

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:                   WAR OF THE WORDS: STRATEGIC  
NARRATIVES IN NEWS COVERAGE OF  
COVID-19 TRAVEL POLICIES IN U.S. AND  
CHINESE MEDIA

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Journalism

This dissertation investigates how a global shock such as the COVID-19 pandemic creates challenges and opportunities for the projection of strategic narratives. Sitting on the intersection of the literature between journalism studies, political communication, and international relations, the strategic narratives framework provides a comprehensive approach to evaluate the stories told by political actors that are aimed at influencing perceptions. The author proposed a narrative-centric perspective to enrich the theoretical framework. While the conventional policy-centric perspective evaluates strategic narratives as a means to legitimize political behaviors, the narrative-centric perspective considers strategic narratives as tools for shaping the identities and characterization of political actors. A global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to frame pandemic responses in service of strategic goals. While political actors could legitimize policies in the name of health amid the lack of scientific authority in the infodemic where problematic information overwhelmed the global information environment, the situation also enabled political actors to frame policies such as travel restrictions for enhancing

or renegotiating actor identities and worldviews. This dissertation analyzes the projection of COVID-19 strategic narratives and how they responded to foreign strategic narratives in the U.S. and Chinese English-language national news. A large sample of online news ( $N = 263,014$ ) was sampled from the GDELT Coronavirus news dataset (The GDELT Project, 2020). This dissertation employed mixed methods of human-in-the-loop machine learning, conventional content analysis, and Granger causality tests to identify and examine strategic narratives, as well as evaluate the interactions between strategic narratives. Findings suggest that Chinese strategic narratives were responsive to offensive strategic narratives from the U.S. and depicted the U.S. as an immoral actor who intentionally smeared China. The U.S. reinforced the identity-level strategic narrative that China lacks transparency through issue-level strategic narratives about travel policies and virus origin. Two patterns of strategic narratives projection were found. Chinese strategic narratives maintained coherent storylines in the three years and between news outlets. They projected a clear Chinese story to the international audience but found it difficult to address the rapid changes in pandemic situations and policies. Meanwhile, strategic narratives from the U.S. were less coherent and were contested domestically between news outlets. Although it might have weakened a unified U.S. story, the flexibility allowed strategic narratives to transform and adapt to evolving pandemic realities. U.S. strategic narratives were able to frame stories about travel restrictions and virus origin as a manifestation of the lack of transparency from China. This dissertation demonstrated the feasibility of studying the dynamics of strategic narratives through a large dataset. The mixed method approach offered a thick analysis of strategic narratives and illustrated their interactions, thus consolidating the theoretical and methodological foundation for future research on strategic narratives contests.

WAR OF THE WORDS: STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN NEWS COVERAGE OF  
COVID-19 TRAVEL POLICIES IN U.S. AND CHINESE MEDIA

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2024

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## Dedication

To the friendship between the U.S. and Chinese people.

## Acknowledgements

Journalism Studies is interdisciplinary, and so am I. I consider myself a deviant who crosses academic fields. Curiosity drove me, a high school student who studied natural science, to venture from sociology to journalism and communication during my undergraduate years. Before joining Merrill, I studied for an MSc in Security Studies and worked in a research team that focuses on aging and mental health. The thread that connected all my research interests is news and media. That is why I chose a dissertation topic that sits at the intersection between academic fields. My past decade engaging in social science and humanities research brought me to people who inspired me to bridge ideas from different academic fields. This dissertation is not possible without each piece of the puzzle.

Dr. Sarah Oates, the chair of my dissertation committee, sets an example for her students. This dissertation is only possible with her guidance, long before the researcher's hunch for this dissertation emerged. Every meeting with her is seeing a “doctor,” literally. Her puns are the best cure for nervous students. Her encouragement through metaphors and energy empowers students to go the extra mile. Sarah is an extremely knowledgeable scholar who generously passes her skills and wisdom to students. Not only did I learn a lot from her expertise, but also from her dedication as an academic who “wears a lot of hats” as a mentor, researcher, and leader, to name a few. Sarah is also the kind of mentor who gives freedom to students while ensuring we hit all the checkpoints. At the same time, she does not get tired of taking the research journey with us, editing our work, and making sure everyone is

well-caffeinated. I especially appreciate the trust she has in her students, giving us much-needed reassurance in the sometimes relentless academia.

Dr. Susan Moeller was the first person who inspired me to pursue an academic career. My life was changed in Salzburg, Austria, at the moment she invited me to do a PhD at Merrill, when I was an undergrad. She is the kind of scholar who brings theories to the ground and always gets students to reflect on their daily lives, asking the “so what” question. Susan does not tell students to follow one boilerplate path but shows us all the fascinating possibilities. She is a role model for young teachers like us. Dr. Ronald Yaros was the PhD director at the time I joined Merrill, amid the pandemic. He cares deeply about his students. His support helped our cohort to stay afloat in challenging times. As a scholar, I particularly appreciate his emphasis on a robust research framework. I am lucky to have worked with him on several projects, learning good practices in designing and conducting surveys. I first met Dr. Naeemul Hassan in a big data course. He was the one who officially introduced me to the world of Python and big data. He was always able to give clear and concise technical advice, which laid the foundation for this dissertation. Dr. Scott Kartsner is my cognate member of the dissertation committee. His knowledge in international relations and U.S.-China affairs ensured that my work could be communicated across academic fields. I sincerely appreciate his friendly support at every stage of this dissertation process.

Merrill is a fertile ground that inspires young academics. I thank everyone who taught me during these four years, prepared me for this dissertation and an academic career ahead. Dr. Linda Steiner and Dr. Krishnan Vasudevan made my

remote-learning days rewarding. They were accommodating and pushing the boundaries in online classes to facilitate intellectual exchanges. I thank Dr. Mark Feldstein, Dr. Daniel Trielli, and Dr. Rob Wells from Merrill, as well as Dr. Jóhanna Birnir and Dr. Shannon Carcelli from the Department of Government and Politics for their constructive advice and immense support. I am also grateful to have Dr. Serap Rada helping me navigate through the administrative processes at UMD, as well as Clint Bucco for resolving all sorts of IT issues and giving me access to much-needed computer resources for this dissertation. Everyone I met at Merrill was warm and encouraging. Thank you for every smile in the hallway.

My Ph.D. colleagues are the best. Thank you for running this marathon with me. I am grateful to have met Aaron Wenyou Ye in this Ph.D. program. He is the best housemate, coworker, and officemate. His company kept my sanity in the game. Dr. Dinfin Mulupi and I were the pacemakers of each other in this program. It is my pleasure to work and co-author with her. She was the first colleague I met in the program, and I am glad that we are finishing together. Dr. Wei-Ping Li is the unsung hero of this dissertation. She was the expert coder who worked with me on the codebook and content analysis. I would also like to thank Dr. Sohana Nasrin, Dr. Robin Sundaramoorthy, Mahfuzul Haque, Jodi Friedman, Keegan Clements-Housser, Ivy Lyons, Mohammed Ademo, Joey Mengyuan Chen, Diana Krovvidi for their warm words and cheers. Special thanks to Gea Ujčić, a good friend, who fights for our welfare and wellbeing.

Hong Kong is my home and where I started my thesis/dissertation “trilogy” on Chinese news media and international affairs. It all began in my undergraduate final



year project with Dr. Francis L. F. Lee from CUHK who introduced me to the world of academic research. During my time in the U.K., Dr. Katerina Tertychnaya from UCL advised my thesis and encouraged me to continue my academic path. Her sincere words motivated me to choose academic work at the crossroads right after my master's degree. I have known Dr. Donna S.C. Chu from CUHK since my undergraduate years. She is more than an academic and career advisor who gives insightful opinions, or an enthusiastic co-author who sparks curiosity, but also a life coach who illuminates paths. Talking to her cleared my mind and helped me make many important decisions. The two years working at HKU showed me how academic work can contribute to society while bringing research at home in Hong Kong to the world. I thank Dr. Terry Y.S. Lum, Dr. Gloria H.Y. Wong, and Dr. Bridget T. Liu for their mentorship and advice that kick-started my career.

I bet my parents had never thought of having an academic son. Until university, I was a troublemaker and mediocre student who kept them worried. Nonetheless, they were the ones who sparked my interest in journalism as a kid, because the only TV programs I was allowed to watch were current affairs documentaries. I appreciate how much they trust me to pursue an unconventional career path. My grandmother, Madam Tang, is a legend and the spiritual leader in the family. She is the one who told me to pursue what I want and created a safe haven where I can take refuge anytime. My buddy and co-author Cheryl S.Y. Shea was the one who gave me faith in venturing into the academic world. I am glad to have a close friend like her who can thread an academic discussion into our daily conversations. Last but not least, I would like to thank Dr. Dara K.Y. Leung, my life

partner. She is always proud of me even when I have doubts. I am grateful to have Dr. Leung to run the ultramarathon with me, academically, and in our daily lives.

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## List of Abbreviations

United States (U.S.)

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Severe-Acute-Respiratory-Syndrome-Related Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)

Severe-Acute-Respiratory-Syndrome (SARS)

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)

World Health Organization (WHO)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CMFA)

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT)

Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT)

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)

Topic Modeling (TM)

Structural Topic Modeling (STM)

Application Programming Interface (API)

term frequency-inverse document frequency (tf-idf)

Large Language Models (LLMs)

Artificial Neural Networks (ANN)

Bi-directional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT)

Universal Sentence Encoder (USE)

Deep Averaging Network (DAN)

Conditional Masked Language Modeling (CMLM)

Logistic Regression (LR)

Naive Bayes (NB)

Random Forest (RF)

Support Vector Machines (SVM)

Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR)

Augmented Dickey-Fuller test (ADF test)

Kwiatkowski–Phillips–Schmidt–Shin test (KPSS test)

Communist Party of China (CPC)

Republic of Korea (ROK)

China Global Television Network (CGTN)

Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome  
(HIV/AIDS)

messenger Ribonucleic acid (mRNA)

National Health Commission (NHC)

United Kingdom (U.K.)

Public Relations (PR)

Artificial Intelligence (AI)



## Chapter 1: Introduction

International news is essential for people all over the globe to comprehend the events happening in other parts of the world as it breaks physical and time boundaries. While up-to-date information can help people make informed decisions in their lives, as well as construct their understanding of foreign countries and formulate foreign policy preferences, international news often carries the points of view that influence our understanding of the world. Academic studies in the past decades found that the perspectives in the news can be shaped by political forces to advance policy goals (Brown, 2017; Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1990; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012; Miskimmon et al., 2017; Potter and Baum, 2010). As more attention was paid after the Cold War to the ways the rapid development of media communication shaped global information exchange, various academic disciplines put effort into conceptualizing the mechanisms of international communication in global politics. The study of journalism, political communication, and international relations converge in the theoretical discussion around strategic narratives (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020; Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2016; Gackowski and Brylska, 2022; Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021; Miskimmon et al., 2017).

Scholars argue that people build their values and conceptualization of the world through stories that explain how an actor behaves, by suggesting causations from the past to the present, and pointing to the possibilities in the future (Fisher, 1985; Livingston and Nassetta, 2018; McClure, 2009; Miskimmon et al., 2013a). The contemporary news and media environment provides a platform for these narratives

to be projected globally in no time. Thus, political actors try to harness this power by crafting narratives strategically, so that the stories can persuade the audience to align with the political goals of the actors. In times of global crisis, particularly those filled with uncertainties, political actors may find more opportunity to formulate different strategic narratives that best suit their goals (Kluver et al., 2019; Manantan, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic was the latest global shock that took place in a fog of uncertainties around the virus, its origins, and its trajectory amid the intensification of the U.S.-China rivalry. The infodemic that flooded the media environment with questionable information also provided abundant narrative elements for formulating different and competing strategic narratives. This serves as a timely case for examining how global powers project their strategic narratives to shape and contest worldviews and values globally.

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise in January 2020 when a mysterious coronavirus caused serious and sometimes fatal respiratory infections in Wuhan, China. The virus rapidly spread across the world in the following months. As the pandemic caused inflicting high casualties, particularly at the early stage when no vaccine or cure was available, countries responded to this unprecedented public health crisis with extreme policies such as city-wide lockdowns and quarantines. International travel was severely affected by travel restrictions and border closures that were aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. The U.S. was one of the earliest to apply travel restrictions on travelers from China. At first, health screenings at the airport were implemented, but this was soon replaced by a travel ban on February 3, 2020, for all non-U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and their immediate families

who had a travel history in China in the last 14 days. The ban was implemented while the WHO was advising against travel restrictions, which was also deemed ineffective in preventing virus import into the U.S. as local cases were already identified.

China banned foreigners from entering on March 26, 2020, and later implemented the “circuit breaker” policy that would temporarily ban airlines if their flights carried more than five COVID-19 cases identified through testing arrival. Harsh travel policies of this kind seemed unnecessary as the quarantine system in China was very tight. Later in 2021, the world slowly returned to normal and retracted travel bans but China maintained isolated from the world. Only in November 2022, China finally relaxed stringent pandemic policies and reopened to the world. However, the surge of the COVID-19 caseload in China prompted the U.S. to reimpose virus testing requirements on travelers from China. While the U.S. government deemed it as the means to prevent virus spillover and detect virus mutations, experts doubted its effectiveness. All in all, why did the U.S. and Chinese governments advocate for these travel restrictions when they were considered costly but inefficient? This study shed light on their utility beyond their face value of pandemic control by focusing on the stories these policies projected to the world.

The purpose of this study is to examine strategic narratives projection by government officials and in the news by the U.S. and China during COVID-19 to understand how the strategic narratives contest between the U.S. and China portrayed different worldviews and how the COVID-19 travel policies play a part. This study considers the utility of strategic narratives beyond explaining and rallying support for state policies. It is argued that strategic narratives can drive policy choices by states

as they attempt to shape worldviews and identity. In other words, policies that might appear irrational based on available evidence on the ground may make sense from a point of view of how a nation wishes to position itself in the world through strategic narratives. Shaping the stories about states and international affairs is a critical task for political actors, who can suggest favorable policy implications based on the strategic narratives projected. Thus, costly and inefficient travel policies might not be a particularly effective in the U.S. and China, but the related strategic narratives that points to the identities of political actors in the international system is very valuable. For example, barriers on the national border could signal a divide between the disrupted outside world and the protected domestic environment. The externalization of foreign threats coupled with the securitization of the pandemic from the health policy realm into a security realm, as a matter of national survival, could act as a strong legitimizing force for extraordinary state behaviors (Balzacq, 2019; Schäfer et al., 2016; Wæver, 1995). Rival strategic narratives from both sides met in the international news environment, telling distinctive and sometimes contradictory stories about each other during the pandemic.

This study investigates how a global shock such as the COVID-19 pandemic creates challenges and opportunities for the projection of strategic narratives. This study proposes a narrative-centric perspective to enrich the theoretical framework that addresses the utility of strategic narratives, as well as takes a methodological first step to identify strategic narratives from a large digital news dataset through a human-in-the-loop machine learning analysis. While it is also important to estimate the effects of strategic narratives to understand their utility, this study focuses on the creation

and project of strategic narratives. It is important to study strategic narrative projection in the news environment not only because it demonstrates the desired storylines and policy solutions from political actors, but also because the news environment can serve both as an amplifier for political actors as well as a platform for strategic narrative negotiation (Gackowski and Brylska, 2022; Leslie and Roselle, 2022; Miskimmon et al., 2017; O'Shea, 2019). As findings from this study show, the room for strategic narratives to be contested can affect the flexibility of strategic narratives to respond to both world events and contesting narratives from other nations. This study contributes to the literature by analyzing the mechanisms of strategic narrative projection, how they interact, and how they portray the stories of different worlds to the global audience.

### Overview

This chapter first summarizes the key literature on political communication and international relations that builds the foundation for the strategic narratives framework. The political communication literature provides the theoretical basis from framing to a narrative approach to explain the mechanisms in which media texts in the news play a role in contemporary global politics. The international relations literature presents the constructivist perspective in international relations, in which scholars consider the influence of narratives on global politics. The chapter then explains the methodological step forward taken by this study, which analyzes a large news dataset by computational techniques with humans in the loop to deliver a thicker analysis of a broader trend identified. The chapter then briefly presents the qualitative characteristics of strategic narratives identified from the U.S. and Chinese

news media, accompanied by qualitative analyses of strategic narratives from political actors in the U.S. and China. The chapter presents an overview of the quantitative findings on the relationships between strategic narratives to show how they likely responded and built on one another. Finally, the chapter discusses the findings through the lens of the theories mentioned in the literature review and gives summaries of upcoming chapters.

### *Strategic narratives in the news environment*

#### Representations of foreign affairs in the news

The conceptualization of strategic narratives can be traced back to decades of theoretical development in political communication and international relations. In the field of journalism and political communication, the study of the influence of media content on politics relies heavily on the literature around media framing. Frames, or the ways media texts present an event, are considered a powerful source in shaping the political preference of the audience (Iyengar, 1990). Entman (1993) defines framing as “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). Frames are powerful because they can define problems for the public to shape public perceptions and policy preferences (Entman, 1991; Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar and Simon, 1993). Thus, political actors can wield their power strategically to influence media frames for public support. In the realm of foreign policy, the Cascading Activation Model explains how the presidential administration in the U.S. held the power to define the key “War on Terror” frame in the wake of 9/11, where this frame travel downward in the power hierarchy to

Washington elites, journalists, news texts, and eventually to the public (Entman, 2003; Entman and Usher, 2018). While political actors hold more power in forging media frames to rally support, journalists and other social actors may intervene and negotiate in the framing process to steer public deliberations (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001; Matthes, 2012). Nevertheless, Entman notes that “cascading activation” works only if there are no relatively powerful contesting frames among the elite.

Although framing provides a compelling conceptual framework to understand the influence of news and media text on politics, it becomes challenging to expand the concept to explain the flow of international news. One of the most debated issues in the study of framing concerns its scope. On one end of the spectrum, scholars believe that frames should only be concerned with the linguistically different representations of the same information out of context, such as presenting 90% employment as 10% unemployment (Chong and Druckman, 2007). On the other end of the spectrum, it is argued that frames are only meaningful in specific contexts to their specific audiences because frames are interpreted differently according to the social and political environment in which they are situated (D’Angelo et al., 2019). A dilemma exists when framing as a theoretical framework is stretched to explain thicker descriptions of a policy issue that could blur the conceptualization of framing, which concerns the salience highlighted in a media text (Scheufele and Iyengar, 2014). Therefore, this study employs a narrative-based framework that incorporates framing and its conceptualization of the influence of news and media text on politics to reconcile the differences (Gackowski and Brylska, 2022; Livingston and Nassetta, 2018).

Strategic narratives are stories told by actors to advance their political goals (Miskimmon et al., 2013a, 2017). While the conceptualizations of narratives and stories differ between various fields in social science and humanities, this study follows the traditions in political communication. The narrative paradigm suggests that humans understand the world and communicate through stories that contain values and beliefs (Fisher, 1984, 1985). Narratives are stories that connect the past to the present and suggest the future of actors and the world. Similar to childhood stories such as *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* and *The Three Little Pigs* that help children understand the morals of the characters through their actions and consequences, strategic narratives tell stories about political actors, their identities, and the motivations behind their behaviors to suggest causal relationships in international events (Miskimmon et al., 2013a, 2017). Frames are part of a storyline. They play a crucial role in conveying perspectives in a political event in which an actor engages. Frames help interpret the nature of the behaviors of actors in narratives, which forge the images of actors and shape public perceptions of policy issues (Ferree et al., 2002). In other words, the strategic narrative framework suggests that political actors tell stories that contain specific interpretive frames to influence the public on their imagination of the world, other actors, and current events. In this way, they are broader and more complex than frames.

Strategic narratives can be broadly categorized into three levels (Miskimmon et al., 2013a, 2017). Issue narratives tell stories about policy events and related challenges and solutions. Identity narratives are stories about political actors, their history, values, and objectives. Finally, international system narratives tell stories



about the rules and mechanisms that govern actors in the world. While the categories should not classify narratives too rigidly, they do provide a structure to evaluate the scope of strategic narratives. These types of strategic narratives can work with one another. For example, issue narratives can inform identities such as heroes, victims, and villains that are meaningful beyond the interpretation of a single policy event (Crow and Lawlor, 2016; Wijermars, 2021). Miskimmon et al. (2013, 2017) suggest that researchers can study three phases of strategic narratives: narrative formation, projection, and reception. Narrative formation concerns the factors that influence how political actors craft narratives; narrative projection is about narratives are formed and how they are delivered to the global media environment; and narrative reception concerns the ways in which individuals interpret and respond to strategic narratives. This study focuses on the strategic narrative projection between the U.S. and China during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only examining how strategic narratives told pandemic stories and justified travel policies, but also disentangling the relationships among strategic narratives to shed light on the narrative contest in the contemporary U.S.-China rivalry.

#### Shaping perspectives in international relations

Scholars in political science and international relations have paid more attention to the role of information in global politics in recent decades. Political signals are essential tools for actors to update beliefs and build reputations in bargaining situations (Fearon, 1994, 1997), where the credibility of political actors relies on the capability of the domestic audience to keep their leaders in check. Thus, these political signals function in a two-level game between domestic and international

politics, where the behaviors of state leaders are observed and reciprocated on both levels (Putnam, 1988). In the contemporary digital environment, the domestic political audience such as voters not only receive signals on the domestic level from their state leaders, but also from international news. This means that the domestic audience may also consider narratives projected by other global actors when making political evaluations and decisions. Given that information from the media environment is the major source for ordinary citizens to learn about foreign affairs, political actors have the incentive to misrepresent and manipulate information to gain political support domestically and internationally (Potter and Baum, 2010; Slantchev, 2006). In other words, actors can alter perspectives and values by projecting their side of the story into the global news environment, which helps them advance their political goals.

The propaganda model is a key paradigm for analyzing the manipulation of information for political goals (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). Propaganda can be broadly defined as the fabrication of information and selective representation of facts by political actors with the intention to deceive the audience (Zollmann, 2019). Jowett and O'Donnell suggest two categorizations: "black" propaganda that fabricates false information with malicious intent and "white" propaganda that uses distorted information that is truthful but promotes only a particular political perspective (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). While Jowett and O'Donnell present useful case studies in propaganda throughout history, the propaganda model is not sufficient for the contemporary global media and political environment. International political communication is more than deception, given that actors can influence the global

audience through means such as relationship-building and persuasion through identities (Gregory, 2008). From a constructivist perspective, interactions in the media environment between actors and the audience create the opportunity for reshaping perceptions and values (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). Therefore, scholars argue that public diplomacy, as the tool to engage in conversation with the global audience, can build soft power for states that influence preferences through non-coercive means (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 1990). The line between public diplomacy and propaganda can be blurred when it comes to opinionated public diplomacy and “white” propaganda. News and media content could be technically factual but promote only a specific view.

The strategic narrative framework provides a more comprehensive conceptualization of the flow of contemporary international political communication and its potential influence. The narrative paradigm suggests that humans communicate through stories (Fisher, 1984, 1985). It goes beyond the propaganda model to capture the influence through the identities and values built by stories, and the assumption of goodwill in public diplomacy as it is not uncommon for political actors to manipulate information. Because a storyline is meaningful for how well it connects current events with identities and values, it bypasses the challenge of being the arbiter of facts as in the propaganda model. In other words, the factualness of a storyline does not necessarily affect the persuasiveness of a strategic narrative. Rather, the power of strategic narratives lies in how well they interact with the worldviews of the audience (Stroud, 2002). This study is not aimed at investigating the manipulation of information by the U.S. and China, but rather strives to evaluate

how they tell their own stories and compete to reshape identities and worldviews. The perception of factualness is a matter of narrative reception, which is beyond the scope of this study.

#### The policy-centric and narrative-centric approach

This study focuses on identities in the study of strategic narratives. As a developing area of research, previous studies paid more attention to the ways strategic narratives justify policies that political actors intended to implement (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2016; O'Shea, 2019; Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). They argue that strategic narratives are useful tools to rally political support by aligning foreign policy stories with the set of identities and values desired by the audience (Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011). In that way, the proposed policy solution would signal coherent maintenance of the status quo or move toward an ideal status as perceived by the audience. On the international level, by diffusing strategic narratives that point to positive gains, it is more likely for foreign political actors to steer foreign policy in the same direction and endorse grand strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative by China (van Noort and Colley, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many political actors around the world adopted more nationalistic strategic narratives that externalized the public health threat (Cho and Wang, 2021; Chung et al., 2021; Sun, 2021), which can be interpreted as stories to justify extreme containment policies.

However, as previously mentioned, some policy tools such as travel restrictions were costly but inefficient. They could be employed to work with strategic narratives to externalize the threat of the pandemic and contribute to undermining rivals in the international system. A better theorization is required to

capture the political behaviors that are aimed at shaping perspectives. This study synthesized a narrative-centric approach to analyze efforts aiming at forging worldviews. Tracing back to its roots in the constructivist literature, strategic narratives are tools to contest soft power (Roselle et al., 2014). States project strategic narratives to the world not only to give reasons to legitimize their present behaviors, but also to tell stories to give context to behaviors that illuminate how the world works and the characteristics of other political actors. Strategic narratives can be deployed for offensive purposes, such as portraying rival states as evil and a threat to the international order, or work to redefine values that challenge the status quo in the international system (Kluver et al., 2019; Yang, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was a disruptive global crisis filled with uncertainty. Political actors saw more opportunities to formulate storylines that address the unknowns on topics such as foreign pandemic situations and virus origins. These stories could contribute to the efforts of a persuasion contest in the international media environment, which is a different viewpoint that conceptualizing states as manipulating through “black” or “white” propaganda.

Guided by the duo-track framework of strategic narratives, this study asks how strategic narratives in the U.S. and Chinese news make sense of the crisis response in both countries, as well as how a global crisis can provide sources and opportunities for identity contests through strategic narratives in the news environment. This study sampled English-language national news from the U.S. and China because it is much more commonly read by the international audience and referenced by global media outlets, hence demonstrating the greatest potential for

narrative projection. The first question concerns both the identification, and analysis of strategic narratives that justify COVID-19 travel policies at home, analyzing the reasoning behind pandemic policies and how responsibility was attributed. The latter seeks to analyze the issue-level strategic narratives that describe foreign pandemic situations, and identity narratives that illustrate the characteristics and morals of the U.S. and China as state actors. Building on these analyses, this study further examines the strategic narrative contest between the U.S. and China. The relationships between strategic narratives were evaluated on their remediation, responsiveness to foreign pandemic situations and hostile strategic narratives, as well as in terms of the reinforcement of identity strategic narratives. These analyses demonstrate the utility of strategic narratives in leveraging the uncertainties in a crisis to foster favorable stories in the information environment.

#### *Scaling up the study of strategic narratives*

This study expands the methodological scope of the study of strategic narratives. Conventionally, researchers utilize qualitative methods to study strategic narratives to give a thick analysis of storylines that consist of narrative elements such as actors, places, actions, history, and frames. When scholars try to scale up the analysis systematically, they adopt a content analysis approach that employs human coders to read through and classify each document manually. For example, Gackowski and Brylska (2022) studied the Polish news coverage of the Crimean conflict in 2014-2015 using a content analysis that involved 27 coders. This approach not only creates a significant human resource challenge for smaller research teams, but also makes it difficult to control the consistency within a large team of coders. Therefore, this study

suggests employing computational methods for scaling up strategic narrative identification with greater efficiency and consistency. The latest developments in natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning provide various solutions for this task. Words can be transformed into data, which were quantified as computational representations, that form the attributions of a document for analysis. This study compares the output from different algorithms using a test dataset to identify the best-performing model for identifying strategic narratives from the entire dataset.

The news dataset used in this study is a consolidated sample from the Coronavirus news dataset curated by the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) project (The GDELT Project, 2020). GDELT is a big data project that monitors and codifies global online news in real time (Leetaru and Schrodtt, 2013). The Coronavirus news dataset was a curated subset that contains COVID-19-related keywords. News items in the dataset include its publishing date, URL, title, and snippet of the text. The literature suggests that national legacy news media continue to set the news agenda on healthcare news and influence global news, online and offline (Ruget and Usmanalieva, 2021; Su and Borah, 2019; Vargo and Guo, 2017). This study sampled leading English-language national news outlets from the United States including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Voice of America*, and *Fox News*, and English-language national Chinese outlets including *The People's Daily*, *The Global Times*, *CGTN*, and *The China Daily*. The sample timeframe was from January 1, 2020, to April 30, 2023. Google BigQuery was used to access the Coronavirus news dataset (N = 263,014). Next, the news items

were retrieved from the Internet Archive, a non-profit digital library that captures the snapshots of websites (Internet Archive, n.d.), using the Wayback Machine API with Waybackpy in Python (Mahanty, 2022). A total of 225,778 articles were retrieved (85.8% retrieval rate). To provide additional information to evaluate similarities and differences between news and governmental strategic narratives, data from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Conference Corpus (CMFA PressCon) (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021) and the American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters, 1999) were sampled. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) provides data on pandemic parameters and policy responses (Hale et al., 2022).

The job of identifying strategic narratives resembles a categorization task. There are two major approaches to classifying text documents in NLP, unsupervised and supervised machine learning. This study employs a human-in-the-loop narrative identification process which is similar to a hybrid approach in computer-assisted systematic framing analysis (Guo et al., 2022). First, the corpus was analyzed by unsupervised machine learning – Structural Topic Modeling (STM) (Roberts et al., 2019), to reveal its structure. Second, a human-in-the-loop process employs a content analysis to identify strategic narratives, instead of frames in Guo et al. (2022). Topics, their keywords, and their most relevant documents identified by STM were examined qualitatively to extract strategic narratives. A codebook of strategic narratives was compiled to code a subset of the data (1690 articles or 23,660 coded items). Third, supervised machine learning models were trained using the coded subset to classify the rest of the data. The test with various combinations of text vectorization and



machine learning algorithms with the training data showed that the pair of Universal Sentence Encoder (USE) (Cer et al., 2018) with Support Vector Machine (Hearst et al., 1998) performed best, which was employed to code the rest of the data.

Strategic narratives were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. A qualitative analysis explores the details in each of the strategic narratives of interest in this study. The storylines and their transformations or maintenance were delineated. Next, to examine the relationships between strategic narratives, a series of Granger causality tests were employed to analyze the time series data of strategic narratives, aggregated by date. The tests showed which strategic narratives proceeded the other, demonstrating a likely situation where one strategic narrative was relayed, responding to or building on another, to refute or reinforce storylines in the global media environment. The findings were interpreted through examples to illustrate the strategic narratives competition.

#### *Strategic narratives projected by the Chinese news media*

This study identified six relevant strategic narratives in the Chinese news data and four from the CMFA PressCon data (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021). Overall, Chinese strategic narratives justified stringent pandemic control policies and refuted U.S. accusations. Strategic narratives found in Chinese news media and the CMFA demonstrated similar qualities. The storylines were stable and consistent throughout the pandemic but did not adjust to accommodate the changing pandemic situation. Following the policy-centric approach, Chinese strategic narratives tried to justify stringent Zero-COVID pandemic policies that involved large-scale lockdowns and travel restrictions. Two strategic narratives were projected in the Chinese news and

by the CMFA, telling the stories of *scientific Zero-COVID policies*, and the *lives first philosophy* in China. The former argues that Chinese pandemic control was scientific because it successfully halted the transmission of COVID-19, and from March 2020 to early 2022 blocked the import of COVID-19 from abroad, where the pandemic was out of control. Meanwhile, the latter tells a nationalistic story of the fight against an invisible enemy that threatened the people in China, particularly in the early days of the pandemic. By highlighting the motivation to save lives, this storyline called for the cooperation of the people to contribute to the fight, or in other words to bear the high costs of the Zero-COVID.

In 2022, as vaccines and cures were made available worldwide, countries reopened to international travel. China remained disconnected and kept enforcing Zero-COVID to prevent local outbreaks. However, as the newer virus variants became more contagious and less severe, the caseload in China increased considerably and triggered more containment measures by the authorities. As the burden on society and the economy surged, public discontent and protests erupted, making the policy approach unsustainable. Thus, the Chinese government relaxed COVID-19 policies in late 2022 and rapidly reopened to the world. Amid this drastic change in the pandemic situation and policy response, Chinese strategic narratives resorted to reemphasizing the *scientific Zero-COVID policies* and the *lives first* storylines. Since the policy was no longer able to justify a scientific approach by its effectiveness, the strategic narrative was gradually reduced into a catchphrase. The loss of traction became more apparent when the authorities announced an “optimization” of policies that scrapped most containment measures and reopened

Chinese borders. The *scientific* argument did not argue based on evidence but used its past success early in the pandemic to prove the scientific rigor behind policies.

In refuting U.S. accusations, Chinese strategic narratives found in the news environment and from the CMFA both suggested a storyline on the identity level that portrayed the U.S. as an antagonist exploiting the pandemic to smear China and undermine its recovery. This offensive strategic narrative was refuting U.S. accusations of Chinese pandemic policies and information control as hyping the threat from China. The argument was connected to the history of the U.S.-China rivalry in which China was described as the victim of the U.S. containment strategy. It pointed out that the U.S. kept criticizing no matter whether China closed or reopened borders, employing tight or loose pandemic restrictions or not. The “baseless” accusations can only be explained by the ill intentions of the U.S., who has long been unfairly attacking China.

From a narrative-centric approach, Chinese issue-level strategic narratives refuted U.S. accusations based on the characterization of the U.S. as an actor. Responding to the new testing requirements for travelers from China enacted by the U.S. in early 2023, China projected the storyline in the news environment that suggests these restrictions were discriminatory. This storyline suggests that the U.S. reimposed travel restrictions out of political needs, which ignored scientific evidence and the trend of post-COVID reopening. The Chinese strategic narrative cited expert opinions on the ineffectiveness of travel restrictions and the low risk of developing a new variant. It was argued that compared to the caseload in the U.S., the cases imported into the United States would only be a drop in the bucket. An alternative

explanation was proposed, in which the United States was portrayed as sabotaging public health efforts in China and its political system. The U.S. policy was framed as contributing to the “anti-China agenda” that alienates China from the world, including from its neighbors such as South Korea and Japan, which also imposed similar COVID-19 testing schemes on travelers from China. This strategic narrative pointed to the villainous character of the United States that gives priority to undermining China over science and international cooperation.

The character of an “evil” United States who tried to smear China was further highlighted in the virus origin debate. In the Chinese news media, strategic narratives suggest that the United States fabricated the *Wuhan lab leak theory as a political weapon* and counter proposes that *COVID-19 was possibly leaked from Fort Detrick*. The CMFA thus advocated for an investigation in the United States should the Wuhan lab be investigated. In the news, Chinese media dismissed the *Wuhan lab leak theory* by referring to the U.S. mainstream media that suggested that the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was a conspiracy theory from the U.S. political right, who was intended to divert attention away from the mishandling of the pandemic by the Trump administration and blame China to “score political points.” Later, the strategic narrative encompassed the WHO-China virus origin report as scientific evidence to suggest that the Wuhan lab leak was extremely unlikely, although this report was criticized in the West for its questionable reliability. The Chinese media continued to project the same storyline throughout the pandemic, even when the U.S. mainstream media gradually shifted to endorse the *Wuhan lab leak theory*.

