionally, the earliest

reports on COVID in December began on the 7th, eliminating the need to consider samples before this date. Therefore, I ultimately determined the relaxation stage time period to be from December 2022 to February 2023.

3.1.3 Keywords Selection for Sampling

In Chinese, COVID can be translated into several terms. According to common usage in Chinese, the more popular translations of COVID are "新型冠状病毒" (novel coronavirus), "新冠肺炎" (COVID pneumonia), and "疫情" (pandemic). I tried searching using these three keywords and found that "新型冠状病毒" tended to yield more policy announcement texts. These announcements, often monotonous and lacking diverse elements, did not meet my research needs. Thus, I excluded this term. Continuing with "新冠肺炎," I found similar results and ultimately decided on "疫情" as my keyword. This keyword produced diverse content, offering a more comprehensive view of the full image of each stage.

Using "疫情" as a keyword, the search results included a vast amount of daily updates on infection and death numbers. While these updates reflect the authorities' transparency regarding infection data, they are merely daily numerical updates and do not contain the elements of framing strategies I require. Observing a common template in these updates, which all began with "截至目前" (as of now), I refined my keyword search. I entered "疫情" in the "include all keywords" field and added "截至目前" in the "exclude keywords" field, ensuring my search results focused on relevant media reports and excluded daily data updates.

After finalizing the keyword, I needed to determine the search location for my keyword. The Chinese government website offered three options: "anywhere on the page," "in the text," and "in the title." I conducted searches in all three locations using the same keyword. I found that searching "anywhere on the page" yielded thousands of results, significantly increasing the difficulty of my research. For example, searching for the initial stage using this option resulted in 6,632 results. While thousands of results could provide a more comprehensive and detailed explanation, the sheer volume exceeded my capacity, given the limited research time. Sampling from thousands of results would weaken the representativeness of my research

findings. Thus, I did not choose the "anywhere on the page" option. Next, I tried searching "in the text" and found 6,547 results for the initial stage set from January to April 2020, still an overwhelming amount. Consequently, I selected the "in the title" option.

Therefore, my search settings in the advanced search function of the Chinese government website were set to the time periods January to April 2020 and December 2022 to February 2023, using the keyword "疫情" in "in the title," and targeting the "News" category.

3.1.4 Data Collection and Sampling Methods

In this section, I elaborate my data collection and sampling process.

Data Collection

After determining my sampling target, I chose to use the Houyi Collector (www.houyicaiji.com) to crawl news reports from the Chinese government website. Houyi Collector is a Chinese language data crawler that is user-friendly and effectively collects the necessary content from the website, including news titles, text, and links.

Sample Methods

Using the Houyi Collector with my confirmed keyword search method, I collected 562 samples for the initial stage of COVID-19 and only 20 samples for the relaxation stage. The 20 samples were clearly insufficient. Considering that China renamed COVID-19 from "COVID-19 Pneumonia" to "COVID-19 Infection" on January 8, 2023, and subsequently stopped all COVID-19 testing and data updates (Xinhua News Agency, 2022, December 27), it's understandable that the term "pandemic" was no longer used in titles. To obtain a sufficient number of samples, I used the same keyword but chose "in the text" instead of "in the title" for "search term location." Under these search settings, I found a total of 326 articles for the relaxation stage. After reviewing these 326 articles, I identified 72 that primarily discussed COVID-19. In this way, I finalized 72 samples for the relaxation stage.

Sampling Stage	Sampling Period	Number of Texts	Source
Initial stage	January 2020 - April 2020	70	Xinhua News
Relaxation stage	December 2022 - February 2023	72	Xinhua News

Table 1

I collected 562 samples in the initial stage and 72 samples in the relaxation stage. To ensure comparability between the two stages and to manage my workload, I applied a sampling method to the initial stage' 562 texts. I calculated that 562/72 is approximately 8, so I determined 8 as my sampling interval.

Since my research aim is to explore Xinhua News Agency's framing strategies during COVID-19, and these strategies might vary with the virus's progression and different time, I arranged the samples chronologically and used systematic sampling to obtain evenly distributed samples over the entire period. Then I set the sampling interval for the initial stage articles to every 8th article. To enhance representativeness, I used an online random sampling tool to select a number between 1 and 8, resulting in 7. Then, starting from the 7th article, I sampled every 8th article, ending up with 70 articles in total.

Through these processes, I obtained a total of 142 samples.

3.2 Choice of Research Methods

In this section, I discuss how I consider and use qualitative and quantitative analysis methods for my research.

Initially, considering my research subject is news texts with the aim to explore meaning construction, I planned to use only qualitative analysis. However, as I read through the texts, I noticed the Chinese authorities' rare use of negative reporting during COVID-19 (Chen & Xu, 2021), which posed a challenge in defining the core problem of focus in both stages. Therefore, I incorporate word frequency analysis, a quantitative method, enabling me to more effectively identify the core focus amidst

the predominantly positive sentiment in the reports. Thus, my research method primarily involves qualitative analysis, supplemented by word frequency analysis.

3.2.1 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research is widely used in hermeneutic, phenomenological, symbolic interaction studies, and more (Patton, 1999, p. 1189). For my study of news reports, qualitative analysis matches my research question well, allowing me to carefully analyze the samples. Under Entman's framing theory (1993), I use qualitative analysis to examine the four elements in each stage: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (p. 52). Based on Entman's theory, I analyze what these four elements are in the samples and how they collectively construct a comprehensive understanding of COVID-19.

3.2.2 Word Frequency Analysis

Due to the scarcity of negative reporting, I incorporate word frequency analysis, examining the top 50 high-frequency words in each stage and creating visual word frequency figures to intuitively display the mainstream topics within the stage. These high-frequency words effectively indicate the focal points of authorities in each stage, providing numerical support for my qualitative analysis. This approach mitigates the inherent subjectivity risks associated with qualitative analysis due to selection bias and enhanced the objectivity of the identified frames (Zhang, 2022, p. 188).

3.3 Utilization of NVivo Software

In my research, I use NVivo software as my tool. NVivo is a software that is easy to code (Kaefer et al., 2015, p. 15). In this software, I can edit nodes in the text and conduct back-and-forth checks between analysis and data, which allows me to easily view the frequency of coding (Kaefer et al., 2015, p. 10). The software also offers basic word frequency analysis function, meeting my requirements for this type of analysis.

To accurately and efficiently identify the problems in the sample reports, I first utilized word frequency analysis to gain an intuitive understanding of the focal points within each stage. Recognizing that Chinese characters typically form meaningful units with at least two characters, I adjusted the character requirement from one to

two for the analysis.

After gaining an intuitive understanding of the themes within each stage, I began coding. During the coding process, I established nodes for the four elements based on Entman's framing theory. Then, I separately imported samples from the two phases for analysis. For content that matched the elements, I coded it into the corresponding nodes. Since the codebook is crucial for understanding my coding process, I present it in Table 2 for easy reader comprehension. It includes detailed definitions for each code, application guidelines, and examples.

During qualitative analysis, I maintained an open-minded approach, reserving potential emerging themes. However, due to the complexity of COVID-19 events, retaining all minor thematic frames was challenging. Therefore, although I maintained an open attitude in qualitative analysis, in order to consistently maintain the purposefulness of my research, I eventually reviewed all my coded nodes. In the end, I only retained the dominant frames and conducted a detailed analysis of them.

Codebook

Code Name	Description	Application Guidelines	Example
Problem Definition	Describes how the text defines or characterizes the issue.	Look for explicit statements or descriptions of the problem. Pay attention to the main concepts and definitions involved.	The COVID-19 pandemic is the most significant sudden public health event in China since the founding of People's Republic of China, with the fastest transmission speed, the broadest infection range, and the most challenging prevention and control
Causality	Analyzes the causes or explanations of the issue provided	Identify and record the causes of the issue as presented in the	Over the past three years, the COVID-19 virus has

	in the text.	text. Note the logic and clarity of the causal relationships.	continued to mutate, with its infectivity and immune escape ability increasing, but its virulence is weakening.
Moral Evaluation	Explores moral viewpoints or ethical judgments in the text.	Identify any moral or ethical evaluations of the issue, including statements about responsibility, justice, or moral obligations.	"Everyone is primarily responsible for their own health," says Chang Zhaorui, a researcher from the Division of Infectious Disease Prevention and Control at the China CDC, in response to a question at a press conference about whether there should still be regulations regarding mask-wearing.
Treatment Recommendation	Extracts solutions, suggestions, or action guidelines from the text.	Identify any proposed solutions, suggested actions, or strategies. Note the specificity and feasibility of the recommendations.	Starting from 24:00 on February 13, all communities (residential areas) in Huanggang City, Hubei Province, were fully closed. Except for medical staff, pandemic prevention workers, and basic livelihood support workers, other residents were not allowed to enter or leave the community (residential area) without permission.

Table 2

3.4 Credibility, Validity, and Limitations of Research Methods

Credibility and quality are important for qualitative research (Patton, 1999, p. 1189). In this section, I elaborate on the credibility, validity, and limitations of my research methodology.

3.4.1 Credibility

The coder's conduct in qualitative analysis is a creative process (Patton, 1999, p. 1190). Researchers, as tools for qualitative analysis (p. 1198), have backgrounds that can influence the interpretation of samples.

In this study, my research topic is the information construction strategy of the Chinese authorities. My research subjects are the reports of Xinhua News Agency. Whether it is the strict lockdown measures in the initial stage, or the new changes brought by the relaxation stage, the framing strategies chosen by the authorities aim to guide the actions of the Chinese people. Therefore, as a Chinese, my background enhances the credibility of my interpretation of these samples (Patton, 1999, p. 1198), as I am one of the target audiences of the authorities' framing strategies. I not only have the ability to read and understand Chinese, but more importantly, I share a common cultural background that resonates culturally with the frames, making my interpretation of frames and understanding of the social dynamics in China at that time beneficial to this research, increasing the research quality and credibility of this study.

In qualitative analysis, the collection of data is an important criterion for credibility (Patton, 1999, p. 1190). My collection of samples is strictly in accordance with my research objectives. Therefore, my samples are consistent with my research goals. From the perspective of data collection, my research has high credibility.

3.4.2 Validity

My guiding theory in this research is Entman's framing theory, which is an important theory in the field of media framing. I strictly adhered to the conceptual definitions of this theory and applied it to my research. This theory effectively addresses my research question and aligns with my research objectives. My research results contribute empirical experience to this theory. Also, I use NVivo software for coding, ensuring

each code's description and application guidelines were clear, thus guaranteeing the transparency and replicability of my study. In conclusion, my research has high validity.

3.4.3 Limitations

The limitation of my research methods is the smaller sample selection in the initial stage. To maintain consistency with the 72 samples from the relaxation phase, I sampled from the 562 samples taken from the initial stage, which resulted in my final selection of 70 samples not being able to represent the full picture of the initial stage and might miss some important information. At the same time, all 70 samples taken from the relaxation phase were analyzed. This caused a difference in the granularity of analysis between the two stages.

At the same time, all coding was completed by myself. Although I strictly followed the theory for coding, and have reviewed my coding results many times, personal interpretations are inevitable, which may have led to discrepancies in the number of references selected for certain nodes in my research.

Chapter 4. Findings

In this chapter, I explore the samples in detail. This chapter is divided into four sections, elaborating on my findings. In the first section, I present the results of the word frequency analysis and discuss them. In the second section, I study how the issues in the initial stage were framed to answer my first research question. In the third section, I examine how the issues in the relaxation stage were framed to answer my second research question. In the fourth section, I compare the two and discuss the transition between them, analyzing the similarities and differences, to answer my third research question.

4.1 Word Frequency Analysis

In this section, I conduct word frequency analyzes on the 70 texts from the initial stage and the 72 texts from the relaxation stage, respectively. The goal of this section is to more effectively identify the mainstream focus of each stage from a data perspective before qualitative analysis, by discovering the dominant words. This section is divided

into three subsections. In the first subsection, the word frequency analysis results of the initial stage are presented. In the second subsection, the word frequency analysis results of the relaxation stage are shown. In the third subsection, I compare the word frequency analysis results of the two stages and explore the differences.

