'One City, Many Tales': COVID-19, perception, and the importance of contextualization

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Abstract
This introduction to the special issue summarizes the contributions from the five leading scholars in the field—their contribution to the conceptualization of such concepts as soft power, sharp power, image shaping, image reception, as well as methodological approaches. It highlights the importance of contextualizing their findings for a full understanding of the image of China in the media narratives examined. In doing so, the Introduction lays foundation for further investigations on the relationship between media coverage of health crisis and image construction as the world continues to fight against the virus.

Keywords
Conceptualization, contextualization, further study, image reception, image shaping, methodological approach, sharp power, soft power

It is almost a year since we started to plan for this special issue on media coverage of China's fight against the coronavirus. A quick review of what had happened regarding the development of the novel coronavirus in the first half of 2020: on 5 January 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) announced Mysterious Coronavirus-Related Pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China.[1] In less than 2 weeks following the announcement, Chinese scientists confirmed COVID-19 Human Transmission, and on 21 January, China made the unprecedented move to close off Wuhan, where the virus was first reported. As the virus spread around the world, the WHO finally declared a public health emergency, and on 11 March, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

At the time of organizing papers for this special issue in April 2020, the coronavirus seemed to have been contained in China while its grip was tightening around the world. Consequently, the year of 2020 witnessed extensive media attention on the outbreak of the COVID-19. Indeed, media around the world have been following every step of the development of this pandemic, with

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multiple stories. To be specific, media narratives of the disease started from the beginning of January 2020, when most of the international population read the new virus outbreak as something happening in a geographically and/or culturally distant place. February saw the increase of coronavirus cases in China and the beginning of the spread of the virus throughout the rest of the world. From 28 March, after China's initial struggle, and following ruthless control measures and mobilization of resources to curb the spread of the virus, China started to close its borders, from air to land, to avoid imported cases of the new coronavirus. As the situation improved and stabilized, and as its economy began to recover, China started to earn goodwill by exporting and donating vital medical supplies and doctors to stricken countries. At this stage, global citizens were no longer just reading about this threat but also experiencing it. Reading or watching the news to stay informed became one of the essential elements in people's lives since many had to confine themselves to avoid the contagion and the uncontrolled spread of the disease.

However, although media coverage of the coronavirus around the world has moved from the outbreak of the virus at the beginning of 2020 to the current development of the COVID-19 Vaccines, this special issue chooses to focus on early reporting on China's fight against the pandemic, with a view of capturing the variations in media coverage patterns over the development of the disease—its rise, fall, and containment in China in the context of its development around the world. The benefits of studying the coverage, or the multiple stories, during this period are many. First, it tells us a lot about how Chinese media has transformed since the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, when some scholars called the change from limited to an overwhelmingly all-out coverage a turning point (U-turn) in media reform in China (Zhang, 2006). Seventeen years on, with further political, economic, and social changes, especially with social media playing a more active role in China, is China's media landscape changed, and if so, in what ways? While these questions will be addressed in the special issue coming out in June 2021, the study of this special issue focusing on media representation of China's handling also tells us how China's efforts to stem the virus from spread is perceived by global media, which has a great impact on the image of China among the media publics. Sun in this issue rightly stated when discussing the impact of media on Australian publics: "although there is no direct proof linking the media's coverage of China to Australia's public sentiment—during the pandemic or otherwise—it is fairly safe to speculate that such a connection does exist. After all, Australians mostly find out what China did and did not do from their favorite media outlets and their preferred social media opinion leaders." To know and understand the formation and shaping of China's image is important for China as well as the world, as the media narratives serve as important indicators to the global perception of China as it takes an increasingly important leadership role in globalization represented by such initiatives as the Bel t and Road Initiative (BRI). The current world order, as Jia and Lu point out in their paper (9), "has been greatly challenged especially between the US as the largest developed country and China as the largest developing country." Chan and Fung argue that there exists a need to understand "how the general public perceives the rising global influence of non-democracies, especially China and Russia" (Chan and Fung, 73). This is what this issue sets out to accomplish.