Running in parallel, the *Fort Detrick theory* that emerged from Chinese social media was picked up by Chinese officials and news media in mid-2020, soon after the Trump administration publicized the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. The *Fort Detrick theory*, as a Chinese counternarrative, follows a similar story structure as the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. It suggests that there were safety incidents in the Fort Detrick laboratory in the United States in late 2019, coupled with mysterious infections near the lab, that suggest COVID could have leaked from this American lab. Overall, these counternarratives on virus origin were coherent with other Chinese strategic narratives to show the identity of the United States as trying to smear China for political gains domestically and abroad.

#### *Strategic narratives projected by the U.S. news media*

This study identified five U.S. strategic narratives in the news environment and five from the White House from the sample of the American Presidency Project data (Woolley and Peters, 1999). In the United States, strategic narratives were projected to justify travel policies as a means to stop the spread of COVID-19 from abroad, arguing about the virus origin, and portraying China as lacking in transparency. Strategic narratives found in the news environment were less coherent compared to the consistency found in Chinese strategic narratives. The strategic narratives in the U.S. news also did not directly mirror the strategic narratives projected by the White House. It should be noted that these findings reflect the diversity in the U.S. political system and the freedom of the press in the U.S. media system. In the sample, *Fox News* demonstrated the greatest difference with the rest of the U.S. news sampled, covering more right-leaning perspectives than the others. As the findings show, this

tension in the domestic news environment brought inconsistency in the projection of national strategic narrative, but at the same time allowed for more flexibility for narrative transformation.

From the policy-centric perspective, issue-level U.S. strategic narratives in the news justified the extraordinary pandemic measures as necessary against an external threat. China was considered the key source of the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, a strategic narrative skeptical about pandemic control in China was identified in the U.S. news. It focuses on the rapid spread of the virus and later the “waves” of caseload spikes in China. At the early stage, a storyline described how the mysterious new virus quickly spread across China despite Chinese authorities trying to downplay the severity. Later in the pandemic, as COVID-19 became more contagious, the storyline increasingly focused on the inefficiency of the Zero-COVID policy in China. By the time China rapidly scrapped Zero-COVID and reopened borders, the strategic narrative turned to the surging COVID-19 cases and the chaos associated with the caseload. Another strategic narrative thus justified the new COVID-19 tests required for travelers from China because of the lack of scientific evidence and data from China in the latest virus surge. Nevertheless, the strategic narratives about these U.S. policies were contested by health experts quoted in the news because of the inefficiency of these policies. While relaying the justifications for travel restrictions suggested by the authorities, U.S. news media also challenged the costs and the effectiveness of these policies in stopping the virus.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration was securitizing the pandemic by externalizing the threat as a “*China virus*” and claiming a “war” with COVID-19

when COVID-19 spread to the U.S., after initially praising Chinese pandemic controls. Trump reemphasized the origin of COVID-19 in China and maintained that the name of the disease should be associated with China. By externalizing the threat, Trump portrayed himself as a hero, saving America against the foreign threat. Thus, another White House strategic narrative militarized public health responses. The American nationalistic identity was mobilized to strategically create a “rally-round-the-flag” narrative. The Trump administration created the Coronavirus Task Force, telling the public that the battle against the virus was a great national trial. Extraordinary policies such as travel restrictions were justified as the means to win the war. Even after the Biden administration took power, the narrative maintained into 2021, as long as the policies were in place. In other words, the war narrative was likely evoked to justify policies and the mobilization of resources.

From a narrative-centric perspective, U.S. issue-level strategic narratives reinforced the strategic narrative on the identity level that suggests *the Chinese government lacks transparency*. Since early in the pandemic, U.S. news media aired doubts about the transparency of Chinese officials in disclosing the true pandemic situation in China. They pointed to the information control in the Chinese political system, where local governments were trying to cover up problems to avoid responsibility, and the central government was hoping to maintain the image of an effective pandemic control to the world. From the White House, the Trump administration attacked China for misleading the world with misinformation. The strategic narrative suggested that China did not share timely and accurate information but held back information about COVID-19, which delayed pandemic responses

worldwide and created a security threat for America. Later in the pandemic, from late 2022 to early 2023, both the U.S. news media and the White House argued that China was likely underreporting caseload and withholding epidemiological and viral genomic sequence data. This led to the justification for travelers from China should be tested to prevent the spillover of the outbreak and detect potential new virus variants.

The debate on virus origin evoked further doubts about Chinese transparency. On the issue level, the strategic narrative *Wuhan lab leak theory* was projected in the news environment. It suggests that the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which carried out studies of coronavirus, was the likely source of COVID-19. This theory includes the idea that the virus was leaked from the lab environment through contacts in the neighborhood, including the Huanan Seafood Market where COVID-19 first broke out. Initially, during the Trump administration, this storyline emerged from the political right in the United States and, was regarded by the mainstream media as a conspiracy to divert attention from the chaotic pandemic control domestically. However, the attitude about the *Wuhan lab leak theory* started to shift as the Biden administration in 2021 relaunched virus origin investigation following the distrust in the WHO-China report. The *Wuhan lab leak theory* received more credit and became mainstream, particularly when the U.S. Energy Department report suggested it most likely happened. Although the conclusion was made with low confidence, the U.S. media put more emphasis on the “most likely” frame.

Meanwhile, the White House never officially confirmed the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, as different government agencies gave contradictory reports. The White



House maintained that the source of COVID-19 was unknown, and more investigation was required. The Trump administration argued there was evidence implying the possibility of a lab leak, and later the Biden administration reiterated the importance of investigating various likely COVID-19 sources. All in all, issue-level strategic narratives in the U.S. news media and the White House pointed to the lack of transparency in China on the identity level. Endorsing the *lab leak theory* suggested a cover-up, while the inability to arrive at a conclusion further demonstrated the missing evidence that was withheld by China. The discussions and debates around the *lab leak theory*, supportive of the *Wuhan lab leak theory* or not, reinforced the offensive strategic narrative against China.

#### *Relationships between strategic narratives*

This study employed Granger causality tests to estimate the relationships between strategic narratives, as well as between strategic narratives and pandemic parameters. The Granger causality test shows if a time series variable was better predicted by another time series variable than its own trend (Granger, 1969). First, Granger causality tests show if the trends of strategic narrative projection followed the changes in pandemic parameters such as COVID-19 caseload, casualties, and containment policies. Findings suggest that Chinese strategic narratives likely responded to the domestic pandemic situation, to reassure the public and the world that the Chinese government was effectively handling the crisis when caseloads and casualties were on the rise. U.S., strategic narratives were likely externalizing the pandemic threat by responding to increased Chinese containment policies and emphasizing the Wuhan lab leak when the pandemic worsened domestically.

Second, strategic narratives competition was demonstrated through the Granger causality tests by showing the remediation and responsiveness of strategic narratives. Chinese news media relayed three U.S. strategic narratives, but the U.S. news media relayed only one Chinese strategic narrative. The Chinese news media relayed *China struggled to contain COVID-19*, the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, and the *lack of transparency* storylines. The U.S. news media relayed the *Fort Detrick leak theory*. A closer qualitative examination suggests that both U.S. and Chinese news media relayed rival strategic narratives with the purpose of rejecting them. In addition to this rejection, both the United States and China mobilized alternative strategic narratives to compete with each other. The most prominent examples were the lab leak theories. Granger causality tests showed that the Wuhan lab leak theory and the Fort Detrick leak theory caused each other. It was likely that the two strategic narratives were trying to outbid the other for the news agenda.

Meanwhile, Chinese strategic narratives were responsive to U.S. strategic narratives that deemed offensive to China. The Granger casualty analysis suggests that the U.S. narrative of *China struggled to contain COVID-19* triggered use of the Chinese narratives that showed a *scientific policy response* and the *lives first philosophy* of the Chinese government. In other words, it was likely that Chinese strategic narratives were attempting to counter and disprove U.S. accusations by trying to argue that authorities were making efforts to curb the virus outbreak using appropriate measures. Additionally, in an analysis using only data since 2022, the U.S. strategic narrative that justified *new testing requirements on the grounds of the lack of scientific evidence from China* was shown through Granger testing to cause

the Chinese strategic narrative that argued *the U.S. travel restrictions were discriminatory*. Again, it was likely that China responded in attempt to invalidate U.S. accusations.

Third, Granger causality test results help explain the engagement of identities between strategic narratives through the narrative-centric perspective. Again, findings show that Chinese strategic narratives were responsive to U.S. accusations. The Granger test shows that the Chinese identity-level narrative *U.S. smears China* was caused by the U.S. issue-level narrative that *China struggled to contain COVID-19* and the U.S. identity-level narrative that *China lacks transparency*. Coupled with the qualitative analysis results, findings suggest that the Chinese strategic narrative was framing accusations from the U.S. as deliberately reporting China in a negative light to hinder the post-COVID recovery and international image of China, within a broader goal of undermining China's growth in the international system.

On the other hand, U.S. strategic narratives were cohesively shaping the identity of China. U.S. issue-level strategic narratives *COVID-19 tests required because of the lack of scientific evidence from China* in 2022 and the *Wuhan lab leak theory* were shown Granger analysis to cause the identity-level strategic narrative *Chinese government lacks transparency*. A closer qualitative examination also provides evidence that the two issue-level narratives were likely providing evidence to prove that China was withholding information. The travel policy response from the U.S. as well as the inconclusive results in the virus origin search were exemplifying the transparency problem in China. In summary, the U.S. and China employed two distinct approaches to engage the identity of their rival in strategic narratives. While

China tried to deflect offensive strategic narratives by framing them under the “evil” characterization of the United States, U.S. strategic narratives built on one another to solidify a negative identity narrative that attacked its rival.

### *Constructing worldviews with strategic narratives*

The findings of this study demonstrated how the U.S. and China have employed strategic narratives aggressively to compete in the global information environment. To explain the findings in the context of the recent theoretical discussion around global media influence and international politics, the use of more offensive strategic narratives can be examined through the rise of “sharp power” since the 2010s (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Between hard and soft power, sharp power is not entirely coercive nor harmlessly persuasive, but disruptive through softer means such as penetrating the global media sphere to divert public deliberation on important policy issues (Nye, 2018). While not overtly forceful, sharp power manipulates political information exchange to distort public perceptions and public opinion (Walker, 2018). Strategic narratives found in this study show that political actors are not only trying to justify policies and project a more positive image to the world, but also wish to strike rivals by coordinating with other policy tools. China likely projected the *Fort Detrick leak theory* to distract from the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, and the U.S. fostered the image of China lacking transparency with a new COVID-19 testing requirement and strategic narratives about it in early 2023. The study of strategic narratives sheds light on the efforts of political actors in forging worldviews, by fostering their own legitimacy and delegitimizing rivals as the ideological gap grows wider internationally.

This study shows the interaction between the identities of political actors and the public health crisis through strategic narratives. The mixed methods approach aided by computational techniques bridges nuanced qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis that examine relationships between strategic narratives. The evidence yielded addresses the puzzle raised earlier: Why did the United States and China employ seemingly inefficient COVID-19 policies? This study argues that strategic narratives were working side-by-side with policy tools to shape public perceptions. Travel policies such as new testing requirements in the U.S. or the “circuit breaker” in China externalized pandemic to suggest that the threat was coming from other countries as opposed to emerging from the domestic sphere. These policy signals contributed to exemplifying the strategic narratives that suggest two very different realities, such as either an uncontrollable surge of COVID-19 caseload in China or the scientific rigor of Zero-COVID that has controlled the situation. Furthermore, by examining the findings through a narrative-centric lens, it is argued that strategic narratives engaged in the characterization of international rivals. For example, issue-level strategic narratives suggested that there was a lack of data about the new pandemic situation in China in late 2022 to justify the necessity of new testing requirements. This storyline was explained by the identity-level strategic narrative that suggests China lacks transparency. Meanwhile, China framed the policy as discriminatory in its strategic narrative, prompting the identity of an “evil” United States government working to undermine post-pandemic recovery in China.

The literature suggests that uncertainties in the international systems allow political actors to formulate strategic narratives more flexibly with the abundance of

narrative elements. Arguably, U.S. strategic narratives captured the uncertain pandemic situation in China in late 2022. Without credible statistics and open information sources, the outbreak in China was ripe for international speculation. Thus, U.S. strategic narratives were able to cite expert opinions of a bleak pandemic situation in China that projected the risk of pandemic spill-over to the U.S. and highlight the need to impose new testing requirements for visitors from China.

These findings also give perspective on the evaluation of the quality of strategic narratives. While a conventional theoretical perspective suggests that the coherence within strategic narratives and their alignment with the perceived reality determine their persuasiveness (Fisher, 1984; Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011), scholars have argued that narratives can maintain persuasiveness through transforming or reinterpreting storylines (McClure, 2009). This study found that U.S. strategic narratives were more flexible, likely due to the openness of the U.S. media environment. Strategic narratives that justified travel restrictions such as health screening in early 2020 and testing requirements in early 2023 were contested domestically, questioning the efficiency and effectiveness of the policies. Conventionally, this contestation could be seen as a weakness of the media system to project a strong strategic narrative.

Nevertheless, the openness of the U.S. media environment allowed for the flexibility of policy transformation and reinterpretation. The most prominent example of this was the transformation of the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. The strategic narrative managed to turn from a marginalized story advocated by Trump to a mainstream belief. On the other hand, although Chinese strategic narratives were projected

consistently from the CMFA and the news media from early 2020 to 2023, the lack of diversity in the media landscape could have hampered the ability of Chinese strategic narratives to maneuver when the pandemic situation changed drastically in 2022. Thus, the original storylines found it difficult to explain the rapid reopening and relaxation of Zero-COVID.

Findings on the competition of strategic narratives that built on incompatible perceptions of reality demonstrated the complexity of evaluating their implications in global politics. The strategic narrative framework provides a comprehensive perspective that enriches the theoretical discussion on propaganda and public diplomacy. The propaganda model highlights the deceptive use of information for political goals (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). The public diplomacy concept suggests states can conduct public relations-like activities to persuade through identity and value appeals (Gregory, 2008; Melissen, 2005). The strategic narratives framework gives a constructivist interpretation of the contest in the global news environment. Because constructed storylines can be built on both factual and fabricated elements, the analysis of strategic narratives bypasses the positivist evaluation of the manipulation of facts, particularly when the “truth” is unclear. From the lab leak theories to the effects of reopening Chinese borders, the “truth” remained uncertain. The strategic narrative framework considers this a situation in which political actors can formulate a desirable storyline using narrative elements available in the public sphere. The U.S. strategic narratives that built up an identity of China lacking transparency can serve the U.S. political agenda, but this narrative is not necessarily deceptive.

Meanwhile, although Chinese strategic narratives may sound unconvincing and propagandistic to the political audience in the West, these storylines can be more meaningful to people in other parts of the world. If Chinese strategic narratives were to be evaluated solely through the lens of propaganda or disinformation, it would overlook the potential of these narratives in engaging with audiences that shares similar worldviews to China. An “evil” American identity narrative can be persuasive in countries with hostile relations with the United States. Given that strategic narratives function by connecting history, values, and worldviews to interpret current events, countries previously colonized by the West or antagonized by the global influence of the United States could find Chinese strategic narratives attractive. In the past two decades, China has been increasing its media presence in the developing world (Gagliardone, 2013). Building on an alternative understanding of the world, the influence of Chinese strategic narratives should not be underestimated. Put against the backdrop of the current U.S.-China rivalry, alternative strategic narratives might not be aimed at winning over the audience in the West, but other parts of the world that view the international system differently.

### Upcoming chapters

Chapter 2 reviews the literature in journalism and political communication, as well as the constructivist literature in international relations. The discussion of the news coverage of COVID-19 in the United States and China led to research questions on the construction and interaction of strategic narratives that engage with the identities of the United States and China as political actors. Chapter 3 introduces the news data and other supportive data that were sampled for this research. Based on the literature



review of the methodology in studying strategic narratives and natural language processing, a human-in-the-loop machine learning process was introduced to identify and analyze relevant strategic narratives from large text datasets. Chapter 4 presents the qualitative findings of strategic narratives identified in Chinese news from the GDELT Coronavirus news dataset (The GDELT Project, 2020). This discussion is further augmented by a qualitative analysis of the strategic narratives identified in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference data (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021). Chapter 5 presents the qualitative findings from the U.S. news (The GDELT Project, 2020), with the addition of findings from the strategic narratives identified in the American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters, 1999). Chapter 6 presents and discusses the quantitative findings from Granger causality analyses to demonstrate the interactions between strategic narratives. Chapter 7 provides a discussion based on the literature and concludes by pointing out the limitations of this study, as well as future research directions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

As the news environment and international relations changed rapidly in the post-Cold War 21<sup>st</sup> century, theories evolved to capture the extended contestations between political actors in the media sphere. This study investigates the news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel policies in the U.S. and Chinese media to analyze the role of international communication in global politics. The literature on political communication and international relations provides different theoretical frameworks that can be bridged to explain how political actors can utilize media to advance their goals. On the representation of international events, the line of research that studies media framing conceptualizes how news coverage can highlight certain parts of events to generate different meanings and attribute responsibility to various causes (Iyengar, 1990). Earlier scholars focused on how frames change the meaning of the same issue by emphasizing its different aspects but later scholars suggest that context is crucial in interpreting the meaning of frames (Scheufele and Iyengar, 2014). Some argued that the theoretical scope of framing became unclear as it expanded to capture more than the effects of the use of language (Cacciatore et al., 2016). Therefore, this study operationalizes framing as a highly useful concept that provides rigor in theorizing about the power of media content in making meanings. A comprehensive framework of strategic narratives is employed, which encompasses framing to capture the political implications of messages in specific times and places. The literature review in this chapter discusses the scope of framing and how it can be incorporated in the same theoretical framework of strategic narratives.

In the field of international relations, scholars were also working to explain the mechanisms and effects of political messages. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a “narrative turn” in the field where more attention was paid to the construction of the political reality through stories told by political actors (Roberts, 2006). The conceptualization of state power expanded to include soft power (Nye, 1990), which suggests the communication of identities can be powerful in shaping political outcomes. One of the ways to operationalize this influence is through projecting strategic narratives, or in other words, the stories told purposefully about global events in attempts to shape public opinion (Roselle et al., 2014). News and media play an important role in this process of engaging the international audience as they provide fast and accessible ways to learn about current international affairs. The narrative-based framework provides a comprehensive scope for understanding the flow of international communication as stories that explain the behaviors of actors in the international system, connecting the past to the present, and implying future policy directions (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). In the framework, frames can be considered as building blocks of strategic narratives that portray actors and events (Gackowski and Brylska, 2022).

This chapter synthesizes the literature in political communication and international relations. In order to do this, the theoretical foundations of media framing and strategic narratives are discussed. It is suggested that while framing remains a useful concept to explain the meanings stemming from the representation of international events in the news, the strategic narratives framework captures the intentionality and context of the stories being communicated. Two perspectives in

approaching strategic narratives are presented. Conventionally, a policy-centric perspective addresses how issue-level strategic narratives align the justification of policies with values and worldviews to persuade audiences. This study proposes a narrative-centric perspective that centers on the purpose of strategic narratives in shaping identities, which are key sources of soft power. It is suggested that political actors leverage opportunities in international events to deploy strategic narratives that highlight specific qualities in political actors. Thus, on top of justifying policies, strategic narratives use stories to infer the morals and characteristics of themselves and one another to legitimize or delegitimize actors in the current international system. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the political communication of unusual or deviant international events with unclear policy directions, as it demonstrates the role of strategic narratives in power dynamics more obviously.

After the discussion of the theoretical promising of identifying and tracking strategic narratives in the global media ecosystem, this chapter introduces a case study of the U.S.-China rivalry in the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the theoretical lens of strategic narratives, this study analyzes how this global crisis created an opportunity for the U.S. and China to project strategic narratives around the pandemic and related travel policies to reinforce and challenge each other's global identities.

### *Media framing*

Framing theory provides a theoretical lens to understand how news coverage conveys political messages. The theoretical foundation of framing is crucial to understanding how strategic narratives operate (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020). Framing is a broad

concept in social sciences that explains the influence of representation and interpretation in social processes. Goffman (1974) considers framing as the ways people define a situation and their relationship with it (Ytreberg, 2002). In a study of news media, Iyengar (1990) identified how news was presented as frames, where thematic frames give overviews of events and episodic frames focus on illustrating a broader issue with specific examples. Thematic frames tend to attribute responsibility to greater social factors such as culture and economic conditions, while episodic frames assign responsibility to individuals or groups (Iyengar and Simon, 1993). Entman (1993) did important work in consolidating framing theory in the field of communication. He argued that framing “consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (p. 51). He defines framing as “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). Salience means that information becomes noticeable, meaningful, or memorable (Entman, 1993). For example, the U.S. news framed similar shootdowns by the Soviets and U.S. military differently, where the former was framed as an act of war with a focus on moral responsibility but the latter as a tragic mistake with a focus on technical problems in military technologies (Entman, 1991).

Framing theory helps conceptualize how elites strategically influence the media for political ends. Entman (2003) explains this influence by proposing the Cascading Activation Model, which describes the activation and spread of interpretive frames from the top of a stratified political system. The model suggests that a frame, decided by the presidential administration in his case study of the 9/11 and the War on Terror, cascades down to the levels of Washington elites, journalists,

news texts, and eventually to the public. Entman's (2003) theory noted that a lack of contesting frames meant that a single powerful frame, such as the War on Terror, could become dominant even though it did not logically reflect the facts on the ground. Empirical findings support this theory. For example, Hänggli and Kriesi (2010) found that framing input from political actors was decisive in the media frames of elections. Matthes (2012) summarized previous research and suggested that news media were governed by a political logic, in which they adopted frames from political elites to facilitate dialogue and exchange of arguments. Nevertheless, although scholars generally agree that while journalists are not entirely autonomous in deciding which frame to deploy in news coverage, they may intervene in the framing process by structuring the tone of political debates and packaging policy narratives under different themes (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001).

There are two major approaches in the study of framing. Scholars from the sociological tradition study "emphasis" frames (Scheufele and Iyengar, 2014), which are the qualities of different aspects of the same event (Chong and Druckman, 2007). For example, an event can be presented through *conflict* or *human interest* aspects that frame the discussion in the news (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). They highlight the nature or consequences of a news event (de Vreese et al., 2001). Meanwhile, scholars from the psychological tradition conceptualize frames using prospect theory, which suggests changes in wordings that describe a situation will affect its interpretation among the audience (Scheufele, 2000). They study "equivalency" frames in the news, where the same objective fact is described in different ways; for example, the description of 90% employment and 10%

unemployment are factually equivalent but they illustrate the situation by anchoring on the opposite ends of the same concept (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Because of the different theoretical foundations in the two traditions, scholars from the sociological tradition focus on examining the content of media to identify what aspect of an event is highlighted. Scholars from the psychological tradition are typically more interested in the effects of the representation of the same information. They focus on the study of audience reception of media frames.

The diverse conceptualization of media frames leads to different interpretations of the influence of media in politics. While scholars from the psychological tradition see influence as a matter of content presentation, scholars who believe context is crucial in political communication argue that the influence on political values is specific to particular times, places, and individuals (D'Angelo et al., 2019). Because this study aims to analyze the storylines projected by political actors, which suggest different aspects presented in international events, the conceptualization of frames as elements in strategic narratives aligns more with the sociological tradition. Nevertheless, the over-expansion of the conceptualization of framing could render the theory into a "catch-all phrase," where frames become a general description of topics in the news rather than focusing on the perspectives on topics (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). Therefore, the scope of frames should be confined to the interpretive aspects described in the news to maintain theoretical clarity. Contextual elements such as time, place, or actors can be captured together with frames by a broader theoretical framework of strategic narratives to better explain the flow and interaction of political communication. It should be noted that

while audience reception is an important element of studying framing, narrative, and the media more broadly, this dissertation will focus on identifying the content of narratives and not audience reception of varying narratives.

### *From framing to the narrative approach*

There is a rising interest in applying the concept of narratives in international relations, particularly in the use of strategic narratives to explain international information flows (Kluver et al., 2019; Miskimmon et al., 2017; Roselle et al., 2014). While framing theory illustrates how different presentations of policy issues may shape public perceptions, the political meaning of frames should be interpreted according to the social context and political values of the public (D'Angelo et al., 2019). Moreover, the scope of framing theory does not capture temporal and causal features that explain how perspectives are shaped in context (Miskimmon et al., 2013a). The concept of strategic narratives offers an alternative by considering international political communication as dynamic storylines that are constructed by frames and contextual elements such as actors and events (Bryanov et al., 2023).

The strategic narrative approach explains political communication by showing the connections between individual events and stories that are made by political actors. Literary theorists suggest that the core components of narratives include an actor, an action, a goal or intention, a scene, and an instrument (Burke, 1969). In the field of political communication and international relations, narratives are considered constructs that connect various story components: A basic narrative fits at least two events on the same timeline to make sense of their relationship (Prince 1982, as cited in Shenhav, 2006). This action of explaining relationships between events by



suggesting sequence and causality shapes human understanding of the world and perspectives in politics (Roberts, 2006). Miskimmon et al. (2013) explain the importance of narratives in communicating politics by noting that “a narrative entails an initial situation or order, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that reestablishes order, though that order may be slightly altered from the initial situation” (p. 5). Developed on this conceptualization, Miskimmon et al. (2017) consolidated five essential components in a political narrative: the agent, the scene, the act, the agency, and the purpose.

#### The concepts of frames and narratives

The literature suggests that strategic narratives and framing theory are both useful concepts for analyzing political communication on foreign policy issues. Although the two concepts have commonalities in their theoretical foundation, they conceptualize the mechanisms of political communication differently.

First, while framing theory stems from the psychology of language use, the narrative approach focuses on decision-making mechanisms that are informed by narrative structures (Shenhav, 2006). Framing scholars hold that the choice of words suggests how the audience interprets the text (Scheufele and Iyengar, 2014).

Narrative scholars argue that meanings in the text are better understood through narratives than frames because narratives better reflect how humans navigate experiences (Sarbin, 1986). In particular, people both construct meaningful stories and make sense of the world by looking for meanings within stories (Sarbin, 1986). Thus, it is critical to consider the connections between events in the news and how these coalesce into stories that resonate with the audience in order to understand how

perceptions are communicated. In other words, knowing the frame of a single event is insufficient to explain its political implications; rather, one needs to know how frames fit into narratives that are stories constructing the worldview of the public.

Second, both the concepts of frames and narratives help analyze the power of language in shaping political perspectives presented in the media, but their scope is different. On one hand, they both concern the selection of a part of reality to represent events in the communication process. Livingston & Nassetta (2018) suggest that framing and narratives share a common constructivist origin, which sees social reality as shaped by the use of language. On the other hand, the theoretical scope of framing is narrower than narratives. The earlier definition of framing concerns ways of presenting information (e.g., Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1990). It suggests that the scope of framing is confined to individual messages, focusing on how a particular aspect of an event is highlighted. The narrative approach takes a wider perspective, in particular with the refined concept of strategic narrative that considers the agent, the scene, the act, the agency, and the purpose of events (Miskimmon et al., 2017). The theoretical framework of narratives illustrates the interactions between various narrative elements that explain how communication works by taking into account the fabric of stories that construct an understanding of history and culture.

Third, while some framing scholars work on broadening the scope of framing to cover the complex communication environment, these extensions of framing theory overlap with the conceptualization of strategic narratives, which created theoretical conflations that are counterproductive for analyzing political communication (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020). Some studies consider frames that

address a particular event as “issue-specific frames” and build on top of them a level of “master frames” (e.g., Ihlen & Nitz, 2008; Mooney & Hunt, 1996). Master frames are frames that interpret various issues according to the same line of logic, as long as they have similar cultural embeddings (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020). The expanding theorization of framing demonstrated the efforts to embody greater explanation power under the same theoretical construct, but eventually rendering framing into a catch-all phrase that is difficult to theorize and operationalize reliably (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Scheufele and Iyengar, 2014).

The relationship between frames and strategic narratives

Recent scholarship seeks to draw the boundary between strategic narrative and framing theory. Coticchia and Catanzaro (2020) bridge the literature by proposing three ways to delineate the relationships between frames and strategic narratives. They argue that strategic narratives have emplotment, a strategic dimension, and that narratives can incorporate frames conceptually. First, emplotment sits at the heart of narration, where individuals “select, evaluate, and order events to create stories” (Jacobs, 2000:21, as cited in Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2020). In the process, the narrator picks elements from events and formulates a coherent story. Causal linkages between different events are drawn to constitute a narrative. On the contrary, frames are more limited to the interpretation of events and less about weaving pieces of events together. As Miskimmon et al. (2013) suggest, frames are not always anchored in past causes or necessarily suggest future outcomes.

Second, strategic narratives are constructed purposefully but framing is “sometimes purposeful, sometimes accidental, and sometimes instinctive” (Castells,

2009, as cited in Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2020). Strategic narratives are stories projecting a version of reality for political ends. Framing is not always intentional. Coticchia and Catanzaro (2020) point out that scholars suggested a dual view on framing. Framing can be unintentional, as a consequence of social processes that do not necessarily reflect the goals of an actor. For example, institutional processes in newsrooms can alter news framing: Time constraints, limited resources, and organizational routines can influence the news frames presented (e.g., Gitlin, 1980). The other view sees framing as intentional. Entman (2003) argues framing is an active process where actors deliberately frame events for political purposes.

Third, frames can be considered as parts of narratives. Livingston and Nassetta (2018) argue that frames are “less ambitious,” where the relationship between frames and strategic narratives is like the relationship between weather and climate. Frames can be considered as building blocks of a storyline (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2020). A similar view can be observed in the framing literature as well. Entman (2004) suggests that frames, which highlight parts of the selected perceived reality, assemble narratives. Narratives are built by sequentially arranging events with frames that tell coherent stories. Miskimmon et al. (2013) also agree that “various components of a narrative must be framed a certain way, so framing must be taken into account” (p. 7).

### The narrative approach and strategic narratives

#### The narrative paradigm

The persuasive power of narratives is illustrated by the narrative paradigm which suggests that humans seldom communicate through logical arguments but rather through stories that contain values and beliefs (Fisher, 1984, 1985). Fisher (1984) argues that “the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation” (p. 8). Storytelling is important in political communication because humans address uncertainties in the future by telling stories derived from their internal model of reality and concept of orientation, where narratives “resolve exigencies by locating and activating values that go beyond the moment, making it possible that principles of decision or action can be generalized” (Fisher, 1985, p. 354).

Therefore, the contest in political communication is about convincing the audience to choose a narrative. Fisher (1984) proposes that human decision-making relies on “good reasons” in stories. A “good” reason is determined by *narrative probability*, which is the coherence of stories, and *narrative fidelity*, which is accessing the truthfulness of new stories by referencing stories known to be true (Fisher, 1984). Nevertheless, scholars later argue that *narrative probability* is not necessarily determined by story coherence because some narratives deliberately include incoherence and contradiction to introduce novel ideas and values; and *narrative fidelity* does not always rely on identification with pre-existing values because the audience can be convinced by new ideas and values (Stroud, 2002). This contemporary interpretation of the narrative paradigm suggests that contests in

political communication not only shape individual policy perspectives in the audience, but also show the potential to modify worldviews and values that people rely on to make decisions.

#### Strategic narratives

The concept of strategic narratives specifically explains how political actors exert influence by considering humans as storytellers who communicate for a purpose (e.g., Burke, 1969; Fisher, 1984). Since there are multiple ways to describe and connect a series of events, by creating a particular storyline, a narrative by nature conveys perspectives, or frames, as a product of human choice (Shenhav, 2006). By connecting worldviews and identities via narratives (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001), public perceptions of social issues can be shaped (Ferree et al., 2002). Given their utility, narratives can be employed strategically by political actors to legitimize their policies and sway public opinion to support their actions.

The concept of strategic narratives specifically addresses narratives from political actors in an international context (Miskimmon et al., 2013a). Its theoretical foundation that considers narratives as means for identity-building to influence political behaviors stems from the constructivist approach that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (O’Loughlin et al., 2017). This persuasive force is conceptualized by Nye (1990) as soft power, as opposed to conventional military and economic hard power that coerces political choices in a foreign state. When the field of international relations experienced a “narrative turn” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Roberts, 2006), scholars sought to conceptualize political actors as individuals who tell stories to achieve their goals. Political actors try to influence not by imposing a perspective on

the audience but rather by using narratives to forge the identity of a political actor. Miskimmon et al. (2013) consolidated the idea and suggest that strategic narratives integrate political interests and goals, which “articulate end states and suggest how to get there” (p. 5). In other words, strategic narratives tell stories that are in line with the perspectives and values of the storyteller, intending to convince the audience to envision a shared outcome. By using narratives, political actors may give or negotiate the social meaning of certain events to shape perceptions of reality and facilitate policymaking (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2016). Miskimmon et al., (2013) argue, in the long run, narratives shape the perceptions and identities of political actors as seen by others.

Meanwhile, the constructivist theoretical foundation of the strategic narratives framework allows it to better address the networked international communication wrought by the development of ICTs. Before the digital age, the broadcasting model played a central role in explaining public diplomacy between state actors and the global audience in the media environment (Cull, 2008). As the internet and social media platforms have provided more agency for the public to interact across borders, meanings in international events are increasingly negotiated by online users. The strategic narratives framework captures this dynamic by conceptualizing the process as storytelling. Thus, stories from all sides and locations in the media environment compete with one another to construct meanings.

#### The structure of strategic narratives

In order to conceptualize the political influence of strategic narratives, it is essential to identify three levels of strategic narratives: system, identity, and issue narratives

(Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017). First, international system narratives are stories about the structure of the world, the roles of actors, and the rules in the system. For example, the Cold War narrative describes a bipolar world of an East-West contestation based on an ideological struggle between totalitarianism and freedom (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). Second, identity narratives are stories about the identity of a political actor and its goals and values. For example, the Chinese Communist Party utilized stories of the victimization of China during foreign aggressions in the late 19th to early 20th century to establish its role as a legitimate ruling institution (Liao, 2017). Third, issue narratives are stories about policies surrounding particular events, which are typically generated spontaneously. They explain the explicit challenges of the event and propose necessary policy solutions. For example, NATO countries employed strategic narratives after 9/11 to explain why sending troops to Afghanistan was desirable to generate public support for the operations (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). Strategic narratives in these three levels anchor the interpretation of international policy events and give perspectives to resolve crises (Miskimmon et al., 2013a, 2017).

The communication process of strategic narratives involves narrative formation, projection, and reception (Miskimmon et al., 2013a, 2017). First, narrative formation concerns the forces that shape a narrative, such as the role of political actors, political interests of actors, public opinion, etc. Actors may employ various types of communication skills, such as persuasion, argument, and representational force, to construct their narratives. Second, narrative projection is about delivering narratives in the media environment. Not only is it focusing on how the messages



travel through different media, but it also concerns the contestation of different narratives in the media. Third, narrative reception is the process of how individuals interpret and respond to narratives. This dissertation will focus on narrative projection, with reference to how these narratives were shaped by the national interests of the U.S. and China. While this study does not measure audience reception, it discusses the implications of strategic narratives for domestic and international audiences from news sources.