4.1.1 The Initial Stage

I conducted a word frequency analysis on the 70 texts collected during the initial stage. The results indicate that the focus of the reports during the initial phase was centered on the COVID-19 virus, suggesting an emphasis on the urgency and severity of the virus during this phase. This finding is consistent with the word frequency analysis results of other scholars (Yang & Chen, 2020; Zhao et al., 2020), confirming that in the reports of the initial phase, the theme of the public health crisis dominated.

The 50 most frequent words in the texts from the initial phase are shown in the word cluster Figure 1.
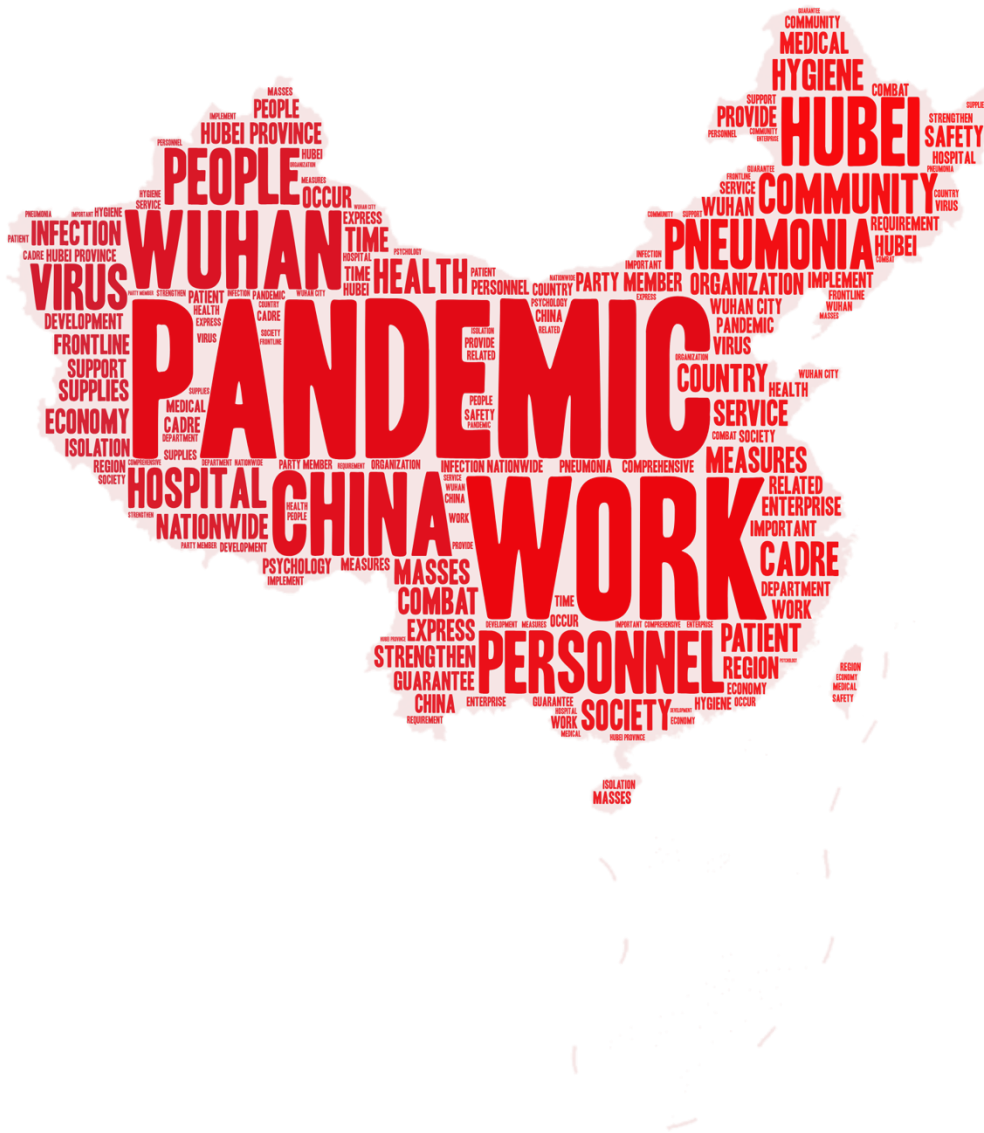
Figure 1

    In the top 50 words with the highest frequency, I manually excluded the two words "Xinhua News Agency" and "reporter" and replaced them with the next two words in order, "time" and "related". Since my research object is the report of Xinhua News Agency, the source of the data is determined. Therefore, my research results do not focus on the source of the data. This replacement ensures that the analyzed vocabulary is highly relevant to my research question.

    In the word frequency analysis results, "pandemic" had the highest frequency.

Words like "pneumonia," "virus," "infection" also accounted for a significant proportion. The frequent appearance of these words indicates that the focus of the text at this stage was primarily on the health and disease related to COVID-19, suggesting a public health crisis theme at this stage.

In terms of regional vocabulary, terms like "China", "Wuhan", and "Hubei" indicate that the geographical focus at this stage was centered on Wuhan city in Hubei province, China.

Words like "hospital," "personnel," and "patient" imply that China has taken necessary medical measures to counter the virus, reflecting the response of the medical system.

Words like "work," "community," "economy," and "enterprise" suggest the pandemic's broader impact on Chinese society and economy.

The results of this word frequency analysis are consistent with Yang and Chen's (2021) word frequency analysis of reports on COVID-19 from five different Chinese newspapers from January 1 to May 15, 2020. In their findings, words like "pandemic," "China," "virus," "pneumonia," "work," "hospital," "patient," "personnel," were among the top 30 high-frequency words (p. 104). This indicates that during the initial phase, the public health crisis theme was the dominant narrative.

Unlike their findings where words like "USA," "global," and "world" were common (p. 104), these terms were absent in my high-frequency findings. Instead, my word frequencies show that terms like "measures," "organizations," "cadres," "party members," and "departments" occupy a certain portion, suggesting a narrative focusing on the government's central role in pandemic management. Given that Yang and Chen's (2021) research targeted international and domestic readers with reports from media outlets like People's Daily, Guangming Daily, Xinhua Daily News, China Daily, and Beijing Review (p. 97), while my study focused on Xinhua's Chinese reports for domestic citizens, the differences in our high-frequency vocabularies suggest that the authorities' non-English reports for domestic citizens emphasize the domestic situation was tense, with a high number of infection cases, and the focus of society was on

organizing teams for rescue efforts. Also, "cadres" and "party members" indicate that ruling party's effective pandemic response, legitimizing the ruling party (Wang & Tao, 2021, p. 544).

Similarly, my high-frequency word findings align with Zhao et al.'s (2020) word frequency findings from hot search words on the social media platform Weibo from December 31, 2019, to February 20, 2020 (p. 2). Their research found that Weibo's hot search words were focused on terms like "pandemic," "patient," "pneumonia," "Wuhan," and "nationwide"(p. 4), consistent with my findings. This confirms that the mainstream narrative during the initial phase revolved around the public health crisis narrative.

4.1.2 The Relaxation Stage

After analyzing the word frequency during the initial phase, I continued with the word frequency analysis for 72 texts from the relaxation phase, summarizing the top 50 words with the highest frequency. The results showed that the reports during this phase mainly focused on two themes: the public health crisis and economic recovery.

In word frequency analysis, the 50 words with the highest frequency as follows.

Figure 2

In the results of word frequency analysis, "pandemic" and "economy" were the two words with the highest frequency, indicating the emphasis on the pandemic and the economy at this stage.

Words like "virus," "infection," "medical," and "treatment" accounted for a significant proportion, hinting at the emphasis on medical treatment at this stage, corresponding to the highest frequency theme of "pandemic."

Words like "consumption," "growth," "enterprise," "market," and "recovery"

accounted for a significant proportion, indicating the economic emphasis at this stage, corresponding to the highest frequency theme of "economy." Thus, during the relaxation phase, these high-frequency words suggest that the two emphasized themes were public health and economic recovery.

In terms of geographical focus, words like "everywhere" and "Beijing" were used to indicate the areas of focus at this stage, suggesting the authorities' nationwide attention at this phase, centered around the capital, Beijing, which aligns with the fact of the early outbreak of the pandemic in Beijing in the winter of 2022 (Dong & Gu, 2022, December 23).

Words like "elderly," "severe," and "countryside" occupied a significant proportion, indicating that during this phase, the authorities paid attention to the infection status of individuals with underlying health conditions and those living in remote areas. The attention of the authorities shows a situation that aligns with the actual circumstances. During this peak of infection, over 90.1% of the deceased were elderly people aged 65 and above (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 112), highlighting the vulnerability of the elderly in this crisis.

The word "optimize" accounted for a certain proportion, indicating the authorities' proactive attitude towards policy improvement at this stage. Words like "vaccination" and "vaccine" occupied a significant proportion, indicating that vaccination was viewed as a measure against the pandemic during this phase.

4.1.3 The Comparison

In sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2, I analyzed the top 50 high-frequency words in reports from the initial and relaxation phases, respectively. In this section, I compare the high-frequency words from both phases. By doing so, I observed the evolution of report content and focus from the initial phase to the relaxation phase, revealing the authorities' narrative focus changes during these two phases, indicating the changes in the objective environment of the COVID-19 policy, such as the virus mutations and improvements in medical levels.

According to Figure 1 and Figure 2, it can be seen that during the initial phase, the term "pneumonia" occupied a significant proportion. However, moving into the

relaxation phase, this term disappeared completely. This aligns with the policy change announced on December 27, 2022, by the State Council, which no longer includes COVID-19 in the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases" and renamed the novel coronavirus pneumonia to novel coronavirus infection (Xinhua News Agency, 2022, December 27). The evolution of the term "pneumonia" from being a high-frequency word to disappearing entirely indicates that the authorities no longer view COVID-19 as a threat. This fundamental policy change would directly lead to a significant shift in the framing of the COVID-19.

Regarding the main theme, during the initial phase, high-frequency words mainly focused on the public health theme. In the relaxation phase, the word "economy" became one of the highest frequency words, almost the same frequency as "pandemic." This implies the introduction of a new economic theme, indicating that the authorities' reporting focus has evolved from solely concentrating on virus prevention to a coexisting emphasis on both public health theme and economic recovery theme. This change in themes indicates that during policy shifts, framing's focus is adjusted to adapt to new policy directions.

Regarding the prevention and control methods, during the initial phase, "isolation" occupied a certain proportion. But in the relaxation phase, this term disappeared. Instead, the newly added high-frequency words "vaccination" and "vaccine" indicate that the authorities' recommended method for controlling the virus spread has changed.

In terms of portraying the infected, during the initial phase, words representing the infected were general, such as "patients" and "masses," which occupied a certain proportion. In the relaxation phase, words like "elderly," "rural," and "severe cases" became high-frequency words for the infected population. Specific population and regional words indicate that during the relaxation phase, the authorities focused on the infection status of specific groups, emphasizing the vulnerability of disadvantaged populations.

By comparing the changes in high-frequency words between the two phases, it can

be seen that the focus of reports in these two different phases has changed, with the public health crisis theme being the common reporting focus in both phases. The topic of economic development received more attention in the relaxation phase. This contrast difference provides a basis for subsequent qualitative research, indicating that the authorities adjusted the information provided according to changes in the virus, changes in medical conditions.

This discovery reveals that during the initial phase and relaxation phase, the focus and mainstream views in the reports evolved, and the potential popular opinions and changing trends are supported by data.

The quantitative analysis results in this section provide an objective and clear preliminary understanding of the potential themes of the two phases from a data perspective. From my current word frequency analysis results, it can be seen that when the authorities changed policies, a new economic theme was introduced as the mainstream topic of the relaxation phase. Furthermore, the authorities' emphasis on the public health crisis underwent a shift in various narrative methods. It is essential to further explore the strategic framing that realizes these changes.

Next, I delve into the specific content of the text, excavating the context and background of these high-frequency words. By combining quantitative and qualitative analysis methods, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the framing strategies in the two phases, to comprehensively answer my research questions.