The papers in this special issue examine and analyze representative media from five countries and regions: Australia, Central East Europe (17 + 1 countries), Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and the United States. While these studies raise no claim to completeness, they give a glimpse into the mixed international responses to China by showing how global journalists cover and depict the other (China), contributing to the dynamic process of news coverage and image construction in the international media. As the papers demonstrate, the coverage also reveals the challenges China faces in its endeavor to develop its soft power. Although "China has increasingly adopted

an assertive position on the global stage, with its widely and openly declared 'going global' agenda aimed at globalizing Chinese media and projecting a more attractive image of China" (Sun, 2015), the analysis of the media coverage shows the challenge of Chinese public diplomacy to articulate the country's significance for the countries and regions discussed in this special issue. Indeed, the specificity and detail of each paper demonstrate the intricate, multi-layered nature of enquiries into image shaping. The contrasts and complexities that emerge through the case studies indicate that the challenges of image-shaping initiatives vary not only from region to region, but also among different interest groups and within different spheres of influence.

The five papers, all theoretically engaged and presenting empirically grounded views of China's handling of the coronavirus in the chosen countries and regions, share three findings from their analysis in addition to other findings specific to the media they analyze.

First, although to varying extents, negative sentiment against China was prevalent in the media examined during the chosen period. Second, all authors in this special issue found that it is a must to conduct the analysis within the political, economic, and social contexts as well as their evolving relation with China, which served as a valuable backdrop to the studies in this special issue. They all pointed the readers to the fact that the negative (or biased) perception of China demonstrated in the media examined tend to be a continuation of what was prevalent already in the country. For instance, Jia and Lu (9) reminded us in their paper on American media's coverage that according to the data released in the first half year of 2020 by Pew Research Center, two-thirds of Americans held an unfavorable attitude toward China, which reached the highest peak of negative rating of Chinese people and the government leaders by Americans since 2005. They also pointed out that an increasing number of Americans, about 9 in 10, view China's power and rise as a threat to the United States, especially among young people, compared with 15 years ago. Similarly, Zhang and Shaw (43) cautioned readers that their findings should be understood within the context of the perceptible increase in nationalistic and anti-immigration sentiment within the United Kingdom in recent years, which was brought to the fore primarily through the United Kingdom's polarizing 2016 referendum on (and subsequent departure from) membership of the European Union (EU; Bell, 2020). Before presenting her findings, Sun also warned the readers, when referring to "adversarial journalism" in Australia's mainstream English-language media, that it was not just about stories that are critical of China. "Rather, it involves the adoption of a pre-determined news-making agenda that privileges a particular point of view—in this case, that of the security and intelligence establishment—at the expense of other perspectives, and the consequently narrow framework for selecting what to cover and how to cover it." Sun told us that "this approach to reporting on China had become the norm for several years before COVID-19, and any analysis of how the Australian media reported China's experience with COVID-19 must keep this backdrop firmly in mind." Although it was not mentioned in their paper by Chan and Fung on the Hong Kong media representation of Mainland China's dealing with the coronavirus in comparison with media narratives of SARS 17 years ago, most readers are aware of the context of the protests in Hong Kong against the proposed extradition bill and the clashes between Hong Kong and Mainland China, which could lead to contested views of China during the outbreak of COVID-19. Similarly, Kavalski reported the same sentiment in the media representation of China's fight against COVID-19 in Central East Europe (CEE). He found that "media accounts suggest a growing suspicion and even hostility towards China in much of the region." However, like other authors in the special issue, he called our attention to the context before we tried to understand fully the media's representation: "more often than not, the CEE states have themselves been bundled as part of the non-Western others." As a result, "the paradigm of localizing the other appears to be the