#### Forging perspectives

Political actors are more likely to gain political support if their projection of strategic narratives on the three levels is coherent. Employing concepts from the narrative paradigm, this means that the *narrative fidelity* of issue narratives should be anchored to identity and system narratives, where the stories should explain events with existing values that political actors projected. Otherwise, contradictions between the suggested worldview and relevant policies would undermine the effectiveness of narratives and the identity of the actor. Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011) argue that, in narrative formation, political actors should make clear the purpose of the action and describe the prospect for that action to achieve its goals. In narrative projection, political actors should be consistent in their communication and not introduce other narratives that contradict each other. In narrative reception, a strategic narrative would be more likely to be effective if it is not contested by other political actors who project alternative strategic narratives (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011).

Nevertheless, it can be risky for political actors to justify policy solutions only by using status-quo narratives while ignoring potential rival narratives. The “success

formula” of strategic narratives that emphasizes probability and fidelity remains too conservative by limiting the possibilities of narrative transformation and reinterpretation (McClure, 2009). A strategic narrative focused on an issue that coincides with existing system and identity narratives is not necessarily effective. Aside from narratives that support the status quo, competing narratives that promote alternative explanations and solutions should be considered. For example, O’Shea (2019) analyzed the strategic narratives in Japanese news on the issue of U.S. military base relocation in Okinawa from the 1990s to 2010s. Findings suggest that the issue narrative of “deterrence” aligns relocation with the narrative of the “China threat” and the identity of the U.S.-Japan alliance (O’Shea, 2019). In this case, issue narratives do not justify policies on their own merits as the Japanese strategic narratives did not address the social and environmental problems caused by the relocation (O’Shea, 2019). Anti-relocation public opinion may in turn promote an alternate narrative that challenges the system and identity narratives. Therefore, scholars should examine competing narratives in the media environment to evaluate the projection of strategic narratives in a policy issue.

#### *Incorporating framing theory in the framework of strategic narratives*

The study of strategic narrative, as an analytical device, is better able to address the complexity of political communication in the 21st century than framing theory (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). Particularly in the international context, political communication in countries with different political and media systems may not be explained by framing theory. Livingston and Nassetta (2018) point out that the theoretical foundations of many conventional theories rest on a U.S.-centric

interpretation of the regime-media relationship. For example, the cascading activation model (Entman, 2003) is developed to explain how frames flow in a presidential democracy. Information flow can be restricted and directed by the regime in authoritarian states (Norén-Nilsson, 2021). Furthermore, technological advancements in digital media could render the theory obsolete as they were developed in an era when mainstream media controlled the centralized communication process (Livingston & Nassetta, 2018). The audience was no longer a passive receiver subjected to the persuasion of communicators; now the ways in which individuals interpret framing can in turn enter the media environment easily through internet-based communication (D'Angelo, 2017).

Incorporating framing into the concept of strategic narratives allows us to better analyze the flow of international political communication. For example, some studies of strategic narratives focus on actor framing. Kluver et al. (2019) studied global news coverage of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. They identified the valence of candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, how they were characterized, and the issues associated with them to reconstruct strategic narratives. This study does deliver the promises of Livingston and Nassetta (2018) by demonstrating the interplay and tensions between political actors internationally, which went beyond the conventional theoretical framework of framing. However, Kluver et al. (2019) illustrated a challenge in scaling up strategic narrative research. At the core of their method – coding elements in the strategic narratives, categories such as the danger of Clinton or Trump, or their political parties being unified or not — had a scope similar to a frame in conventional content analysis. This approach did

not go further to assemble frames and other linguistic elements to delineate the construction of strategic narratives. Thus, strategic narratives contests were not systematically analyzed by means such as showing their trends and relationships. A better coherence between the theoretical framework and research methods may maximize the explanatory power of the framework of strategic narratives.

Some studies of political narratives demonstrate better integration of framing theory into their conceptual framework. For example, in the study of policies, Crow and Lawlor (2016) propose the integration of frames into the Narrative Policy Framework to capture the role of media and communication in the policy process. They recognize the utility of studying framing, which unveils the perspectives of actors. The Narrative Policy Framework seeks to analyze the role and contributions of different actors, including the media, who construct policy narratives that consist of various frames. The benefit of this approach lies in its comprehensiveness. Based on the study of narratives, the Narrative Policy Framework shows which actors are perceived as “heroes,” “villains,” or “victims” (Crow and Lawlor, 2016), which provides greater analytical depths than a simple categorization of frames in the media. Similar approaches have been utilized for studying narratives in international events (e.g., Gackowski & Brylska, 2022; Wijermars, 2021). Wijermars (2021) examines the media framing of the temporary banning of the social media app Telegram in Russia. Although she adheres to the conventional content coding to identify frames, the study was enriched by identifying other narrative elements, to investigate “the presence or absence and identity of heroes, victims and villains,” in the media content (Wijermars, 2021).

Recent work by Gackowski and Brylska (2022) demonstrated a more seamless theoretical integration. They consider frames as the building blocks of narratives in their study of the media coverage of the Crimean conflict (2014-2015) and argue that the study of frames helps deconstruct some parts of narratives (Gackowski and Brylska, 2022). In addition to news frames, they also identified actors, places, actions, and means in the analysis to reconstruct underlying strategic narratives. This method of analysis provides thick findings to explain how frames forge strategic narratives. Nevertheless, their approach presents two major challenges. The first is their limited case study. Gackowski and Brylska (2022) only analyzed Polish news coverage to discover the Polish strategic narratives in the Crimean conflict (2014-2015). They did not include strategic narratives from relevant countries that could influence or contest the Polish narratives. As the previous discussion on Ringsmose and Børghesen (2011) and O'Shea (2019) suggests, alternative strategic narratives could shape the strategic narratives of interest. Because Gackowski and Brylska (2022) devoted a considerable part of their analysis to narratives about Russia, as tracking Russian strategic narratives in the international media environment could help explain the Polish strategic narratives in turn. The other challenge is methodological. Because Gackowski and Brylska (2022) seek to identify a long list of narrative elements (nearly 40 categories) with traditional content analysis techniques using human coders, the manual labor is extremely intensive when the study scales up. As a solution, Gackowski and Brylska (2022) employed 27 coders to analyze 430 articles. It would be more efficient to find a more parsimonious way to measure narratives,

preferably a method that could employ automated or semi-automated content analysis.

The works cited above show promising directions in the use of the strategic narratives framework for studying international political communication. First, integrating framing theory into the framework of strategic narratives illustrates the perspectives from and on political actors and events. Second, strategic narratives from key actors in the same event could interact and shape one another. Third, methodologically, the study of strategic narratives can scale up systematically. Media frames and narratives were identified through methods such as conventional content analysis. To further increase the efficiency of this workflow, machine learning in natural language processing can be deployed to dramatically increase the size of corpus under analysis. Nevertheless, the literature pointed out the value of having a qualitative step to ensure the validity and reliability of the categories identified in the analyses. Thus, this study introduces computational techniques in a mixed-method design that embeds a qualitative narrative identification step between two machine learning cycles. Details are provided in the next chapter.

### *Strategic narratives and politics between major powers*

#### Information and political audience

Strategic narratives help explain complex global affairs and advocate for corresponding foreign policy options in the national context, as well as provide signals that facilitate political processes at home and internationally. Information signaled by political actors is essential in international relations not only because it

illuminates foreign policy choices by updating beliefs on their counterparts, but also because it affects the reputation of political actors (Fearon, 1994). These signals operate in the dimensions of domestic and international politics, as conceptualized as two-level games (Putnam, 1988). On both levels, signals provide references for audiences to make political decisions. According to the polity types, audiences are relevant to political processes in different ways to shape policies and determine who is in power.

On the international level, the targeted audience is political actors abroad and the foreign public (Fearon, 1994). The international audience could shape the foreign policy responses in their home states, which influences the political outcomes of the foreign policy of the origin state in the two-level game. On the domestic level, the audience includes political institutions and politicians in the state, and the constituencies who are informed by the mass media (Fearon, 1994). A key feature defining the domestic audience is their ability to sanction leaders. This mechanism at the domestic level informs international actors about the potential consequences of state leaders regarding their performance at the international level.

Fearon argues that the domestic audience gives weight to information signaling on the international level in international crises, because they can sanction state leaders if the reputation of the state is damaged in front of the international audience. On the domestic level, “unfaithful agents” who do not align with audience expectations would be punished, particularly if political leaders deceive the audience and manipulate the information on policy quality (Slantchev, 2006). Therefore,

audience costs create the incentives for political leaders to make claims that are aligned with reality and follow through with their policy promises.

A functional free press can play an important role in facilitating this mechanism. First, widespread media coverage of foreign policy issues increases public awareness to pressure leaders to take clear policy positions, thus making commitments in the international arena. Second, media coverage of policy positions checks and pushes leaders to follow through on their commitments. If the leaders failed in their foreign policy goals, a free press could hold them accountable and expose wrongdoing. Finally, the influence of domestic media coverage may reach beyond the “water’s edge” where the foreign audience can be informed and activated to generate cross-national pressure on state leaders (Miller, 2016).

Nevertheless, information in the media environment does not always provide unbiased references for the audience. A free press may have a lower intention to distort information for domestic political contests but could misinterpret information and create noise in the communication process (Slantchev, 2006). While free media plays a gate-keeping role in democracies, they are not free from political influence and the audience should not be assumed to be all knowledgeable and attentive to foreign policy issues (Potter and Baum, 2010). Moreover, in non-democratic countries, the media environment is often controlled by political elites. Information that forms strategic narratives can be manipulated to advance political goals instead. In other words, strategic narratives have the potential to shape perceptions and behaviors of political audiences who could alter the locus of domestic and international politics to a certain degree. The stories that help the political audience



understand the world are by no means neutral but carry the values and worldviews that are projected through the selection of narrative elements and construction of storylines. Political actors could leverage this narrative process to shape international and domestic audience costs for managing their reputations or create leeway for policy flexibility.

#### From propaganda to strategic narratives

The propaganda model provides a well-established alternative theoretical framework to conceptualize the political influences in international communication processes. The propaganda model also concerns the political implications of stories about policy events covered in the media. Since messages can be distorted and noise can be introduced in the communication process (Slantchev, 2006), political actors would seek to misrepresent events to change public perceptions. Scholars have been using the theoretical framework of propaganda to analyze the manipulation of media for political goals (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). Work that engages with the propaganda model focuses on how political actors project fabricated information or present selective facts to deceive the audience (Zollmann, 2019). In the framework, information produced by propaganda can be broadly categorized into two types. This includes the malicious use of “black” propaganda that fabricates information and deceives the public; but also the “white” propaganda that promotes particular views with truthful but partial information (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012).

However, the globalized and decentralized communication environment presents two major challenges for the propaganda model. First, deception is not the only method to promote political values in international communication, where

polities can influence one another through means of relationship-building (Gregory, 2008). Second, the propaganda model suggests a unidirectional communication model from political actors to the audience but it can no longer explain the interactions in the contemporary globalized digital media landscape (Melissen, 2005). Instead, both political actors and the audience respond to media content produced by one another. From a constructivist perspective, perceptions and values are shaped by the interaction between the purposive use of communication tactics (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). The propaganda model might be able to address the first challenge by considering truthful but persuasive framing as “white” propaganda. Yet, it failed to capture the co-constructed narrative reality not as a result of the powerful one-way effect of propaganda, but a negotiation between actors and their worldview.

Scholars attempt to capture this complexity with the concept of public diplomacy, which suggests states enhance soft power to alter global politics (Gregory, 2008). As soft power can be translated as a non-coercive means to gain compliance (Nye, 1990), influence and persuasion become more effective on the “two-way-street” of communication (Melissen, 2005). The public diplomacy framework considers purposeful international political communication as an interactive process where states engage in “listening”, “advocacy”, “cultural diplomacy”, “exchange,” and “international broadcasting” (Cull, 2008), providing a wider scope to understand means of communication that shape political processes intentionally.

Nevertheless, it was not always easy to distinguish between public diplomacy and propaganda in practice. For example, although the U.S. government shifted from “propaganda” to “public diplomacy” in its global information campaign strategy,

operations such as black propaganda continued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Guth, 2009). The two concepts are not always mutually exclusive. Public diplomacy can include “white” propaganda elements but implemented in a responsive way. For example, authoritarian states such as China and Russia employed propaganda tools such as news broadcasting to achieve public diplomacy goals (Rawnsley, 2015). Some content in these news outlets might not be entirely fabricated, but only heavily opinionated. While they manipulated news content heavily to inject ideas into the audience, they were utilized as image-building tools for public diplomacy. Therefore, propaganda is intertwined in public diplomacy.

The strategic narrative approach provides a more comprehensive conceptualization of the influence of communication in an international context by considering it through the public diplomacy framework. The contemporary information environment is overwhelmed by alternative interpretations of the reality of policy issues. From a constructivist perspective, the influence of political communication could only be meaningfully understood under specific worldviews. In other words, it would not be meaningful to analyze a piece of false information under the propaganda paradigm should that be perceived as factual in the first place. What is propaganda to some people could be public diplomacy to others. The strategic narrative framework bypasses the evaluation of the factuality of information that is required in the propaganda paradigm in order to analyze deceptive communication processes. Strategic narratives are stories that help people conceptualize the world. As the narrative paradigm suggests that people do not necessarily understand the world through logical arguments, the persuasiveness of storylines is a more important factor

than the “factuality” of narrative elements in powering strategic narratives. Therefore, while this study is not dismissing the studies on disinformation for their strengths in uncovering political manipulations, the strategic narratives framework provides the theoretical bedrock for understanding interpretive information exchange that involved uncertain situations where the line between facts and falsehood is blurred, which is common in international relations.

The narrative paradigm suggests that the audience not only builds beliefs by passively receiving information, but also by juxtaposing it against stories that build existing values. In this regard, the propaganda model does not adequately consider the influence of identity and values in shaping audience perspectives, reducing the audience to passive consumers of manipulated information. Meanwhile, strategic narratives are stories that imply the cause and effect of international events, relationships between actors, and the mechanisms in international relations (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Through communicating strategic narratives to construct national identities and worldviews, the criteria of the target audience can be shifted, thus shaping political behaviors (Brown, 2017). Compared to the propaganda model, the strategic narratives framework can better explain how political actors manage international crises through soft power. This is because strategic narratives not only provide perspectives for the international audience to evaluate policy issues, but also for highlighting worldviews and identities that may point to particular policy solutions.

## *Two approaches to conceptualize strategic narratives in international crises*

### A policy-centric perspective

Conventionally, the study of strategic narratives concerns how political actors utilize strategic narratives to rally support for foreign policies (e.g., Dimitriu & de Graaf, 2016; O'Shea, 2019; Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011). This focus stems from the concerns in international relations on the persuasiveness and utility of narratives in explaining tangible foreign policy choices. The literature on strategic narratives suggests that strategic narratives on the issue level are more effective when they align with identity and system narratives (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). The audience costs theory suggests political actors have incentives to send credible signals that are within public expectations (Fearon, 1994). While the two logics align if political actors are consistently signaling policies in line with popular beliefs, it is possible that actors respond to international crises with unfavorable policies that are not palatable to both domestic and international audiences. To address the gap, political actors may try to persuade the public through framing these policies in the media. The strategic narratives framework understands the choices of frames by considering them as building blocks for narratives. Political actors would try to frame unfavorable policies as close to identity and system narratives as possible so that it is easier to generate public support (Miskimmon et al., 2013a).

Scholars generally agree that issue narratives can justify policies. This study considers it as the policy-centric perspective. For example, Dimitriu and de Graaf (2016) consider issue narratives as a way to sway public opinion for the Dutch military deployment in Afghanistan in the 2000s. In studying the reception of Chinese

issue narratives on the Belt and Road Initiative, van Noort and Colley (2021) suggest that strategic narratives that are aimed at persuading foreign states should show a compelling future gain to rally support. Hagström and Gustafsson (2021) studied the dissemination of COVID-19 strategic narratives and argue that they were enabled and constrained by master narratives on the current international order. These arguments illustrated how actors would craft their issue narratives to resonate with existing perceptions in the audience.

The level of belligerence and consistency in these narratives may shape politics by inducing domestic and international audience costs that influence regime stability, national image, and diplomacy (Kertzer and Brutger, 2016). On the one hand, strategic narratives send policy and diplomatic signals to the world. In the COVID-19 pandemic, issue narratives may have reflected how a state evaluated the severity of the pandemic and the philosophy of disease control. Other states may have referenced these narratives to formulate their policy reciprocation if being targeted. For instance, a travel ban on specific countries may trigger hostile responses if the scientific evidence and public health necessity are not well communicated. On the other hand, belligerent strategic narratives may induce domestic political pressure. Militant and antagonistic policies that threaten foreign countries are not welcomed by dovish voters (Brutger and Kertzer, 2018). Issue strategic narratives should be carefully crafted to mitigate these risks. In the COVID pandemic, the lack of scientific evidence made it particularly challenging to support drastic policy measures and issue strategic narratives. It was rational for states to adopt more conservative issue strategic narratives to avoid risks. Nevertheless, states were aggressive in

projecting strategic narratives and invoking nationalism to differentiate “us” from “them” (Cho and Wang, 2021; Chung et al., 2021; Sun, 2021). How should the theoretical framework of strategic narratives explain the seemingly risk-taking narrative behavior?

#### A narrative-centric perspective

The constructivist theoretical roots of the strategic narrative framework suggest that political influence can stem from the identities of actors, where strategic narratives are the tools to contest soft power (Roselle et al., 2014). It means that the goals of strategic narratives can go beyond legitimizing policy choices to purposefully shape the identities of states. Therefore, the focus of analysis can be placed on narratives that speak to the intentions and behaviors of political actors. Unlike the policy-centric approach that takes issue narratives as ad hoc tools crafted for rallying support for policy options, the narrative-centric approach considers strategic narratives on the identity or system level as the “outcome.” The purpose of issue strategic narratives is thus to reinforce or challenge identity or system narratives projected by political actors. By incorporating intentionality in soft power competition, the narrative-centric perspective can help explain seemingly bold and belligerent strategic narratives that signal little policy implications.

The narrative-centric perspective informs how international events and related policy responses created the opportunity for strategic narratives to actively shape identities and worldviews. An international event can enable the deployment of different frames in issue narratives by supplying raw material and opening up possibilities for narratives to compete (Manantan, 2021; Miskimmon et al., 2017).

The former suggests fresh narrative elements such as actors, venues, and frames in local or global events that attract international attention can be woven into different storylines. For example, Kluver et al. (2019) studied strategic narratives from global news outlets on the U.S. presidential election and argue that media outlets may interpret new raw material, such as speeches and behaviors of an actor and evidence in events, provided in elections to formulate strategic narratives for global contestations. They found that strategic narratives projected from China and Russia told different stories about the spectacle of the Clinton-Trump election in 2016. In Chinese media, scandals such as the email crisis from Clinton and Trump's refusal to disclose tax returns were utilized to exemplify the problems of democracy. In Russian media, strategic narratives pointed to the "corruption" and "elitism" in the global leadership of the U.S. which manipulated the international order for the benefit of the U.S. and its allies (Kluver et al., 2019). The abundance of narrative elements gave the flexibility for other states to weave storylines that supported their envision of the identity of the U.S., as well as the current global order.

On top of telling stories about events that happen in other parts of the world, political actors also engage in discussions about policy choices. Strategic narratives can respond to policies from foreign governments that target the home state. Kluver et al. (2019) found that Russian media formulated strategic narratives against U.S. election-meddling allegations and sanctions. The U.S. was a villain in the storyline, who tried to bully Russia for defending against NATO expansion. In this case, Russian strategic narratives presented themselves as innocent and deflected the U.S.



foreign policies about the elections along the lines of identity narratives. Policies from foreign states were interpreted as exemplifying its intentions in global politics.

Furthermore, policy differences between states create opportunities for strategic narratives. Because the consequences of various policy responses to the same international crisis may differ state by state, political actors can leverage the comparative difference to expand strategic narratives (Manantan, 2021). For example, the U.S. and China adopted distinct policy solutions in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to relatively lower casualties in China due to stricter restrictions on population movement. Manantan (2021) argues that the situation created an opportunity for China to challenge the existing U.S.-led world order with strategic narratives that attribute causation between the “Chinese approach” and the success in containing the virus. Given the nature of state media control, China also was able to obfuscate or mask any adverse effects of widespread lockdowns, such as the surge in cases once the lockdowns were lifted due to citizen protest. This perspective sees issue narratives doing more than working to promote policies, as they also can be deployed as a tool that engages identity and system narratives. In other words, frames for interpreting policies can be strategically constructed to challenge or reinforce identities and worldviews. The contest between powerful states can be unfolded in the form of competing strategic narratives.

In summary, this study approaches the strategic narrative framework from two perspectives. From a policy-centric perspective, strategic narratives are the tools that help political actors push forward their desired foreign policy options. Political actors can try to bolster popular support by aligning a policy to preexisting values and

worldviews agreed by the audience. The narrative-centric perspective brings the focus back to its theoretical roots of soft power. The purpose of strategic narratives is to construct a perception of the world through telling stories. Therefore, political rivals with competing worldviews can project distinct strategic narratives that contest identities and worldviews in the global media sphere. They try to legitimize their roles and undermine rivals in the international system. To provide a comprehensive analysis, this study adopts both perspectives to analyze how strategic narratives are projected in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a global public health crisis. From a policy-centric perspective, political actors needed to justify extreme policy options that were trying to control virus transmission. Meanwhile, the narrative-centric perspective suggests that new challenges and opportunities emerged in the political and information environment for states to compete for a greater objective — the power to reshape worldviews.

### *The COVID-19 pandemic*

#### COVID-19 amid the U.S.-China strategic rivalry

By the end of the twentieth century, the Cold War had ended with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. China, a rising authoritarian state, was experiencing dramatic economic growth. Under this context, the narrative of a “China threat” to the liberal world order emerged in the 1990s in the U.S. (Yang and Liu, 2012). The concept of a U.S.-China rivalry gained traction in the foreign policy circle, where some in the U.S. were concerned not only with the expanding economic power of China, but also its build-up of military capabilities that will extend throughout Asia-Pacific and

eventually to the world (Broomfield, 2003). Meanwhile, Chinese leaders have long emphasized the “peaceful rise” of China (Buzan, 2010). When Chairman Xi Jinping took power in 2012, he adopted a rejuvenation grand strategy into the agenda that seeks to resist threats to core Chinese interests and reform the international order, at the same time maintaining a peaceful intention (Goldstein, 2020). Although China was becoming more revisionist in challenging the liberal political order, it was supportive of other existing orders such as the constitutive order and international trade order (Johnston, 2019). On the other hand, China was also concerned that the U.S. intended to contain the development of China (De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn, 2018). As a result, tensions between the U.S. and China continued to grow in multiple aspects. Eventually, U.S. President Donald Trump launched a “trade war” with China on the grounds of trade deficit, despite the tariff war being largely political (Fetzer and Schwarz, 2021). Against this backdrop, the world moved into the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

COVID-19 is a contagious respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, where infected people could show flu-like symptoms (World Health Organization, 2022). The first case of COVID-19 emerged in late December 2019 in Wuhan, China, which was connected to a cluster of cases in the Wuhan Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market in early January 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020b). The virus started to spread across China and to neighboring countries including Thailand, Japan, and South Korea (Wang et al., 2020). Because the SARS-CoV-2 virus can reproduce quickly in the upper respiratory tract in large quantities before showing symptoms, symptomless people could spread COVID-19 easily,

making the pandemic much more difficult to control than previous SARS and MERS outbreaks (Heymann and Shindo, 2020). The U.S. first detected COVID-19 in mid-January 2020 from a man who returned from the Wuhan area (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020 as the virus reached most parts of the world.

In the early stage of the pandemic, when vaccines and effective treatment for COVID were not yet developed, governments tried to prevent COVID-19 by imposing travel restrictions. In the U.S., as travel-related infections started to emerge in late January 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a Travel Health Notice against traveling to China (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). From February 3, 2020, anyone with a travel history in China within the past 14 days who was not a U.S. citizen, permanent resident, or their immediate family was not allowed to enter the U.S. As the pandemic worsened in March 2020, the U.S. denied people traveling from the Schengen area to the U.S., and soon suspended all routine visa services. Land borders between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico were closed for non-essential travel on March 21, 2020 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020). Meanwhile, in China, the government suspended all foreign nationals, with valid visas or residence permits or not, from entering China (Xinhua, 2020). These travel restrictions were only to be revoked in late 2021 in the U.S. and late 2022 in China. On November 8, 2021, the U.S. started to allow vaccinated foreigners to enter. China remained off limits until January 8, 2023, when foreigners could finally enter the country. Nevertheless, the relaxation of the COVID-zero policy in December 2022 triggered a spike in infections in China, where the U.S. and

some countries reinstated requirements of negative COVID-19 test results for people traveling from China. Starting from January 5, 2023, Chinese travelers were required to present a negative test result to enter U.S. borders. The test requirement was lifted on March 10, 2023.

Table 2.1 U.S.-China travel policies timeline.

| Date              | The U.S.                                                                                  | China                                                          |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| December 31, 2019 |                                                                                           | China reported cases of pneumonia of unknown causes to the WHO |
| January 7, 2020   |                                                                                           | Cases confirmed as COVID-19                                    |
| January 13, 2020  |                                                                                           | Thailand reported the first COVID-19 case outside China        |
| January 20, 2020  | CDC confirmed the first COVID-19 case in the U.S.                                         |                                                                |
| February 3, 2020  | People with a 14-day travel history in China were banned, except U.S. citizens, permanent |                                                                |

|                  |                                                                                                       |                                                |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
|                  | residents, and their immediate families.                                                              |                                                |
| March 11, 2020   | WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic                                                                   |                                                |
| March 13, 2020   | Travel from Schengen area banned                                                                      |                                                |
| March 18, 2020   | Suspended all routine visa services                                                                   |                                                |
| March 21, 2020   | All non-essential travel between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico was limited.<br><br>Land borders closed |                                                |
| March 26, 2020   |                                                                                                       | All foreigners were banned from entering China |
| November 8, 2021 | Vaccinated foreign travelers can enter the U.S.                                                       |                                                |
| December 7, 2022 |                                                                                                       | China loosening COVID-zero policy.             |

|                 |                                                                        |                                     |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| January 5, 2023 | Negative COVID-19 test result required for people traveling from China |                                     |
| January 8, 2023 |                                                                        | Reopen borders to foreign travelers |
| March 10, 2023  | Lifted COVID-19 test requirement for people traveling from China       |                                     |

#### COVID-19 amid the U.S.-China strategic rivalry

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a useful case to analyze the efforts to reshape the world order with strategic narratives. First, COVID-19 was a global crisis that jeopardized public health in every country. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was no cure or vaccine that targeted the virus in particular. Governments were mobilized to tackle the pandemic both domestically and internationally, where the pandemic inevitably became a foreign policy issue that played out between domestic and international politics because of attempts to limit the spread. Second, the extensiveness of the pandemic means that extraordinary policies that states implemented would likely affect their foreign relations. Especially early in the pandemic, many states introduced lockdowns and travel bans in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. These policies severely disrupted transnational commerce and human movement around the globe. How these policies are justified internationally

could affect the reputation of a state. Third, uncertainties in the COVID-19 pandemic created abundant raw material (Kluver et al., 2019) for crafting strategic narratives. In the context of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, both sides could leverage the pandemic situations of each other to undermine their images internationally with strategic narratives. Offensive strategic narratives may work to redefine universal values that construct the current liberal world order (Yang, 2021). Finally, states could utilize raw narrative material relatively freely because of the lack of a coherent global voice that sets the tone to communicate scientific evidence clearly (Nielsen et al., 2020), particularly in an unprecedented world pandemic. In this context, a narrative-centric analysis is particularly useful in explaining how states project particular strategic narratives to reshape national identities and redefine the perceptions of the world order.

The lack of clear health and scientific communication during the COVID-19 pandemic opened the opportunity for contestations of narratives because stories could be framed as scientific to boost their legitimacy. The overabundance of information, misinformation, and disinformation in the media environment triggered an “infodemic” that overwhelmed the public with unverified and opposing narratives (World Health Organization, 2020a). This chaos was caused both unintentionally and intentionally. The unintentional infodemic was caused by the lack of scientific knowledge of the new virus. Because the scientific community was trying to gather and analyze as much evidence as quickly as possible at the beginning of the pandemic to better inform treatments and public health policies, many studies were published in hasty ways that accelerated or ignored conventional rigorous peer review processes



(Mheidly and Fares, 2020). As a result, the media environment was flooded with conflicting ‘scientific’ evidence.

The mass media also played a role in sending out exaggerated and inaccurate messages, where part of the news coverage focused on some of the most extreme cases that were not common during the pandemic (Zarocostas, 2020). Particularly during the time of crises that created large news holes, the news media would try to fill the gap quickly, meaning that often unverified or poor-quality information would be broadcasted (Bennett and Graber, 2007; Graber, 2007). This situation was exacerbated by social and political actors who exploited the void of health authority to deliberately disseminate inaccurate information to advance their own agendas. In particular, misinformation can spread like a pandemic on social media (Cinelli et al., 2020). Rumors, stigma, and conspiracy theories were rampant online during the global emergency (Islam et al., 2020). While scientists urged policymakers not to rely on preprints and less rigorous evidence (Mheidly and Fares, 2020), it remained possible that political actors could legitimize their policy options only with evidence that supports their narratives. The infodemic created both a challenge and an opportunity for political actors to craft strategic narratives that were justified in the name of science.

In particular, the uncertainty in virus origin was leveraged by both sides, as the lack of concrete evidence fermented narratives that can be utilized for political purposes. While scientists generally agreed that a wet market in the Chinese city of Wuhan was the first epicenter of COVID-19, the origin of the virus was inconclusive (Worobey et al., 2022). Two mainstream explanations pointed to very different

sources. Some suggested that the virus passed from animals to humans and others believe that it was leaked from a virology laboratory in China (Ruiz-Medina et al., 2022). The former suggests that the Wuhan market hosted wild animals trades in poor hygiene conditions, which created a range of potential zoonotic infections (Xiao et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the WHO-led investigation found that this theory was plausible but did not generate conclusive results on the matter (Ruiz-Medina et al., 2022). The latter argues that the Wuhan Institute of Virology, with a biosafety level that allowed it to work with dangerous viruses with a high risk of aerosol transmission, leaked the virus. Again, scientists did not rule out the possibility but found it unlikely (Holmes et al., 2021). The U.S. Energy Department in the Biden administration concluded that the virus likely came from this institute, but the judgment was made with low confidence (Gordon and Strobel, 2023), and the evidence supporting the theory was weak (Frutos et al., 2022). It should be noted that levels of confidence in the source of the virus changed significantly over time: Initially, the “lab leak” theory was seen as propaganda, but it gained credence over time.

The ambiguity in the virus origin created an opportunity for political actors to flexibly employ strategic narratives. In China, an alternative theory emerged that pointed the source of the virus to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick. The theory was supported by Chinese officials who highlighted out the bio-safety incidents and unknown infections near the U.S. facility (Xinhua, 2021a). A Chinese diplomat further suggested that the virus was brought to China by U.S. Army personnel in the World Military Games, which was

held in Wuhan in 2019 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Chinese officials strongly urged an investigation in Fort Detrick. This issue narrative was seen alongside the “century of humiliation” identity narrative. In a long list of accusations published by the Chinese official news agency Xinhua, the “biological militarization activities” in Fort Detrick were described as inheriting “the devilish legacy of Unit 731 of the Imperial Japanese Army, which waged an aggression war against China” (Xinhua, 2021b). By mobilizing the history of World War II, this narrative attributed the illegitimacy of the U.S. and activating the Chinese nationalist identity that builds on resisting foreign powers. Unlike the media discussions of the Chinese sources of the virus, the idea or ‘evidence’ that COVID was generated from a U.S. facility can generally be traced to Chinese sources.

Another way political actors justify their policies is through securitization, that is by moving a policy issue into the realm of security and presenting solutions to counter an existential threat (Wæver, 1995). Securitization is a constructivist theory that suggests state leaders use speech acts to problematize everyday policy issues as threats to the audience, so that states can legitimize extraordinary policies to tackle them (Buzan et al., 1998). The earlier theorization of securitization was criticized for assuming a powerful communication effect of speech acts and ignoring non-Western experiences (Balzacq, 2019). Later studies put more emphasis on the audience, where they consider successful issue securitization also relies on the persuasiveness of securitizing speeches (Côté, 2016; Roe, 2008). Securitizing acts help actors manage audience perceptions of policies, where aggressive policies can be explained by the necessity to mitigate existential threats, or presenting concessions made in a crisis as

promoting national security (Lupovici, 2019). Because the political communication process in securitization largely unfolds in the media environment, it is essential to bridge the knowledge in the study of media and politics (Mortensgaard, 2018). Vultee (2010) connects securitization theory with framing theory, where media frames demonstrate who “do” or “speak” security, as well as how it is done. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, many states securitized their responses against the public health emergency (Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Wong, 2022). Given that COVID-19 was framed as an external threat in many countries (e.g., Kuteleva & Clifford, 2021; Pfrimer & Barbosa, 2020), how securitized policies were portrayed in strategic narratives can affect the reputation of a state and potentially the locus of the contestation between global powers.

The securitization of COVID-19 moved the policy discussion about this global public health crisis into the realm of national security. Countries highlighted the threat of COVID-19 to make reference to the war experiences in history and justified extraordinary policies as way to protect the “vulnerable” population (Kirk and McDonald, 2021). More specifically, Brazil considered the pandemic as a war against an “extra-territorial threat” to mobilize the military for pandemic response (Pfrimer and Barbosa, 2020); the Philippines framed COVID-19 as an “existential threat” to justify disciplining and policing citizens (Hapal, 2021); Zimbabwe leveraged the securitized health response to prevent protests and delay elections (Makahamadze and Sibanda, 2021). In the U.S., the Trump administration securitized COVID-19 as a foreign threat when it broke out domestically (Lee and Haupt, 2021). Trump took a nationalistic stance and declared himself a “wartime president,” treating

the pandemic as a matter of “national security” (Sears, 2020; Smith, 2020). Trump saw himself as the hero that led the U.S. in this patriotic struggle (Kuteleva and Clifford, 2021).

### *The current study*

#### Strategic narratives in the COVID-19 pandemic

This study investigates how a global shock creates challenges and opportunities for the projection of strategic narratives. Because analyses of narrative components in media content “are helpful in understanding contestation and processes associated with projection of narratives” (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 79). this dissertation focuses both on government statements as well as English language news, projected for the international audience from China and produced in the United States for the domestic and global audience. In particular, English language news from national news outlet was most likely read by the international audience and referenced by news outlets in other countries. It provides a common platform, observed by the world, for political actors to project their strategic narratives. This study did not sample Chinese language news because it was less likely to reach the global audience, suggesting a lower chance of using it to engage in a strategic narratives contest. On top of that, some Chinese-language news articles from major state-affiliated Chinese news outlets were translated and published in their English-language publications. They demonstrated the deliberate choice of making some Chinese-language news articles accessible for the global audience. These translated news articles were covered by the sampling scope in this study. While the analysis of narratives in domestic media –

and how they might vary from those projected internationally – is an interesting question, it is beyond the scope of this study.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an optimal case for this study not only because it is a global event that major powers leveraged to compete diplomatically, but also because the uncertainties in the pandemic presented an opportunity for political actors to formulate different storylines to justify policies and employ aggressive strategic narratives to undermine rivals. Because the COVID-19 pandemic emerged when the rivalry between the U.S. and China intensified, policies in the name of public health were promising fodder for contesting narrative powers. This case can demonstrate the utility of a narrative-centric approach to analyze the projection of strategic narratives.