4.2 Framing Strategy During the Initial Stage of COVID-19

During the initial phase, the high-frequency words were focused on pandemic-related terms, indicating that the focus of reporting during this stage was on the public health crisis. This is consistent with the findings of other scholars for this stage. Shi et al. (2022) analyzed over 45 million Weibo posts from December 1, 2019, to April 30, 2020 (p. 1), and found that during this stage, the public's fear was above normal, especially in January when it surged, particularly in Wuhan (p. 4). Their findings validate the public health crisis shown in my word frequency analysis. They found that although the announcement of the lockdown led to a surge in public fear, it significantly decreased

within two to three days (p. 4). This directly proves that the authorities' communication played a positive role. Also, 97.1% of Chinese believed that China would win the battle against the virus (Zhong et al., 2020, p. 1750), and they had the highest willingness to get vaccinated among 19 countries (Lazarus et al., 2021, p. 255). The Chinese citizens' high compliance with policies and strong trust in the government indicate that the communication measures adopted by the authorities were effective. Therefore, exploring the framing strategy during this stage can provide insight into how the Chinese authorities guided public perceptions and reactions during a crisis, offering a basis for comparison for my third research question, that is, how did the authorities rationalize policy shift.

I analyzed and coded 70 texts collected from the initial phase, combined with the direction given by word frequency analysis, to excavate how meaning was constructed in the text. I used Entman's framing theory to evaluate the problem definition, causal relationships, moral evaluation, and treatments during the initial phase.

4.2.1 Public Health Crisis Theme

In this part, I present my coding results, as shown in Table 3. Using Entman's theory, I analyzed the reports from the initial phase, focusing on how the authorities guided public perceptions through framing strategies.

Name	Description	File	References
Problem Definition	What core issues emerged	1	24
Public health crisis	Virus triggers massive infections and deaths	1	24
Causality	What factors contribute to the public health crisis	1	5
The nature of virus	Origin of virus and nature	1	5

Moral Evaluation	Values in a time of crisis	1	31
Life is above all else	Public health over personal freedom or other considerations	1	31
Treatment recommendation	Solutions or policies to solve the problem	1	43
Government Intervention	Government-led series of measures	1	41
Formulate new regulations and policies	Control the profit-seeking behavior of the business	1	9
Strict control measures	Controlling the behavior of residents	1	32
Individual responsibility	Advocating residents to comply with COVID related regulations	1	2

Table 3

Problem Definition

According to Entman (1993), the problem definition is determined by selectively presenting certain facts and situations. During the initial phase, the authorities strategically communicated with the public, and the public's emotional attitude gradually shifted from negative to neutral, with positive emotions rising (Zhao et al., 2020, p. 9). The frame set by the authorities guided the public's understanding of this crisis. By selectively presenting information about COVID-19, the authorities defined the problem as a public health crisis, with the core issue being the virus causing a large number of infections and deaths.

To further clarify my findings and show how this problem definition was constructed in the reports, I present some of the texts I coded. The following are some key text nodes I coded using the NVivo software.

He Jianfeng, deputy director of the Guangdong Provincial Center for Disease

Control and Prevention, said that the current situation of prevention and control of the novel coronavirus pneumonia in Guangdong is relatively severe, and there is a risk of community transmission [...] He Jianfeng said that with the approach of the Spring Festival, Guangdong predicts that there will definitely be imported cases before and after the Spring Festival, especially before the Spring Festival. (Ma & Zhou, 2020, January 21)

This excerpt was taken from a press conference given by a government official in the early days of the outbreak. The official directly stated that there was a crisis in Guangdong Province, affirming that the virus is transmitted from person to person. After the appearance of COVID, on the afternoon of January 20, 2020, renowned medical expert Zhong Nanshan first confirmed to reporters that the virus could be transmitted from person to person, and that medical staff had been infected (Wang & Qu, 2020, January 20). This excerpt is from the day after the medical expert's confirmation when Chinese officials, for the first time at a press conference, formally confirmed to the public that the virus can be transmitted from person to person. This confirmation deepened the public's awareness of the virus's danger.

> Wuhan Deputy Secretary Hu Lishan revealed at a routine press conference on the prevention and control of the pneumonia pandemic caused by the COVID-19 in Hubei on the evening of the 5th that there are currently 20,629 people in home isolation in Wuhan. (Liang & Yu, 2020, February 5)

This excerpt is from a press conference in Wuhan, where senior Wuhan officials announced the number of people in home isolation. The fact that 20,629 people were in home isolation directly indicates the massive threat of the virus and indirectly shows the unprecedented strain on Wuhan's medical resources.

The authorities have defined the existence of COVID: "The COVID-19 pandemic is the most significant sudden public health event in China since the founding of People's Republic of China, with the fastest transmission speed, the broadest infection range, and the most challenging prevention and control" (Xinhua News Agency, 2020, April 2). This excerpt is taken from an article by Xinhua News Agency that designated

frontline personnel who died in the pandemic as martyrs. This excerpt directly states the official problem definition of the Chinese authorities for COVID-19, that is, an unexpected public health event. The three parallel structures emphasize that COVID is a very harmful virus. What's more, this excerpt was published at the end of the initial stage. In April, China had essentially controlled the pandemic, and society was already in a state of gradual opening. This excerpt actually reinforces the pride of the Chinese people in successfully overcoming the pandemic, and, by emphasizing the danger of the virus, strengthens the outstanding performance of the Communist Party in this crisis.

The above three key nodes are representative nodes of Xinhua News Agency's problem definition construction during the initial phase. In the first node, Chinese officials first confirmed to the public the human-to-human transmission of the virus, marking the authorities' clear acknowledgment of the threat the virus posed to society. Three days after confirming human-to-human transmission, on January 23, the authorities announced the lockdown of Wuhan (Hubei Provincial People's Government, 2020, January 23). The second node directly indicates the widespread impact of the virus and indirectly indicates the strain on medical resources. The third node represents the nature of the virus as defined by Chinese authorities. From these three nodes, it can be seen that during the initial phase, the problem constructed by the authorities is an unprecedented public health crisis.

Causality

Based on Entman's (1993) framing theory, causality provides an explanation for the occurrence of events or problems. During the initial phase, the authorities clarified that the existing issue was a sudden public health crisis. In this problem definition, the corresponding causality is what caused this public health crisis to happen. Regarding the source of the COVID virus, there are many related controversies and even conspiracy theories that the virus originated from a secret laboratory in Wuhan (Bolsen et al., 2020, p. 564). In this part, I reviewed the Chinese authorities' explanation for the source of the virus. Due to the serious public health crisis caused by the virus, I also reviewed the authorities' construction of the virus's nature. I found that, in the early stage of the initial phase, the Chinese authorities believed that the virus might have

originated from illegal wildlife sales in a Wuhan market (Liu & Ren, 2020, January 23; Xiong, 2020, January 27). However, later on, China condemned the international community for stigmatizing China (Yang et al., 2020, April 30) and abandoned the information that the virus might have originated from wildlife. I also found that Xinhua constructed a causality due to the virus's high transmissibility and unknown nature, and the lack of definite treatment measures, explaining the cause of this public health crisis.

To further clarify my findings and demonstrate how this causality is constructed in the reports, I show parts of my coded text. Here are some key text nodes that I coded using NVivo software.

Regarding the explanation of the virus's origin, Xinhua mentioned the possible origin of the virus twice in the report.

The first relevant news report was on January 23, 2020, the day Wuhan was locked down: "The Emergency Committee advises the WHO multidisciplinary expert team to participate in the investigation of the animal origin of the pandemic" (Liu & Ren, 2020, January 23).This excerpt explains that the authorities provided a causal explanation to the people that the virus originated from the consumption of illegal wildlife when the city was locked down. This kind of causal interpretation is noteworthy. It suggests that the authorities created internal contradictions among the people, causing them to blame the lawbreakers, as they brought trouble to the society. Therefore, the causality provided on the day of the lockdown shifted the blame to within the people, legitimizing the government's measures.

The second relevant report regarding the explanation of the virus's origin was published on January 27, 2020："Strengthen security checks, especially for live poultry and other animals " (Xiong, 2020, January 27). This excerpt is from a report detailing a series of measures taken by China's railway transportation departments to contain the spread of the virus. The report emphasizes that the public security organs at all levels should supervise the transportation departments and strengthen the inspection of live poultry and other animals. This highlights the Chinese government's view of live animals as potential dangers and possible virus carriers. This new measure to contain

the virus reinforces the authorities' belief that animals are related to COVID. These two excerpts show that the authorities believed in January that the virus might originated from animals. Although Xinhua mentioned the word "animal", the expression is ambiguous, without explicit confirmation, thereby leaving a reserved space.

These two text nodes are the only information about the origin of the virus that I observed in the 70 texts from the initial phase. They both occurred in the early stage of Xinhua's reports, in January 2020. After that, there was no relevant information in my samples, indicating that the results of this investigation were inconclusive. Therefore, my research found that the way the authorities constructed the origin of the virus shifted from the initial default of originating from animals to later not mentioning the investigation results of the virus's origin. This finding is consistent with Zhang's (2022) study on China Daily. Zhang believes that this represents China's communication failure regarding the virus's origin (p. 195), but I believe that this deliberate avoidance is part of the authorities' strategic communication.

This intentional blank space left by the authorities provides an environment for conspiracy theories in China. Although the 70 texts I collected during the initial phase did not directly reflect the conspiracy theories in China, scholars have found that Hua Chunying, the spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has repeatedly questioned whether the COVID virus originated from the US Fort Detrick Laboratory (Cheng et al., 2022, p. 1173). This indicates that China's conspiracy theories are state-led (p. 1172), same as the United States, but is a counter-conspiracy against the international accusations. This counter-conspiracy framing of the origin of the virus provides a new understanding of the cause of the initial stage' s public health crisis.

Therefore, my data capture of this inconclusive investigation of the Wuhan wild animal market indirectly proves that the authorities deliberately ceased the discussion about the animal origin. Meanwhile, counter-conspiracy theories were used to fill this gap, attributing the blame to a malicious intent from an American laboratory.

Additionally, as the virus spread widely outside of China, voices labeling it as the "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" emerged worldwide, also gaining the support of US

President Trump, reflecting the public's strong intention to attribute blame (Bolsen et al., 2020, p. 566). Overseas Chinese also faced a lot of discrimination as a result (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020, p. 5).

The Chinese authorities strongly condemned this stigmatization phenomenon.

Some politicians in certain countries, driven by narrow personal or party interests, have politicized the COVID-19 pandemic to cover up their own shortcomings in controlling the outbreak. Such actions will not only worsen the situation in those countries but also threaten the overall global cooperation in fighting the pandemic. (Yang et al., 2020, April 30)

Apart from strongly condemning the term "Chinese virus" internationally, the authorities gradually adjusted the causality regarding the origin of new infection cases: "Believing the spreading virus abroad was becoming a 'new problem' that brought pressure to China." (Xinhua News Agency, 2020, March 18). This excerpt expresses the success of domestic control with no new cases and the spread of the virus overseas. It shows that the authorities have reframed the source of the public health crisis from initially spreading from Wuhan to new cases being imported from abroad.

My findings are consistent with Xia et al. (2022), who state that the authorities use a contrast frame to highlight the failures of the Trump government in pandemic prevention and control (p. 257), reflecting the success of the Chinese system. However, my findings are not only limited to the existence of this contrast frame but go further by showing how this contrast exists in the framing and how it shapes the public's overall understanding of the virus. Specifically, my findings indicate that in the initial stage, the contrast frame interacted with other frames to form a more powerful collective frame. Here, I observed the interaction between the contrast frame and counter-conspiracy theories. On one hand, the authorities emphasized the slander of China by foreign politicians, reflecting the unfair treatment China suffered. On the other hand, they stressed that new infection cases were all imported from abroad, indicating the failure of pandemic control in other countries. The combination of these two aspects strengthened domestic confidence and caution towards the United States.