established pattern of CEE countries" engagement with the dominant others in their neighborhood (Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013; Kavalski, 2003). Kavalski pointed out that such context is crucial to understanding the split in the CEE countries following the pandemic—those siding with China (mainly, Serbia and Hungary) and those suspicious of China (most of the remaining participants in the "17+1" cooperation). Most of these misgivings, Kavalski told us, came to light already during 2019. All this contextualization helps us to understand the sentiment in the countries about China in a much better way. More importantly, it also helps us to realize that the findings not only tell us about the examined media's view of China but also, in Sun's words on Australia's shaping of China's image (Sun, 34): "How various segments of the Australian media have reported on China's COVID-19 experience says more about their own fears and anxieties and their political, ideological, and cultural positions than about the reality of how the Chinese people experienced COVID-19."

Another finding worth our attention is the politicization and localization of China in many media reports on China's handling of the disease. As far as politicization is concerned, Jia and Lu (12) noted that "the coverage of COVID-19 by Western media in general, the American mainstream media in particular, is one of the most biased and politicized cases of news coverage in recent memory." According to them, the harsh criticism resulted from China's political system—"the implication being that such practices would not happen in a liberal democracy." In a similar vein, Kavalski identified what he termed as "localization" of China in the media he studied, a recent phenomenon in the CEE countries (Kavalski, 2019). Localization, "in this setting, refers to the ways in which images and representations of an external other are internalized in domestic discourses." CEE media accounts of both China and the COVID-19 pandemic reveal an interesting "localization of the other" (Kavalski, 2007). That is, "China has been used to validate specific domestic positions of different political formations. Thus, perceptions of China (what it is assumed to stand for) have been deployed domestically in the CEE region to justify particular visions of the state and its international identity" (Kavalski, 79).

Together, the papers make important contribution to conceptualization of soft power, sharp power, image shaping, image reception, as well as methodological approaches. This is especially the case with Chan and Fung's paper as it examines China's media image in Hong Kong's health crises of SARS in 2003 and the COVID-19 in 2020. By engaging with the concepts of soft power, sharp power, and the international debate on the rise of China, they conceptualized the shifting media image and concluded that China's image during the pandemic crisis of COVID-19 reflects the contested scholarly and political discourses about soft power and sharp power in the rise of China in recent decades. Their comparison of China's media image in Hong Kong during the health crises of SARS and COVID-19 indicates that "China's international image has shifted from a soft power to a sharp power" (Chan and Fung, 62). Jia and Lu proposed a framework in revealing how the media of a given country report on China's handling of COVID-19: a number of factors need to be examined including that country's relationship with China, its position in the global geopolitical order, the dominant ways in which its media narratives depicted China prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, and the degree of pluralism in that country's mainstream journalism. Sun similarly suggests that in order to understand the frames, perspectives, and discursive positions the studiesd media adopt, academics should look beyond the natural to cultural ideological and commercial factors (Sun, 35). Zhang and Shaw's findings indicate that media targeting at different readerships in the United Kingdom with differing political and social outlooks affect the attitudes and perceptions of their readers.

This leads us to Kavalski's another contribution: his study, while examining CEE's media coverage of China during its fight against the coronavirus, also seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the interdisciplinary conversations between the fields of International Communication (IC)

studies and International Relations (IR). He argues strongly for the need to widen and deepen the interdisciplinary engagement between IC and IR (Kavalski, 79). He advocates for such interdisciplinary cross-pollination as he believes with good evidence that such conversation offers productive disclosure of the contingent iterations of inter-cultural dissonance in the political ordering of media landscapes. Such approach also promotes a flexible understanding of cultural frontiers and their communication in the constantly shifting political discourses of the CEE media landscape.

Bringing together five leading scholars of interdisciplinary backgrounds, this special issue is then one of the first to contribute to a better understanding of the impact of media coverage on perceptions of public health crisis, but more importantly, it lays foundation for future investigations on the relationship between media coverage of health crisis and image construction as the world continues to fight against the virus.

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Note

1.   WHO—Pneumonia of unknown cause—China, accessed 10 February 2021.

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