COVID-19 narratives from a policy-centric and narrative-centric perspective

Strategic narratives could be utilized by states in two ways in the COVID-19 pandemic. From a policy-centric approach, strategic narratives were projected to legitimize extreme policy tools that aimed at curbing the pandemic. Therefore, issue strategic narratives should align with system and identity narratives under a global public health emergency. System narratives are the stories explaining how international relations work, and identity narratives are the stories characterizing a country's role in the system (Miskimmon et al., 2017). When states justify their COVID-19 policies, issue narratives should fit into their view on the situation of the global pandemic and be consistent with their participation in global public health. For example, issue narratives can be aligned with the system narrative of international cooperation (Roselle, 2017). The U.S. administration had projected a strategic

narrative that emphasizes its leading role in the global response against COVID-19 (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021). Because the alignment of COVID-19 travel restrictions narratives with system and identity narratives is essential in rallying political support, issue-specific strategic narratives should also emphasize the contribution of policies to global health.

Nevertheless, narratives might not always carry explicit policy implications, particularly when the pandemic situation was murky and lacked clear policy directions. For example, in COVID-19 origin tracing, there was a lack of confident scientific evidence on most of the origin theories. Actionable policy options were not available. The policy-centric approach shows its limitation in explaining the continuous projection of strategic narratives on the matter.

From a narrative-centric approach, the goal of issue strategic narratives goes beyond engaging in current policy debates. Political actors actively tell stories strategically to the international audience to build national images and promote a favorable worldview (Miskimmon et al., 2017). As contemporary international relations are increasingly chaotic, strategic narratives play an increasingly crucial role in diplomacy by making sense of the complexities of global events (Roselle et al., 2014). Thus, political actors could leverage raw narrative materials from the COVID-19 pandemic, including pandemic situations and policy responses, to construct issue narratives that engage in constructing or challenging national identities in the contest with rival states. The chaos in the media environment caused by the infodemic provided an opportunity for political actors to formulate issue narratives to reinforce or challenge the existing world order.

For instance, the lack of evidence on virus origin created a void in attributing responsibility for the outbreak of COVID-19. Thus, an opportunity emerged and COVID-19 was framed as an external threat from China in U.S. media (Cho and Wang, 2021; Sun, 2021). On one hand, a policy-centric perspective would suggest that this frame was employed to legitimize policies such as travel restrictions as security measures against a foreign threat. In this case, the persuasiveness of the narrative stems from the alignment of issue narratives that considered COVID-19 as a Chinese threat with existing U.S. strategic narratives that describe China as a global security challenge. However, this perspective does not address the interactions between narratives on identity and system levels. On the other hand, the narrative-centric approach considers the securitized narrative as a tool to reinforce the China threat image. The security aspect of travel restrictions is deliberately highlighted to bring up the challenge in the security realm. In other words, the perspective that there is a threat from China can be reinforced by framing travel restrictions as security responses. By considering the purposefulness of issue strategic narratives, the narrative-centric approach evaluates the mobilization of policy stories to construct worldviews. Thus, hostile narratives can be employed to shape the image of particular countries in existing systems and identity strategic narratives, where political actors could exploit the pandemic to reframe foreign policies that target and potentially undermine political rivals.

The narrative-centric perspective enriched the strategic narrative theoretical framework. This study asks both how policies can be justified under the status quo worldview or how strategic narratives adapt to the changing international political



landscape, as well as how political actors address the challenges and utilize the opportunities that emerge in global crises to reshape the global order through strategic narratives. The narrative-centric perspective illustrates the contest between issue strategic narratives from different political actors. It suggests that the competition between strategic narratives that tells stories about specific policy issues not only originated from differences between worldviews from different states, but also the purposeful projection of contesting worldviews. Analyzing strategic narratives from both policy- and narrative-centric perspectives would help clarify how the U.S. and China frame pandemic responses according to their political values, as well as how narratives can be leveraged to negotiate the global order.

#### COVID responses in the U.S. and China

In China, travel restrictions were part of the Zero-COVID policy. The government limited international travel and enforced quarantine on inbound travelers. While these policies can be framed as the Chinese rationale for handling a public health crisis, they can also align with the strategic narratives that suggest the “China model” was superior to liberal democracy. For example, the relative success of containing the virus with tight public health measures and advanced surveillance technologies may enable China to become a “norm-maker” internationally, especially when liberal democracies failed to provide better pandemic solutions to developing countries (Greitens, 2020). Therefore, strategic narratives in China could highlight the failure of disease control abroad and the need to prevent importing COVID-19 from abroad. Nevertheless, this narrative was difficult to sustain when most states in the rest of the world abandoned these policies. Moreover, when China made a rapid policy

turnaround in late 2022 and abruptly lifted restrictions, how did strategic narratives readjust to justify a seemingly illogical change? How much was the policy legitimized by scientific evidence? To what degree were narratives securitized?

In the U.S., early policy responses to COVID-19 were incoherent, despite the government's claims that the U.S. was the global leader against the virus (Carter and May, 2020). Nevertheless, as the pandemic spread across the U.S. and caused chaos, the situation provided raw material and opportunities for foreign strategic narratives. What happened in the U.S. can be exploited by foreign strategic narratives to promote an alternative policy solution. Foreign rivals, such as China, may justify their travel restrictions by citing the U.S. situation. Later in 2021, as vaccines and treatments against COVID-19 were made available, there was significant domestic pressure on the government to lift travel restrictions. Policies and strategic narratives gradually shifted from a public health emergency to a post-COVID new normal. Restrictive policies were no longer justified and soon lifted. However, the sudden reopening of China and the surge of COVID-19 cases in late 2022 brought uncertain public health risks. The situation also created opportunities for foreign strategic narratives to exploit, particularly that the sudden increase of travelers from China could bring new pandemic waves to other countries. Similar to other countries, the U.S. responded by reimposing restrictive policies on travelers from China. Travelers from China were required to show a negative test result before boarding a flight to the U.S. On one hand, the policy could have contradicted narratives for reopening, which was scientifically supported. Justifications were required when the international community generally accepted COVID-19 had entered the less severe endemic phase

(Biancolella et al., 2022). On the other hand, policy responses to the reopening of China can be a gesture to undermine the authority of the Chinese government. In this case, issue strategic narratives of restrictive policies may highlight the security challenge and lack of transparency in China (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021).

The news coverage of COVID-19 in U.S. news media was initially focused on health and economic impact but became more political later in 2020 (Ming et al., 2021). In the early stage, U.S. news put weight on the disruption of the pandemic to social and economic activities, as well as the preventive strategies people could take (Basch et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the issue soon moved into polarized debates, as political actors started to leverage COVID-19 in their speeches (Hart et al., 2020). The Trump administration in particular connected COVID-19 with nationalistic discourses where China was seen as an adversary in the pandemic, state borders were racialized, and exclusionism of ethnonational identities was constructed (Chung et al., 2021). In other words, those narratives were about the health and economic threats by China. The Trump administration treated the matter as a “national security” problem and framed SARS-CoV-2 as the “Chinese Virus” and “Wuhan Virus” (Sears, 2020), while establishing travel restrictions and announcing a national emergency (Smith, 2020). China was seen as weak and unable to curb COVID-19 from spreading and the U.S. was strong in mobilizing a patriotic battle against the virus (Kuteleva and Clifford, 2021).

### Research questions

This study examines the news coverage of COVID-19, with a specific focus on strategic narratives related to travel policies, between the U.S. and China. In order to

understand the ways strategic narratives operate in the flow of international political communication, both policy- and narrative-centric approaches were employed to guide the analyses. The policy-centric approach concerns how strategic narratives justify policies that political actors proposed or implemented; the narrative-centric approach focuses on the engagement with identities and characterization of political actors via strategic narratives. In the first step, this study extracts strategic narratives that addressed U.S.-China pandemic policies from international news. As the literature review and discussion above suggest, strategic narrative projection can be observed in the news coverage from national English language media. Thus, this study pays specific attention to these outlets. From a policy-centric perspective, strategic narratives on the issue level serve as legitimizers for extreme policies. In the case of COVID-19, one type of these policies was the travel restrictions that disrupted international exchange and economic activities. Especially in late 2022 and early 2023, when the world was returning to normal, the U.S. and other countries reimposed COVID-19 test requirements on travelers from China. Explanations were required to justify the policy turnaround. This study delineates the storylines associated with these policies on the issue level and asks, how were COVID-19 travel policy narratives constructed in the international news.

RQ1: How do strategic narratives in the news make sense of the policies that respond to a global crisis?

RQ1.1: What were the strategic narratives employed to address COVID-19 and related travel policies in national media in the U.S. and China?

RQ1.2: How did strategic narratives justify COVID-19 travel policies in the home country?

RQ1.3: To what extent were travel policies discussed as security issues in the news?

On the other hand, the narrative-centric perspective suggests that strategic narratives serve more than justifying policy options. Through telling stories about policies, values and identities can be actively associated with political actors. In other words, strategic narratives attribute the action (policy) to the history and perception of political actors (identity). Issue-level strategic narratives describe policies as responses to the current challenges in the international system described by identity- and system-level strategic narratives, which entail who political actors are by rationalizing the purposes of policies employed. Thus, strategic narratives are formulated to enhance or challenge identities and worldviews. Specifically in an international crisis with murky situations, there are more unexplained events and narrative elements that can be woven together as storylines. Developments of political situations or actor behaviors can be utilized actively for constructing issue narratives that speak to identities and worldviews projected by political actors.

In the case of COVID-19, both the uncertain pandemic situation and policy responses from other states could provide the elements to construct competing narratives. The former was exacerbated by the infodemic where multiple plausible theories of the causes and outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic were proposed. The latter was the efforts to reframe policy behaviors by strategic rivals so as to explain

the intention and identity of rivals. Issue strategic narratives can reinforce the identities presented in these two aspects. Policies such as travel restrictions and reopening implied the evaluation of foreign pandemic situations. In addition, articulating the narratives on travel policies could point to problem definitions of the pandemic and their implications on actors' capacity and the world system they were trying to shape. Pandemic policy stories can be formulated to strengthen perspectives that suggest how well a foreign country or the international community handled the pandemic. Thus, this study examines the identity strategic narratives that were built on foreign pandemic situations and travel policies. On top of that, how strategic narratives describe foreign pandemic situations and policies might not always reflect objective measurements. Political actors can exaggerate or downplay the situations to fit their strategic narratives. The associations between news coverage and pandemic parameters including the numbers of infections, deaths, and policy responses can illustrate if strategic narratives were responsive to pandemic situations or if they were parallel to reality (e.g., Wong et al., 2023).

RQ2: How does a global crisis provide sources and opportunities to formulate strategic narratives that construct identities of political actors in the news environment?

RQ2.1: What were the identity strategic narratives projected in national media in the U.S. and China related to COVID-19 travel policies?

RQ2.2: How did the strategic narratives in the U.S./Chinese national media frame foreign pandemic situations and travel policies?

RQ2.3: How did strategic narratives respond to the parameters that measure the development of the pandemic?

Third, from a narrative-centric perspective, the flow of strategic narratives is not unidirectional but interactive. Issue narratives engage identity and system narratives to co-construct worldviews and global order. For example, Hagström and Gustafsson (2021) suggest that in the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese strategic narratives projected were constrained by pre-existing “master narratives” that maintained the U.S.-led liberal world order. From a policy-centric perspective, Chinese strategic narratives were aligned with the identity and system narratives that emphasize Western values of multilateralism and international cooperation to justify policies. Nevertheless, this view ignores the potential reinterpretation of these jargons that characterize a different set of strategic narratives. China has been actively redefining concepts such as “human rights” and reestablishing norms and institutions that promoted an alternative way of international cooperation (Nathan, 2015). The narrative-centric perspective suggests the importance of looking into the utilization of the current developments in international events to reshape identity and system narratives globally. The current world order can be challenged by a modified worldview associated with new issue narratives (Stroud, 2002). The storyline and value of international cooperation can be changed when alternative stories envision a different form of cooperation (van Noort and Colley, 2021). Therefore, the

association between issue narratives and the appropriation, reinterpretation, and dismantling of identity and system narratives should be examined.

RQ3: How did strategic narratives compete in a global crisis to reshape worldviews?

RQ3.1: To what extent did national media in the U.S. and China remediate COVID-19 strategic narratives from each other?

RQ3.2: How did national media in the U.S. and China respond to COVID-19 strategic narratives from each other?

RQ3.3: What were the relationships between issue strategic narratives and the identity and system strategic narratives in the news coverage?

### Chapter summary

This chapter examined the theoretical roots of strategic narratives in the fields of political communication and international relations. The strategic narratives framework encompasses framing theory which suggests meanings of the same event can be altered by highlighting its different aspects in media text. The stories told can then co-construct values and worldviews that alter the perceptions of the political audience on evaluating international events and policy options. A narrative-centric perspective is proposed to conceptualize the utility of strategic narratives in shaping the identities of political actors. This perspective highlights the purposiveness of strategic narratives on the aspect of soft power, where political actors not only tell stories to justify policy responses in international crises but also leverage the crisis to reshape the international order. This perspective can be particularly useful for



analyzing the contestation between strategic narratives when an international crisis presents many uncertainties while having unclear policy options. Strategic narratives about extraordinary policies can be deployed as a tool to reinforce or challenge worldviews.

This study analyzes the news coverage of COVID-19 and related travel policies from the U.S. and China to investigate the ways strategic narratives work. The pandemic provided ample opportunity for both countries to project strategic narratives about the pandemic and policy responses that affect foreign states because of the uncertainties and ambiguity in public health and scientific evidence. Different storylines can be mobilized to present competing versions of perceived realities amid the chaos caused by the infodemic in the media environment. Three sets of research questions were asked. First, to understand the qualitative characteristics of strategic narratives, this study asks the ways strategic narratives make sense of global crises. In the COVID-19 pandemic, how did the U.S. and China tell the stories about the disease and related travel policies? Second, this study concerns how the pandemic created an opportunity for the U.S. and China to reshape national identities with each other and project worldviews. Particularly, how did issue strategic narratives engage identity narratives about the legitimacy of the U.S. and China? Third, the competition between strategic narratives and policies is examined. How did strategic narratives from the U.S. and China respond and rebut one another? This study answers these questions by analyzing a collection of English language news articles from national news outlets. The next chapter explains the data-sampling and analytical approach

employed to extract strategic narratives from a large sample of news data, as well as how strategic narratives and their relationships were analyzed.

## Chapter 3: Data and Method

This chapter outlines the procedures for obtaining the data and the analytical approaches taken to investigate strategic narrative projection between the U.S. and China on the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel policies. A sample of news articles from online big data was extracted from the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) project (The GDELT Project, 2020). To aid the qualitative analysis of strategic narratives in the news, official narratives from both the U.S. and Chinese governments were also sampled. The data for Chinese official narratives were obtained from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Conferences Corpus (CMFA PressCon) (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021). The data for U.S. official narratives came from The American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters, 1999). While the two sets of data from official sources were not directly comparable as the former specifically targets foreign press but not the latter, they represented the voices of governments that can influence news coverage in the two distinct political systems. The purpose of obtaining the two datasets was not to compare them head-to-head but to provide reference points for the qualitative analysis of the news data. Meanwhile, for evaluating the trends of strategic narratives vis-à-vis the development of the pandemic situation, parameters such as casualty numbers and policy implementation measurements were extracted from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) (Hale et al., 2022).

There are two major phases in the mixed methods analysis. First, strategic narratives were identified from the data. A human-in-the-loop machine learning narrative identification process was employed to extract strategic narratives from

more than 200k news articles. Conventional content analysis was embedded between supervised and unsupervised machine learning cycles to anchor the analytics on strategic narratives of interest from a wealth of news data. Second, strategic narratives were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The former examined the storylines of strategic narratives with reference to official narratives from both governments. The latter aggregates narratives into daily trends and explores their relationships with one another, as well as pandemic parameters.

The two arms of mixed methods analysis gave the details and overviews for triangulating the projection of strategic narratives in the news that shaped the identities and legitimacies of political actors amid COVID-19. On the one hand, the qualitative examination of each of the strategic narratives identified gave a contextual analysis that shows the nuances in storylines, such as how and why actors behaved in a certain way, adding depth to the findings. On the other hand, the use of two rounds of unsupervised and supervised machine learning allows the analysis to scale up efficiently. This lowered the cost of processing large datasets significantly, as discussed in the previous chapter. The quantitative time series data of strategic narratives further allowed for the analysis of their statistical relationships. Findings from the time series analysis demonstrated the interactions between strategic narratives, which enhanced the credibility of the qualitative analysis. The use of mixed methods allows this study to leverage the strengths of individual methods to compensate for the weaknesses in any single method.

## Data

### News data

This study analyzes strategic narratives on COVID-19 and related travel policies from the U.S. and China in English language international news coverage. Mainstream news outlets from the U.S. and China were sampled because of their influence on the global news agenda (Ruget and Usmanalieva, 2021). Legacy news outlets have evolved in the digital age to provide online services. Not only do they construct the media agenda for other legacy media such as TV news (Cushion et al., 2018), but they also lead the discussion on social media (Su and Borah, 2019). Specifically on healthcare news, national media continue to set the media agenda in public deliberation (Vargo and Guo, 2017). Leading news outlets from the U.S. including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Voice of America*, *Fox News*, and English-language national Chinese outlets including *The People's Daily*, *The Global Times*, *CGTN*, and *The China Daily* were sampled. This study focuses on collecting news from the online platforms of these news outlets because they likely covered the news stories in the print version while readily available for sharing via social media, thus possessing a stronger narrative-projection potential. The sample timeframe was from January 1, 2020, to April 30, 2023. It should be noted that while the two samples from the U.S. and Chinese news represents the global outreach of the news media from the two countries, their media systems differ. The U.S. has a free market and China has a state-media system. It means that the media outlets are not directly comparable, and they could demonstrate distinct ecologies in the formation of strategic narratives.

The news data was obtained through a two-step process. In the first step, the scope of the data sample was identified. This study utilized the Coronavirus news dataset curated by the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) project (The GDELT Project, 2020). The GDELT project uses a computational method to monitor and codify the global online news flow from broadcast, print, and web news outlets in real-time (Leetaru and Schrodt, 2013). To facilitate research about the unprecedented pandemic, GDELT filtered its data into a subset that contains COVID-19 keywords for easy access. The Coronavirus dataset collected COVID-19-related news from November 2019 to the present day and categorized them according to key topics such as “Masks” and “Quarantine” (The GDELT Project, 2020). Each record in the Coronavirus news dataset is a news item that includes the date, URL, title, and snippet of the text that is associated with COVID-19. Google BigQuery was used to access the dataset. The lists of news items from selected media outlets were downloaded (see Table 3.1). The total number of news articles recorded in the Coronavirus news dataset was  $N = 263,014$ .

In the next step, the lists of news items were retrieved from the Internet Archive. It is a non-profit digital library that captures versions of internet sites, the digital artifacts of human history (Internet Archive, n.d.). Websites can be retrieved from the URLs using the Wayback Machine. This study accessed the database via the Wayback Machine API with Waybackpy in Python (Mahanty, 2022). The earliest possible version of the news items was sampled because it reflected the initial coverage of news events. They were also the most likely version captured by GDELT, given that its algorithms codify online news instantaneously. The main texts

in news items were extracted using the Python package Beautiful Soup (Richardson, 2023). The number of news articles retrieved was  $N = 225,778$ , yielding a retrieval rate of 85.8%. Note that the *Washington Post* and *China Daily* had lower retrieval rates (64.17% and 49.03%, respectively) due to their use of multimedia formats such as videos and images.

Alternative sources for news data were also explored. One potential source was the MediaCloud project (Roberts et al., 2021), which is an open-access archive of searchable media content from around the globe. Users can query the MediaCloud database with keywords and retrieve the main text, which is the cleaned output from the Wayback Machine API. However, the MediaCloud portal was undergoing maintenance and upgrade during the research phase of this project, thus data availability was limited. By the time this study commenced, MediaCloud only provided data from 1 August 2022 to the present. Another potential source was conventional news databases such as Factiva and Nexis Uni. While they allow keyword query and full-text access, the user interface limited the number of news articles per bulk download to 100 articles. This approach becomes logistically unviable when the sample scales up. This study opted for the GDELT for its scalability and flexibility of the data to facilitate other downstream processes. It should be noted that because the GDELT Coronavirus news dataset was curated using an automated process with a keyword-based approach, some of the news articles were not directly relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic but were discussing other current affairs issues under the backdrop of COVID-19. This study identified and filtered out those topics later in the analysis with the aid of unsupervised machine learning.

Table 3.1. Sample of news articles from the U.S. and Chinese English language national media (N = 225,778).

| News Outlet       | Retrievable items | GDELT items | Retrieval rate |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Washington Post   | 40,360            | 62,895      | 64.17%         |
| New York Times    | 49,581            | 58,408      | 84.89%         |
| Voice of America  | 14,529            | 16,788      | 86.54%         |
| Los Angeles Times | 35,678            | 35,958      | 99.22%         |
| Fox News          | 47,685            | 47,838      | 99.68%         |
| Global Times      | 12,927            | 13,060      | 98.98%         |
| CGTN              | 2028              | 2234        | 90.78%         |
| China Daily       | 1893              | 3861        | 49.03%         |
| People's Daily    | 21,097            | 21,972      | 96.02%         |

#### Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The official narratives from the Chinese government were evaluated through the press conferences held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They were conducted in English and allowed foreign correspondents to ask questions. The press conferences created the chance for the Chinese government spokesperson to respond to hostile strategic narratives and project counternarratives through international media. The data from these press conferences was obtained from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Conference Corpus (CMFA PressCon) (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021), where



the transcriptions were structured in a question-answer format. The answers were sampled for analysis in this study. Due to data availability, the answer transcripts between 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2022 were extracted ( $N = 8326$ ). To narrow down the scope to transcripts that were only discussing COVID-19 topics, a keyword filter was applied. The CMFA PressCon dataset curated a miscellaneous reference index for each answer transcript. This study selected only the items that contain “nCoV,” “COVID,” and “virus” within the miscellaneous index (i.e., “COVID-19” is included). The final sample size was  $N = 1389$ .

#### U.S. presidential administration

The U.S. government does not routinely hold dedicated press events for the international media in the same way as the Chinese government. Although the Cascading Activation Model suggests that the presidential administration in the U.S. has the first-mover advantage in framing news, particularly on foreign affairs (Entman, 2003; Entman and Usher, 2018), it should be noted that COVID-19 narratives from U.S. government institutions during the Trump administration could be incoherent (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021). Given the different political and media systems in the U.S. and China, there was no institution or media event in the U.S. that can directly compare with the CMFA press conference, which reflects a consolidated official stance. Nevertheless, because the U.S. presidential administration enjoys more global news attention, it is reasonable to trace the press materials from the administration to understand the narratives that represent the identity of the U.S. government in the international media sphere. The media engagements from past administrations were sampled from the database curated by

The American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters, 1999). The search query filtered for the Trump and Biden administrations; document categories of “Presidential,” “News Conferences,” “Spoken Addresses and Remarks,” “Press Office,” “Press Releases,” “Remarks by Administration Officials,” and “Statements”; between 1 January 2020 to 30 April 2023. Similar to the CMFA data, this study only selected the items that contain “nCoV,” “COVID,” and “virus” within the text (i.e., “COVID-19” is included). The final sample size of the White House data was  $N = 2729$ .

#### Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker

This study is also interested in the relationships between pandemic developments such as new infection cases, government policies, or casualties in the pandemic to formulate strategic narratives. While the projection of the perceived reality can be observed through investigating the strategic narratives in news, the associations between pandemic parameters and strategic narratives can demonstrate the responsiveness of strategic narratives to a developing situation. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) collected country-level data on COVID-19 infections, deaths, and measurements of various policy responses (Hale et al., 2022). This data provides a systematic measurement of pandemic developments. OxCGRT indexes provided data from January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2022, which were all extracted for this study.

## Method

This section documents the human-in-the-loop narrative identification and other downstream analyses that were conducted to investigate the qualitative characteristics and relationships between strategic narratives in the U.S. and Chinese media. The narrative identification procedure is similar to a hybrid approach in computer-assisted systematic framing analysis. This study builds on the theoretical foundation that considers frames as building blocks of narratives (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020). Therefore, strategic narratives were identified with a modified frame identification procedure because this study employs a theoretical scope that considers frames as building blocks of strategic narratives. Initially, unsupervised machine learning was employed to map the topical structure of the sample, which inspires the qualitative analysis to extract and analyze strategic narratives of interest in this study. Next, a conventional human content analysis was conducted to label a subset of the data for supervised machine learning.

Three text vectorization methods and five machine learning algorithms were tested for their performance in classifying the training dataset. The combination with the best performance was used to classify all data in the sample. Results were systematically aggregated to generate quantified measurements of narrative prevalence per day for further analysis. Finally, the trends and interactions among strategic narratives were analyzed. Statistical methods such as Granger causality tests were employed to examine the relationships between strategic narratives. Combined with the findings from qualitative analyses, the ways issue strategic narratives engaged identities and values were evaluated. This study makes a methodological

innovation by analyzing strategic narratives with a multistep mixed methods approach. Through considering both the qualitative and quantitative features of strategic narratives and their relationships, the narrative contest between two political actors were illustrated in greater detail.

#### Topic modeling

##### *Technical consideration*

The first step in the narrative identification process looks for the structure of the news text and teases out narratives that were related to COVID-19 and U.S.-China travel policies. Traditionally, this task was carried out by a qualitative-heavy approach to inductively extracting the commonalities in the bulk of texts. For example, in qualitative thematic analysis, researchers would read the texts closely to identify themes that emerge from the data, iteratively until data saturation (Guest et al., 2012). This approach is difficult to scale up because it would require a very long time to achieve data saturation. Computational methods can be helpful in boosting efficiency in this situation. Computational methods allow scholars to quantitatively leverage big data to uncover frames in the media environment through automation (Wilkerson and Casas, 2017). It becomes possible to analyze large datasets with thousands and millions of text documents (e.g., from internet sources), the scale of data that was not feasible to analyze by manual labor. This inductive approach to consolidating meanings resembles a data-driven class-discovery task, where the computer identifies clusters of text, which represent the categories of similar language patterns (Guest et al., 2012). Given that this study analyzes strategic narratives that are created

purposefully in their specific context, a qualitative analysis was employed to examine the machine learning output to ensure that narratives were interpreted meaningfully.

Unsupervised machine learning such as Topic modeling (TM) is widely employed to conduct classification tasks (Wilkerson and Casas, 2017). Topic modeling is a family of techniques that develops from generative probabilistic modeling (Liu et al., 2016). It considers topics as latent variables that are hidden in the data, which are events or concepts discussed in documents (Vayansky and Kumar, 2020). Topic modeling builds mixed-membership models, meaning documents can belong to multiple topics with various distributions (Hornik and Grün, 2011). Although topic modeling is one of the most popular unsupervised machine learning methods, researchers should be cautioned that topic modeling classifies by term co-occurrence, where topics are “probability distributions over words” (Nicholls and Culpepper, 2021), or in other words, the collections of likelihoods of words that appear in the same cluster. Therefore, it requires human interpretation and validation to acquire meaningful topic models.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) and the LDA-based variant Structural Topic Modeling (STM) are two widely employed topic modeling techniques. Latent Dirichlet Allocation is a “bag-of-words” (i.e. list of words) approach that considers documents consisting of various randomized mixtures of topics, in which, independent topics are the probabilistic distribution of words (Blei et al., 2003). Conceptually, LDA assumes topics exist before documents do, and the distribution of topics builds a document (Blei, 2012). The goal of LDA is to identify this hidden structure from the collections of words in documents (Jelodar et al., 2019). In

practice, LDA requires the user to input a document-term matrix (dtm) and the number of topics  $k$ . The dtm has rows of documents represented by columns of terms, where row size equals the corpus size and column size equals the number of all vocabularies (Hornik and Grün, 2011).  $K$  is fixed a priori (Jelodar et al., 2019). To identify the probability of a topic in a document and the probability of a word in a topic, LDA starts by randomizing the two probabilities and updates them through iterations by Gibbs sampling based on the Markov Chain Monte Carlo algorithm (Agrawal et al., 2018). LDA produces the probabilities of each topic in each document and each word in each topic.

The algorithm and assumptions of LDA suggest three major limitations. First, the selection of the number of topics,  $k$ , can significantly alter results. Because the performance of each  $k$  can only be observed after running LDA, researchers must repeat the process to identify the best-performing  $k$ . Although there are statistical methods to evaluate each  $k$ , the iterations are inefficient and the fluctuations in the measurement parameters due to the inherent randomness of the LDA algorithm make it difficult to determine an ideal  $k$  (Vayansky and Kumar, 2020). In a related issue, LDA suffers “order effects” because a random start is required in the algorithm, where changing the order in the training data changes the topics (Agrawal et al., 2018). Third, LDA assumes the independence of topics, which may not be the case in reality. Later developments of TM addressed this problem by changing sampling methods (Vayansky and Kumar, 2020).

One of the advances in this area is the introduction of *structural* topic modeling (STM). Similar to other TM methods, STM is a generative model (Roberts

et al., 2019). The basic assumptions of STM are similar to LDA but STM allows topics to correlate with one another and incorporates metadata in models (Lucas et al., 2015). Topics can be conceptualized as nodes and the correlations between topics are the edges that form a network of topics (Roberts et al., 2014). The inclusion of metadata also allows researchers to control for covariates (e.g., differences between media outlets) in the model and demonstrate the varying prevalence of frames over time (Nicholls and Culpepper, 2021). In practice, this helps to analyze the relationships between actors and topics, providing essential analytics for understanding the use of language for political goals, such as framing contests (Stelmach and Boudet, 2022). Nevertheless, other challenges exhibited in LDA remain. Although there are statistical methods to “find k” for STM, the reliance on statistics does not always generate interpretable results (Nicholls and Culpepper, 2021). Therefore, researchers should examine outputs such as topical words and the documents that are rated as more related to a topic to validate and give meanings to the topics.

### *The topic modeling process*

This study follows the conventional topic modeling procedures to preprocess text corpora using the R package Quanteda (Benoit et al., 2018). The purpose of preprocessing is to keep only meaningful words for the analysis and keeping them in a uniform way (e.g., transforming verbs with different tenses into the same word stem) to reduce noise. First, the texts in datasets were converted into corpora and tokenized (Küçük and Can, 2021). Tokenization splits text into tokens depending on the rules defined by the algorithm, which is specific to the grammar of different

languages. Next, punctuations and stop words were removed, remaining words were stemmed. Then, to exclude the word stems that were not helpful in topic identification, word stems that occurred in more than 99% (e.g., meaningless but frequently used words such as “a,” or “the”) and less than 0.5% of the documents were removed. Finally, a document-term matrix was constructed and transformed into a Structural Topic Modelling-compatible format (a bag of words structure). These preprocessing techniques allow the computer to “read” the text as data (numbers) which represent the occurrence of each word in a document.

Structural topic modeling (STM) was employed in this study as it takes correlations between topics into consideration and allows users to input covariates in the text model (Nicholls and Culpepper, 2021; Roberts et al., 2014). This study selected Country (U.S. or China) and time series (by month) as the covariates as they could explain some of the variance in changing topical trends.

In order to find the number of topics ( $k$ ) that best fit the corpora and maximize the interpretability of topics, the method of iterating topic model fitting and evaluation was chosen over statistical methods (Nicholls and Culpepper, 2021). Thus, the best fitting  $k$  was determined by comparing the balance between exclusivity and semantic coherence for different numbers of topics ( $k$ ). Exclusivity measures the degree that words are exclusive to one topic but not associated with many, while semantic coherence measures the co-occurrence of probable topic words in a topic (Airoldi and Bischof, 2016). Exclusivity is maximized when  $k$  increases, as uniqueness of word bags increases; semantic coherence is maximized when  $k$



decreases, as most probable topic terms co-occur more frequently. Therefore, the best fit  $k$  is a compromise between the two measures.

Two rounds of topic modeling were performed for each corpus. The first round narrowed down the scope of  $k$  and the second round identified the best suitable  $k$  for interpretation. For the news corpus, the first round of topic modeling started from  $k = 20$ , with an interval of 10, until  $k = 50$ . Exclusivity and semantic coherence measurements suggested that the optimal  $k$  was between 30 to 40. This result prompted the second round to start from 30 to 40, with an interval of 1. Exclusivity and semantic coherence measurements showed that  $k = 34$  and  $k = 36$  both exhibited a desirable balance. After examining the two models qualitatively,  $k = 34$  was selected (see Appendix A) because the topics were more interpretable, which was also indicated by its slightly higher semantic coherence. For the U.S. presidential administration (White House) and Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CMFA) corpora, because of their smaller  $N$  size, the first round of topic modeling started from  $k = 6$ , with an interval of 6, until  $k = 30$ . In the White House corpus, exclusivity and semantic coherence measurements suggested an optimal  $k$  between 12 and 18. The second round identified  $k = 14$  achieved a better balance (see Appendix B). Meanwhile, the first round of CMFA topic models suggests a  $k$  between 18 to 24. The second round found that  $k = 19$  and  $k = 21$  showed a good exclusivity and semantic coherence balance (see Appendix C). After examining the two models qualitatively,  $k = 21$  was selected.

All the topics in the three topic models were analyzed and labeled manually in the following step. First, to get a sense of the topical scopes, the top words in each of

the topics from topic models were extracted and examined. They were the most related words in each topic because topics were collections of words that were more likely to co-occur in the text documents. Next, the main texts that were most related to each topic were examined qualitatively to derive their themes. Finally, guided by the top words, the key meanings of a topic were identified (see the topics in Appendix D, E, and F).

#### Strategic narratives identification

While the technical meaning of topics in LDA-based topic models is defined by probabilities of word occurrence, there is little consensus on the theoretical meaning of LDA-based topics in the literature. Some scholars consider LDA topics to be synonymous with frames, but others argue that the scope of LDA-based topics is not to be confused with frames (Walter and Ophir, 2019). The task becomes even more complex in narrative identification as it involves other narrative elements such as actors and events. The diversity of word distribution within a topic could point to multiple consolidated meanings (Ramage et al., 2009). Thus, there lacks a theoretical ground for treating STM topics (also LDA-based) directly as individually operationalizable elements of narratives.

This study reconsiders the utility of STM topics in their technical definition. Topic models show hidden structures of word distributions (Jelodar et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2016). It means that topic modeling does not discriminate against the contextual meanings of words and functions of narrative elements (i.e., actors, locations, behaviors). By reading within the topics, researchers may infer the relationships between narrative elements and reconstruct the narratives by observing these latent

word structures. The utility of topic modeling lies in showing the contours of meaningful linguistic constructs such as frames (Guo et al., 2022; Hubner, 2021), or in this study, narratives. This is because topics show the word bags of distinct groups of words from the documents. Patterns of associations between narrative elements such as actors and their discursive cues can be observed (DiMaggio et al., 2013). In other words, topics can show how actors were commonly described by specific words, or the actions they engaged in, as manifested in frequently co-occurred words. Topics can be considered as themes (Mohr and Bogdanov, 2013), where they might not directly equate frames or narratives, but group together the words that can build into frames and narratives. In other words, this approach calls for some human interpretation of the use of the output.