The contrast depiction of China and the US in opposition is something that was not seen during the SARS health crisis in China (Zhang, 2022, p. 196), but during the COVID pandemic, the authorities employed framing emphasizing the China-US conflict, blaming the failures of the Trump administration (Zhang, 2022, p. 196; Xia et al., 2022, p. 261; Yang & Chen, 2020, p. 89).

The above nodes show that during the initial phase, the authorities reconstructed the origin of the virus and the source of new infection cases through framing methods. The authorities used counter-conspiracy theories to construct that the pandemic originated from the U.S. Detrick laboratory and the conspiracy theories from western governments aim to curb China's development (Cheng et al., 2022, p. 1181). The authorities also reconstructed that new cases were imported from abroad, leading to a public health crisis. This method reinforces the confrontational concept between China and the U.S., subtly instills the idea that the authorities are the defenders of the Chinese people's interests, strengthens the authority's power, and consolidates the legitimacy of the Communist Party (p. 1177).

In this health crisis "problem", in addition to the explanation of the virus's origin, the explanation of the virus's nature is indispensable. The following points show Xinhua's interpretation of the virus: "'We tested the air conditioning, door handles, and elevator buttons for the virus's nucleic acid,' said Dean Wang Wei " (Cao et al., 2020, March 26). This excerpt is from Wang Wei, the dean of a hospital in Wuhan, which shows the authorities' understanding of the virus. This new virus has a high transmissibility, not only can it spread from person to person, but it can also spread by adhering to object surfaces.

This construction of the virus's dangerous nature helps the public understand why this virus has caused a severe public health crisis and offers citizens a rationalized space for understanding the strict lockdown measures in Wuhan.

Besides the high danger of the virus, the lack of effective treatment methods is also a reason for this public health crisis: "According to medical experts, in the absence of specific drugs and vaccines, convalescent plasma therapy is one of the effective

means for treating severely ill COVID-19 patients" (Xu & Yu, 2020, February 19). This excerpt comes from an article discussing the use of convalescent plasma therapy to treat severe and critical cases. The excerpt explicitly states that there are no specific drugs for the COVID-19 virus, nor vaccines for prevention and treatment. Although the excerpt mentions the use of plasma therapy, this method targets a limited population and is difficult to implement on a large scale. Therefore, this quote directly and indirectly indicates that there are no specialized treatment methods for this unknown virus.

From the above empirical analysis, it can be seen that the authorities provided the public with a carefully designed causal explanation. This includes emphasizing the virus's high transmission ability and clearly indicating the lack of effective treatment methods. This provides a lot of acceptance space for the public to accept the strict preventive measures implemented and the increasing number of infections and deaths. Also, although the government's early response to the virus had many issues (Li et al., 2021, p. 658; Mutua & Ong' ong'a, 2020, p. 5；Zhang et al., 2020, p. 7), the authorities avoided the early government's chaotic handling in providing a causal explanation (Mei, 2020, p. 317). Instead, they emphasized the deadly danger of the virus, which helps to alleviate the government's responsibility and reduce public criticism of the government. The counter-conspiracy theory led by the authorities built the U.S. laboratory as the origin of the virus and set up the U.S. as an enemy (Cheng et al., 2022, p. 1181), to some extent，providing ample fuel for constructing the moral evaluation of this "problem".

Moral Evaluation

According to Entman's theory (1993), moral evaluation refers to the values that play a role in a particular issue. The construction of moral evaluation guides people's actions in response to the issue. In the public health crisis I studied, the prevailing moral evaluation constructed by the authorities is that life is paramount during this crisis. I found that when constructing this moral evaluation, there was a strong display of patriotism and the use of war metaphors to create a "heroic" image (Xia et al., 2022, p. 261; Gui, 2021), which led to a binary moral evaluation, that is, citizens who comply

with strict prevention and control measures during this crisis are national heroes.

To further explain my findings and show how this value is constructed in the text, I present some of the text I coded using NVivo software.

> Upon hearing that the hospital was going to aid Wuhan, she was the first to sign up […] "Participating in a national rescue operation with the army for the first time feels extremely sacred," said Li Jun at the departure ceremony, not daring to look at her husband and 7-year-old daughter who came to see her off. As she boarded the vehicle, tears streamed down her face. Initially, after working on New Year's Eve, she was going to take a long vacation and planned to spend quality time with her family during the holidays.   （Jia, 2020, January 25）

This excerpt is from a Xinhua News Agency report describing the medical team from the Air Force Medical University going to Wuhan for a rescue mission. The excerpt tells the story of medical staff from outside Wuhan going there to assist. By describing Li Jun's personal decision to aid Wuhan during the Spring Festival leaving her family, it depicts the emotional struggles of ordinary medical staff. Li Jun's personal choice resonates with Chinese traditional collectivist values. Thus, this framing, which closely aligns with traditional Chinese cultural values, greatly increases public acceptance of this moral evaluation.

> Fifty-year-old Song Liqiang is the deputy director of the Department of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine at Xijing Hospital. […] "That night, my wife stayed with our elderly parents at home for New Year's Eve. When they heard I was going to the pandemic area, they were worried, but they were all very supportive," Song Liqiang said. Before leaving, the only task he entrusted to his wife, Li Yan, was to take good care of their elderly parents. (Jia, 2020, January 25)

This excerpt once again uses detailed descriptions to depict individual stories. Going to the pandemic area for aiding during the Spring Festival indirectly expresses the uncontrollable state of the Wuhan pandemic. Xinhua again depicts the personal choices of ordinary people, highlighting the emphasis on filial piety within Chinese

culture, arousing public admiration and sympathy. Song Liqiang's elderly parents, though worried, were supportive, reflecting their sacrifice and resonating with the concept of "平天下"(serving the greater good) prevalent in Chinese culture.

> Before departure, medical staff from various departments […] had their hair uniformly trimmed. Nurse Fu Shuijuan didn't regret cutting her long hair, but she worried about her 5-year-old daughter: at 6 am when she left the house, her daughter was still asleep, not knowing that her mother was going on a trip. This is the fourth group of medical teams dispatched by Zhejiang Province to support pandemic prevention. (Fang et al., 2020, February 9)

This excerpt describes the individual stories of medical staff from other provinces going to Hubei province for support. Collective hair cutting is because wearing protective clothing for a long time will wet the hair, making it inconvenient for prolonged work. The description of hair cutting indicates the uncontrollable state of the pandemic and the current situation of medical staff's extended working hours. This excerpt once again describes the individual choices of facing rescue tasks and family.

The above excerpts describe the personal stories of medical staff facing the initial stage's pandemic, sacrificing their personal families and joining the rescue teams. These three stories, from the perspectives of collectivism, filial piety culture, and family values in Chinese values, construct the value that life is above all during a crisis.

The collective interest is commonly emphasized during times of crisis. Many countries and regions appealed to their populations to prioritize collective interest during the COVID period (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, p. 6). For example, in the Macau region, there was a call for everyone's well-being, urging people to stay in and look after their own families for the benefit of the entire Macau area (Wang et al., 2023, p. 8). Norway experienced a similar situation, with Norwegians coming together due to the cultural concept of "dugnad", motivating them to work for the common good of the community (Ihlen et al., 2022, p. 193). Oslo used "Do it for Oslo" to encourage people to adhere the suggestions (p. 193).

While emphasizing collective interest, individual losses were downplayed (Wang

et al., 2023, p. 8). Of my text, I found that China's approach to emphasizing collective interest is entirely different. Of my text, China also advocates collectivism, but collective interest and individual interest are seen as opposing, not downplayed, but rather the sacrifice of individual interest. China promotes the sacrifice of individual interests for the maximization of collective benefits. All three textual nodes mentioned above praise the act of sacrificing one's own small family and dedicating oneself to the collective interest, showing that China's construction of collectivism during times of crisis is distinct. This way of shaping collective interest is more like heroism (Xia et al., 2022, p. 261) instead of normal collectivism. This construction shapes the behavior of complying with strict lockdown policies as responsible moral actions and offers a moral halo to frontline medical staff.

> Where there are difficulties, police officers appear; where there is a pandemic, police officers fight. He said, "In the face of the pandemic, the police do not retreat. This is the language written in the officers' letter of request for battle. (Tan & Yu, 2020, February 23)

The excerpt describes the vow of the police community during the pandemic. The letter of request for battle directly indicates that the Chinese authorities used war metaphors during the COVID period. In fact, war metaphors are often employed during crises. During COVID, China was confirmed to have used war metaphors extensively (Gui, 2021; Wang & Tao, 2021). In times of crisis, the use of war metaphors often promotes national unity (Wang et al., 2023, p. 2), but war metaphors are believed to exacerbate anxiety and panic, and can be cruel to patients (Semino, 2021, p. 50). For instance, while war metaphors were successful in China, they failed in some Western contexts (p. 51). This might be because the use of war metaphors simplifies the richness of morality and ethics to a simple good or bad (Wang et al., 2023, p. 2), making it easier for the public to accept the possibility of autocracy (Semino, 2021, p. 52). China's political system and cultural values make it relatively easier for the Chinese to accept.

> Hua Yuchen, a music teacher […] chose to become a volunteer to contribute to the fight against the pandemic. […] At the Wuhan Beihu toll station, Hua

Yuchen witnessed large trucks and lorries from all directions rushing to Wuhan with supplies, all carrying banners saying, "Wuhan is not afraid, we are here!" A village cadre from Wenchuan came with villagers, driving more than 20 hours to send supplies to Wuhan, with a banner that read, "Wenchuan is grateful, Wuhan rise!" Hua Yuchen said, "Only by personally experiencing that scene can you feel the shock... You will think, don't be afraid, Wuhan will not lose." (Tan & Yu, 2020, February 23)

This excerpt uses 'winning or losing' to describe the situation of the pandemic in Wuhan, directly indicating that the pandemic in Wuhan is perceived as a war. This excerpt highlights the spontaneous volunteer actions of the Chinese people and the support from all over the country. The excerpt stimulates emotions by leveraging the historical background of the national trauma from the 8.0 magnitude Wenchuan earthquake happened in 2008 to inspire people to overcome the difficulties of the pandemic.

The above nodes prove that the authorities have emphasized national unity in fighting the virus through narrative means, reflecting a strong sense of patriotism.

3 minutes, 180 seconds, grief fills our hearts.

The heroic motherland and the heroic people have written a heart-wrenching chapter in the history of mankind's fight against the pandemic.

3 minutes, 180 seconds, the alarm echoes throughout the land…

Farewell, heroes! Today, from the south to the north of the Yangtze River, inside and outside the Great Wall, the nation mourns the heroes with the highest tribute, and the people bid farewell to the heroes with the deepest remembrance. (Xinhua News Agency, 2020, April 04)

This excerpt recounts how on Qingming Festival, a traditional Chinese holiday for commemorating ancestors, people across the nation observed a three-minute silence in memory of the "heroes" who sacrificed their lives during the pandemic. The data indicates that on this day, people's emotions were the saddest (Shi et al., 2022, p. 4). The "Great Wall" is a representative architectural symbol of the Chinese nation, built

thousands of years ago by Emperor Qin Shi Huang to protect the Chinese from foreign invasions. Coupled with the fact that only China successfully controlled the pandemic, this sparks a sense of national superiority. This excerpt reflects that the authorities perceive the end of the pandemic not merely as a scientific accomplishment in terms of case termination, but as a victory for the nation.

The key nodes above illustrate how the Chinese authorities constructed moral evaluations during the initial phase. By employing war metaphors (Gui, 2021; Wang & Tao, 2021), the authorities simplified complex moral evaluations into a binary of good vs. bad. Numerous stories that chose collective benefits over individual ones demonstrate to the public that the "right" choice is self-sacrifice and forgoing personal interests. Additionally, I discovered the introduction of the concept of heroism, similar to the findings of Xia et al. (2022). Their study identified the use of a heroism frame by Chinese media, praising the contributions of medical personnel. The difference in my research, although also identifying the heroism frame, is that the hero frame is not limited, as in Xia et al. (2022), to merely describing medical personnel as heroes. My research reveals that the heroic image constructed by the authorities encompasses every ordinary individual contributing to the pandemic response. This universalistic construction of heroes exerts a moral influence on every member of society. Through this construction, the authorities successfully built a moral evaluation that life is above all during times of crisis.