In the following step, a qualitative procedure was adopted to tease out the storylines that were intertwined with STM topics. It was conducted in two parts. First, the top 100 (news corpus) or 50 (White House, CMFA corpora) text documents that were most related to a topic were examined. Storylines were extracted for further analysis. This study analyses these storylines from a policy-centric perspective that examines how strategic narratives explain specific travel policies and the reasons for their implementation, and from a narrative-centric perspective to investigate how political actors shape the characterization and morals of political actors in the international system.

In the second step, a targeted narrative identification process was conducted. As the literature points out LDA-based topical top words were not evenly distributed in the corpus (Ramage et al., 2009), as a document can contain topical top words, but

the topical top word could have a lower probability of topic association because of the competition from other words. Therefore, this study employs a keyword-based approach to unearth strategic narratives that were meaningful but sometimes less salient within a topic. A shortlist of keywords that were related to U.S.-China travel policies were selected from topical top words in the STM topic models (see Appendix G). For each keyword, text documents that were most correlated to STM topics and contained the keyword were examined. A list of strategic narratives was identified in this qualitative process.

#### Supervised Machine Learning

##### *Technical considerations: Text vectorization*

Supervised machine learning treats text as data to conduct classification. The first step involves transforming the text into vectors, which is similar to the procedures in preprocessing for unsupervised topic modeling. Conventionally, to reflect the importance of words within a particular document and in the entire corpus, a term frequency-inverse document frequency (tf-idf) approach can be employed (Qaiser and Ali, 2018). The tf-idf vectorization process weighs a term by term-frequency — the importance of the term in a document, and by inverse document frequency — the uniqueness of the term in the corpus. The tf-idf of terms are used to construct feature vectors that represent terms in a document, and the vectors form a vector matrix representing the corpus. Nevertheless, although tf-idf makes important features more salient to aid machine classification, it remains a bag-of-words approach that ignores the order of words in a document and the surrounding context of a word. They were both essential elements in giving meaning to text documents.

Recent technological developments in neural networks and AI gave birth to pretrained large language models (LLMs). They have the advantage of using embedding vectors to represent the meanings and contexts of the text (Lai et al., 2016). Word embeddings in LLMs are generated through deep learning with Artificial Neural Networks (ANN). ANN-based methods build models that resemble the networks of neurons in brains, where nodes receive data input, process, and pass results to the other node(s) (Goldberg, 2016). By creating more hidden layers of neurons (nodes), the ANN becomes deep. In the deep learning process, a word embedding layer can be included, where words are represented by fixed-length vectors in a dense space (Onan, 2021). This is different from a bag-of-words approach which represents words in sparse vectors (one-hot vector, or discrete vectors for every word), target words are mapped based on other co-occurring words in the document (Lai et al., 2016). For instance, the vector representation of “dog” and “cat” could be similar because other words used in the texts containing “dog” and “cat” are similar (Goldberg, 2016). Thus, the context is introduced in word embeddings.

Training deep learning models requires computational resources and a large amount of training data (Kroon et al., 2022). Developing an accurate model from scratch is costly. One solution is to employ transfer learning – borrowing pre-trained deep learning models for similar tasks (Guo et al., 2022). For example, the Bi-directional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) model developed by Google is widely used and performs well for various tasks (Devlin et al., 2018). BERT can also be employed in multiple languages (Akyürek et al., 2020). To conduct supervised learning, users can feed labeled data to BERT, where it can build a new

model by learning from the data with contextual awareness. Or, if researchers lack the resources to annotate a dataset for learning, some scholars have fine-tuned BERT on issues such as immigration and gun violence for “off-the-shelf” use (Smith et al., 2020). Users can vectorize a corpus by passing text through pretrained LLMs. Vector arrays received can be passed downstream for tasks such as classification.

This study adopted this transfer learning approach that utilized and compared two widely employed LLM-based encoders. Both encoders operate in the Python TensorFlow environment, including the Universal Sentence Encoder (USE) trained with a deep averaging network (DAN) encoder (Cer et al., 2018), as well as a version of the Universal Sentence Encoder that was trained with Conditional Masked Language Modeling (CMLM) based on the BERT architecture (Yang et al., 2021). They are both sentence-level encoders, meaning that they transform greater-than-word length text into high-dimensional vectors. Unlike word-level embeddings that consider between-word context, the USE was trained on sequences of words and their surrounding context, allowing it to flexibly encode texts with variable lengths into vector representations. This feature is particularly important in this study because word-based encoders often limit intake sequence length. It will result in the need for truncation or expansion of the input length, in which the former would ignore part of the meaningful texts in sequences and the latter would significantly increase the computational resources required. Accuracy and efficiency of classification would be undermined. The performance statistics suggest that USE yielded better precision, recall, and F1-score in general. Thus, USE was used for the classification of the entire dataset.

### *Technical considerations: Supervised machine learning algorithm*

This study employed four machine learning algorithms for supervised narrative classification, including logistic regression, Naive Bayes classifier, random forest, and support vector machine. They cover a diversity of classification logic that will typically yield a varying performance for different corpora structures. Because it is possible that these algorithms could perform differently in identifying specific narratives, a majority voting method was introduced as well. The target text document would receive a positive result (consisting of a narrative) if the majority of algorithms considered it as such. All supervised machine learning was conducted using the scikit-learn library in Python (Pedregosa et al., 2011). Default values of algorithm hyperparameters were selected. Although it may not yield the best performance across the board, default values provide a more efficient and objective way to classify documents (Probst et al., 2019), especially when this study utilizes multiple machine learning algorithms. As demonstrated later in this section, the performance of default hyperparameters in this study also suggests that they deliver adequate results.

Logistic regression (LR) is a technique for binary classification based on the log odds of the dependent variable (Wright, 1995), which is whether a document belongs to a category or not in classification tasks. In the modeling phase, text features (tokens) are treated as independent variables that estimate the log probability of classification in the range between 0-1. Results can be represented on a sigmoid S-shaped curve (Shah et al., 2020). Next, the text model can be used to predict the unseen data. LR results are interpretable. Similar to other regression methods,

researchers can observe which text features have a stronger predictive power of a class. Because of its simplicity and good performance in various text classification tasks (Pranckevičius and Marcinkevičius, 2017; Shah et al., 2020), LR is widely used as a standard for evaluating other methods. Nevertheless, LR is limited by its bias in imbalanced categories and ill-posed regression problems. The former is caused by the cut-off point of the probability of classification (by default 50%:50%), where misclassification rates depend on the distribution of categories in data (Liu et al., 2011). If the majority of the documents are coded as positive, the model will be biased toward predicting a positive categorization. The latter problem is associated with the regression algorithm. Over-fitting, multi-collinearity, and infinite solutions become more likely when the dimensionality of data increases (Liu et al., 2014). Since text modeling often utilizes many text features for predictions, the accuracy of LR can be undermined.

Naive Bayes (NB) classifier also classifies by probability but with Bayes' theorem. It is “naive” because the algorithm holds the simple assumption that features between classes are independent (Rish, 2001), or in other words, the word clustering patterns are irrelevant between categories. NB learns from the frequency of attributes in the training set independently (McCallum and Nigam, 1998). It means NB estimates the probability of every individual attribute – text features, in this case, to predict a class. Distribution models such as multinomial, Bernoulli, and Gaussian event models can be utilized (Xu, 2018). The advantage of NB is that it scales up with a large number of attributes easily because of the independence assumption between attributes (McCallum and Nigam, 1998). Although the naive assumption is



unrealistic, where features are nearly impossible to be unrelated to one another, NB performed well in classification (Burggraaff and Trilling, 2020; Leavy, 2019). This is explained by the distribution of dependencies of text features, where local dependencies of each feature can work together to support the prediction of a category (consistency between features) or cancel out the prediction (inconsistency) (Xu, 2018). In other words, the accuracy of NB does not come from the individual predictive power of text features but the combinations of probabilities from text features. Nevertheless, NB can suffer from the zero-frequency problem which is limited by its probabilistic nature. When the training data cannot provide enough examples to identify the predictions of features to classes, the algorithm would predict a zero conditional probability for unseen instances in the test data (Wu et al., 2013).

Random forest (RF) is based on the method of the decision tree, which classifies a target by running through a series of feature-based decision nodes (Rokach and Maimon, 2014). The nodes of the tree are binary decisions that divert data points to the next node until it reaches the leaf – a class. The decision tree is interpretable because it shows the logic of which feature determines the path to a particular class. However, it can be too specific to the training data, especially when the tree grows deep with many nodes, when small changes in the training data can result in a drastic change in the tree, making the predictions unstable (Shah et al., 2020). RF overcomes this problem by sampling features and building trees multiple times, which averages out the high variance of trees (Fawagreh et al., 2014). The final decision is made by a majority voting by the trees. Therefore, RF is less affected by

outliers and noise (Nadi and Moradi, 2019). However, it sacrificed the interpretability of the model as there is no single way to understand the classification decision. The number of trees in a forest is also limited by the number of features available (Nadi and Moradi, 2019).

A large-margin classifier such as support vector machines (SVM) can achieve better accuracy compared to probabilistic methods (Kroon et al., 2022). SVM makes classification decisions by inputting the data vectors with kernel techniques on a high-dimensional feature space that is non-linearly related to the input space; and uses linear methods to identify the boundaries of two classes (Hearst et al., 1998). The binary classification is done by estimating a hyperplane that separates two groups in the high-dimensional space, with the goal of maximizing the margin between the closest points from each group (Meyer and Wien, 2015). The vectors lying on the boundaries in the feature space are support vectors, where their mid-points draw the separating hyperplane. The advantage of SVM is that adding extra dimensions (text features) to the analysis does not increase computational costs significantly, because the data vectors are not transformed (mapped) on a new space but represented using the “kernel trick” with dot products of the data points (Karatzoglou et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the quadratic optimization algorithm and the kernel transformation used significantly increased runtime when scaling up (Meyer and Wien, 2015). Misclassification occurs when extreme values may lie beyond the class boundaries in the high-dimensional space.

Given that the supervised machine learning algorithms above all come with unique strengths and weaknesses, this study evaluated their performance with

manually annotated data and compared them side by side. A majority voting scheme was also introduced to pool the results from all algorithms. Its performance was compared with individual algorithms.

### *The supervised machine learning classification process*

A training dataset of the news data was human labeled for the machine to learn and make classifications in supervised machine learning. Three rounds of classification were conducted to enhance the performance of the text models and the size of the final training dataset. The training dataset was purposefully sampled and coded by hand for each strategic narrative in this study. This is because as the strategic narratives were sparsely distributed in the corpora, it would be inefficient to code a random sample as the training set. The performance of supervised machine learning can also benefit from a more balanced training dataset. A targeted approach was adopted by purposefully sampling the text documents that were most associated with the STM topics as well as the selected keywords in the STM topics. An expert coder in China and U.S. news, with a Ph.D. in Journalism Studies, participated in the manual coding process with the author.

To start with, inter-rater (coder) reliability (IRR) between two coders was established. A sample of 200 news articles was systematically selected from the narrative-related topics, so that the dataset represented an equal proportion of topics. Both coders discussed the codebook and then coded the 200 articles separately. The article-narrative pairs were categorized into three groups to facilitate the manual coding process. Each article was assigned to be coded for four to six narratives

depending on its narrative-related topics, with a total of 970 coded items. The inter-coder reliability statistics show satisfactory results: The agreement rate between the expert coder and the author was 90%, the conventional inter-coder reliability measurement of Cohen's Kappa = 0.66, and Gwet's AC1 = 0.80, which is a better measurement for sparse data (Wongpakaran et al., 2013).

In the next step, the training dataset was constructed. The process consisted of three rounds of machine learning-aided coding. In the first round, the inter-coder reliability dataset with 970 coded items was utilized as a training dataset. The target dataset was the rest of the manually labeled article-narrative pairs in the dataset, which had 1830 items. Supervised machine learning was employed to estimate the existence of any of the remaining narratives. The following section will detail the choice and performance of four supervised machine learning algorithms and an auxiliary majority voting process. Results were manually checked to create a corrected dataset with the 200 articles in the IRR dataset, with 2800 coded items. The same process was repeated for two more rounds.

In the second round, the 2800 coded items in the inter-coder reliability dataset were used as the training data. The target data was 500 articles systematically sampled from narrative-related topics, yielding 7000 observations. In the process of validating the machine-coded results, if the machine learning algorithms unanimously coded an article as 0 (without a narrative) or 1 (consisting of a narrative), they would be classified as such. The items that received non-unanimous codes were manually checked and categorized. This approach is more time-consuming than adopting a majority voting system but ensures better accuracy in the final coded dataset.

In round 3, the training dataset consists of the 200 articles from the inter-coder reliability dataset and the 500 articles from round 2. There were 700 articles or 9800 coded items in total. In order to diversify the final dataset for machine training, the target dataset in round 3 injected time and country dimensions in the sampling. For both U.S. and Chinese news articles, a stratified sample weighted by the frequency of articles per month was selected. In other words, there were more articles in the sample for the months with more news articles, and vice versa. Thus, the sample has a sample ratio of articles per month similar to the entire dataset, for both countries respectively. A sample of 495 from each country was taken, creating the target dataset of 990 articles for round 3, consisting of 13,860 items to be coded. The same process in machine coding and manual validation was applied.

Finally, the corrected dataset from the three rounds was consolidated into a training dataset of 1690 articles or 23660 coded items. It was used to train machine learning models that classified the entire news dataset.

The supervised machine learning method used for classifying the entire dataset was based on the performance statistics in round 3. There were three statistics used. First, precision is the ratio of true positives in all positive classifications made by the machine. Second, recall is the ratio of true positives in all positively labeled data, which is identical to the concept of sensitivity. The F1-score is the harmonic mean of precision and recall, which is the balanced representation of how well the model does in identifying true positives and keeping misidentification low (Chinchor and Sundheim, 1993; Zijdenbos et al., 1994). The three metrics are measured on a scale of 0 to 1, 0 being no true positive identified and 1 being perfect precision and/or

recall. Table 2 shows the average F1-score of all five classification methods using the three vectorization methods (see Appendix H for precision and recall). Overall, SVM using USE embeddings showed the best performance, which was selected to classify the entire dataset.

Table 3.2. Performance of supervised machine learning methods, measured by average F1-scores.

|                        | Average F1-score     |          |         |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------|---------|
| Classification Method  | Vectorization Method |          |         |
|                        | tf-idf               | USE-CMLM | USE-DAN |
| Logistic regression    | 0.279                | 0.829    | 0.777   |
| Random forest          | 0.461                | 0.643    | 0.723   |
| Naive Bayes classifier | 0.439                | 0.774    | 0.806   |
| Support Vector Machine | 0.869                | 0.851    | 0.894   |
| Majority Voting        | 0.606                | 0.815    | 0.885   |

### Statistical analyses

Statistical methods were employed to illustrate the trends and interactions between strategic narratives to understand the flow of strategic narratives. Trends were illustrated by aggregating the number of strategic narratives per day, visualized by prevalence charts, and smoothened trend lines. The relationships between strategic narratives were assessed by Granger causality tests. Unlike regression methods that

reflect correlations between variables, the Granger causality test measures the ability of one variable to predict another (Granger, 1969). It should be noted that the term “Granger causality” is more limited than broader concept of “causality” in general in social science: Statistically significant Granger causality test results show how one variable is more able to predict another in a statistical sense. A time series variable X Granger causes another time series variable Y when past values of X and Y better predict the current value of Y than predicting the current value of Y only with the past values of Y.

Granger causality test should be conducted on stationary time series data or the test could lead to the suggestion of spurious causality (He and Maekawa, 2001). Two tests for stationarity were performed. Augmented Dickey-Fuller test were employed to evaluate the stationarity of the strategic narratives time trend data (Cheung and Lai, 1995). For the strategic narratives of interests, the ADF tests rejected the null hypotheses and suggested stationarity in the data. Next, the trend stationarity of the data was evaluated by the Kwiatkowski–Phillips–Schmidt–Shin (KPSS) test (Kwiatkowski et al., 1992). The null hypotheses were rejected, suggesting that the data was not trend stationary. Therefore, detrending was carried out by differencing the data, meaning that the time series were reconstructed as the difference between time steps (Granger and Joyeux, 1980). The differenced data rejected the null hypotheses of ADF tests and did not reject the null hypotheses of KPSS tests, suggesting that the data was suitable for Granger causality tests. Relationships between strategic narratives such as narrative diffusion in foreign media outlets or counternarratives that responded to another strategic narrative were

evaluated. Findings inform the flow and responsiveness of strategic narratives between the U.S. and China. On top of that, Granger causality tests were also conducted to examine the relationships between strategic narratives and pandemic parameters measured in the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) (Hale et al., 2022). All Granger causality tests were conducted with a one-day lag interval. These tests suggest the ways strategic narratives were responding to the frames, other strategic narratives, and policies advanced by governments.

### Chapter summary

This chapter outlines the data and methods used in the study of strategic narrative projection between the U.S. and China on COVID-19 and related travel policies. The large dataset and mixed method analysis employed advances the literature in four ways. First, in terms of data, this study sampled a large dataset of online news articles to provide a broader overview of the trends of strategic narratives, which have been underexplored in previous studies. Second, the human-in-the-loop machine learning narrative identification process demonstrated an effective way to extract strategic narratives of interest to a study from a high volume of data. This is achieved by zooming in and anchoring on targeted narratives from qualitatively examining unsupervised machine learning results. Third, a supervised machine learning cycle leveraged the qualitative analysis results to scale up narrative identification. This study conducted rigorous tests to select the best-performing combination of text vectorization and classification methods. F1 scores suggest that machine learning models with contextual awareness are feasible for narrative identification tasks. This process conventionally involves more situational interpretation by human coders, but



the utilization of pretrained large language models in vectorization helped the machine to “read” with the knowledge of human language use patterns. Finally, this analytical approach showcased the flexibility of mixed methods analyses for mapping the flow of international communication in the news environment while also providing critical details. The upcoming chapters present the findings on the qualitative characteristics of each strategic narrative of interest, as well as their quantitative relationships.

## Chapter 4: Strategic Narratives from China

Chapters 4 and 5 present the findings of strategic narratives identified from the U.S. and Chinese news media, as well as from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Conferences Corpus (CMFA PressCon) dataset (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021) and the corpus of the American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters, 1999).

Chapter 4 presents the findings from Chinese news media and the CMFA. Chapter 5 presents the findings from the U.S. news media and the White House. In both chapters, strategic narratives were organized by themes. In each theme, a qualitative analysis is used to define the strategic narratives in the news. Next, official strategic narratives from the CMFA and the White House were discussed to provide the context of state-led strategic narratives projection for analyzing the strategic narratives in the news. The similarities and differences between the news and official narratives illustrate how the news both mirrored storylines emanating from government officials or negotiated the strategic narratives by incorporating perspectives from other social or political actors. This research illuminates how the operationalization of strategic narratives can provide critical insights into the interplay of information flows among two different national government and news systems.

The strategic narrative analyzed for these chapters were identified by a mixed-method approach through two machine learning cycles. To start with, Structural Topic Modeling was employed to analyze the structure of the corpora sampled from target news outlets from the GDELT Coronavirus news dataset (The GDELT Project, 2020), CMFA PressCon dataset (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021) and the American

Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters, 1999). Next, a qualitative narrative identification process was conducted to extract strategic narratives from topic modeling results. While some scholars take the topic modeling output as media frames, others argue that consolidated meanings from words can overlap and spread across and within topics (Fast et al., 2016; Ramage et al., 2009; Walter and Ophir, 2019). Thus, a qualitative analysis of the topics was employed to extract meaningful language constructs (Guo et al., 2022; Hubner, 2021), which are strategic narratives in this study. In the news data, 34 topics were identified by topic modeling (see Appendix D). After reading the news items that are most related to the topics and associated keywords, 6 relevant Chinese strategic narratives and 5 from the U.S. were extracted. In the White House data, 14 topics and 5 relevant strategic narratives were identified (see Appendix E). In the CMFA PressCon data, 21 topics were identified (see Appendix F) and 4 relevant strategic narratives were extracted.

### *Strategic narratives from China*

This chapter presents the Chinese storylines and how they interpreted the pandemic and policy responses from both the U.S. and China. Chinese strategic narratives were deeply engaged in both justifying the stringent pandemic control policy and refuting U.S. accusations. Findings suggest that strategic narratives from Chinese news media demonstrated qualities similar to the official narratives from the CMFA. Chinese media often quoted sources from Chinese officials and amplified official claims. Strategic narratives were stable throughout the pandemic, as both the Chinese government and its media outlets tried to maintain a storyline by adapting to the changing pandemic and policy situation, rather than adjusting the strategic narratives

to accommodate. This chapter first presents an overview of Chinese strategic narratives projection from 2020 to early 2023. The following subsections provide a detailed analysis of each of the strategic narratives.

The early COVID-19 outbreak that caught global media attention emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in January 2020. In Chinese news coverage, strategic narratives were projected to justify pandemic policies and refute foreign accusations. This study categorized relevant Chinese strategic narratives into three themes: Chinese pandemic policies, unfair hyping of ‘threat’ from China, and virus origin. Early in the pandemic, although the Chinese government initially suggested that the outbreak was controllable, the virus soon spread across the country and to the world. China quickly adopted a tight containment policy that aimed to virtually eliminate COVID-19 transmissions, which was known as the Zero-COVID policy. Large-scale community lockdowns and mass virus testing were widespread, and the infected people were sent to isolation facilities for treatment. In terms of travel policies, China limited international flights in March 2020 as the pandemic worsened across the world. A “circuit breaker” policy that temporarily banned airlines with flights having more than five COVID-19 cases and the “closed-loop management” of an inbound traveler quarantine scheme was put in place to prevent importing COVID-19. All of these policies severely disrupted the daily lives of Chinese citizens, but China claimed it maintained a low caseload with its ZERO-COVID policy.

Strategic narratives were employed to justify these policies. Chinese news and the official CMFA narratives aligned to suggest that COVID-19 responses from China were *scientific* and put *people’s lives first*. The former emphasized the efficacy

of the strict Zero-COVID policy, and the latter tells a nationalist story of Chinese people united to fight off a viral enemy. Although the scientific mechanisms were not spelled out, the effectiveness of these strict measures was considered the positive outcome of adopting a scientific approach. The high social and economic costs of Zero-COVID were explained by the philosophy of putting people's lives first in the pandemic. By securitizing anti-pandemic efforts, the Chinese strategic narrative utilized a wartime storyline to justify the sacrifice made.

China maintained its Zero-COVID policy into 2022, when the world was reopening as the virus evolved into more contagious and less deadly strains, coupled with better vaccination rates and treatment options. As the caseload increased, China initially doubled down on Zero-COVID as well as the two supporting strategic narratives. Nevertheless, by the end of 2022, the Chinese government relaxed pandemic policies as the stress on the economy and society – including usually strong pushback from Chinese citizens – appeared to outweigh the value of Zero-COVID. The two strategic narratives continued to project the same storylines, despite the pandemic and policy situation had turned around completely.

While Chinese strategic narratives were remarkably stable and resolute during most of the pandemic, they were responsive to foreign strategic narratives. Accusations from the U.S. were framed as the act of smearing China. The storyline projected by both the news and the CMFA suggested that the U.S. has long been undermining the development of modern China. On the policy level, it was argued that the U.S. leveraged the public health crisis to blame China. The U.S. was portrayed as an immoral actor in the international system because political goals

became the priority of U.S. pandemic policies. Specifically, on travel policies, the Chinese news criticized new U.S. travel restrictions in early 2023 that targeted travelers from China as discriminatory. The strategic narrative argues that the goal of the West was to sabotage the post-pandemic recovery in China. It was contextualized under a wider plot of a U.S. government that has been promoting an “anti-China agenda.”

The anti-U.S. identity narrative was further reinforced by Chinese strategic narratives projected on the issue of virus origin tracing. Early in the pandemic, Chinese news media picked up the U.S. mainstream narrative that suggested that the Wuhan lab leak theory was a conspiracy theory from the far right. The Wuhan lab leak theory was described as a political weapon manufactured by U.S. politicians. The Chinese media cited opinions from experts and the WHO-China report to argue that science showed an extremely low likelihood of the Wuhan lab leak. Thus, U.S. politicians were playing the “anti-China” card again for political goals. In addition to amplifying the accusations that the Wuhan lab leak story was a far-right conspiracy theory, the Chinese state and media amplified a counter-narrative that emerged on social media to claim that COVID-19 originated with a lab leak in America. Playing offense, the strategic narrative claimed there was a possible lab leak from the U.S. Fort Detrick. It was argued that the lab incidents in 2019 matched possible COVID-19 cases in the U.S. before the first case was reported in China. Specifically, the strategic narratives from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggested that if virus origin tracing should be conducted in China, Fort Detrick should be investigated as well. The refusal of the U.S. to conduct such a study showed that a cover-up might

have happened, which was a similar storyline that the U.S. employed to attack China. While there was only uncertain circumstantial evidence to support the *Fort Detrick theory*, it was promoted by both the Chinese government and its English-language media as an alternative against the *Wuhan Lab leak theory*.

Overall, the structure of Chinese strategic narratives from both the CMFA and in the English language news were stable and clear. Strategic narratives in the news mirrored the CMFA official narratives but sometimes operated with more flexibility to engage in discussions that was not convenient for the CMFA to directly participate. Throughout the pandemic, COVID-19 policies were justified as scientific and putting lives first, from locking down the country to a rapid reopening. At the same time, Chinese strategic narratives were actively refuting negative news coverage from the U.S., U.S. travel restrictions, accusations of a lack of transparency, and the virus origin trace were considered as American efforts to smear China. The center of gravity of the Chinese strategic narratives did not deviate much from 2020 to 2023, despite dramatic shifts in both policy and the course of the epidemic.

The subsections in this chapter describe and explain Chinese strategic narratives in each theme, exploring how it played out in both the news and in content from the CMFA (see Table 4.1). Strategic narratives in the news mirrors the ones from the CMFA. While the both the Chinese media narratives and the CMFA narratives tell very similar stories, they showed unique characteristics. Examples are given below to illustrate the storylines. All quoted samples were coded for easy reference (e.g., “GT1” indicates the first sample from *Global Times*). The list of

sampled articles in the following analysis can be found in Appendix I. All typos and grammatical mistakes in the quotes are original.

Table 4.1. Chinese narratives in the news and from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

| Theme                     | Strategic narratives in the news                                                                                            | Strategic narratives from the CMFA                                               |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Chinese pandemic policies | <p>Scientific Zero-COVID policies</p> <p>China puts people's lives first</p> <p>U.S. discriminatory travel restrictions</p> | <p>Scientific Zero-COVID policies</p> <p>China puts people's lives first</p>     |
| Hyping China threat       | The U.S. smears China                                                                                                       | The U.S. smears China                                                            |
| Virus origin              | <p>The U.S. fabricated the lab leak theory as a political weapon</p> <p>COVID-19 possibly leaked from Fort Detrick</p>      | <p>COVID-19 origin tracing should not be conducted in China, but in the U.S.</p> |



### Chinese pandemic policies

#### Scientific Zero-COVID policies (news)

This strategic narrative observed in the Chinese news coverage argues that Chinese pandemic policies were formulated from a science-based approach, hence achieving their goals effectively. Specifically, the narrative put an emphasis on justifying the policies that were aimed at a scientific approach to stopping the spread of the virus. From the early stage of the pandemic, Chinese media highlighted the importance of science in the Chinese pandemic response. In a *Global Times* opinion piece titled “Keep faith in science to combat epidemic,” published on February 4, 2020, quarantine and associated management policies were justified as effective ways to stop COVID-19 transmission. The article highlighted this by saying “We must trust science rather than panic. With such a big scale of national mobilization, we believe most channels for the virus to spread will be blocked” (GT1). The narrative continues to suggest policy outcomes, “Since a nationwide epidemic control system has been deployed, the future is highly certain: First, the outbreak will be curbed and controlled. Next, we will combat and completely overcome it step by step...” (GT1). Similarly, a *People’s Daily* online article titled “Let science build strong power against epidemic,” published on February 18, 2020, argued that,

To cut the spread of the novel coronavirus with the sword of science is a mission that allows no hesitation. China, battling on the frontline, has rapidly integrated scientific power and increased efforts on R&D to enhance development of targeted drugs. (PD1)

At the beginning of the pandemic, Chinese media had stressed the scientific efforts China devoted in both the areas of developing cures and curbing transmissions. This strategic narrative provided a sound reason for China to legitimize a “Zero-COVID” policy of massive lockdowns and quarantine to block off infection cases, which helped China to maintain the caseload at a lower level.

Travel policies were also framed as scientific, with the goal of blocking the spread of the virus. In the area of international travel, Chinese policies were justified on the lines of preventing the import of COVID-19. For example, a *Global Times* article titled “US has ‘no ground’ to limit passenger capacity from China: FM,” published on August 19, 2021, quoted the Chinese Spokesperson Hua Chunying that,

the "circuit breaker" policy for overseas flights is an important measure to curb imported cases, and the policy is fair and transparent for airlines from home and abroad... China will continue to implement epidemic prevention measures, including the "circuit breaker" policy, to prevent the virus from spreading. (GT2)

Implemented from June 2020 until November 2022, the "circuit breaker" policy would ban an airline from flying into China for two weeks if there were more than five passengers tested positive on the previous flight. The logic behind this policy was explained by the allegedly relatively few local COVID-19 cases in China compared to the rest of the world, as mentioned in a *CGTN* item, published on November 30, 2021,

unlike other countries whose local COVID-19 cases far exceed the imported ones, China cannot simply lift travel curbs by adopting the entry strategy of

"full vaccination proof and negative PCR test within 72 hours." So far, each new outbreak of COVID-19 in China has been attributed to an imported case of the disease. (CG1)

Travelers entering China during this time period also had to undergo the “closed-loop management,” termed by the Chinese government, that included a series of tests and quarantine. These strict measures, as described in an article from *China Daily*, were considered to be part of a “science-based tool kit” (CD1). This article, titled “Zero-COVID policy keeps pandemic under control,” has quoted five health officials and medical experts to explain how Chinese policies kept the COVID-19 virus at bay.

The same scientific narrative was maintained and amplified when the pandemic policy shifted from hardline containment to a more open approach by the end of 2022. Facing the social and economic pressure brought by the long-term Zero-COVID policy, the Chinese government revisited its public health measures in November 2022. The move was framed as an “optimization” by the Chinese government. For example, a *Global Times* article titled “China's central leadership calls for optimized COVID response, precise measures amid dynamic-zero policy,” published on November 10, 2022, reported a Party meeting that “reiterated that China will unwaveringly stick to its dynamic zero-COVID policy” while directing local governments not to apply a “one-size-fits-all” approach that took “excessive policy steps” (GT3). It explained that,

While China stressed it will stick to its dynamic zero-COVID policy, the meeting also urged the effective coordination between COVID-19 prevention and economic and social development, and called for the impact of COVID-

19 on social and economic activities to be minimized. ... adapting to the virus' traits of spreading rapidly, early detection, early reporting, early quarantine and early treatment should be implemented to eliminate transmission, so that virus control measures will not be protracted. (GT3)

These policies were realized in a matter of days. Another *Global Times* article titled “China's 20 optimized measures a refinement on previous effective measures against COVID-19: health official,” published on November 12, 2022, quoted health authorities that “China's 20 optimized measures for combating COVID-19 are the optimization and improvement of the ninth version of the epidemic prevention and control plan” (GT4). The justification of these “optimizations” was consistent with the narrative early in the pandemic. It was reiterated that “The government remains committed to the principles of scientific and targeted prevention and control measures to deal with the epidemic in an orderly and effective manner” (GT4). The same article later referred to an expert source that pointed to the data which shows cutting quarantine days of travelers could still effectively “catch the vast majority of COVID-19 infections, with an accuracy rate of 94.5 percent” (GT4). The policy change was packaged under the same concept of science-based pandemic response and was reinforced by numbers and medical experts quotes that woven together the storylines.

Overall, the *scientific COVID-19 policies* narrative was consistent throughout the sampling period. As a strategic narrative, it not only tried to rally support under the flag of science, but also connected the causal effect of the “scientific measures.” The former was evident when public health policies shifted away from the status quo maintained throughout much of the pandemic, whether it was the unprecedented

lockdowns imposed early in the pandemic or the “optimization” of Zero-COVID by the end of 2022. The strategic narrative aligned policies with “science,” a universal value that was likely agreed upon by many, to rationalize the costs of extreme policies. Thus, the narrative was able to point to an anticipated desirable outcome for the audience – because the policies were based on science, they would achieve the desired goal of both curbing the spread of the virus early in the pandemic as well as balancing social and economic factors with virus control by the end of 2022.

#### Scientific Zero-COVID policies (CMFA)

The strategic narrative of a scientific-based policy approach was also found in the CMFA PressCon data. The CMFA has been very consistent in framing the Chinese pandemic response as “science-based.” It was so widely employed that it essentially became a catchphrase. At the press conference on April 30, 2020, the spokesperson explained a list of measures after expressing that,

China has taken the most comprehensive, strict and thorough measures in an open, transparent and responsible manner, earnestly fulfilled the duties and obligations and adopted and adjusted border exit health and quarantine measures in a scientific and timely fashion in accordance with the Border Health and Quarantine Law (CMFA1)

This narrative was constantly employed on the issue of travel policies, citing that “China adjusts its management measures on in-bound travelers in light of the changing epidemic situation in a science-based manner” (CMFA2, on June 7, 2021). Later, in the dispute with the U.S. on the “circuit breaker” policy that temporarily banned and limited the passenger load factor of some U.S. flights, the CMFA argued

that it was “an important step to reduce the risk of cross-border spread of the epidemic” (CMFA3, on August 19, 2021). Even further on in the pandemic on January 24, 2022, the CMFA spokesperson “urge the US to respect science” to protect the health and safety of people. He said, “Facts have proven that this measure has played an important role in effectively curbing the cross-border transmission and protecting the health and safety of Chinese and foreign travelers” (CMFA4). In other words, “science” was made synonymous with the “circuit breaker” policy. Regardless of the actual scientific mechanism behind it, the “circuit breaker” was considered scientific because of its effect in stopping the virus, or in fact, humans who can carry the virus, from entering the country.

Amid the policy turnaround in late 2022, the scientific narrative widened to include social and economic factors in its equation, similar to the strategic narrative in Chinese media. For example, the tone of the CMFA on Zero COVID softened as it mentioned on August 19, 2022, that “In addition to COVID containment, we have also endeavored to advance socio-economic development” and the travel policies were improved “with a science-based and prudent approach” (CMFA5). Later, the “optimization” of policies was also carefully crafted along those lines, on November 11, 2022,

Today, China’s National Health Commission announced 20 measures to further improve COVID containment. These measures are aimed at more science-based and targeted response. They certainly do not mean we can slacken in our response or even simply end COVID restrictions and lie flat... The adjustment is not only science-based, but also necessary. (CMFA6)

Eventually, as other countries reimposed travel restrictions on travelers from China as the infections number grew in late 2022, the CMFA adopted the same narrative and argued that policies should be “science-based.” On December 28, 2022, the spokesperson stated, “We’ve always believed that for all countries, COVID response measures need to be science-based and proportionate and apply equally to people of all countries without affecting normal travel and people-to-people exchange and cooperation.” (CMFA7). In addition to “science,” freedom of movement was then added to the narrative, which was previously understated. Although the label of science-based policymaking was consistent throughout the pandemic, the CMFA strategic narrative treated “scientific” more as a catchphrase. The scientific rigor in the storylines was sometimes missing, especially by the end of the pandemic, but the frame was merely reiterated to boost the persuasiveness for policymaking. Meanwhile, traces of this *Scientific Zero-COVID policies* strategic narrative can be found in the Chinese news media as discussed in the previous section. The reiteration of this narrative can be attributed to the Chinese media system where state media fulfilling its mission of directly amplifying official communication sources. English-language Chinese news from state media was playing an intermediate role in propagating official strategic narratives abroad.

#### China puts people’s lives first (news)

This strategic narrative emphasizes that a key priority of the Chinese pandemic response and travel policies was to protect people’s lives. Early in the pandemic, COVID-19 was portrayed as an enemy that threatened China and the world. Therefore, China mobilized efforts on a war footing to defeat the virus. The storyline

is heavily securitized as it moved a public health crisis into the realm of national security (Herington, 2010). By doing so, extreme policies that significantly disrupted daily social and economic activities were justified. For example, a *People's Daily* article published on April 11, 2020, titled "Saving lives, economic growth, int'l cooperation: China responds to humanity's COVID-19 test," suggests that "Since the outbreak, China has been waging all-out war to fight the virus, and its response has proven quite effective" (PD2). The prime objective of the pandemic response was highlighted, "A life-first principle, strong and open economic policies and a cooperative mindset have defined China over the past few months, and the world has taken notice" (PD2). The article continues to quote global and Chinese leaders on their call to "save lives and livelihoods."

From a narrative-centric perspective, this opportunity was further utilized to consolidate the image of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Wuhan, the epicenter of COVID-19, was portrayed as a war zone and Xi was leading the battle there. Another *People's Daily* article titled "Xi leads people's war on epidemic," published on March 12, 2020, described Xi as the "commander-in-chief of China's war against COVID-19" (PD3). The article centers on Xi's visit to Wuhan. Militarized language such as "Under Xi's command," and "Xi declared a people's war" were used. The initial success of curbing the spread of the virus was attributed to Xi.

On Tuesday, Xi again called the people of Wuhan "heroic", saying that today's positive trend in epidemic control would not be possible without their sacrifices and devotion.



"Xi is the backbone of this battle," said Liu Jingbei, a professor at the China Executive Leadership Academy in the Pudong New Area in Shanghai. "His leadership is crucial for the country to ultimately beat the epidemic." (PD3)

On the ideological level, the Chinese political system was praised,

By and large, it is a war waged by the people and for the people, reflecting the core values of the 90-million-member CPC... Xi ordered the use of the entire country's resources to pool strength into tackling the issue, which is an advantage of China's socialist system. (PD3)

As the examples show, this securitized strategic narrative justified the costs of extreme policies such as war efforts that aimed at saving lives, and this was made possible by the Chinese political system and exceptional leadership.

This securitized narrative approach continued, but evolved to externalize the threat, as the Zero-COVID policy kept reports of local infections low while reported infection rates abroad were higher. In a *Global Times* article published on May 18, 2021, titled "Why can China confine flare-ups to dozens cases?" the authors were rhetorically asking for the reasons why China could "withstand more than 10 rounds of domestic resurgences" (GT5). It quoted a health expert, who provided a securitized answer, "China adopted 'an entire army' to wipe a virus flare-up out... After the hard-won battle in early 2020, China has basically eliminated the domestic existence of the virus" (GT5). Meanwhile, the threat was externalized. The article points out that "The tight control, strict quarantine and testing at port cities also build up a strong wall that protected China from many dangerous variants" and quoted health experts to suggest that "Domestic outbreaks have been found to be connected to imported items

or people returning from abroad, meaning China's gate should continue to be guarded" (GT5).

Nevertheless, as social and economic pressure to loosen COVID restrictions increased as the pandemic reached its second year, the narrative started to shift from the realm of security back to health policy while maintaining the policy goal of protecting people's lives. In late 2021, the strategic narrative still put saving lives as the priority. For example, in a *People's Daily* article titled "Stop questioning China's zero-COVID approach," published on November 9, 2021, it was argued, "Human lives are invaluable. The sufferings, miseries and pains of the patients and their families cannot be measured by economic cost" (PD4). The authors rebutted outside criticisms of Zero COVID and highlighted how many lives could have been lost if the policy had not been adopted, by comparing it to the situation in other countries. In late 2022 when the Chinese government started to make a policy shift, the narrative also maneuvered around the issue. In a *CGTN* item titled "Expert: Conditions in place to downgrade COVID-19 management in China," published on December 27, 2022, an expert was quoted to rationalize the change. It was suggested that the extreme policies implemented in the past were correct "because of the sudden appearance and threatening nature of the disease," and that

Practices have also proved that the measures have achieved good results, effectively protecting the life and health of the people," he said. Currently, the conditions are ripe to adjust the management measures for COVID-19, as the virus mutation, the development of the epidemic and many other factors have changed (CG2).

In parallel with the Chinese government, the life-first principle was reiterated. Examples include a *People's Daily* article titled “China's commitment to putting people, their lives first unchanged: FM spokesperson,” published on December 30, 2022. It quoted the Chinese spokesperson that “China's commitment to putting the people and their lives first has remained unchanged” (PD5). The article continues to summarize the achievements of the tight pandemic policies adopted in the past. It was suggested that the measures were then refined to respond to changing circumstances.

As a strategic narrative, it again connects past experiences to illustrate the morals behind Chinese policymaking. The low casualty rate was upheld as evidence of success in prioritizing human lives. Meanwhile, as the narrative pivoting from a focus on security to a focus on morals, it was no longer necessary to persuade the global audience why extreme policies were adopted. Standing on a moral high ground of saving lives, the social and economic costs of stringent health policies were justified. Nevertheless, by the end of the pandemic, when Zero-COVID was “optimized” and the COVID-19 caseload surged, the strategic narrative was only reiterated to signal policy consistency because the pandemic measures that were to be legitimized were revoked.

#### China puts people's lives first (CMFA)

Similar to the patterns found in the science-based policy narrative, this lives-first narrative was mirrored in the CMFA PressCon data. While the CMFA also securitized the narrative by portraying COVID-19 as a threat, the virus again was presented as an enemy of humanity. The CMFA storyline suggests that, in the face of this common enemy, China put people's lives first in formulating pandemic policies,

including the strict travel policy. In particular, this narrative was widely employed in response to criticisms from the U.S. and the outside world. For example, when commenting on the remarks from U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo in May 2020, which argued that “China is the most dangerous adversary,” the spokesperson reframed,

We believe that the common enemy we face now is the virus. China and the US are not enemies to each other, nor should we become enemies or rivals. We should join hands to fight the epidemics. We hope that US officials can focus on fighting the epidemic at home. (CMFA8)

At the same time, the spokesperson compared the pandemic response between China and the U.S.,

the CPC and the Chinese government always put the life and safety of the people first, cherish every life, and do whatever it takes to safeguard people's life and health. That's why in this outbreak, the number of fatalities in China is far less than the US. (CMFA8)

As suggested by the narrative, the choice of China to prioritize people's lives was reflected in the relatively low number of COVID cases and fatalities that were reported. The same storyline was emphasized repeatedly. In response to a comment from former U.S. President Trump that considered “China was doing lousy compared to us (the U.S.),” the spokesperson again highlighted the achievements in pandemic policies,

These indisputable facts prove that China has successfully put the virus under control...There's no magic in China's anti-epidemic response. We have the

spirit of combating the COVID-19 epidemic, which features putting people's lives first, nationwide solidarity, heroic self-sacrifice, respecting science, and a sense of mission for humanity. (CMFA9)

This narrative reiterated the nationalistic call by the government that emphasized collectivism in a response that often felt like “boilerplate,” journalistic slang for when exact phrases and text are often repeated in stories. The science-based policy narrative was mobilized to reinforce the grounds for the high individual costs of strict pandemic policies as well. The same storyline persisted to 2022, in defense of Zero-COVID,

In the spirit of putting people and life first, the Chinese government gives priority to people’s life, safety and health. It follows the “dynamic zero-COVID” policy, and adopts targeted and science-based protocols for the most effective COVID-19 containment at the lowest cost possible. (CMFA10)

However, although this strategic narrative often parroted the words of the government, it further engaged the concept of “human rights” by negotiating its definition with the “people’s lives first” philosophy. This connection was made evident when the U.S. criticized the human rights issues in China later in 2021 and 2022 and the CMFA leveraged China’s relative success in the pandemic response against these allegations,

China attaches great importance to promoting and protecting human rights...The CPC has led the Chinese people in securing the victories of poverty eradication and the fight against COVID-19, where more than 700 million people have been lifted out of poverty and the health of over 1.4

billion people has been effectively protected. These are the best illustration of the great achievement of China's human rights development. (CMFA11)

This definition of human rights was elaborated,

The Chinese side always believes that a happy life for all is the biggest human right. Safety and health is the prerequisite for a happy life. The Chinese government puts people's lives and health front and center, and has rallied the support of the entire country for epidemic prevention and control, and promoted economic development while putting in place effective COVID control measures. (CMFA12)

Regardless of how the rest of the world defines human rights, the Chinese strategic narrative gave its own interpretation of these rights and reaffirmed this definition.

This example showcases the utility of the life-first strategic narrative. From a policy-centric perspective, it was an extremely useful reason for justifying the extreme policies implemented in China. The favorable policy outcomes, at least in the early-mid pandemic, further reinforced this concept by providing a clear future for the audience. Therefore, its power was borrowed to engage in universal values such as "human rights." If successful, it could hold the potential to shape values in the audience.

### *Hyping China threat*

U.S. discriminatory travel restrictions (news)

While Chinese media did respond to foreign travel restrictions early in the pandemic and framed them as "unnecessary," the rhetoric soon faded when COVID-19 spread

across China. A strategic narrative against travel policy only took shape in late 2022 in the days when China decided to open up to the world after more than two years under Zero-COVID. Some countries, including the U.S., reinstated some restrictions such as testing requirements on people traveling from China. The Chinese strategic narrative thus argues these measures were unscientific and political, aiming to undermine post-pandemic recovery in China as well as damage China's reputation in the world. The Chinese rebuttal sees these restrictions as "unnecessary" and "discriminatory." In a *Global Times* article published on December 29, 2022, titled "Travel curbs targeting China 'discriminatory,' against trend," it was suggested that "the real intention is to sabotage China's three years of COVID-19 control efforts and attack the country's system" (GT9). Another *People's Daily* article published on the same day contrasted how other countries "extended their olive branches" but the U.S. and Japan took the opportunity to "smear" China with "groundless accusations through media" (PD10). The morals of the U.S. were challenged. A Chinese social science researcher was quoted, "Responding to the epidemic is the common cause of the whole world, and people who deliberately targeting a country must have no moral bottom line" (PD10). The article continued to quote another medical expert to question the effectiveness of the U.S. pandemic policies in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

To support the argument that the newly imposed restrictions were unnecessary, the Chinese strategic narrative employed expert opinions to strengthen the scientific rigor of the evidence. For example, a *Global Times* article published on

January 4, 2022, titled “Entry restrictions for travelers from China ineffective: IATA,” cited the International Air Transport Association,

the measures have proven ineffective and it urged governments to base their decisions on “science facts” rather than “science politics.” Several countries are introducing COVID-19 testing and other measures for travelers from China, even though the virus is already circulating widely within their borders. It is extremely disappointing to see this knee-jerk reinstatement of measures that have proven ineffective over the last three years. (GT10)

Another *Global Times* article published on January 5, 2022, cited scientists from different countries to suggest that “from a scientific perspective, danger of new variants emerging from China is very little, and that travel restrictions are not an effective means of controlling the spread of the coronavirus at this stage” (GT11).

Medical doctors and academics from China, Japan, the U.S., and Australia were quoted. They presented evidence on virus variants in circulation to suggest the travel restrictions were “cumbersome and waste of time, resources” (GT11). Another commentary from the *People’s Daily*, published on January 14, 2023, even quoted the *New York Times* for a physician’s opinion who suggests “the coronavirus load from any infected traveler would be just ‘a drop in the bucket’ for the United States” (PD11).

On top of dismantling the validity of travel restrictions, the strategic narrative further connected these measures to the “anti-China agenda” that has been preventing the rise of China. For example, in a *China Daily* interview with a Chinese academic, published on January 12, 2023, titled “ROK must lift entry curbs for own good,” the



travel restrictions from Korea and Japan were tied to a wider U.S. foreign policy that aimed at containing China. The academic commented on the Korean administration,

For more than half a year of its tenure, it has been, together with the Japanese government, dancing to the tune of the US administration on many major diplomatic issue including its “Indo-Pacific” strategy.

The ROK and Japan could be under pressure from the United States to impose entry curbs on Chinese visitors as the US was among the first batch of countries to announce restrictions following China's decision to ease the strict pandemic prevention and control measures. (CD2)

The academic went on to propose that South Korea should stop “alienating” China for bilateral relationships and the economy. It was argued that “standing with the Joe Biden administration” would not earn the respect of China (CD2). Travel restriction was interpreted as a foreign policy tool in the strategic narrative, where implementing it signals a country fall in line with the U.S. “anti-China agenda.” Similar to strategic narratives analyzed previously, the Chinese narrative tended to link storylines to universal concepts such as racism and xenophobia. In a *People’s Daily* commentary published on January 14, 2023, titled “COVID restrictions on travelers from China another political farce,” the U.S. was criticized,

The way Washington and its allies are treating China travelers is reminiscent of their disastrous early response to the pandemic. Disregarding scientific advice and facts, stoking up racism and spreading disinformation...Although accusing the former administration of “hysterical xenophobia” amid the pandemic, the current White House and its allies are hardly behaving

differently, applying the usual double standards and hypocrisy found in Western political discourse. (PD11)

To further connect this storyline to the history of racial discrimination, the commentary cited the *New York Times* for a quote from a Chinese American, suggesting that “The U.S. government effectively endorses the centuries-old tropes of Asians as the 'diseased other',” and argues that it “could harm the return of corporate travel and tourism” (PD11). Overall, this strategic narrative not only aligns with other Chinese strategic narratives in depicting the intentions of U.S. travel policies, but it also links the storyline to the backdrop of U.S.-China rivalry. In this way, new travel restrictions were rationalized under the Chinese worldview, at the same time reinforcing the villainous character of the U.S.

#### The U.S. smears China (news)

While strategic narratives were widely employed as tools to legitimize state policies as the previous section shows, they also have the potential to send aggressive messages to undermine the national image of political rivals. This strategic narrative offers an example of when the storyline plays offense. It accuses the U.S. of using the COVID-19 pandemic to smear and discredit China. With reference to popularized jargon such as the “China threat theory,” this Chinese strategic narrative juxtaposed the discourse from U.S. media and politicians against the backdrop of the U.S.-China rivalry over the past decades. It started as a rebuttal to U.S. COVID-19 policies that targeted China, and the hostile comments from U.S. politicians. In a *People's Daily* article published on February 2, 2020, it stated that U.S. comments and travel policy were “unfriendly,”

the U.S. Department of State issued a notice to raise travel advisory on China to the highest grade of warning, which is currently placed on Iraq and Afghanistan...Just as the WHO recommended against travel restrictions, the U.S. rushed to go in the opposite way, Hua said, adding this was certainly not a gesture of goodwill. (PD6)

The article went on to suggest that “certain U.S. officials' words and actions are neither factual nor appropriate” (PD6). The tone was serious but remained mild and objective. Nonetheless, as the criticisms of China intensified in later months, the Chinese strategic narrative started to describe a systematic effort by the U.S. in a bid to undermine China. For example, a *People's Daily* online article published on May 9, 2020, titled “Can U.S. politicians really save lives by 'attacking China'?” detailed an “anti-China playbook” from Republicans, as an effort to shift attention from the “negligence” of the U.S. government which failed to handle the situation (PD7).

The U.S. media was also targeted for their negative reporting on the situation in China. This media coverage was conceived as hostile and deliberately aimed at smearing China. In a *Global Times* article published on February 2, 2020, titled “Using virus to smear China will 'backfire',” a Chinese academic was quoted,

...these media reports showed that some Western media outlets are using the coronavirus outbreak as a chance to hype the "China threat theory," and this just proves that they take pleasure in seeing bad news from China and the virus just provides them a good chance for engaging in such dirty tricks.

(GT6)

The article continued to quote another researcher who claimed that this “Sinophobia” was not new, and these Western media would only receive criticism for using it. This example demonstrates the depiction of the morals of the West. It was linked to the deep-rooted idea of the “China threat” as a reason to prevent the global development of China. The antagonism toward China or the Chinese people was attached to a redefinition of “racism.” In an interview with an academic in China, a *CGTN* report on February 15, 2020, titled “Rethinking COVID-19 media coverage: A call to humanize suffering,” negative reporting on China was labeled as racism,

Denigration and the re-framing of news focusing on negative aspects of Chinese culture and its current communist rule. Both strategies are closely linked to what scholars term "cyber-racism." In fact, what we find to have resulted from media coverage of the coronavirus outbreak in China is a hostile racial climate, where Chinese people, instead of being sympathized with as humans in suffering, have actually been criticized, blamed, and stigmatized worldwide. (CG3)

Thus, China was portrayed as the victim of racism. While this argument can be traced back to the hate crimes against Asians early in the pandemic, this strategic narrative further appropriated the concept to cover rhetoric that was negative about China. It was considered as a hostile response to China and Chinese people under the climate of “Sinophobia,” a political smear on China.

By the end of 2022, as China was “optimizing” pandemic policies, Western media expressed their concerns. This was largely framed as “hypocrisy” by Chinese strategic narrative, which explained that the West was trying to smear China without

legitimate reasons. In a *People's Daily* article published on December 11, 2022, titled “Wrong, wrong, and wrong again -- Some Western media's unprincipled criticism of China's COVID policy,” the negative reporting was described as unreasonable.

Ironically, over the past years, almost the same rhetoric was deployed by these media when throwing stones at China's proactive prevention and control measures to fight the epidemic...To these biased journalists, strict prevention and control measures are wrong. Adjustments and optimizations are also wrong. So one wonders what is right in terms of their thinking? Maybe for them, nothing is right. The "only constant" is their blind criticism of China's COVID policies. (PD8)

According to this interpretation, negative reporting was only for the purpose of criticizing China. Specific U.S. media outlets were targeted. CNN was depicted as having a “sour grapes mentality” when the U.S. rushed to ban African countries amid the Omicron surge (GT7), and the *New York Times* was “using the epidemic as a political tool to hurt China's global influence” (GT8). This strategic narrative argues, therefore, that the criticisms made when China eventually opened to the world by the end of 2022 were demonstrating the true intentions of Western media. As put bluntly in a *People's Daily* online article published on December 29, 2022, titled “Whatever China does is wrong! Western media's hypocrisy and double standards on China's COVID response policies”

The hustle and bustle of daily life and business have gradually returned to the Chinese people, but this may not be to the liking of Western media outlets and certain politicians who have been relentlessly critical of China's pandemic

control measures. Many Western media outlets, which previously voiced opposition to China's dynamic zero-COVID policy, have recently changed their tune, exposing their hypocrisy on this issue. (PD9)

Overall, this strategic narrative was reflecting on the morals of the U.S. from the actions and speeches of politicians and news media. The storyline highlighted the ill intention of the actor, which was supported by the evidence of “baseless” U.S. accusations – keeping the country isolated or reopening to the world were both criticized. Although Chinese media was in a defensive position, they took this opportunity to counteract U.S. narratives. Narrative components were taken from U.S. politicians and media, connected to a wider concept of “China threat,” and emphasized the continuous negative portrayal of China that was “inconsistent” with the “fact.” The past and the present were woven together to formulate the image of the U.S. as unfairly attacking China.

#### The U.S. smears China (CMFA)

The CMFA formulated a strategic narrative against criticism from the U.S. for the accusations of the lack of transparency in COVID-19 and an alleged cover-up attempt. As in the Chinese news report, the CMFA portrayed the U.S. as leveraging the pandemic to undermine China. On March 9, 2020, as U.S.-China relations intensified on COVID-19, the CMFA refuted accusations from Mike Pompeo, who as then U.S. Secretary of State. It was suggested that “Since the COVID-19 broke out, China has been providing timely updates to the WHO and countries and regions including the U.S. in an open, transparent and responsible manner” (CMFA13). Therefore, the world acknowledged China’s contribution and “Mr. Pompeo's attempt

to smear China's efforts will not succeed” (CMFA13). The CMFA was coherent and projected a similar storyline repeatedly. For example, the CMFA responded on March 19, 2020, that

Recently amid the COVID-19 pandemic, paying no respect to science and WHO advice, some US high-level officials and congress members have been stigmatizing China in their slanders against our country...Since the outbreak, in an open, transparent and responsible spirit, China has been providing timely updates to WHO and other countries and regions, the US included, sharing with them the genome sequence of the virus, responding to their concerns, and conducting closer cooperation with them. (CMFA14)

Another accusation against China was an attempted cover-up about the virus epicenter, suggesting that China was not sharing information about the pandemic situation in Wuhan. The CMFA responded on April 9, 2020, that “China has been open, transparent and responsible in updating WHO, other countries and regions of the epidemic data” (CMFA15). The spokesperson went on to argue against the cover-up

It is unfair and unjust to say there was a "cover-up" in China. After the COVID-19 broke out, the Chinese people have been making concerted efforts in fighting it, which has bought precious time for and made important contributions to global response. As the coronavirus is novel, it took us some time before we knew more about it. There is no so-called "cover-up" at all. (CMFA15)

The examples above suggested that Chinese officials were reiterating the boilerplate storyline, which highlights the “transparent and responsible” pandemic response from China. Grounding on this “philosophy,” the Chinese strategic narrative tried to prove the U.S. accusations wrong.

As a strategic narrative, the motives of the U.S. behind these accusations were again brought under scrutiny. It was put bluntly early on by the CMFA. On March 13, 2020, the spokesperson stated, “We firmly oppose the unfounded and irresponsible comments made by certain high-level US officials and Congress members on this issue to smear and attack China” (CMFA16). In response to former U.S. president Trump calling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus,” the CMFA suggested that “Some US political figures have recently been connecting the coronavirus with China. We express strong indignation and objection to such stigmatization” (CMFA17). The intentions of U.S. politicians were highlighted, who were “irresponsible” in smearing China with stigmatizing speeches. This attempt to attack China was interpreted as a method to divert attention from the inadequate pandemic response by the U.S. government. On March 31, 2020, the spokesperson responded to the “cover-up” accusation from the White House,

The lies told by this US politician are not worth refuting...How can the US politician allege that China's delay set the world back six weeks? What is his intention? He just wanted to muddy the water, shift the blame and undermine China-US cooperation as well as global cooperation in fighting COVID-19. (CMFA18)



The spokesperson was rhetorical in emphasizing the intention of making untrue accusations. U.S. politicians were portrayed as disregarding facts. On April 30, 2020, the CMFA argued that “certain US politicians neglects facts and attempt to shirk their responsibility and hide their incompetence by blaming China” (CMFA19). The strategic narrative also points to a possible policy outcome, where the smears from the U.S. “will only expose certain US individuals' malicious intentions and the serious problems in the US” (CMFA19). To summarize, this storyline suggests that because the U.S. was not performing well in pandemic control, politicians shifted the blame to China. Although China was transparent and competent in curbing the spread of the virus, the U.S. was being immoral to ignore the contribution by China for political goals. This strategic narrative was mirrored in Chinese news media, where the intention of the U.S. strategic narrative was further connected to the “China threat” theory.

### *Virus origin*

The U.S. fabricated the lab leak theory as a political weapon (news)

There were two major theories that explain the origin of COVID-19. The zoonotic theory suggests that the virus jumped from animals to humans through close contact. The lab leak theory proposes that the virus originated from an artificial laboratory setting instead. While the former was the mainstream explanation at the early stage of the pandemic, the latter was receiving more media attention as the Trump administration repeatedly mentioned it in front of news media. Nonetheless, the lab leak theory was mostly treated as a conspiracy theory at the beginning of the

pandemic. The Chinese strategic narrative was constructed based on this assumption. For example, in a *CGTN* item on May 3, 2020, titled “U.S. researcher in Wuhan virology lab says COVID-19 leak 'unlikely',” scientists from the U.S. were quoted for suggesting that the start of the pandemic was “highly unlikely a lab accident” (CG4). The zoonotic theory was promoted, where *CGTN* quoted a scientist to argue that virus jumping from animals to humans was “very common in nature,” which happened in the SARS, Ebola, and H1N1 outbreaks (CG4). Aside from building on the evidence against the lab leak theory, Chinese news explained the intentions of the U.S. in promoting the lab leak theory. The Chinese strategic narrative leveraged the mainstream U.S. perspective that considered lab leak theory a “political weapon,” such as when a *People’s Daily* article published on May 1, 2020, cited a *New York Times* report (PD12),

Senior Trump administration officials pushed U.S. intelligence agencies to hunt for evidence to support an unsubstantiated theory that a lab in China's Wuhan was the origin of the coronavirus outbreak, the report said, citing current and former U.S. officials. (PD12)

The *People’s Daily* concluded that “the Trump administration and its allies in Congress have tried desperately to deflect criticisms about their blunders by blaming others,” as the U.S. failed to contain COVID-19 on its soil (PD12). This strategic narrative follows the structure of the previously mentioned ones, first putting up evidence against accusations to call it a conspiracy, and then questioning the purpose of criticizing China.

Nonetheless, the U.S. mainstream started to give more credit to the lab leak theory as the Biden administration re-launched the investigation into the virus origin, citing the lack of trust in the WHO-China investigation. The Chinese strategic narrative had to be decoupled from the U.S. mainstream news that was giving credence to the Chinese lab leak theory and stick with the original storyline of zoonotic origins. For example, a *People's Daily* article published on June 9, 2021, titled “Ridiculous for U.S. to repeatedly hype up ‘lab leak’ conspiracy,” argued that the new investigation was “merely another attempt at political manipulation made under the pretext of tracing the origin of the virus, and is no different from those made at the beginning of the epidemic” (PD13). Rhetorically, *People's Daily* questioned the motivation of the investigation, “What is the U.S. up to? The U.S. efforts in repeatedly hyping up the “laboratory leak” conspiracy are nothing but a trick to deflect attention” (PD13). To further support the Chinese case, “international support” from other countries and experts was often cited. For example, in a *China Daily* article published on August 2, 2021, titled “Politicizing virus-tracing jointly opposed,” a joint statement from about 70 countries was cited,

Politicians and experts in many countries also have expressed their rejection of attempts by certain countries, including the United States, to politicize COVID-19 origin-tracing, emphasizing that the study of the origin must be based on evidence and science. (CD3)

The *China Daily* article accused U.S. politicians of “insisted on carrying out a virus origin probe in China” (CD3). According to this strategic narrative, pushing an

investigation was an act of undermining China by suggesting the possibility of the lab leak theory.

By early 2023, the U.S. Energy Department reported that the lab leak theory was the “most likely” origin of the virus, although the conclusion was made with low confidence. While the U.S. media picked up the “most likely” frame, Chinese media emphasized the “low confidence” frame and woven it to the strategic narrative that origin tracing was utilized by the U.S. as a political tool. A *Global Times* editorial published on February 28, 2023, titled “COVID origins tracing is on US' 'anti-China production line' again,” commented how the U.S. was treating a “low confidence” report, “As long as China is labeled on the package, even if it's trash, it can immediately be turned into treasure” (GT12). It was suggested that,

the virus origins tracing issue has been used by US politicians as an omnipotent political tool that can be brought up at any time to disgust people due to its unverifiable and difficult to disprove nature. To be frank, “low confidence” basically means baseless. (GT12)

According to this storyline, the U.S. intended to smear China even when the accusation was baseless. The U.S. as an actor was portrayed as putting politics before facts. Again, the Chinese strategic narrative tried to rally support by citing international experts. In a *China Daily* article published on March 15, 2023, titled “Experts slam US attempts to politicize origins of COVID-19,” a WHO expert was quoted as Tweeting that “she was frustrated that the US did not share additional information with WHO on its latest assessment of the virus' origins” (CD4). It was argued that the origin tracing has no definite answer but the Energy Department

report “reignited speculation and conspiracy theories regarding the origins of COVID-19” (CD4). Overall, the Chinese strategic narrative remained consistent. The lab leak theory was framed as a conspiracy theory throughout the years, which was considered a tool for the U.S. to shift blame to China.

COVID-19 possibly leaked from Fort Detrick (news)

On top of responsively reacting to accusations from the U.S., Chinese media also tried to turn similar allegations against the U.S. on COVID-19 origin tracing. The Chinese strategic narrative proposed a potential Fort Detrick lab leak theory, as opposed to the Wuhan lab leak theory. The U.S. was accused of lacking transparency and attempted to cover up a lab incident in the Maryland lab. The lab under scrutiny was a U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) facility that halted operations in July 2019. The *Fort Detrick theory* was emerged from Chinese social media. It gained wider media attention when the CMFA official Zhao Lijian shared it on social media and then covered by Chinese media. The *Fort Detrick theory* was soon cited as plausible by Chinese media and government officials to explain the source of COVID-19. In a *People’s Daily* article published on May 4, 2020, titled “Five questions Washington needs to answer on coronavirus pandemic,” the Chinese strategic narrative turned the table to target origin tracing doubts at the U.S.,

Facing criticism at home, some U.S. politicians have been irresponsibly attacking a certain country and the World Health Organization (WHO), hampering global efforts against the pandemic.

Their actions have drawn questions from around the world, and Washington should provide clear answers.

WHERE DID THE VIRUS IN U.S. ORIGINATE? (PD14, all uppercase was original)

Fort Detrick was mentioned to answer this rhetorical question. *People's Daily* suggested, “The public is waiting for Washington to provide a clear explanation to the sudden halt and resumption of the research” (PD14). At this point, the Chinese strategic narrative did not directly endorse the Fort Detrick theory but did present alleged evidence about the problems in that lab. For example, a *China Daily* opinion piece published on May 16, 2020, titled “US should make bio-labs more transparent,” figures from USA Today were cited, “From 2006 to 2013, labs notified federal regulators of about 1,500 incidents with select agent pathogens, and 15 people contracted laboratory-acquired infections” (CD5). The author then called for international attention to the safety of U.S. labs, criticizing the lack of transparency in the U.S.

The Fort Detrick theory continued to gain media attention as Chinese media progressively implied that COVID-19 could be leaked from the lab. A *Global Times* article published on May 29, 2020, titled “The Fort Detrick horror: a closer look at the US' largest biochemical weapons research center,” argued that the Trump administration was turning a blind eye to public doubts about “the possible link between the institute and a series of deadly disease outbreaks in this country, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has caused some 103,000 deaths...” (GT13). The article continued to point out a potential “cover-up,” where online

information about Fort Detrick was deleted or became inaccessible. Direct accusations were made as well, sometimes through comments from foreigners. For example, in a *People's Daily* online article published on June 5, 2020, titled “Blaming China for COVID-19 groundless: Russian media,” a Russian columnist was quoted,

The famous U.S. military biological laboratory, Fort Detrick, suddenly closed in August. The most dangerous viruses and bacteria on the planet were stored and researched at the facility...

In September 2019, a strange lung disease epidemic started in the United States... Symptoms of the disease very closely resembled those experienced by COVID-19 patients. (PD15)

After that, the columnist suggested that COVID-19 could have been brought by U.S. military personnel who traveled to Wuhan for sports competitions. The lab leak story was completed.

The timing between the lab shut-down and the emergence of early COVID-19 cases became the cornerstone of the Fort Detrick theory. Yet, the U.S. government failed to provide more information, leading to further suspicion by the Chinese media. In a *CGTN* item published on June 24, 2022, titled “Finding True America: The veiled Fort Detrick lab,” it was questioned,

...the time proximity between the Fort Detrick shutdown and the COVID-19 outbreak has raised questions. Silence from the authorities further ignited speculation over the government's decision to keep details of Fort Detrick secret...the history of Fort Detrick gives a clear picture of just how worrisome

the lab can be, and how easily things can go wrong inside the U.S. lab network. (CG5)

The story continued to discuss the history of Fort Detrick, dating back to the World War II era to suggest the test and production of bioweapons that were against international law (CG5). As a strategic narrative, the *Fort Detrick theory* was explained through the track record of the lab conducting inhumane experiments and staff handling dangerous substances with negligent irresponsibility. These incidents were cited as circumstantial evidence to suggest the likelihood that COVID-19 could have escaped from the lab, similar to previous incidences at Fort Detrick. From a theoretical perspective, the *Fort Detrick theory* could serve propaganda purposes by distracting and confusing the audience. The *Fort Detrick theory* has a similar narrative structure as the *Wuhan lab leak theory* that told the story of a mismanaged national lab conducting dangerous research, which could have leaked virus into its neighborhood. The parallels between two *theories* could dilute the attention on the *Wuhan lab leak theory* that was proposed earlier. From a strategic narrative perspective, the similar narrative structure allowed the *Fort Detrick theory* to borrow narrative probability from the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. In other words, the logical validity of both *theories* was made parallel so that the Chinese government could mirror the call for similar investigation in the U.S. on the same ground of the lack of evidence. The strategic narrative thus engaged the identity of the U.S., trying to portray it as a country that attempted to blame China and cover up the misconduct in the U.S. military.



COVID-19 origin tracing should not be conducted in China but in the U.S. (CMFA)

The CMFA projected a very similar strategic narrative that rejected the Wuhan lab leak theory and pointed to a possible *lab leak in Fort Detrick*. It was argued that Fort Detrick was more suspicious than the Wuhan lab. The CMFA put more emphasis on the unknowns surrounding Fort Detrick. Thus, it was argued that investigations should be conducted there to bring transparency. The CMFA emphasized that origin tracing should be “scientifically” conducted rather than resort to politicization. As pointed out by the spokesperson on March 13, 2020,

We firmly oppose the unfounded and irresponsible comments made by certain high-level US officials and Congress members on this issue to smear and attack China. The fact is, there are different opinions in the US and among the larger international community on the origin of the virus. China believes it's a matter of science which requires professional and science-based assessment.

(CMFA20)

The CMFA then started to question when COVID-19 first emerged. On May 8, 2020, the spokesperson argued that

Considering the reports of cases in the US and some other countries which are believed to be earlier than those in Wuhan, all countries concerned should work closely with the WHO in a scientific and down-to-earth manner so that scientists can get to the bottom of the puzzle as soon as possible. (CMFA21)

Up until this point, the official narrative from the CMFA was urging a scientific investigation into the true origin of COVID-19, including the U.S., in collaboration with the WHO. The tweets on the personal social media account of spokesperson

Zhao Lijian, which suggested the possibility of a Fort Detrick leak, were not the official perspective of the CMFA.