Treatments

According to Entman (1993), treatments refer to the suggestions and solutions proposed to address the issues at this stage. After analyzing the previous three elements, namely problem definition, causality, and moral evaluation, I now delve into the methods suggested by the authorities to resolve this issue. The solutions provided by the authorities are constrained by the preceding three factors. I found that the suggestions at this stage can be categorized into two: individual responsibility and government intervention, with the latter being overwhelmingly predominant, reflecting the immense power of the government at this juncture.

To further elucidate my findings and demonstrate how this treatment is

constructed in the reports, I present some key text nodes from my coded texts using the NVivo software.

> Based on a grid system, carry out rolling screening of personnel within the jurisdiction; collect fever and cough patient purchase records of related medicines from retail pharmacies within the jurisdiction every day, and report according to the pandemic reporting procedures.　(Li, 2020, January 30)

The excerpt indicates that the government, organized by communities and streets, enforces strict regulation on the procurement of medicines in pharmacies. Residents buying fever-reducing drugs or other medications related to COVID-19 symptoms are required to register their personal information so that the government can quickly identify potential cases and control the spread of the virus.

> Starting from 24:00 on February 13, all communities (residential areas) in Huanggang City, Hubei Province, were fully closed. Except for medical staff, pandemic prevention workers, and basic livelihood support workers, other residents were not allowed to enter or leave the community (residential area) without permission. (Zou & Xu, 2020, February 13)

This excerpt describes the stringent pandemic control measures in Huanggang City, Hubei Province, which is close to Wuhan. It suggests that the virus had spread from Wuhan to other neighboring cities. The use of absolute terms like "fully" and "permission" embodies the strictness of the zero-COVID policy, highlighting the authoritative stance of the authorities at this stage.

Both of the above key nodes reflect the strict lockdown measures implemented by the authorities. Such stringent measures drew criticism (Rigby & Mason, 2022, May 10), leading to a historical drop in the international public's favorable view of China (Zhang, 2022, p. 183). However, research by Shi et al. (2022) found that after the lockdown on January 23rd, the feelings of tension and anxiety among the Chinese public dropped significantly. The public's sentiment gradually shifted from negative to neutral, with positive emotions steadily rising (p. 4). This suggests that the Chinese public not only did not oppose these policies but highly accepted these stringent

measures.

Apart from imposing restrictions on the lives of its citizens, the authorities also limited businesses.

> An official from the Hubei Provincial Market Supervision Administration explained that during the I-level and II-level public health emergency response periods for the novel coronavirus pneumonia outbreak in Hubei Province, prices for medical supplies related to pandemic prevention and control, protective disinfection products, agricultural products closely related to people's daily lives such as fruits, vegetables, livestock, and poultry, as well as food like rice, flour, oil, and transportation fees, must not be increased. Those who are found to be "price gouging" will be dealt with swiftly and severely according to the "People's Republic of China Price Law" and will be ordered to correct the issue immediately. （Li, 2020, January 27）

This excerpt is from the Hubei Provincial Market Supervision Administration regarding the new policy on price violations during the pandemic. The authorities' actions against enterprises for hiking prices during COVID times reflect their firm stance on representing people's benefits. By safeguarding the interests of the public in this way, trust in the ruling party is reinforced.

I also observed that, besides the strong intervention by the government, the authorities also introduced a few sparse recommendations regarding individual responsibility: "When residents have a fever, if no pneumonia symptoms are present, it is recommended to self-quarantine at home and establish contact with doctors from the community health service center" (Liang & Yu, 2020, February 5). This excerpt offers the government's advice on how individuals should respond if they contract the virus. In my sample, such personal treatments are rare, with the government's strict control measures occupying the majority of the content. This mirrors the high-pressure political environment during the initial phase (Xia et al., 2022, p. 271). This was not seen during the previous SARS phase (Zhang, 2022, p. 196).

The analysis of the above key nodes indicates that the authorities have absolute

discursive power and administrative power in dealing with the COVID crisis. This strict policy has led to a significant decline in the international public's goodwill towards China (Zhang, 2022, p. 183), but the domestic public has shown a high degree of acceptance (Shi et al., 2022, p. 4). Under such strict lockdown measures, people have demonstrated the highest willingness to get vaccinated and the most positive attitude towards the pandemic among 19 countries (Lazarus et al., 2021, p. 255). This suggests that the Chinese authorities have adopted different strategies in their domestic and information dissemination, and the domestic frame construction has been very successful. The success of this strict policy treatments cannot be separated from the authorities' strategic communication of framing.

The full image

The previous analysis, from the perspective of the four elements of framing (Entman 1993), explained how the authorities constructed a problem during the initial phase. My analysis found that the authorities strategically constructed this public health crisis problem. Overall, it is portrayed as a war of humanity against the virus. Under this full image, the problem definition, causal explanation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation interact with each other, strategically guiding the public's perceptions.

In the face of the virus's strong transmissibility and the imminent collapse of local medical resources during the initial phase of the public health crisis (causal explanation), the authorities conveyed to the public that the only way to win this "war" (moral evaluation) was to strictly lock themselves at home and ensure, as much as possible, that they were not infected. The high level of national unity and national pride invoked in the "moral evaluation" and the opposition to stigmatization in the "causal explanation" strengthened the state-driven counter-conspiracy theory that the virus is from US lab, reinforcing resistance to external enemies and emphasizing national unity (Cheng et al., 2022). By highlighting the successful control outcomes (treatment recommendation) and comparing them with other countries (Xia et al., 2022; Yang & Chen, 2020), the sense of national superiority constructed in the moral evaluation was reinforced, further enhancing national pride (Wang & Tao, 2021; Yang & Chen, 2020).

4.3 Framing Strategy During the Relaxation Stage of COVID-19

4.1.2's word frequency analysis found that during the relaxation phase, high-frequency words focus on pandemic and economic-related terms, further suggests that the reporting focus during this phase is on public health crisis and economy recovery themes. This is clearly in contrast to the initial phase's lack of emphasis on the economy (Zhang, 2022, p. 196); instead, it aligns with the early pandemic framing strategy focus of some Western countries, emphasizing the economic consequences (Sørensen & Evensen, 2023, p. 5).

Due to this emphasis on the economy during this phase, two themes coexisted. To comprehensively study the framing strategies of this phase, I separately investigated the themes of public health crisis and economic recovery. I identified four elements (problem definition, causality, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation) under the public health crisis and four elements under the economic recovery theme. By doing so, I could more clearly sort out the framing strategies of this phase, ensuring the clarity of the analysis and the quality of my research. The word frequency analysis results in subsection 4.1.2 show that during the relaxation phase, the most frequent words were "pandemic," followed by "economy." Therefore, I first analyzed the theme of public health crisis, then the theme of economic recovery. Through the analysis of this phase, a comparative foundation is provided to answer my third research question, which is how the authorities rationalized policy shifts. At the end of this section, I combine the framing strategies of the two themes and conduct a comprehensive analysis of how both themes collectively frame the issue to form a full image, thereby influencing people's perceptions during the relaxation phase.

4.3.1 Public Health Crisis Theme

In this subsection, I present my coding results, as shown in Table 4.

Name	Description	File	References
Problem Definition	What core issues emerged	1	28
Public health crisis	A public health crisis targeted at specific populations, where most people will get through smoothly.	1	28
Causality	What factors contribute to the public health crisis	1	37
Changing conditions	Vulnerability of specific populations, reduction in the toxicity of the virus, and improvement in medical standards.	1	37
Moral Evaluation	Values in a time of crisis	1	19
	Protecting specific populations is important. Everyone is the primary responsible for their own health.	1	19
Treatment recommendation	Solutions or policies to solve the problem	1	39
Adaptable and targeted strategies.	High emphasis on prevention and treatment for specific populations. Advocate personal preventive behavior.	1	39

Table 4

Problem definition

According to Entman's theory, problem definition is determined by selectively presenting certain facts or situations to identify current issues that need to be resolved.

To further clarify my findings and show how this issue was constructed in the reports, I present some key text nodes that I coded using the NVivo software.

"Overall, the production capacity for our country's COVID-19 treatment drugs can fulfill patients' demands. However, due to the recent surge in patient numbers, the demand for these drugs has dramatically increased, leading to a shortage of some specific drugs in certain areas," stated Zhou Jian, Deputy Director of the Consumer Products Industry Department of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology […] Any temporary shortages of antigen detection reagents in certain locations are mainly due to previously low market demand and depleted pharmacy inventories. (Hu et al., 2022, December 14)

This excerpt is from the State Council press conference. The excerpt indirectly indicates an increase in infections during the relaxation phase through the phenomenon of drug shortages. However, the drug supply was neither timely nor sufficient (Allen, 2022, December 14). This indicates the lack of transparency in the authorities' communication.

Recently, there has been a rapid increase in demand for fever clinics, causing the discrepancy between supply and demand to become more evident, says Jiao Yahui, the Director of the Department of Medical Affairs of the National Health and Health Commission. Yahui reassures that the utilization rate of corresponding medical resources is within a safe and controllable range. (Hu et al., 2022, December 14)

This excerpt is taken from the State Council press conference. The authorities directly stated that after the pandemic measures were lifted, domestic cases surged, posing challenges to the medical system. Unlike Nordic countries' use of uncertainty (Sørensen & Evensen, 2023), in the face of a surge in cases due to new policies, the authorities directly stated that medical resources are within a safe and controllable range.

The authorities provided specific data to the people while stating that everything was under control: "Recent statistics show that the hospital sees an average of 350 to 400 cases of fever outpatients per day and about 500 emergency cases per day" (Dong

& Gu, 2022, December 23). This excerpt shows the authorities' transparency during the relaxation phase by presenting data. The report selected a medical expert, the deputy dean of a Beijing hospital, to enhance the credibility of the content. Under these circumstances, it was demonstrated that China already had the capacity to handle such a magnitude of infections.

From the above quotations, it can be seen that the Chinese authorities have a certain level of transparency in terms of data, but their language is controlled and positive.

> Jiao Yahui, director of the Department of Medical Administration of the National Health Commission, reported that the national surge in fever clinic visits reached a peak at 2.867 million on December 23, 2022, and subsequently followed a steady downward trajectory to 477,000 by January 12, 2023. [...]
> The tally of severe patients hospitalized with COVID-19 hit a high of 128,000 on January 5, 2023, which then gradually tapered off to 105,000 by January 12 [...] from December 8, 2022, to January 12, 2023, hospitals across the nation reported a total of 59,938 fatalities related to the COVID-19 infection. This encompassed 5,503 deaths as a result of respiratory failure caused by the COVID-19 , and 54,435 deaths triggered by the virus along with pre-existing conditions. The bulk of the deceased, over 90%, had underlying health issues, with an average age of 80.3. (Xinhua News Agency, 2023, January 14)

This excerpt, by citing specific data, shows the authorities' efforts to maintain public trust. The data directly shows that the main threat from the virus is to the elderly population.

The above nodes show that the authorities have made it clear that only specific groups and areas would be threatened by the virus, indirectly indicating that the rise in new cases will not cause a widespread public health crisis, alleviating public concerns.

During the relaxation phase, the authorities emphasized the virus's threat to vulnerable populations, framing the current issue as a crisis affecting a minority, with most of the society navigating through smoothly. Over time, two months after relaxing

the policies, in February 2023, the authorities stated that China's pandemic peak had passed, society gradually returned to normal, and the public health crisis no longer existed.

> Liang Wannian stated that China has withstood the test of this round of the pandemic, established a good population immune barrier, and it can be said that this round of the pandemic is basically over, and the current infections are in a sporadic and localized outbreak state. (Gu & Dong, 2023, February 23)

The above key nodes indicate that the authorities announced that China's pandemic peak had been successfully navigated. The authorities no longer viewed the virus as a factor that could cause a societal crisis.