Nevertheless, starting from mid-2021, the CMFA was more aggressive in pushing the Fort Detrick theory, when the Biden administration discredited the WHO-China report and planned to re-launch the virus origin investigation. The spokesperson made this critical statement on July 14, 2021,

The US has been denying the science-based conclusion of the WHO joint team of experts and has drawn on its intelligence apparatus to conduct the so-called investigation of origins. It also fabricated and spread the rumor and lie that the virus came from a lab leak in Wuhan and tried to muffle the objective, just and rational voice from the science community. (CMFA22)

The spokesperson went on to accuse the U.S. of turning a blind eye to “domestic earlier cases that have been reported” and being “evasive about the mystery-shrouded Fort Detrick biological base” (CMFA22). The strategic narrative tried to further expand its credibility by citing international support. On July 26, 2021, the spokesperson referenced media sources from Russia, South Africa, Maldives, Korea, Japan, the U.S., and the Philippines to prove that COVID-19 could have broken out in the U.S. in late 2019 and Fort Detrick was “very suspicious” (CMFA23). It was concluded that,

If labs are to be investigated, then the WHO experts should go to Fort Detrick. The US should act in a transparent and responsible way as soon as possible and invite WHO experts to the US for an inquiry into the Fort Detrick lab so that truth can be revealed to the world. (CMFA23)

The spokesperson implied the “truth” could be found if Fort Detrick were investigated. In other words, there was evidence that needed to be uncovered in Fort Detrick. On August 25, 2021, the spokesperson made a stronger accusation,

The international community strongly asks the US side to be open and transparent and provide detailed information on this. The US side has been dodging these questions. It remains reticent and puts up obstacles. This only shows that the US has a guilty conscience. (CMFA24)

It was implied that the U.S. refused an investigation into Fort Detrick because of guilt. Although the CMFA did not make a clear allegation, the strategic narrative described the story of origin tracing as the U.S. trying to scapegoat China for leaking viruses from a lab, and “use the issue to suppress other countries and serve its own interests” (CMFA24). As a strategic narrative, it utilized the lab leak theory on the issue level to turn the accusations against the U.S., leveraging similar values such as “science” and “transparency,” while engaging in shaping the image of the U.S. as immoral.

### Chapter summary

This chapter outlined the Chinese strategic narratives in three main themes that contribute to legitimizing Chinese COVID-19 policies and shaping the image of the U.S. and China as actors in the international system. To answer research questions 1.1 and 1.2, this chapter analyzed the strategic narratives from China that addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel policies, as well as how they were justified. In the face of a novel contagious virus, the Chinese strategic narrative highlighted the importance of saving lives with scientific policy tools. The effectiveness of these tight

measures became a synonym for science, where blocking virus transmission was the measurement of success. Under the same storyline, travel policies such as the “circuit breaker” that temporarily banned flights and the “close-loop management” that put arrival passengers into quarantine were described as a part of a “science-based tool kit” (CD1). Meanwhile, the objective of these costly policies was put under a “lives first” strategic narrative that suggested hardline measures were imposed for the benefit of the people. The low COVID-19 fatalities in China were emphasized and compared to the high casualty in the U.S. to show that these policies achieved their goals. Nevertheless, in 2022, as the pandemic worsened due to new contagious virus variants and public discontent fueled by the high social cost of the Zero-COVID policy, the Chinese government relaxed containment measures. This was framed as the “optimization” of pandemic policies, which was woven together with the *science-based* and *lives first* strategic narratives that had been projected by Chinese sources. The two strategic narratives were then often reduced to catchphrases when the reality of surging COVID-19 caseload contradicted the storylines that were built on claims of successful pandemic control. Policy effectiveness was less able to back the logic in the original narratives, although the strategic narratives were trying to signal policy stability.

In response to research question 1.3, this chapter examined the extent of securitization in the strategic narratives on pandemic policies. The *lives first* strategic narrative was heavily securitized both in the Chinese news and from the CMFA. The storyline conceptualized COVID-19 as an enemy of all humans. China waged a “people’s war” against the disease which was led by Chairman Xi. The “waves” of

infection surges were analogized as “battles” where the nation was mobilized to fight the virus. Similar to how the U.S. securitized COVID-19, the disease was taken out of a public health context and put into a military scenario. The threat was also externalized when China maintained a lower caseload compared to the outside world. Travel restrictions were metaphorized as a “wall” (GT5) that protected China from outside threats. The securitized strategic narrative gives urgency to the “lives first” notion while glorifying the sacrifice people had to make.

The analysis of the *hyping China threat* theme responded to research questions 2.1 and 2.2, which seek to understand the identity narratives related to travel policies and the responses to foreign travel policies. Strategic narratives in the Chinese news and from the CMFA both reinforced the image of the U.S. as an immoral actor. The strategic narrative suggests that the U.S. was trying to *smear China* to shift blame from its own incompetence to China. The history of U.S.-China rivalry was mobilized, which pointed to the “China threat” theory that was long “hyped” to contain China. On the ideological level, the U.S. news coverage that negatively portrayed China was scrutinized on the basis of racism, connecting to the actor identity of the U.S. which has the habit of stigmatizing Chinese culture and political system. Based on this logic, the new COVID-19 testing requirements in 2023 were described as discriminatory and unnecessary. This policy from the West was considered part of the tools to smear China.

In response to research question 3.2, this chapter shows how China responded to the U.S. strategic narrative of the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. Chinese strategic narratives not only leveraged the U.S. news coverage of the lab leak theory in 2020

that treated it as a conspiracy theory, but also constructed an alternative Fort Detrick theory to compete for attention. Strategically, the U.S. mainstream news gave credit to the storyline that the Wuhan lab leak theory was fabricated for political goals. It fitted into the identity narrative that the U.S. was leveraging the pandemic to smear China. To play offense, the Fort Detrick theory picked up similar narrative elements in the Wuhan lab leak theory. Similar to how the Wuhan lab leak theory accused the Wuhan Institute of Virology of biosafety carelessness, the Fort Detrick theory was connected to the history of lab incidents that happened in the U.S. and ultimately pointed to a Fort Detrick incident in late 2019 that led to its temporary shut-down. A perfect opportunity for a useful counter-narrative was brewed when the timing of alleged respiratory infections matched a possible early spread of COVID-19. Like the White House, the CMFA did not directly endorse the Fort Detrick theory but cast strong suspicion. Thus, the Fort Detrick theory was put side-by-side with the Wuhan lab leak theory to deflect U.S. accusations of the lack of transparency and calls for investigation, when the U.S. did not do the same for Fort Detrick. Chinese sources were able to do this, despite a significant dearth of evidence that linked Fort Detrick to COVID, such as showing that COVID cases originated in the area (as the evidence showed for Wuhan).

The above analyses illustrated the relationships between different levels of strategic narratives from China, responding to research question 3.3. The overarching identity and system narratives were stable. The news from China and the CMFA both projected China as a hero in combating the COVID-19 pandemic while the U.S. was incompetent and even exploiting the crisis to undermine China. Strategic narratives

on the issue level supported the identities projected. China was moral for the “lives first” scientific policy amid a “war.” The U.S. was unethical to smear China and shift blame with negative news coverage of China. Strategic narratives analyzed in this chapter were stable and uncontested, projecting the same worldview consistently. Nevertheless, the rigidity of these strategic narratives also meant that they would be difficult to adapt when the pandemic situation changed, particularly on the issue level when China made a policy turn. This consistency or rigidity reflected the close state-media relationship in China. As the analysis shows, English-language Chinese media often amplify the strategic narratives from the CMFA, as they both target the foreign audience. The state-owned or affiliated organizations also were limited in their ability to negotiate or even flip the frames in a strategic narrative as in the U.S. media. As a result, the strategic narratives projected largely spoke to the official understanding of history and the international system to interpret and reinforce the identities of the U.S. and China in the current international system.

## Chapter 5: Strategic Narratives from the U.S.

Chapter 5 has a similar structure as Chapter 4. It presents the qualitative findings of strategic narratives identified from the U.S. news media and the corpus from the American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters, 1999). In the news data, 34 topics were identified by topic modeling (see Appendix D). After reading the news items that are most related to the topics and associated keywords, 5 relevant U.S. strategic narratives were extracted. In the White House data, 14 topics and 5 relevant strategic narratives were identified (see Appendix E). Strategic narratives were organized by themes. Official strategic narratives from the White House were discussed next to provide context for analyzing the strategic narratives in the news. Chapter 4 shows that Chinese strategic narratives were coherent across the news and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and throughout the three years in the pandemic, in justifying strict pandemic policies and accusing the U.S. of exploiting COVID-19 to smear China. Findings in Chapter 5 shows a different picture in the U.S. media landscape. Strategic narratives were offensive on the issue-level, anticipating a grim pandemic situation in China and portrayed China as lacking transparency and covering up negative information on the identity level.

The projection of strategic narratives in the U.S. news environment was less coherent than in China. Not only were the storylines contested by different social and political actors, but they also changed course throughout the three years in the pandemic. The diversity in this free media environment allowed different opinions to flourish, adjusting in accordance to changing pandemic situations. This allowed



strategic narratives to maneuver more flexibly, albeit with less stability, to address the fluid COVID-19 situation in China and justify travel restrictions that targeted China.

### COVID-19 in the U.S.

Before discussing the strategic narratives identified, it is essential to review the changing parameters that could have affected dynamics in the projection of U.S. strategic narrative. As the analysis in the next subsection shows, the evolution of the pandemic situation and the domestic politics in the U.S. contributed to the negotiations of storylines in the news environment. On one hand, strategic narratives should be interpreted against the backdrop of the dramatic rise and fall of U.S. public health responses. In January 2020, soon after China reported that COVID-19 that emerged in Wuhan starting to spread, the U.S. imposed health screening at ports of entry on travelers arriving from China and began putting people under quarantine. This evolved into a travel ban in February and the U.S. was closed to most foreigners by March 2020 as the virus spread rapidly. COVID-19 quickly swept across the U.S., paralyzing the country. Scientists scrambled to develop vaccines and cures, bringing the pandemic to a more manageable level in about a year. As the situation stabilized, the U.S. started to reopen borders in late 2021 and gradually reconnected to the world in 2022. Nevertheless, by the end of 2022, when COVID-19 containment measures were walking into history, the U.S. government reimposed virus testing requirements on travelers from China, citing the need to stop the surging caseload in China from spilling over to the U.S. as China abruptly reopened borders (see Chapter 2 more a more detailed timeline).

On the other hand, the White House itself changed hands amid the pandemic. The Democratic Biden administration replaced the Republican Trump administration in January 2021. Political communication efforts in the previous Trump administration were characterized by bold, if not false, claims on policy issues. While the speeches from Trump were constantly amplified by *Fox News*, the most prominent and influential right-leaning U.S. news outlet, the mainstream media were more skeptical and typically scrutinized what Trump said. Thus, strategic narratives early in the pandemic were more contested and sometimes showed contradicting views between Fox and the right-aligned media and the mainstream media. As Biden took power, strategic narratives aligned better within the mainstream media and sometimes with *Fox News*, as the analysis below shows. The political dimension in the negotiations within strategic narratives brought both diversity and instability to their projection, if one considers a strategic narrative as an amalgamation of storylines from various political and social power domestically (Kluver et al., 2019). It should be cautioned that strategic narratives from the U.S. should be understood as a non-unitary phenomenon shaped by various social and political forces. This chapter shows how these strategic narratives embodied the contradictions and inconsistency within the U.S. domestic environment, which also brought flexibility to grow strategic narratives organically.

#### *Strategic narratives from the U.S.*

In the U.S. news coverage, relevant strategic narratives identified can be categorized into three themes, including *travel policies to prevent COVID-19 transmissions*, *virus origin*, and *lack of transparency of the Chinese government*. On travel policies, the

first strategic narrative in the news described a public health crisis in China that went beyond the control of the Chinese government, and travel restrictions were in place to protect U.S. citizens. Later, by the end of 2022, China saw a surge in COVID-19 infections as newer virus variants became more infectious and pandemic policies were relaxed in China. A second strategic narrative in the U.S. news projected the CDC perspective, which explained a new COVID-19 testing requirement on travelers from China was implemented because of the lack of pandemic data from the country. Both strategic narratives that justified travel policies were contested in the media environment, where critics questioned the costs and effectiveness of containment measures.

The White House was similarly portraying COVID-19 as an external threat but was using a more securitized language. COVID-19 was initially framed as a “China virus” when the virus hit the U.S., as the Trump administration attributed the responsibility of the global pandemic to China. The Biden administration did not adopt the same narrative. Meanwhile, another securitized strategic narrative suggested the U.S. was at “war” against COVID-19. It was maintained in both the Trump and Biden administrations when pandemic policies were rigorous, but faded as containment policies were discontinued.

The strategic narratives in the *virus origin* and *transparency* themes constructed the image of China as an irresponsible international actor. This identity of China was associated with strategic narratives that justified travel restrictions on travelers from China. On virus origin, the U.S. news environment provided the stage for virus origin stories to ferment. Particularly, the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was

amplified through *Fox News* by former President Trump and some Republican politicians early in the pandemic, although the theory was treated as an outlier by the mainstream media. However, when the Biden administration relaunched virus origin investigations, the U.S. media showed more support for the theory. It eventually became a mainstream theory by 2023. Nevertheless, the official position of the White House was stable throughout the two administrations. While Trump personally advanced the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, the press engagements by White House officials maintained that the virus origin was uncertain and required more investigations into the issue. This argument supported the strategic narrative that accused China of lacking transparency and hiding information, which was also consistently found in the U.S. media. This identity narrative eventually contributed to justifying the new COVID-19 testing requirements for visitors from China that were reinstated in January 2023.

The subsections in this chapter describe and analyze the U.S. strategic narratives in each of the themes (see Table 5.1), with examples to illustrate the storylines. The list of sampled articles in the following analysis can be found in Appendix I. All typos and grammatical mistakes in the quotes are original.

Table 5.1. U.S. narratives in the news and from the White House.

| Theme                                             | Strategic narratives in the news                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Strategic narratives from the White House                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Travel policies to prevent COVID-19 transmissions | <p>China struggled to contain COVID-19</p> <p>Travel restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19</p> <p>COVID-19 tests were required for travelers from China because of the lack of scientific evidence and data from China</p> | <p>Travel policies against COVID-19 threat</p> <p>The “China virus”</p> <p>The “war” against COVID-19</p> |
| Virus origin                                      | The Wuhan lab leak theory                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | The COVID-19 origin was uncertain                                                                         |
| Transparency of the Chinese government            | The Chinese government lacks transparency                                                                                                                                                                                                     | The Chinese government lacks transparency                                                                 |

### Travel policies to prevent COVID-19 transmissions

China struggled to contain COVID-19 (news)

This strategic narrative suggests that China had a tough time containing COVID-19 despite implementing heavy-handed pandemic control policies. While China claimed its Zero-COVID policy kept infections low through strict containment measures that severely limited freedom of movement, the U.S. media were less optimistic. Early in the pandemic, because the properties of COVID-19 were unclear, but caseload was on the rise, this strategic narrative captured the trend to suggest that China faced difficulty in dealing with an outbreak of a novel contagious disease. When confirmed cases increased by the end of January 2020, it was apparent the virus was capable of human-to-human transmission. The strategic narrative started to reflect the situation getting out of control. For example, in a *New York Times* article published on January 26, 2020, titled “China Virus Ability to Spread Getting Stronger,” the Chinese politburo was quoted as saying China was facing a “grave situation,” as containment efforts were increasing (NT3). In another *Washington Post* article published on January 29, 2020, titled “Coronavirus spread: Experts aren't sure containment will succeed,” experts suggested that it was “very striking how quickly the numbers are going up,” and despite the containment measures in China, “there is a real possibility that this virus will not be able to be contained” (WP3). At this point, the U.S. news had not specifically commented on the public health response in China but focused on how the virus was getting out of control.

Later, China entered the phase of tight pandemic control, employing drastic measures such as travel restrictions, lockdowns, and involuntary mass testing. The

virus uptake showed a pattern of “waves.” When the infection numbers went up, the U.S. strategic narrative raised concerns over the effectiveness of containment policies. In the spike of cases in early 2021, a *Washington Post* article published on January 19, 2021, titled “China rushes to build virus quarantine center for 4,000 as it battles localized outbreaks,” pointed out that “despite these efforts, cases of the virus continue to pop up” (WP4). In a later COVID-19 “wave” in early 2022, a *Voice of America* item published on March 15, 2022, titled “China Struggles with New COVID-19 Cases Despite 'Zero COVID' Strategy,” argued that “the breakthrough of new COVID-19 cases in China, driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant, is happening despite Beijing’s official “zero COVID” strategy that aims to completely eliminate coronavirus outbreaks across the mainland” (VA3). On April 12, 2022, a *Fox News* item titled “China's 'zero-COVID' strategy failing to hold back coronavirus in Shanghai as U.S. warns against travel,” commented on the containment policies, “Shanghai reported about 26,000 new COVID-19 cases on Monday as China's draconian ‘zero-COVID’ strategy has failed to hold back the omicron BA.2 subvariant despite a weeks-long lockdown” (FX1). The strategic narrative was increasingly critical of the harsh Chinese policies, as the responsibility for the COVID-19 resurgence was attributed to the decreasing effectiveness of Zero-COVID policies.

By late 2022 when COVID-19 caseload climbed to new record levels, skepticism in the U.S. media on how the Chinese authorities could contain the pandemic continued to grow. Under immense social and economic pressure, the Chinese government finally revised the Zero-COVID strategy. The U.S. media

highlighted that not only was Zero-COVID ineffective in curbing the pandemic, but it was also fueling public discontent because of its social and economic costs. A *Washington Post* article published on November 7, 2022, titled “China won't relax its 'zero covid' policy despite worsening toll,” it was suggested that China faced the “greatest surge of coronavirus cases in six months” despite “harsh and widely criticized lockdown” were in place (WP5). After mass protests broke out in various cities, the Chinese government “optimized” pandemic measures, which was described as a policy turnaround in U.S. media. The consequences of pandemic control were raised. For example, a *New York Times* article published on December 2, 2022, titled “As Officials Ease Restrictions, China Faces New Pandemic Risks,” portrayed a possible future,

Researchers worry that China may struggle to reopen the country and relieve the strain on its economy without risking a tide of deaths. Such a catastrophic surge could pose a significant threat to the political leadership., “We often pretend that China has a choice in terms of ‘zero Covid’ versus opening up,” said Dr. Siddharth Sridhar, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong.

“There never was a choice. The simple fact is that China is not ready for a wave on that scale.” (NT4).

It was widely suspected that the sudden policy change would lead to an explosive growth of COVID-19 cases which would be beyond a manageable level. A *Los Angeles Times* article published on December 1, 2022, titled “Ending China's extreme COVID policy could cause a health disaster,” suggested that Zero-COVID made China into a COVID-19 “tinderbox,” where experts worried China “would experience



a public health emergency on a massive scale” without a “coordinated and coherent plan” (LT3).

The policy change was described in a negative light, where surging COVID-19 cases and chaos were emphasized. A *New York Times* article published on December 19, 2022, titled “From Zero Covid to No Plan: Behind China's Pandemic U-Turn,” commented on the “sudden abandon” of Zero-COVID, “now the country faces a surge of infections, and Mr. Xi has left officials scrambling to manage the disarray and uncertainty” (NT5). The chaos was reported in detail. For example, a *Voice of America* item on December 28, 2022, titled “China COVID Pivot Sparks Jitters Worldwide,” featured overwhelmed hospitals where infected medical staff had to continue to work, and cited Chinese authorities who said, “the scale of the outbreak is now impossible to track” (VA4). A *Fox News* coverage published on January 5, 2023, titled “China defends its COVID handling after WHO, Biden say Beijing is under-reporting deaths,” reported a similar situation at hospitals, said “China has played down the severity of the situation” and COVID-19-related deaths can ramp up to over a million (FX2). As a strategic narrative, its storyline not only describes the out-of-control pandemic situation, but also attributes responsibility to the Zero-COVID strategy and policy turnaround, and projects a potential future caused by the policy option.

Travel restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 (news)

Earlier in the pandemic in 2020, the U.S. government first imposed travel warnings on China and health screenings on travelers arriving from China, soon followed by a total ban on all travelers as COVID-19 spread across the world. Later, the U.S.

gradually reopened borders since late 2021 as vaccines and cures were made more accessible. In late 2022, most parts of the world were returning to normal, but the U.S. announced to reimposed testing requirements on travelers from China starting in early January 2023. The strategic narrative that justified these China-targeted policies argues that they could help curb the spread of COVID-19 to protect Americans. Nonetheless, while the narrative projected in the U.S. media explained this official justifications of the policies, their effectiveness was contested by other social actors in America. In late January 2020, the Trump administration temporarily banned foreign nationals who have traveled in China within the last 14 days from entering U.S. borders, and U.S. citizens would have to be self-quarantined for 14 days. A *Washington Post* article published on January 31, 2020, titled “US bars foreigners coming from China for now over virus fear,” described the policies as “drastic steps” (WP1). U.S. officials were quoted to explain the purpose of the ban was to “safeguard the health and safety of the American people” and that the self-quarantine was to ensure returning Americans “don’t pose a health risk” (WP1). A public health expert was also interviewed, who suggested that “quarantine of those returning from Hubei is also reasonable given the high risk of exposure to coronavirus in that province” (WP1). An interviewed American in quarantine also agreed, noting that “all of us really want to stay here and make sure we’re all medically clear and the public safe” (WP1).

Although the U.S. news generally projected the strategic narrative that travel policies were intended to curb COVID-19 transmissions, they raised questions about the cost and effectiveness of these policies. For example, a *New York Times* article

published on February 4, 2020, titled “U.S. Officials Promise 'Aggressive Measures' to Contain Coronavirus,” described the quarantine as “part of a highly unusual federal effort aimed at slowing the spread of the deadly coronavirus” (NT1), acknowledging the goal of the policy. However, later in the article, the psychological pressure to the quarantined was discussed, as well the economic burden created,

Efforts to slow the virus’s spread in the United States have already proven costly. The Department of Health and Human Services informed Congress on Sunday that it may transfer up to \$136 million to help combat the spread of coronavirus, according to a person familiar with the notification. (NT1)

Moreover, the effectiveness of travel bans in stopping the virus at the borders was questioned. A *Voice of America* story published on February 4, 2020, titled “Banning Travelers From China Won't Stop Virus, Experts Warn,” interviewed experts who suggested that “we don't have a lot of great data saying that these measures are very effective” (VA1). Another expert agreed these policies could lower the likelihood of importing the virus but argued that the virus was already in the U.S., rendering the policies less effective. Another expert further challenged that the travel ban could create a “chilling effect on transparency” as countries might be encouraged to underreport infection cases (VA1). Similar doubts were voiced when the U.S. closed land borders in March. A *Los Angeles Times* article reporting on the southern U.S. border on March 18, 2020, titled “Trump administration takes steps to close border to migrants, citing coronavirus” (LT1). In the lede, the official reason for “the rapid spread of the coronavirus” was introduced, quoting U.S. officials “saying it will help stanch the expansion of the pandemic” (LT1). However, later in the article, it was

challenged that “there have been far fewer cases reported in Mexico than in the U.S.,” with an official response claiming, “there’s still concern the virus could spread from Mexico” (LT1). On the northern U.S. border, a *Washington Post* article published on March 18, 2020, titled “US, Canada working on mutual ban on non-essential travel,” exhibited a similar pattern. In the beginning, it was explained by the government that U.S.-Canada borders were closed “as the two nations work to stem the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Both countries are eager to choke off the spread of the virus...” (WP2). Nevertheless, later in the article, a Canadian expert was quoted saying “government-to-government accord merely ratifies what is already in place,” noting that people reduced traveling themselves to avoid getting infected before any government policies were in place (WP2).

Almost three years later, after most of the countries relaxed their COVID-19 policies, the U.S. and some countries reimposed testing requirements on travelers arriving from China. The policy was justified by two strategic narratives: curbing the spread of the virus and the lack of transparency in China (discussed in later subsections). The former argued that the surge of COVID-19 infections in late 2022 could spread across borders. The *New York Times* cited a CDC announcement on December 28, 2022, saying the move was “intended to slow the spread of the coronavirus” amid the “growing concern over a surge of cases in China” (NT2). On the same day, the *Los Angeles Times* also covered the new restrictions as an international effort “because of a surge of infections” (LT2). The news also used figures to justify the policy. In a *Voice of America* item published on December 29, 2022, titled “Experts Weigh Risk of New COVID Mutations from China,” the official

number of around 250 million new COVID-19 cases in December in China was cited (VA2). The quoted experts projected the daily infections can reach millions in early 2023, which could “increases the probability of a new virus mutation taking hold” (VA2). Overall, the strategic narrative aligned the situation with the COVID-19 outbreak early in 2020 to suggest countries reimposed travel restrictions to “keep infections from spreading beyond China's borders” (LT2).

COVID-19 tests were required because of the lack of scientific evidence and data from China (news)

This strategic narrative emerged by the end of 2022 when the COVID-19 caseload in China surged as China reopened. The U.S. government imposed a new testing requirements that targeted travelers from China in response. As previously mentioned, two strategic narratives explained the reimplementation of COVID-19 tests. The need to prevent viruses from spreading across borders as discussed earlier, and the lack of scientific data from China about the latest outbreak. The latter argued that it was difficult to evaluate the true pandemic risk from China, as well as the need to monitor a potential virus mutation in China. The transparency of the Chinese government was scrutinized. After the U.S. announced the new travel policy, *Fox News* cited the CDC on December 28, 2022, “given the lack of adequate and transparent epidemiological and viral genomic sequence data being reported” (FX3). Federal officials were interviewed, who suspected that because of the lack of “adequate and transparent sequencing data,” “there will be a lot of transmission very quickly due to a lack of immunity among people living in China” (FX3). *Fox News* concluded by suggesting that the Chinese government had stopped reporting case

numbers and revised the definition of COVID-19-related deaths. A *Washington Post* article published the next day, titled “Italy and U.S. mandate covid tests of all passengers from China,” reported that U.S. officials were worried about “Beijing’s lack of transparency about the state of the pandemic” (WP6). The strategic narrative further connects the current situation to past events, expressing “the new controls, and China’s reluctance to offer data, recall an earlier stage of the pandemic” (WP6). The same logic was repeated in a *Voice of America* item on the same day as well, suggesting “China has been accused of not being forthcoming about the virus since it first surfaced in the country in late 2019” (VA5). The history of alleged information control and subsequent global virus transmission was brought to attention.

This strategic narrative also elaborated on another reason for reinstating the testing requirements, to track possible virus mutation. A *Voice of America* coverage published on December 29, 2022, titled “Lack of Information on China's COVID Surge Stirs Global Concern,” suggested that “every new infection offers a chance for the coronavirus to mutate, and it is spreading rapidly in China” (VA5). Scientists were concerned about the quantity and quality of information from China, urging for more “transparency” (VA5). Thus, the new policy was justified on this ground. For example, a *Fox News* item on January 6, 2023, titled “As COVID ravages China, US expands testing system for incoming travelers,” cited the CDC on the possibility of adding an extra layer of screening by testing wastewater on arriving airplanes,

But one reason for new testing requirements, according to the CDC, is a lack of adequate and transparent information from China on viral strains infecting people there.

“We have very little control over what happens elsewhere,” said epidemiologist Katelyn Jetelina, a consultant to the CDC. “What we can control is what’s happening in the United States.” (FX4)

It was justified that because the U.S. may not acquire information from China, it is up to the U.S. to monitor the virus.

Nevertheless, the strategic narrative also met pushbacks in the U.S. media, concerning the effectiveness of travel restrictions in the era when the rest of the world was already opened. For example, the *Washington Post* article mentioned earlier referenced health experts, who suggested that evidence shows the restrictions and targeted surveillance were likely to be ineffective given the restoring international travel (WP6). A *Washington Post* opinion piece published on January 9, 2022, titled “Why the covid testing requirement for Chinese travelers is misguided,” commented that “the added coronavirus load from any infected travelers would be a drop in the bucket” (WP7). It was argued that priority should be given to studying possible new variants from China,

Since the Chinese government can’t be relied upon to share what it knows with the world, we don’t want fewer people traveling from China; we should want more so that we can study and identify new strains that might develop there. (WP7)

Therefore, measures such as testing wastewater from planes and on-arrival testing should replace preflight tests that could prevent possible cases from entering, so that new variants can be detected earlier to help the development of treatments and vaccines. As observed from the U.S. news coverage, the strategic narrative projected

a need to test travelers from China because of the lack of transparency in China, which made it difficult to evaluate the pandemic risk from China and potential virus mutation. How testing should be conducted, nevertheless, was negotiated. From a policy-centric perspective, the new test requirements were justified by the behavior and character of China, which was reluctant to share information with the world. A narrative-centric perspective complements this analysis. While the effectiveness of new travel policies was debated, the identity of China lacking transparency was further reinforced. In this view, the strategic narrative about the issue was engaging the image of the Chinese government, prompting policy actions from the U.S. government. It shows how a storyline connects past and current events to shape the characterization of China.

#### Travel policies against COVID-19 threat (White House)

While the strategic narratives found in the news, as demonstrated above, adopted a scientific frame to discuss how the U.S. policy responses were meant to stop the transmission of virus, the strategic narratives projected by the White House framed COVID-19 as a national threat. The Trump administration projected a strategic narrative that was securitized, portraying a national security threat created by COVID-19 from abroad. Thus, travel restrictions were in place to protect Americans. This storyline can be consistently found in official documents such as proclamations and press interactions with the Trump administration early in 2020. For example, in the press briefing by the President's Coronavirus Task Force on January 31, 2020, the policy to put U.S. citizens who traveled in China within the previous 14 days to a two-week self-quarantine was announced. The policy was suggested to ensure those



returnees had “not contracted the virus and do not pose a public health risk” (WH1).

The strategic narrative of mitigating the risk from the threat of disease was highlighted as the U.S. banned foreigners with a travel history in China from entering U.S. borders. In the Proclamation 9984 announced on January 31, 2020, it was stated that,

The United States Government is unable to effectively evaluate and monitor all of the travelers continuing to arrive from China. The potential for widespread transmission of the virus by infected individuals seeking to enter the United States threatens the security of our transportation system and infrastructure and the national security. (WH2)

COVID-19 was elevated from a health issue to “high politics” that could affect the national security of the U.S., which warranted a drastic policy response. As justified by the Proclamation,

Given the importance of protecting persons within the United States from the threat of this harmful communicable disease, I have determined that it is in the interests of the United States to take action to restrict and suspend the entry into the United States, as immigrants or nonimmigrants, of all aliens who were physically present within the People's Republic of China (WH2)

The same wordings were used in other similar proclamations that banned more countries later in 2020. The securitized narrative continued after the Biden administration took power. For example, on the policies to resume global air travel, traces of securitization were still present. In Proclamation 10294, vaccinated travelers were allowed to enter the U.S. under specific conditions. While it cited that the global

resumption of air travel was in the interest of the U.S., it also highlighted the importance of protecting Americans from the threat of COVID-19. Unvaccinated noncitizens remain banned. It was suggested that the new policies “aim to limit the risk that COVID-19...threatening the security of our civil aviation system,” and they were consistent with earlier policies that “advance the safety and security of the air traveling public, the government personnel responsible for ensuring the security of air travel” (WH3). The strategic narrative faded as travel restrictions were lifted in late 2021.

When COVID-19 testing requirements were reintroduced in January 2023, the policy was implemented by the CDC. Thus, the official narratives were beyond the coverage of this dataset. Nevertheless, some of the interactions with the press indicated that the White House was not securitizing the new policies. In a press briefing on January 3, 2023, the press secretary suggested that the testing requirements were “based on public health and science,” which were “coming from our experts here” (WH4). The policy justification was made on the grounds of science. The next day, President Biden explained to the press that the policy was in place because “China has not been—I know they're very sensitive about—when we suggest they haven't been that forthcoming” (WH5). This response aligned with the strategic narrative found in the U.S. media, which projected the CDC storyline, was not securitized. Therefore, the Trump-era strategic narrative on justifying travel policies against the COVID-19 threat faded as previous travel restrictions were lifted.

The “China virus” (White House)

This strategic narrative was exclusively found during the Trump administration. As the previous analysis and the literature suggest (Kuteleva and Clifford, 2021; Rutledge, 2020), the Trump administration externalized COVID-19 as a security threat from China. The attitude of the Trump administration flipped when the virus hit the U.S. and caused a public health emergency. Initially, Trump was very optimistic about the pandemic situation in China. On February 7, 2020, Trump responded to questions from journalists about his view on Chinese pandemic control,

They're working really hard, and I think they are doing a very professional job. They're in touch with World—the World—our World Organization, CDC also. We're working together. But World Health is working with them. CDC is working with them. I had a great conversation last night with President Xi. It's a tough situation. I think they're doing a very good job. (WH6).

His view did not change throughout February, even when COVID-19 started to spread to countries outside China. At a news conference on February 25, 2020, Trump suggested that the U.S. was working with China on the virus and praised China,

I spoke to President Xi the other day. He is so committed to solving that problem. He is—he is working very hard. He is very capable. The country is very capable. And it snuck up on him, but I think he's going to do well (WH7).

Nevertheless, Trump's statements became more aggressive about blaming China as the virus spread across the U.S. in March and April 2020. On April 30, 2020, Trump

spoke in front of the press, “We just got hit by a vicious virus that should have never been allowed to escape China. They should have stopped it at the source. They didn't do that” (WH8). China was blamed for failing to contain the virus. A strategic narrative was starting to take shape, labeling COVID-19 as a “China virus.” Later, Trump explained the label by telling the press on June 15, 2020, “in terms of the COVID or any one of the 15 names you want to call it. There are plenty of them out there. All we know is, it came from China” (WH9).

Thus, Trump tried to illustrate the effectiveness of the travel ban imposed earlier through this external threat narrative. He criticized naming the disease “COVID-19” because “that name gets further and further away from China, as opposed to calling it the Chinese virus” (WH10). In that campaign rally on June 20, 2020, Trump highlighted the effectiveness of his early travel ban,

I have done a phenomenal job with it, I shut down the United States to very heavily infected, but all people from China in late January, which is months earlier than other people would have done it, if they would have done it at all.

I saved hundreds of thousands of lives. (WH10)

The storyline suggested because Trump was aware of the threat from China, he was able to impose a travel ban to save American lives. He also explained the change in his view toward China. On August 4, 2020, he said in a press conference, “I think our attitude on China has changed greatly since the China virus hit us. I think it changed greatly. It hit the world, and it shouldn't have. They should have been able to stop it” (WH11). Meanwhile, Trump was getting more aggressive in labeling COVID-19 as the “China plague,” which he argued “is more accurate” (WH12). By labeling the

virus or the disease as “China virus” or “plague,” Trump strategically attributed responsibility to China, while portraying himself as the hero in the storyline (Kuteleva and Clifford, 2021).

#### The “war” against COVID-19 (White House)

The previous two strategic narratives from the White House both showed signs of securitization of the threat and policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were connected to a broader strategic narrative that tell the story of a “war” against the virus. The American nationalistic identity was mobilized to strategically create a “rally-round-the-flag” narrative. Therefore, COVID-19 was elevated from a security risk in public health to the enemy in a war, which was made comparable to previous wars in U.S. history. This strategic narrative was different from the previous because it got rid of the health and science justification in evaluating a threat but pictured COVID-19 as a hostile “actor” against America. For example, in the Coronavirus Task Force press briefing on March 23, 2020, the war analogy was made to describe the situation,

America continues to mobilize every segment of our society to turn the tide in the battle against the virus... But right now, in the midst of this great national trial, Americans must remain united in purpose and focused on victory.