This part's analysis found that during the relaxation phase, the authorities framed the current issue as a public health crisis that would only affect a minority, reducing public concerns. At the same time, in just over two months, the authorities announced that China's pandemic had entered a stable phase, and the public health crisis had been resolved.

Causality

Based on Entman's theory (1993), causal explanation refers to the explanation of the causes of a certain event. In this public health crisis, during the relaxation phase facing a nationwide peak of infections (The Lancet Regional Health-Western Pacific, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023), the authorities emphasized the reduction of the virus's danger and the improvement of medical standards, indicating that the current virus will not pose a threat to the lives of most people. At the same time, the authorities quoted a large number of medical experts and used medical knowledge to stratify the population at risk, emphasizing the vulnerability of the elderly.

To enhance the understanding of my findings and illustrate the construction of causal explanations in the reports, I present several partially coded excerpts. Below are some key text nodes that I coded with the help of NVivo software.

> The pathogenicity of the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus has significantly decreased, and the majority of infections are asymptomatic or mild, so severe cases are rare. Wang Guiqiang, Director of the Department of

Infectious Diseases at Peking University First Hospital, said that most COVID-19 patients can be managed and treated at home. [...] Elderly people and children are groups that require special attention during the pandemic prevention and control process, with the elderly being at a higher risk for severe COVID-19 pneumonia. (Gu et al., 2022, December 8)

This excerpt introduces medical experts' description of the COVID virus, directly stating that the current COVID variant is different from the previous COVID variant, and the virus that is prevalent in this phase will only threaten the elderly, and most can recover on their own at home. This has an essential difference from the initial stage's description of the virus's nature.

Liu Qingquan, the President of Beijing Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital affiliated with Capital Medical University, stated that clinical practice has proven the significant effectiveness of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) […] can significantly improve symptoms such as fever, sore throat, cough, and fatigue in patients with COVID-19.   (Zhang & Tian, 2022, December 9)

The excerpt text comes from a press conference convened by the State Council. The text emphasizes that China has fully mastered the treatment of COVID-19, directly indicating that the significant improvement in medical standards can effectively treat patients and will not lead to the collapse of the medical system.

The authorities started from the changes in objective circumstances to provide reasons for the policy shift: "With the significant weakening of the pathogenicity and virulence of the Omicron variant and the continuous improvement of China's medical treatment, pathogen detection, and vaccination capabilities" (Wang, 2023, January 9). This quote emphasizes the increase in China's vaccination rate, indicating China already possesses the objective conditions to abandon the zero-COVID policy, and the authorities, approaching from a scientific perspective, inform people that the situation has changed.

The above nodes emphasize that the virus will only harm vulnerable groups, and the improvement in medical standards allows China to form efficient and effective

treatment methods for COVID.

The authorities explained the changes in the virus: "Over the past three years, the COVID-19 virus has continued to mutate, with its infectivity and immune escape ability increasing, but its virulence is weakening" (Dong & Li, 2023, February 9). The quoted comes from the introduction of China's famous expert Wu Zunyou, who stated that the virulence of the virus has indeed decreased. The new definition of the nature of the virus provides a basis for understanding the new policy.

The above nodes show that the authorities widely adopt the words of medical experts, scientifically indicating that the danger of the virus has decreased. At the same time, the authorities stratified the risk groups, detailed the dangers of the virus to various social groups, reduced public worries, and demonstrated transparency.

Moral evaluation

According to Entman's theory (1993), moral evaluation establishes values during a crisis. During the relaxation phase of the public health crisis, the authorities emphasized the concept that "everyone is the primary person responsible for their own health" (Xinhua News Agency, 2023, January 7)., highlighting individual responsibility. At the same time, the importance of protecting vulnerable groups was underscored by the authorities.

To enhance the understanding of my findings and illustrate the construction of moral evaluation in the reports, I present several partially coded excerpts. Below are some key text nodes that I coded with the help of NVivo software.

> Doing everything possible to ensure proper allocation of medical resources, supply of medicine production capabilities, and coverage of vaccination, with an emphasis on protecting key populations such as the elderly, pregnant women, and children. We are making every effort to reduce severe cases and minimize fatalities. （Wang, 2023, January 9）

This text nodes indicate the authorities' commitment to protecting the health of vulnerable groups. Since the problem definition here concerns a public health crisis for a minority of the population, this commitment reflects the authorities' emphasis on the value of human life.

"Everyone is primarily responsible for their own health," says Chang Zhaorui, a researcher from the Division of Infectious Disease Prevention and Control at the China CDC, in response to a question at a press conference about whether there should still be regulations regarding mask-wearing. (Gao et al., 2023, January 11)

This quote shows the authorities emphasizing personal responsibility, encouraging the public to take self-protective measures.

At this stage, the focus of the authorities on the public health crisis had changed: "Ensuring the physical health and safety of the people is the fundamental premise for the normal operation of the economy and society" (Yan, 2022, December 22). This quote shows the authorities emphasizing the importance of health condition and economy recovery.

For the past three years, our country has successfully avoided the widespread prevalence of the more virulent original strain and the Delta variant, significantly reduced severe cases and deaths, and winning a valuable window period for the research and application of vaccines and the preparation of medical resources. (Chen et al., 2023, January 14)

The above text nodes indicate that, during the relaxation phase, the government still maintained its commitment to the safety of people's lives, emphasizing the importance of scientific prevention and control work. However, the guarantee of the safety of people's lives is constructed as a prerequisite for economic recovery. This reveals the authorities' narrative bias.

This section's moral evaluation demonstrates the government's firm commitment to protecting vulnerable groups and emphasizes that everyone should be responsible for their own health.

Treatments

According to Entman's theory (1993), treatments offer solutions to the problem. During the relaxation phase of the public health crisis, the treatment was to gradually and progressively relax measures. In the month when the COVID policy was terminated, in December 2022, the authorities retained daily monitoring for schools and elderly

institutions. By the end of December, the authorities waived testing requirements for schools. In January 2023, they announced the abandonment of testing requirements for hospitals. This reflects the authorities' targeted strengthening of protection for vulnerable groups during this phase. At the same time, the authorities encouraged every individual to adopt protective measures.

To further elucidate my findings, I showcase some of my coded nodes.

First, nucleic acid testing for all individuals should not be carried out based on administrative regions; second, except for special places such as nursing homes, welfare homes, medical institutions, childcare institutions, and primary and secondary schools, negative nucleic acid test results are not required. (Gu et al., 2022, December 8)

This quote indicates that the relaxation of pandemic policies was gradual. Societal restrictions were fully relaxed, with attention given to children and elderly institutions. However, as time went on, policies continued to change. At the end of December, a notice indicated that educational institutions were no longer required to undergo mandatory nucleic acid testing (Xinhua, 2022, December 30). In January, the nucleic acid testing policy for hospitals was also canceled. The government issued detailed medication and home treatment recommendations, encouraging patients to receive treatment at home (Xinhua News Agency, 2023, January 16).

These nodes show that, during the relaxation phase, the authorities gradually relaxed the COVID policies, specifically targeting vulnerable groups.

4.3.2 Economy Recovery Theme

In the word frequency analysis study of 4.1.2, it was found that, in addition to the word "pandemic" during the relaxation phase, economic-related words occupied a certain proportion. This indicates that, besides the public health crisis, the focus of the report during this phase also included the theme of economic recovery.

For this phase, I coded the 72 texts I collected again. This time, the coding was based on the theme of economic recovery.

In this part, I present my coding results, as shown in Table 5. This coding demonstrates how the authorities framed the issue of economic recovery during the

relaxation phase.

Name	Description	File	References
Problem Definition	What core issues emerged	1	39
Economic Recovery	The economy recovers from previous interruptions.	1	39
Causality	What factors contribute to the economic recovery	1	21
New policies instill confidence	The new policies bring confidence to businesses and individuals, increasing consumer and investment behavior.	1	21
Moral Evaluation	Values in a time of crisis	1	23
Prioritize the well-being of individuals and communities.	The well-being of individuals and communities is important.	1	23
Treatment recommendation	Solutions or policies to solve the problem	1	19
Government support	Providing a series of measures favorable to enterprises, assisting individuals in employment.	1	19

Table 5

Problem definition

During this phase, by showcasing specific economic recovery data, the authorities indicated that terminating the zero COVID policy had a stimulating effect on the economy. The authorities defined the issues of this phase as economic recovery and development, suggesting that terminating the zero COVID policy stimulated economic growth.

At this stage, the authorities viewed the lifting of pandemic measures as a means to aid economic recovery: "Optimize their disease prevention and control strategies. A myriad of measures has been put into place to solidify the resumption of work and production, continuously releasing an energetic force towards a rapid economic recovery" (Wei & Wang, 2022, December 21). This positive and active tone implies that the economy has been impacted, reflecting the authorities' emphasis on economic issues. This quoted demonstrate the authorities' confidence in the economic recovery during this phase.

> Data from the Ministry of Transport shows that it is estimated that the total passenger flow during the Spring Festival travel season will be about 2.095 billion people, a 99.5% increase compared to the same period in 2022, recovering to 70.3% of the same period in 2019. (Ye & Fan, 2023, January 7)

The above nodes show the recovery of China's economy from the pandemic, emphasizing that after terminating the zero COVID policy, the society's economy was restored, with significant growth in various sectors such as retail and transportation.

Causality

During the relaxation phase, the governments, by showing the confidence that terminating the zero COVID policy brought to businesses, the public returned to their pre-pandemic lifestyles, indicating an improved overall economic outlook.

> Confidence in Chinese assets has significantly increased among foreign investors. Several investment banks have successively raised their predictions for China's economic growth this year, among which Morgan Stanley further raised China's economic growth forecast to 5.7% […] Multiple factors will drive China's economic recovery to strong growth, one of the most important reasons is that the government actively introduced measures to stimulate market vitality and boost consumer confidence. Ma Leili, Deputy Governor and CFO of the New Development Bank. (Pan, 2023, January 17)

The above text node, quoting economists, directly indicates that China's termination of the zero COVID policy has boosted the international community's investment confidence in China.

Moral evaluation

During the relaxation phase, the authorities framed the importance of well-being in the issue of economic recovery. By describing the joy of citizens returning to normal life, it indicates that individual well-being is important and a priority.

The authorities indicated that prioritizing economic recovery was to provide a better life for the people: "Unlocking economic and social vitality is crucial in providing a solid foundation and guarantee for people's lives" (Yan, 2022, December 22). Furthermore, the authorities likened economic recovery to bringing warmth to the people: "To better serve and ensure the overall economic and social development, it is essential to safeguard the needs and warmth of the people during the winter" (Ye, 2023, January 6).

The above nodes show the authorities' emphasis on economic recovery during this phase.

> The seven-day Spring Festival holiday represents both a rare opportunity for family reunions and a peak period for leisure and recreation [...] Culture shapes travel, and travel highlights culture. Viewing colorful lanterns, visiting temple fairs, touring ancient towns, praying for blessings on a mountaintop, inheriting intangible cultural heritage [...] "I've been busy outside for a year, and I need some time to share a pot of tea with my family," said Ms. Yang from Changsha. [...] Rich and diverse tourism, leisure, and folk activities are carried out to meet the needs of the people for tourism to welcome spring and leisure for the New Year. (Xu, 2023, January 27)

This quote describes that after terminating the COVID policy, citizens can travel freely and can freely return home to reunite during the Spring Festival. The text describes how, after the cancellation of the zero-COVID policy, people can live as they did before. Through the depiction of specific leisure activities, it guides people to consider the benefits brought by the policy change.

The authorities also indicated their focus on employment issues at this stage, subtly implying that unemployment has become a problem: "Employment is vital to every household and is even more closely related to the state's economy and people's

livelihood" (Ye, 2023, January 31).

These above nodes emphasize the importance of individual and community well-being during this phase. The authorities indicate that individual welfare is to be prioritized at this stage.

Treatments

Under the issue of economic recovery during the relaxation phase, I found that the authorities have issued many policies aimed at promoting economic recovery, including promoting employment, subsidizing enterprises, etc., indicating the government's emphasis on economic development and improving people's well-being after terminating the COVID policy.

The authorities proposed specific policy ideas for promoting economic recovery: "Not only should we focus on 'addition,' such as implementing targeted financial subsidies and employment support measures, but also on 'subtraction,' such as timely rent reductions and lowering the cost of corporate financing" (Wei & Wang, 2022, December 21).

The above quoted indicates that the government has actively taken various measures to restore the economy.

The full image

During the relaxation phase, I separately analyzed the two themes of public health crisis and economic recovery. Now, I explore the framing strategy of the authorities during the relaxation phase by combining these two themes.

In December 2022, which was the early phase of the termination policy, the authorities primarily constructed the issue of the public health crisis. By frequently quoting medical experts, the authorities emphasized to the public that the virus's lethality had decreased, medical standards had significantly improved, and even if infected, it would not pose a threat to health. This causal explanation reduced the public's panic.

Additionally, the authorities categorized risk groups, stating that the threat of the virus to the elderly was the most severe. Given the vulnerability of the elderly, the authorities adjusted the pandemic relaxation measures accordingly, evident in the fact

that nucleic acid testing in places where the elderly congregate, such as nursing homes and hospitals, was the last to be canceled. This treatment perfectly responded to the causal explanation that the elderly is a vulnerable group, highlighting the authorities' ongoing responsibility and concern for the health of the nation, demonstrating the government's efforts to resolve this public health crisis that poses a significant threat to the elderly, and maintaining public trust and the legitimacy of the regime.

In January 2023, the authorities began to construct the issue of economic recovery. In this issue, the government prioritized individual well-being and guided the public to value improving the quality of personal life. Combined with the construction of the public health crisis, the government now guided the public to focus on the benefits that the termination of COVID policy brought to individuals and economic development, avoiding making the public overly concerned about the harm caused by virus infection. Therefore, the government framed the issue of the relaxation phase as what the public can gain from ending the COVID policy, rather than what they might lose.

Through strategically constructing the frame, the government rationalized the infection process of the entire Chinese population during the relaxation phase.

4.4 The Shift

In sections 4.2 and 4.3, I used the NVivo software to analyze the initial phase and the relaxation phase, respectively. In this section, I discuss how the authorities rationalized policy changes based on previous findings.

During the initial phase, the authorities strategically framed the situation as a war between humans and the virus. The problem was defined as a severe public health crisis. The war metaphor was widely used (Gui, 2021; Semino, 2021). Although the war metaphor failed in many countries, criticized for creating panic (Semino, 2021, p. 50), blurring moral judgments (Wang et al., 2023, p. 2), and legitimizing authoritarian measures (Semino, 2021, p. 52), this metaphor was very successful in China, effectively framing values in binary terms of good and evil during the initial phase.

The imagined enemy of this war was an unknown virus, which was highly lethal, highly contagious, and lacked effective treatment. Authorities conveyed to the public the strong infectiousness of the virus through strict preventive measures, such as

"nucleic acid testing for elevator buttons" (Cao et al., 2020, March 26), arousing public concern. Meanwhile, the authorities did not leave the public alone in their fears. They used detailed heroic stories (Xia et al., 2022, p. 255), such as medical staff and soldiers supporting the affected areas, to soothe the public's emotions. Another aspect of these hero stories was to trust the government's capabilities, demonstrating the mobilization of resources to help the public. This reinforced public trust in the government, implying that without the Communist Party's abilities, victory in this war would be unattainable, and the death toll from COVID would be immeasurable.

Regarding the early concealment of cases by Wuhan officials and the punishment of whistleblowers, the authorities dismissed them and honored the whistleblowers with national accolades (Xinhua News Agency, 2020, April 4).

Thus, emphasizing the danger of the virus, providing reliable support, and dismissing officials who concealed early cases in Wuhan were strategies that successfully transformed public criticism of the local government into praise for the central authorities.

As for the origin of the virus, it's a more interesting matter. Initially, the authorities did hint at an animal source, placing the blame within the people themselves, implying that some individuals illegally consumed wildlife. But with the escalating stigmatization of China by the international community, such as former U.S. President Trump referring to the virus as the "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus", and conspiracy theories about leaks from Wuhan's lab (Bolsen et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020, April 30; Yang & Chen, 2020), the Chinese authorities shifted their framing on the virus's origin. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson repeatedly questioned the U.S. Fort Detrick bio-lab (Cheng et al., p. 1173). Xinhua News Agency published an English article with references on its official website arguing that the Fort Detrick bio-lab is very likely the origin of the virus, claiming that the US has made vicious slanders against China, challenging the single-source flow of information. From a historical perspective, China claims that the Fort Detrick bio-lab inherited the evil legacy of the Japanese Army's Unit 731 and is the darkest biological laboratory (Xinhua News Agency, 2021,

November 6). This shift is a counter-conspiracy to the allegations against China, reflecting the firm stance of the Chinese authorities in defending the country's international image, while also intensifying the people's hostility towards the United States.

At this point, morally, China's narrative shifted from potentially being at fault, possibly due to the illegal consumption of wild animals, to being the victim of international stigmatization. The Chinese government became the defender of morality, protecting the Chinese people from Western stigmatization, bolstering domestic nationalism, and enhancing public recognition of the authorities (Yang & Chen, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2023)

The public's acceptance of the frames constructed by the authorities during the initial phase has remained effective. This is reflected in the fact that in 2021, the public's trust in the government reached a ten-year high, with 91% (Edelman, 2022, p. 24). In 2022, the trust level of Chinese citizens in the government reached as high as 89% (Edelman, 2023, p. 43). However, since the survey period for the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer was from November 1 to November 28, 2022 (p. 2), this trust level cannot reflect the Chinese public's trust in the government after the new policy. Yet, it can indicate that the public's trust in the government is continuous. This sustained trust level laid the foundation for the public to accept the policy shift on December 7, 2022.

During the relaxation phase, the authorities admitted that the cancellation of COVID policies triggered a domestic public health crisis. However, the authorities cited scientific explanations from medical experts, stating that the situation has changed, the virulence of the virus has weakened, and there are mature treatment options domestically. This alleviated the public's concerns about infections and declared that this crisis only poses a threat to vulnerable groups such as the elderly and those with underlying diseases. This conveyed to the public that continuing the zero-COVID policy is no longer the best treatment and does not align with the overall interests of the entire population. This provided a scientific basis for rationalizing the policy shift.

At the same time, the government introduced an economic recovery theme,

emphasizing the conveniences that canceling COVID policies brought to the public's lives and the positive impact on economic recovery and growth. This guided the public to pay less attention to the temporary discomfort caused by infections and focus more on the long-term benefits of policy cancellation for individual well-being and economic development. By adding the economic theme, the authorities framed this phase of the infection peak as a small temporary discomfort, which can bring long-term benefits to all citizens. That is, the public can gain much more benefits than losses from the cancellation of the zero-COVID policy.

Previously, Chinese authorities constructed a value that life is above all else to rationalize the long-term implementation of the zero-COVID policy. When canceling the policy, the authorities, while clearly pointing out the threat to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, still chose to abandon the COVID policy. This clearly contradicts the previously established value of "life first". More importantly, the cancellation of zero-COVID resulted in many deaths among the elderly (Ge, 2023). This required the authorities to rationalize this public health crisis targeting the elderly and those with underlying diseases.

In this rationalization process, the government established a moral high ground for itself. Facing the public health crisis for vulnerable groups, the Chinese government emphasized that for the past three years, the government has paid a significant cost to help these groups successfully avoid the more lethal early variants of COVID, providing them with ample time to improve medical standards and vaccination rates (Chen et al., 2023, January 14). This implied that the authorities have adequately cared for and protected these vulnerable groups, alleviating public criticism.

The authorities also made it clear that canceling COVID policies is not a complete abandonment, but they will implement targeted policies to protect vulnerable groups (Gao et al., 2023, January 11). In practice, the authorities did, in phases, give these vulnerable groups more time, reflected in the last batch of institutions to cancel nucleic acid testing requirements being nursing homes and hospitals with patients with underlying diseases, and enhancing the treatment capacity for vulnerable areas.

Therefore, although the policy during the relaxation phase contradicts the previously established value that life is above all else, the authorities emphasized that China has paid a significant cost over the past three years to effectively protect the elderly and those with underlying diseases, containing the comparison between China and other countries, indicating the vulnerable groups in China have gained three more years compared to those in other countries. This narrative not only alleviated criticism of the authorities but also invoked gratitude from the vulnerable groups.

Through the above framing strategy, the authorities rationalized the impact of the new policy on most of the public and the threat the new policy posed to vulnerable groups. By February 2023, China announced that the pandemic had stabilized, and most people had been infected, indicating that China had achieved natural immunity (Gu & Dong, 2023, February 23).

Thus, from the lockdown of Wuhan in January 2020, aiming to completely eradicate the virus, to February 2023, China has passed the peak of infections and returned to normal life as it was before 2020.

After discussing the change in shifting strategy, let's take a look at the similarities and differences in the framing strategies of the two key stages, to explore the strategy about policy shifts. I first discuss the similarities, followed by the differences.

4.4.1 Similarities

Although the implementation policies of the two stages are completely different, the framing strategy adopted by the authorities retains a consistent value core, reflecting the continuity of the shift in framing strategy. During the initial phase, the authorities established a value that 'life is above all' and applied this value for three years. In the relaxation phase, the new policy of the authorities caused a peak in infections, but this peak was in the infection rate, not the death rate. Therefore, although the authorities changed the policy, it reflected the governing philosophy of always ensuring the safety of citizens' lives.

Both stages used a strategy of comparing China with other countries to increase public trust in the government, enhance national pride, and reduce public criticism of the government. During the relaxation phase, crises emerged among vulnerable groups

such as the elderly. By comparing with the situations in other countries, the authorities implied sufficient protection for these vulnerable groups. This strategy of comparison with other countries also appeared during the initial phase. During the initial phase, the authorities compared China's successful control of the pandemic with the failure of other countries to control the spread (Xia et al., 2022; Yang & Chen, 2020). Similarly, the use of comparison in both stages was to strengthen the rationale of the policy and enhance public trust. Therefore, both stages inspired a sense of national superiority through comparison (Wang & Tao, 2021; Yang & Chen, 2020). The similarities in strategy between the two stages reflected the continuity of strategy in the shift, enhancing the public's acceptance of the new frames.

4.4.2 Differences

The completely different policies of the two stages led to different specific forms of framing strategies. In the initial phase, the government used a large number of war metaphors (Gui, 2021), stimulated nationalist sentiments (Yang & Chen, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2023), and established a dichotomous value system of only win or lose, right or wrong. In the relaxation phase, the war metaphor has disappeared. The government provided science-based knowledge to the public, alleviated public concerns, reflected an adaptive policy and established an understanding based on science, creating a 'full image' that a small price is paid for a big benefit, reflecting flexibility. Therefore, the manifestation of framing strategies in the two stages is different, one emphasizing a dichotomous value system, while the other emphasizes a flexible and negotiable value system.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

In Chapter Four, I examined the framing strategies used by Xinhua News Agency in both the initial stage and relaxation stage of the pandemic. Through detailed analysis, I found that in the initial stage, Xinhua News Agency constructed a moral value of life above all else, portraying personal hero stories and launched counter-conspiracy, in order to form a united force across nationwide, inspiring national responsibility and pride. In this way, the authorities encourage people to comply with strict policies, to

collectively overcome this "war" against the virus.

In the relaxation stage, I found that Xinhua News Agency rationalized the policy shift for different risk groups and built the full image of small sacrifices for greater benefits, shifting prevention responsibilities from the government to individuals. The authorities framed a complex already-changed situation by citing the scientific knowledge, and incorporated the theme of economic recovery, encouraging people to accept new policies.

5.1 Implications

In this chapter, I examine these strategies from a holistic perspective to further explore their implications. This is because many questions emerged after the analysis in Chapter 4. These questions focus on why China acted in this manner. Specifically, why did the authorities adopt these ingenious methods to construct interpretations of the virus? Why did they portray concrete hero stories and launch the counter-conspiracy in the initial stage? What factors made Chinese people accept the initial stage's information framing, showing the highest willingness to get vaccinated among 19 countries (Lazarus et al., 2021, p. 225）? Why did China introduce the theme of economic recovery after they already justified the health crisis?

These questions arise because I realized that there are always alternative ways for the Chinese authorities to interpret the virus and policies. For instance, facing this unknown virus, China may communicate like Denmark who communicated with the public in a style of uncertainty (Sørensen & Evensen, 2023). Or like some other European countries, claiming that individuals are the core force in limiting the virus, encouraging people to follow policies and contribute to the nation (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020). In the relaxation stage, China had already rationalized new policies for different risk groups, so why did they choose to introduce an economic theme?

The answers to these questions point to the culture underpinning these frames. Culture, as the repository of framing (Entman, 1952, p. 53), is a crucial reason that makes specific information stand out and be effective. Only frames with cultural

resonance have the greatest potential impact. The stronger the cultural resonance and intensity, the more a frame can evoke people's feelings, allowing the frame to exert tremendous power (Entman, 2003, p. 417). Therefore, culture, as the unspoken content within the frame, is as important as the spoken text. Understanding the underlying Chinese culture is important for the deeper understanding of this paper. The unique culture can not only explain the reasons why the authorities employed these framing strategies and their effects but also allows a broader understanding of the Chinese authorities' communication style in crisis moments.

China is a country with a history of over five thousand years. This ancient history has not become dull due to its age. Instead, it has miraculously continued through multiple dynastic transitions and maintains its vitality until today. The reason for emphasizing the length of history is that the Chinese people live within their historical context (Jacques, 2009, p.222). The history is so extensive, and it has shaped the Chinese nation. Five thousand years of history have left a profound cultural imprint, laying a cultural foundation for the authorities to establish effective frames easily. Among this rich cultural heritage, Confucian thought is the most important orthodox thought, occupying the mainstream position for more than two thousand years. Confucian thought is a rich philosophy that cannot be explained in just a few sentences or chapters, as it has absorbed many other ideas over thousands of years. In history, it has had positive effects as well as many drawbacks. Since my research focuses on framing strategies during the pandemic, I mainly explore the key aspects of Confucian culture that play a role in evoking cultural resonance and helping the authorities to justify the information framing.

Confucian thought has an important concept of ethical norms in the relationships, which is "君臣父子"(Jun Chen Fu Zi). This means the relationships between ruler and subject "君臣"(Jun Chen) is the same as the relationships between father and son "父子"(Fu Zi). The authorities do not implement an accountability system to their people (Jacques, 2009, p. 241), just as no child would reprimand their parents. This ethical

view endows the authorities with deep-rooted legitimacy and supreme status. Meanwhile, the authorities bear the responsibility of educating and shaping the people's notions (p. 117), just as parents have the duty to educate their children. This ethical norm means the authorities' power is unlimited (p. 224).

Under unrestricted power, Confucian culture also demands moral self-discipline from people to achieve the harmony. Confucian thought requires everyone to ensure their behavior conforms to social norms which mainly means to obey and respect authority for harmonious coexistence. This produces the culture of filial piety towards elders. Since the relationship between ruler and subject is akin to that between father and son, it also implies loyalty to the state (Jacques, 2009, p. 461). Therefore, harmony is not solely reliant on coercive legal constraints but is based on an understanding of shared culture. This culture has established a good level of acceptance for people to follow state policies and embrace state ideologies.

Politically, Confucian thought advocates unity. China has been a centralized and unified agricultural country for thousands of years, dating back to 221 BC. In 221 BC, Emperor Qin Shi Huang annexed six states, unifying China as a whole and establishing the Qin Dynasty. He issued policies on the unification of the script, road widths for vehicles, measurement units, and currency nationwide. These policies increased the sense of identity and cohesion among Chinese people across the nation. Additionally, the long history of dynastic changes has made the Chinese realize that war only brings bloodshed and disaster, and only unity can promote prosperity (Jacques, 2009, p. 103). Therefore, unlike Europe's pursuit of independent nation-states (p. 102), China has sought unity for millennia. This belief in pursing the unity is reflected in social customs as solidarity. This solidarity is reflected in the fact that, out of China's 1.4 billion population, over 90% of the people identify themselves as belonging to the same ethnic group, the Han, sharing the same cultural customs. This is the result of ethnic assimilation over the long history and proves the long history's power in shaping the Chinese nation's perceptions.

The fixation on unity (Jacques, 2009, p. 103) and culture of solidarity transforms

into cohesion in special moments, manifesting a natural adaptability and high compliance with unified actions. Therefore, in the initial stage, Xinhua News Agency did not advocate individual power as the core force, unlike the strategies of European countries such as Italy and Germany (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020). Xinhua News Agency stimulated national solidarity by describing individual stories, continuing the historical theme of uniting against external threats. This frame is highly sensitive for the people with the culture of solidarity, evoking great cultural resonance and high compliance.

In Confucian philosophy, the ideal personality is the "君子" (Jun zi). Similar concepts exist in the West, such as the "gentleman" or "knight," but their connotations differ from the Chinese "君子". "君子" is a person of high moral character, capable of extraordinary feats, and possessing high social responsibility. A culture that regards such traits as the ideal personality opposes individualism and selfishness, as only those who consider collective interests can become "君子". The concept of "君子" in Chinese culture embodies social responsibility, indicating that collective-oriented social norms are valued. Xinhua News Agency's strategy resonated with the people's historical and cultural psyche, shaping a collective social mindset.

Confucian culture provides an underlying logic for understanding the strategies of the Chinese government during the pandemic. It is precisely due to being rooted in a unique culture that the media's framing has been effective. The deeply rooted Confucian culture offers a foundational understanding for the values conveyed by Xinhua News Agency, while modern Chinese history influences the specific narrative methods of Xinhua News Agency.

China's modern history is a century of humiliation (Gries, 2004, pp. 43-54; Jacques, 2009, p. 91). The experiences of modern Chinese history have made Xinhua News Agency's adoption of war metaphors and hero frames, as well as contrasts with the West, easily accepted by the public.

China's long history has instilled a Middle Kingdom mentality among the Chinese.

For a long time, ancient Chinese believed they were the center of the world and that their culture was universally applicable (Jacques, 2009, p. 269), which is a form of immature patriotism and nationalism (p. 270). This mentality, starting from the Treaty of Maguan, through the Opium Wars, and up to World War II, was gradually challenged and developed into mature patriotism and nationalism through a history of being invaded (p. 271).

During the Qing Dynasty, the Qing government signed multiple unequal treaties with Western countries and Japan. China's sovereignty was severely weakened, reduced to a semi-colonial state, plunging into poverty and humiliation. These powers enjoyed various privileges in China. Anti-Western sentiment among Chinese people surged (Jacques, 2009, p. 109). Unlike India (p. 114), the strong national identity in China did not lead to adaptation to colonial culture. Instead, it sparked intense hostility and deep humiliation. The atrocities of the Nanjing Massacre by the Japanese army in 1937 brought Chinese hatred to a climax, caused tremendous trauma to the Chinese nation (Gries, 2004, p. 59; Jacques, 2009, p. 91). Chiang Kai-shek's government lost people's support and ultimately failed, leading to its retreat to Taiwan, due to focusing more on the civil war against Mao Zedong's Communist Party than on actively combating Japanese invaders (Jacques, 2009, p. 112). The Communist Party under Mao Zedong rapidly amassed a large force during the Anti-Japanese War. The victory in World War II granted legitimacy to the Communist Party (Gries, 2004, p. 84). Therefore, the legitimacy of the People's Republic of China is rooted in nationalist credentials (p. 137). At these two different stages, Xinhua News Agency's strategy utilized contrast frames, emphasizing the notion of China's superiority over the historical aggressors greatly resonated with the emotions of the Chinese people. In the initial stage, it was reflected in China's successful control of the pandemic, while the West failed. In the relaxation stage, when Xinhua News Agency rationalized the threat of the virus to the elderly, it not only used the scientific narrative of virus weakening but also contrasted with the West, showing China's success in protecting vulnerable groups. This construction method echoes the memory of defeating invaders in modern history, thereby

strengthening national pride and providing a more solid foundation for the legitimacy of the ruling party.

The legitimacy of the Communist Party of China was not always smooth sailing. The armed suppression at Tiananmen Square in 1989 severely challenged the legitimacy of the ruling party. In response to this challenge, Deng Xiaoping accelerated economic reforms, which greatly promoted China's economic development, significantly improved people's living standards, and to some extent, regained public support for the ruling party. Since then, China's legitimacy has increasingly depended on the ruling party's ability to achieve economic growth, rather than solely on ideology (Jacques, 2009, p. 247). During the relaxation stage, a sudden policy shift led to a surge in infection rates nationwide. Although the mortality rate may be lower and concentrated among the elderly, China's large population means the absolute number of elderly deaths is inevitably significant. After the public experienced the discomfort of infection and the pain of losing elders, Xinhua News Agency gradually introduced the theme of economic recovery to divert public attention from the negative impacts of the policy shift. This strategy reflects that since the Tiananmen Square incident, a key aspect of maintaining the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China has been its reliance on economic development. Simultaneously, the strategy during COVID reflects that when the legitimacy of policies is questioned, the economic theme is used as a tool to stabilize legitimacy.

Exploring how China's unique history and culture have influenced media framing strategies enriches my research, helping to understand why China ultimately chose such strategies. The Confucian spirit compels loyalty to the state among Chinese people. The long history different from the West has led to a high adaptability among the Chinese to unified actions. The humiliating modern history provides nationalist fuel for the contrast between China and the West and Japan. The achievements in economic development have become a powerful tool for the Communist Party of China to maintain its legitimacy. Through this multi-dimensional construction, the legitimacy of the ruling party is maintained.

These cultural and historical factors, as the unspoken content of Xinhua News Agency's framing strategy, provide deep support for its framing strategy. Through clever narrative and topic selection, Xinhua News Agency consciously stimulates and guides public emotions, shapes public opinions, and ensures that the public's choices align with national interests.

Understanding these factors not only deepened my understanding of my research but also to some extent corroborated my research findings. More importantly, these historical and cultural factors demonstrate that my research outcomes are not anomalies. The strategies chosen by the Chinese authorities are well-considered, ensuring they resonate with the people. This supports why the trust rate among Chinese citizens even reached its highest in a decade during the pandemic (Edelman, 2022). Meanwhile, the intensified national pride in China during the COVID period also provides new insights for future research on related topics.

5.2 Contributions

As I elaborated in the literature review in Chapter 2, my study on how China rationalized the shift in COVID policy is currently a research gap. This policy shift includes both the initial stage transition from normal life to a crisis war state for the whole society and the relaxation phase transition back to a normal state from a crisis state. Using Entman's framing theory, I studied how the initial stage constructed the concept of people's war against the virus and analyzed how the Chinese government rationalized the policy shift during the relaxation phase. My research results filled the gap in existing research.

In summary, my research provides empirical evidence for understanding the communication methods of China's policy shifts and China's unique communication approaches during times of crisis.

5.3 Future Research Directions

My research subject is Xinhua News Agency, representing the official communication strategies of China. My research results can well illustrate the official's way of framing information and underlying intentions during times of crisis. However, as outlined in Section 2.4, China has an extremely active internet filled with various

viewpoints. The strategies of the Xinhua News Agency I studied are unidirectional, focusing only on how the state communicates messages to the public. As for how the public perceives this information, that is a dimension my research does not touch. Studying the public's understanding and acceptance of these strategies is important and can provide a comprehensive understanding of these framing strategies. In my study, I corroborated the initial stage public acceptance of these strategies with high vaccine acceptance rates and high public trust in the government, but more detailed studies, such as interviews and surveys, are necessary.

Research on the relaxation phase is extremely lacking, which means my research on the relaxation phase could only focus on the single output of the government to the public, unable to capture the public's acceptance of the policy shift. Future research could investigate public opinions and attitudes towards this policy shift.

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