(WH13)

A set of war-like language was employed to present a zero-sum scenario where “victory” becomes the goal of the pandemic response. Or put more bluntly in a later press briefing on March 31, 2020, declaring that “We're at war with a deadly virus” (WH14).

As discussed previously, securitization of COVID-19 continued as COVID-19 case numbers were maintained at high levels and extraordinary policies such as travel restrictions were still in place when Biden took power in early 2021. This strategic narrative of “war” was no exception. In Proclamation 10146 made on February 3, 2021, the Biden administration suggested that “we are putting our response to COVID-19 on a war footing and marshalling every resource we have to contain the pandemic” (WH15). President Biden spoke to NIH staff on February 11, 2021,

I know it's a pain in the neck, but it's a patriotic responsibility. We're in the middle of a war with this virus. It's a patriotic responsibility, not only if you care about your family, if you care about your fellow Americans. You realize more people have died in the last 12 months than died in all 4 years in World War II? All 4 years. (WH16)

Nationalistic sentiment was evoked by describing the efforts against COVID-19 as a “patriotic responsibility” similar to the “call of duty” at war. Moreover, the pandemic was compared with actual large-scale wars such as World War II. It connects the history of mass casualties in wars to “rally round the flag.” The same lines were repeated by Biden. On February 22, 2021, he addressed the loss of 500,000 Americans to COVID-19, “That's more Americans who have died in one year in this pandemic than in World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War combined” (WH17). This strategic narrative put COVID-19 in the same category as major wars. It created the preconditions to legitimize the costs of extreme policies as patriotic and necessary to combat a powerful enemy. This strategic narrative made its way out as the Biden administration relaxed containment policies in late 2021.

## Virus origin

The Wuhan lab leak theory (news)

The Wuhan lab leak theory was widely debated in the U.S. news. As a strategic narrative, it tells the story that COVID-19 was originally hosted in the Wuhan Institute of Virology, but the virus escaped in late 2019, causing the global pandemic. Early in the pandemic, *Fox News* was more supportive of the lab leak theory, but the mainstream media was treating it as an outlier, if not a fringe theory. Originating from right-wing sources, *Fox News* picked up the theory early in 2020. For example, a *Fox News* item on April 15, 2020, titled “Sources believe coronavirus originated in Wuhan lab as part of China's efforts to compete with US,” broke an “exclusive” story,

EXCLUSIVE: There is increasing confidence that the COVID-19 outbreak likely originated in a Wuhan laboratory, though not as a bioweapon but as part of China's attempt to demonstrate that its efforts to identify and combat viruses are equal to or greater than the capabilities of the United States, multiple sources who have been briefed on the details of early actions by China's government and seen relevant materials tell *Fox News*. (FX5)

The lab leak was interpreted under the context of the U.S.-China competition. More “evidence” was reported later by the Fox anchor Bret Baier. On April 18, 2020, a Fox coverage titled “Bret Baier says 'more and more dots' point to Wuhan lab as origin of coronavirus pandemic,” gave more details about the lab leak theory,

“There are dots on the board and that is: How much they went to scrub all of the data, the fact that you can't find some of these doctors, including Shi Zhengli, who was working on it,” Baier said. “The fact that some of the

samples were destroyed, [and] the fact that just today, Sean, the Chinese government announced an increase in the death total in Wuhan by 50 percent.” (FX6).

Baier suggested that “there is 100 percent confidence” that China was covering up incidents in the lab. The strategic narrative was further amplified by Trump. In a Fox coverage on April 30, 2020, Trump was quoted saying that he saw evidence supporting the lab leak theory (FX7). Although *Fox News* mentioned that no specifics were raised by Trump, the storyline suggested the plausibility of the lab leak theory.

Other mainstream media were skeptical about the lab leak theory. They reported a range of possible theories and considered the lab leak theory not supported by scientific evidence. For example, in a *Washington Post* article published on April 16, 2020, titled “What caused the coronavirus? A skeptical take on the theories about the outbreak's Chinese origin,” the lab leak theory was described as “a more plausible alternative” that “scientists don’t dismiss this outright” (WP8). Scientists were interviewed. They suggested that there was a lack to evidence to the lab leak theory and concluded that the virus origin remains “inconclusive” (WP8). A *New York Times* article quoted a Chinese professor on April 28, 2020, arguing that “‘malicious’ claims about the lab had been ‘pulled out of thin air’ and contradicted all available evidence” (NT6). The article then contextualized the discussion on conspiracy theories, suggesting that “conspiracy theories are common during epidemics” (NT6). The examples of the SARS and HIV/AIDS outbreaks were cited, ending with a quote from a Chinese scholar hoping for a “rational environment for research on tracing the origin of the virus” (NT6). At that time, the lab leak theory was dismissed, A



*Washington Post* article published on May 3, 2020, reviewed expert opinion, academic study, and government sources, summarizing that,

The balance of the scientific evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the new coronavirus emerged from nature — be it the Wuhan market or somewhere else. Too many unexpected coincidences would have had to take place for it to have escaped from a lab. (WP9)

Although the lab leak theory was widely covered in the U.S. media, doubts were raised about the likelihood it actually happened. This is likely because the U.S. mainstream media was playing a gatekeeping role in scrutinizing the accusations made by Trump, who was found to be pushing forward false information and was antagonistic towards China. Given his problematic speeches during COVID-19, such as underplaying the pandemic situation in the U.S. and claiming that COVID-19 might be cured by injecting disinfectant, the mainstream media were likely paying more attention to the due diligence of questioning the factuality of the lab leak theory.

Nevertheless, the tide started to turn as the 2021 China-WHO report on virus origin tracing was criticized by the international community. The report concluded that the lab leak theory was “extremely unlikely” but the methodology of mostly interviewing Chinese scientists sparked controversies. A *Washington Post* article published on March 29, 2021, titled “WHO Wuhan report leaves question of coronavirus origins unresolved,” criticized that “the findings are far from conclusive and will be overshadowed by questions about China’s lack of transparency — and the WHO’s apparent inability to press for more” (WP10). The *New York Times* published an article titled “What We Know About the W.H.O.'s Inquiry on the Origin of

Covid,” on March 30, 2021, mentioned that “some critics have suggested that the team seemed to take the Chinese official position at face value and did not adequately investigate lab officials’ assertions” (NT7). A health expert was then quoted to suggest that the lab leak theory was dismissed “without strong evidence” while “a lab accident is certainly a possibility” (NT7). As the mainstream media was giving more coverage to the lab leak theory, *Fox News* went after them. A *Fox News* coverage on April 1, 2021, titled “Experts giving COVID 'lab leak' theory second look after mainstream media cried it was 'debunked,’” reviewed how media outlets including the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and CNN “debunked” the “conspiracy” and “fringe” theory (FX8). The lab leak theory was “no longer considered outlandish” (FX8).

While maintaining an “uncertain” attitude in the origin tracing, the mainstream media was giving more credit to the lab leak theory seriously when President Biden reinitiated the virus origin investigation. In a *New York Times* article published on May 27, 2021, it was reported that the Biden administration mobilized intelligence resources to “figure out whether the virus that causes it accidentally leaked from a Chinese laboratory” (NT8). They also cited the *Wall Street Journal* for the accounts from “three scientists who last year dismissed the lab-leak explanation as a conspiracy theory” who changed their minds to “consider it plausible” because of the reluctance of the Chinese government in providing data and assisting the origin trace (NT8). The *Washington Post* on the same day published an article “Facebook will no longer remove content saying covid-19 is manmade.” It suggested that “more mainstream scientists and the World Health Organization have started to also raise

questions and say it (lab leak theory) cannot be ruled out” (WP11). Because of these doubts, the mainstream media largely advocated for more investigation into the issue, aligning with the White House.

By late February 2023, a U.S. Energy Department report, first reported by the Wall Street Journal, concluded that a lab leak most likely happened in the Wuhan Institute of Virology although this claim was made with low confidence. *Fox News* endorsed the report. For example, on February 27, 2023, the Fox coverage titled “Former CDC director: People will come to realize COVID-19 came from a lab,” quoted Former CDC director Dr. Robert Redfield,

I think it's of note that both the FBI and now the Department of Energy have come to the conclusion that they believe this virus came from the Wuhan lab, and what's important about their workforce is they have an enormous, powerful scientific workforce, and I think they really did approach this in an aggressive, scientific way. (FX9)

The Fox coverage highlighted the scientific rigor behind the report, giving the strategic narrative more credibility. A *New York Times* article covered the House panel on COVID-19 origin investigation on March 8, 2023, quoted senior fellow at the Atlantic Council Jamie Metzl, who evaluated the robustness of the evidence, “There is no smoking gun proving a lab origin hypothesis, but the growing body of circumstantial evidence suggests a gun that, at the very least, is warm to the touch” (NT9). Although the mainstream media moved to suggest a higher likelihood of the lab leak theory, they were still being cautious. A *Voice of America* coverage on February 28, 2023, titled “US Ambassador: China Should Be Candid About COVID

Origins,” explained the Energy Department report but also highlighted that other U.S. government agencies were divided over the issue (VA6). While both the zoonotic theory that suggests the virus jumped naturally from animals to humans, and the lab leak theory were both plausible, China should provide more information to assist virus origin investigation (VA6). This position aligns with the White House strategic narrative, which will be discussed in the following section.

Overall, the *Wuhan lab leak theory* spoke to other strategic narratives at various time points by different news outlets. Early in the pandemic, the way *Fox News* framed the lab leak theory was put under the context of the “China virus” strategic narrative from the White House. It was suggested that the Chinese lab was studying viruses “to demonstrate that its efforts to identify and combat viruses are equal to or greater than the capabilities of the United States” (FX5). However, the virus went uncontrolled and threatened the rest of the world while the Chinese government was trying to cover it up. As this point, U.S. mainstream media treated the *Wuhan lab leak theory* as propaganda as no evidence was disclosed and the Trump administration was likely distracting the news flow to divert attention away from the worsening pandemic situation in the U.S.

Later when Biden took power, the mainstream media started to give more credit to the lab leak theory, as doubts started to arise from the science community, as well as from the WHO-China virus origin report that was criticized for its reliability. They scrutinized the lack of information and cooperation from China on origin tracing. Eventually, the tide turned towards the lab leak theory later in 2023, where the “high likelihood” frame was favored over the “low confidence” frame on the

Energy Department report. It should be noted that the strategic narrative remained open to scrutiny as many still called for more investigation before jumping to conclusions, given the lack of conclusive evidence and a consensus among U.S. government agencies.

This storyline connects to the identity-level strategic narrative that portrayed China as lacking transparency, which characterized the information control under Chinese regime and justified policies such as travel restrictions against China. The *lab leak theory*, as a strategic narrative, contributed to portraying China as an illegitimate actor that required a U.S. policy response. The identity-level narrative is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The COVID-19 origin was uncertain (White House)

Although the Wuhan lab leak theory was popularized by former President Trump, the official stance of the White House maintained that the source of COVID-19 was unknown, and more investigation was required. The same narrative did not change when Biden took power in 2021. The White House did not shift the narrative after the Energy Department report that suggest COVID-19 was likely leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. During the Trump administration, Trump was implying the likelihood of the lab leak theory, as opposed to the more popular zoonotic theory. In a press briefing on May 1, 2020, the press secretary was asked if the lab leak theory was favored. The press secretary replied that the current intelligence suggested both infections through animals and a lab leak were possible source of the initial spread of COVID-19. Thus, it was “consistent with what the President said: that he's seen

intelligence suggesting it could be in the Wuhan laboratory” (WH18). The White House was giving a neutral position regarding the origin theories.

In the Biden administration, the tone shifted slightly from suggesting there was evidence pointing to various likely theories, to more information was needed to reach a conclusion. For example, in a press briefing on March 26, 2021, the press secretary was asked to comment on the opinion of former CDC director Dr. Redfield who suggested he believed in the lab leak theory. The press secretary did not respond directly but stated that “we continue to learn more about the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, including its origins, so we can better prepare for future crises” (WH19). Dr. Fauci, the former Chief Medical Advisor, also responded to this opinion on a White House Teleconference, arguing that “Dr. Redfield was mentioning that he was giving an opinion as to a possibility. But again, there are other alternatives, others that most people hold by” (WH20). The official strategic narrative from the White House was to consider multiple possible virus origins and not to jump to conclusions. This position supported the call for an investigation by the Biden administration. On May 25, 2021, the press secretary was asked for an official view on the possibility of the lab leak theory, to which she responded,

we need access to the underlying data. We need access to the information that the Chinese government has in order to make a determination through the international bodies that would do this investigation. And that's something we've called for many, many times. (WH21)

The next day, President Biden addressed the same point in a statement,

I had my National Security Advisor task the Intelligence Community to prepare a report on their most up-to-date analysis of the origins of COVID-19, including whether it emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident. I received that report earlier this month, and asked for additional follow-up. As of today, the U.S. Intelligence Community has “coalesced around two likely scenarios” but has not reached a definitive conclusion on this question. (WH22)

This narrative implied that the origin tracing did not reach a conclusion on the zoonotic theory or the lab leak theory because the Chinese government was withholding information. The uncertainty of virus origin was then attributed to the lack of transparency from the Chinese government. Therefore, it prompted the Biden administration to utilize intelligence resources to reinvestigate the two possible scenarios, which were the same as proposed during the Trump administration.

Even when the Energy Department report brought more attention and credibility to the lab leak theory in late February, the White House maintained the same inconclusive narrative. It suggested that different U.S. agencies provided different assessments of the virus origin. As stated again in a press briefing on February 27, 2023, “there's just no consensus across the government. The work continues. And I'm not going to get ahead of conclusions that haven't been arrived at yet” (WH23). As a strategic narrative, this position not only avoided accusing China explicitly of leaking the virus but also pressed China to provide more information on the issue. It speaks to another strategic narrative that portrayed China as an international actor that lacks transparency, which is discussed next.

### Transparency of the Chinese government

The Chinese government lacks transparency (news)

This strategic narrative highlights the characteristics of the Chinese government in controlling information and covering up undesirable incidents in China. As an identity narrative, which characterizes the intention and morals of a political actor, it was woven through different issue level strategic narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the pandemic, it was connected to the discussion over the initial virus outbreak in China. When the virus origin investigation intensified, the lack of transparency from China was regarded as one of the reasons for failing to arrive at a conclusion. By late 2022, China was reported to have been covering up the surge of COVID-19 cases that occurred because of the more contagious virus variants and the subsequent relaxation of containment measures.

In January 2020, an unknown coronavirus emerged in China. Although former President Trump praised Chinese health responses for effectively disclosing the issue and controlling the virus spread, a strategic narrative was building up in the U.S. media, which doubt the transparency of Chinese officials. The strategic narrative echoes past pandemic history in China, when the failure of the Chinese authorities to provide timely health data in the 2003 SARS pandemic cast a long shadow on China's openness in sharing public health information with the international community. For example, a *New York Times* article published on January 22, 2020, titled "As a Deadly Virus Spreads, China Controls the Narrative," begins by suggesting the cover-up of SARS led to a "disaster" where the "deadly disease rippled across the world 17 years ago," and this experience "was supposed to drag



China into a new era of openness and responsibility” (NT10). The history in 2003 was compared to the current situation,

Today, China faces the spread of another mysterious disease, a coronavirus, which so far has killed 17 people and infected more than 540. And while Beijing’s response has improved in some ways, it has regressed in others. It is censoring criticism. It is detaining people for spreading what it calls “rumors.”

It is suppressing information it deems alarming. (NT10)

It was described that the control of information still existed, albeit might be practiced in a different way. In a *Voice of America* item on February 14, 2020, titled “China Still Not Sharing Coronavirus Information, Experts Say,” a U.S. official was quoted “we’re a little disappointed in the lack of transparency coming from the Chinese” that “China is releasing a daily count of newly identified cases, but not the date when those patients became ill” (VA7). This could impede public health responses because “without the date of symptom onset, epidemiologists can’t tell if an epidemic is growing or waning” (VA7).

More specifically, the U.S. media turned to the intra-government dynamics in China to explain part of the problems in attaining transparency. In a *Fox News* item published on January 22, 2020, titled “Coronavirus vaccine in ‘early stages’ as focus turns to China’s transparency,” top Chinese officials were reported to have been “warned lower-level officials to not cover up the spread of the new coronavirus,” as a response to accusations of the local government withholding crucial information, where “the number of cases was underreported and the risks of the new coronavirus were understated” (FX10). A *Washington Post* article published on March 10, 2020,

titled “How and why did local officials hide the truth in Wuhan?” gave the reasons for such behaviors. It was suggested that,

Local authorities are also motivated by the desire to hide undesirable developments from Beijing. When experts from Beijing arrived to investigate the atypical pneumonia outbreak, Wuhan officials tried to avoid two things: upsetting Beijing; or causing a public panic in advance of these two important meetings. So they took a multipronged approach to control information about the outbreak. (WP12)

Another *Los Angeles Times* article published on March 9, 2020, titled “As Beijing claims credit for beating coronavirus, Chinese people are outraged: ‘Fake! It’s all fake!’” provided a vivid example of how local governments were trying to deceive the central government. It reported when a high-ranking party leader toured a residential compound in Wuhan, local officials “had done a last-minute cleanup and orchestrated a fake setup of grocery delivery to locked-down apartments, when in reality residents were being confined and neglected” (LT4). The U.S. media coverage described the lack of transparency from China was in two-fold, local coverups to avoid political consequences and the party’s habit of controlling information.

This *lack of transparency* strategic narrative was employed in the debate over virus origin investigations, as discussed previously. The behaviors of China during the process were scrutinized to suggest its intentions to misguide origin tracing. As media attention was focused on the WHO-China report, a *New York Times* article published on March 29, 2021, titled “The U.S. is concerned about China’s influence over a report on the pandemic’s origins,” suggested that “the Chinese government

works to take control of the narrative before the release of the report,” where “China has been criticized for withholding raw data and repeatedly delaying a visit by the team of W.H.O. experts” (NT11). Later on June 7, 2021, a *Fox News* item titled “China's 'massive cover-up' on COVID still happening: WHO advisory board member,” quoted WHO advisory board member Jamie Metzl, who argued that “the Chinese have engaged in a massive cover-up that is going on until this day, involving destroying samples, hiding records, placing a universal gag order on Chinese scientists and imprisoning Chinese citizen journalists asking the most basic questions” (FX11). In a *Washington Post* opinion piece published on July 23, 2021, titled “China is stepping up its deception and denial in investigations of covid-19,” the Chinese efforts of taking down databases, silencing whistleblowers, and hiding pandemic information were highlighted, which concluded that “China’s answers add up to a pattern of denial, diversion and deception” (WP13). Overall, the U.S. media reported various examples to explain the ways China was preventing a legitimate virus origin study. They added up and reinforced the authoritarian identity of China which tried to control the flow of unfavorable information.

In late 2022, the same strategic narrative again explained the behaviors of the Chinese government amid the surge in COVID-19 cases. As discussed earlier, it contributes to the justification of new U.S. travel policies targeting travelers from China. The lack of transparency was described as consistent throughout the pandemic. A *Los Angeles Times* article published on December 29, 2022, titled “Lack of info on China's COVID-19 outbreak stirs global concern,” suggested that,

China has been accused of not being forthcoming about the virus since it first surfaced in the country in late 2019. The worry is that it may not be sharing data now on any signs of evolving strains that could spark fresh outbreaks elsewhere. (LT5)

Again, the U.S. media described how China was withholding data. For example, a *Fox News* item published on January 14, 2023, titled “China reports 60,000 coronavirus-related deaths from December after concerns of underreporting,” cited that “Beijing stopped reporting on (COVID-19) deaths following an October surge in cases” and the new figures from China on respiratory failure deaths “did not address people who may have died at home and its official death totals only include respiratory failure and pneumonia deaths,” but other COVID-19 related deaths were not included (FX12). These added up to suggest the reasons why China “faced criticism for allegedly downplaying deaths and case numbers” (FX12). The *lack of transparency* strategic narrative was consistently manifested in debates on pandemic data availability and virus origin throughout the pandemic, which eventually contributed to justifying new testing requirements starting from January 2023, despite the effectiveness of this measure being contested in the U.S. media. The puzzle suggested the goal of new COVID-19 tests might be more than safeguarding public health. As quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* article on December 29, 2022,

Dr. David Dowdy, an infectious disease expert at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said the move by the U.S. may be more about increasing pressure on China to share more information than stopping a new variant from entering the country. (LT5)

The reinstatement of testing requirements could be aimed at tackling the lack of transparency from China, which suggests a larger strategic goal than resolving the challenge of public health at that time.

The Chinese government lacks transparency (White House)

The Trump and Biden administration projected this strategic narrative in drastically different ways, but both arrived at the same story that consistently portrayed China as an illiberal actor who holds back crucial information. Arguably, the narrative projection approach during the Trump administration included some propaganda features. Trump praised China for its pandemic response early in 2020 but changed his attitude as COVID-19 spread across the U.S. in March 2020. As the next chapter will show, this responsive behavior likely reflected an attempt to distract public attention away from the domestic pandemic chaos by blaming China for the crisis. For example, in a news conference on April 14, 2020, Trump attacked the WHO and China for misguiding the world on the pandemic situation in China. He said, “the WHO willingly took China's assurances to face value, and they took it just at face value and defended the actions of the Chinese Government, even praising China for its so-called transparency. I don't think so” (WH24). He accused China of pushing misinformation about the virus which led to increased caseload worldwide. The position of the Trump administration was noted in a fact sheet on August 10, 2020, President Trump has rightly called out China's handling of the virus for refusing to be transparent and failing to contain the virus before it spread. The President held the WHO accountable for its egregious bias towards China that jeopardizes the safety of Americans. (WH25)

The responsibility for spreading the virus, which threatened American security, was attributed to China. In a proclamation made on January 18, 2021, the Trump administration wrote that China,

repeatedly have failed to cooperate with the United States public health authorities and to share timely, accurate information about the spread of the virus. Those jurisdictions' responses to the pandemic, their lack of transparency, and their lack of cooperation with the United States thus far in combatting the pandemic... (WH26)

This narrative resembles the arguments found in U.S. mainstream media since the beginning of the pandemic. It was suggested that because China was holding back information about COVID-19, the world was unable to respond adequately, leading to a global outbreak.

The Biden administration continued to adopt this narrative, but more on the grounds of public health and global cooperation. In a statement by the National Security Advisor on February 13, 2021, the concerns over early COVID-19 investigations were raised,

To better understand this pandemic and prepare for the next one, China must make available its data from the earliest days of the outbreak. Going forward, all countries, including China, should participate in a transparent and robust process for preventing and responding to health emergencies — so that the world learns as much as possible as soon as possible. (WH27)

Consistently, China was accused of withholding crucial information about the virus which could help the international community to formulate a pandemic response.

Similar to the strategic narrative from the news, the White House connected the origin tracing case to the lack of transparency from China. On August 27, 2021, the White House released a Statement on virus origin tracing,

Critical information about the origins of this pandemic exists in the People's Republic of China, yet from the beginning, government officials in China have worked to prevent international investigators and members of the global public health community from accessing it. To this day, the PRC continues to reject calls for transparency and withhold information, even as the toll of this pandemic continue to rise. (WH28)

It was argued specifically that China was not sharing the information they had. The Biden administration consistently adopted this storyline. For example, it was reemphasized explicitly later in a press briefing on December 9, 2022, that “we do not know the origins, as you know, of COVID because of the -- of China's lack of transparency” (WH29). The Biden administration also reiterated the same narrative on international occasions. On January 13, 2023, in a Joint Statement with the Japanese Prime Minister, it was stated that,

We also call on China to report adequate transparent epidemiological and viral genomic sequence data regarding the spread of COVID-19, to enable public health officials around the world be prepared to reduce the spread and identify any potential new variants. (WH30)

Overall, this strategic narrative was stable since it was adopted by the Trump administration in April 2020, albeit the Trump and Biden administration could have projected this strategic narrative based on distinct political agendas. From a narrative

projection perspective, the arguments delivered to the global news environment were similar. Through various incidents revolving around COVID-19 origin tracing and pandemic situation updates, China was deemed as not sharing important information in a timely manner and not being open about the actual situation on the ground.

### Chapter summary

This chapter outlined the U.S. strategic narratives in three main themes that contribute to the justification of COVID-19 policies and the national image of the U.S. and China. In response to research questions 1.1 and 1.2, this chapter identified the strategic narratives employed to address COVID-19, and related travel policies, as well as how they were justified. The strategic narratives in the news suggested that the pandemic in China was out of control, particularly early in the pandemic and since late 2022. Travel policies were implemented to protect Americans. The news did not mediate these strategic narratives without questioning. Although they aligned on illustrating the potential risks of COVID-19 from China, the effectiveness of the policy solutions from the U.S. government was scrutinized.

In response to research question 1.3, this chapter analyzed the extent of securitization in the sample news corpus. Part of the coverage in the U.S. news that externalized the COVID-19 threat can be traced in the strategic narratives from the White House, for example, in evaluating the risks of importing COVID-19 cases from China. However, the U.S. news media did not securitize the pandemic as much as the administrations. While the White House adopted a “wartime” storyline that mobilized the history of significant sacrifice to evoke a patriotic sentiment, the news took a more objective approach in reporting pandemic responses.



In response to research question 2.1 that looks into the ways identity-level strategic narratives were projected, strategic narratives on the issue level reinforced the image that China lacks transparency, in both the news coverage and from the White House. The most prominent example is the strategic narrative on virus origin tracing. The White House maintained that China withheld key information on the matter which led to the inconclusive findings in origin tracing, although former president Trump strongly suggested the virus was leaked from the Wuhan lab. In the U.S. news, the strategic narrative of the Wuhan lab leak theory evolved from a discredited story from the political right to a plausible scenario accepted by the mainstream.

This chapter also provided evidence to answer research question 3.3, on the relationships between different levels of strategic narratives. The rise of the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was intertwined with the transparency accusation as the reluctance of China to provide information was considered a cover-up. The storyline of the lab leak theory suggested China was trying to hide the inconvenient facts, sometimes through projecting the propaganda-like Fort Detrick theory. Moreover, the argument that China was not disclosing enough evidence remained salient even when this theory was difficult to prove. Either way, as long as the lab leak theory remained inconclusive, the discussion around it could reinforce the lack of transparency accusation against China on the identity level. Another example is the justification of new travel policies targeting travelers from China in January 2023. Aligning with the *lack of transparency* identity strategic narrative, the issue-level strategic narrative suggested that COVID-19 testing requirements were legitimate on the basis that not

enough data from China was provided to evaluate the potential risk of causing major outbreaks in the U.S., and a possibility of breeding new virus variants.

Overall, the consistency of U.S. strategic narratives projection in the news varied. This was likely because the White House changed hands from Trump to Biden, shifting not only the official perspectives on the pandemic and U.S.-China relations, but also because U.S. strategic narratives were responding to the changing pandemic situations such as the surge of caseload in China in late 2022 and the emergence of new evidence on virus origin tracing. On the issue level, strategic narratives were projected but contested. The intentions of the government in using policy tools such as travel ban and COVID-19 testing were widely cited and quoted in the U.S. news. Meanwhile, they also reference opinions from different stakeholders such as medical experts or foreign country officials. A spectrum of perspectives was provided. For example, as discussed, travel restrictions in early 2020 were covered in the news as risk-mitigating containment measures, similar to the official language from the White House that suggested the policies were aimed at reducing “public health risk” (WH1). The U.S. news media presented comprehensive views on the issue, covering supporting opinions from people in quarantine to doubts from health experts.

On the identity level, more similarities can be found in the strategic narratives in the news and from the White House compared to on the issue level. The storyline of the lack of transparency from the Chinese government was connected to various issue-level strategic narratives. The U.S. news portrayed the character of the political actor China through the history of SARS and the current performance in COVID-19.

The storyline presented multiple perspectives to illustrate why transparency was lacking, from the authoritarian control of information to the dynamics between local and central government in China. The strategic narrative in the news provided a cohesive interpretation of how and why China lacked transparency. The Trump and the Biden administrations showed very different attitudes in their ways treating public health information around COVID-19, where the former was characterized by the making questionable claims that resembled properties of propaganda. In the projection of the identity of China as a political actor, however, there was significant difference. Regardless of the political intentions behind the two administrations, China was characterized as lacking transparency. The implications of this identity-level strategic narrative on the current pandemic led to the justification of some aggressive policies to limit travel. As the strategic narrative literature suggests, if the storylines should be seen as an aggregation across different social and political forces in a democratic society (Kluver et al., 2019), the combined storyline connected the past and the present to shape the image of a political actor. The storyline carried over from pre-pandemic that suggests China as an illiberal international player who limited information flow was maintained, if not amplified.

## Chapter 6: Relationships between Strategic Narratives

This chapter investigates the relationships between strategic narratives to illustrate the dynamics in the narrative contest between the U.S. and China amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It presents the findings of the Granger causality tests between strategic narratives from the U.S. and China, as well as between strategic narratives and pandemic parameters. Findings in this chapter provide evidence that echoes the literature discussions on the utility of strategic narratives in Chapter 2, which suggests strategic narratives can be useful not only in justifying costly policy choices, but also as the tool to shape the identities of political actors and the worldviews presented to the audience. Both the U.S. and China were found to be projecting offensive strategic narratives that had the potential to redefine meanings in international affairs (Yang, 2021). Issue-level strategic narratives about COVID-19 and relevant policy responses interacted with identity-level strategic narratives. The U.S. was portraying China as an actor that lacked transparency, and China depicted the U.S. as undermining the post-pandemic recovery of China. Findings demonstrated how strategic narratives can be projected into the media sphere to negotiate the meanings of crisis policy responses. These interpretations shaped the perceptions of political actors. This chapter focuses on the dynamic relationship between strategic narratives about policy issues and political actors in the contest for soft power.

The case of COVID-19 is investigated in this study to illustrate the utilization of strategic narratives in the rivalry between the U.S. and China. Chapter 2 posed the question of how strategic narratives responded to the pandemic as well as to the strategic narratives from the U.S. or China. This study is interested in the ways

strategic narratives responded to one another and the changing policy situation in the pandemic. Chapter 3 proposed the method of the Granger causality test to investigate the relationship between the time series of strategic narratives. Figures of the time series can be found in Appendix J.

The Granger causality test measures the ability of a time series variable to predict another (Granger, 1969). A variable X “Granger causes” another variable Y when past values of both X and Y together better predict the future value of Y compared to predicting the future value of Y using only the past value of Y. In the context of this study, it means that a strategic narrative systematically preceded another, indicating a likelihood that one strategic narrative was responding to another one. A strategic narrative can refute another or connect the narrative elements in one strategic narrative to foster a storyline in another strategic narrative. Although their interactive relationships can be observed in the qualitative analysis in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, it can be difficult to evaluate if the relationships are systematically observed in the time series or not. Using a mixed method approach, Granger causality tests would indicate the statistical relationships between the time series and qualitative analyses would illustrate how those relationships unfolded. News article examples quoted in the analysis can be found in Appendix I. The qualitative assessments of the strategic narratives explain how they were deployed to advance a policy agenda and construct a desired worldview.

The following subsections were organized by research questions. Granger causality test results were presented in response to each of the relevant research questions. First, in response to RQ2.3, the relationships between strategic narratives

and pandemic parameters were examined. Second, to answer RQ3.1 which seeks to understand the remediation of strategic narratives, this study tests if a strategic narrative projected in the news environment in one country Granger caused the same strategic narrative in the news environment in another country. Third, for RQ3.2, to investigate the responsiveness of strategic narratives, Granger causality tests between issue-level strategic narratives were conducted. Finally, Granger causality tests between issue-level and identity-level strategic narratives were conducted to illustrate how identities were simultaneously shaped by and shaping issue-level strategic narratives. All time series data were tested for stationarity using the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test and the Kwiatkowski–Phillips–Schmidt–Shin (KPSS) test (Cheung and Lai, 1995; Kwiatkowski et al., 1992). Data were detrended to remove the trend component (i.e., the time sensitive increase or decrease of a variable) that could confound with the observation of Granger causality by differencing to ensure stationarity. All Granger causality test results presented below were conducted using the detrended data and using a one-day lag interval. Granger causality tests in this study were conducted in pairs, testing for both directions of Granger causality (i.e., if X Granger caused Y and if Y Granger caused X). Statistically significant Granger causality pairs were presented in the following subsections.

#### *Strategic narratives and pandemic parameters*

Although the qualitative analysis in previous chapters provided an in-depth account of the strategic narratives that justified COVID-19 policies and travel restrictions, the stories told do not necessarily align with reality. The pandemic situation in the home country or foreign country can be deliberately downplayed or exaggerated to promote

strategic narratives. For example, foreign threats can be overstated to justify travel restrictions. To estimate the responsiveness of strategic narratives to the situation on the ground, anchor points in the public health situation are required. One of the ways to estimate how strategic narratives were deployed vis-a-vis the challenges and opportunities faced in the pandemic is to juxtapose them against scientific measurements of the severity of the disease and the public health responses in place. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) provided country-level data on COVID-19 case counts and death counts, which help estimate the severity of the pandemic in different locations (Hale et al., 2022). This study transformed the variable into daily new confirmed cases and daily new confirmed deaths to show the effects of changing pandemic trends (i.e., an increase in daily new confirmed cases indicates the pandemic was on the rise). The Containment Health Index was also extracted from OxCGRT. It is a composite score that measures containment policies such as international travel controls and canceling public events, and public health efforts such as contact tracing and testing policies. Figures of the trends of the pandemic parameters can be found in Appendix J. RQ2.3 asks, how did strategic narratives respond to the parameters that measure the development of the pandemic? Granger causality test results suggested four statistically significant pairs, indicating that some strategic narratives were likely responding to changing pandemic situations.

#### Chinese strategic narratives responding to pandemic parameters

Granger causality tests showed that two Chinese strategic narratives were likely addressing the severity of the pandemic in China. First, while more daily new

confirmed cases in China in the time series data from OxCGRt Granger caused the strategic narrative *China puts people's lives first* on the next day ( $F = 4.96$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ), the time series data of the strategic narrative did not Granger cause more new confirmed cases on the next day ( $F = 2.47$ ,  $p = 0.117$ ). It means that it is more likely for the Chinese media to project the *China puts people's lives first* narrative when the previous day sees more COVID-19 infections. This relationship suggests that Chinese authorities were likely reassuring citizens and the world that the government was putting effort into saving lives. Both daily infections and the *lives first* narrative saw two peaks in early and late 2022. Late 2022 was the time when newer Omicron virus variants were on the rise, and China starting to dismantle tight containment policies. For example, in an April 12, 2022, *Global Times* article, titled “Dynamic zero-COVID strategy 'the best choice' as infections surpass 325,000: chief epidemiologist of China's CDC,” health experts were quoted suggesting that, “China should unwaveringly stick with the dynamic zero-case strategy as the nationwide situation is still serious” because “this strategy is to guarantee the health and lives of the public to the greatest extent” (GT14). Amid the rise of COVID-19, the strategic narrative was trying to convince people that sticking to Zero-COVID was the better solution as the goal of pandemic policies was to protect people. Nevertheless, the same narrative was used later in 2022 to convince the public that China maintained the same policy objective when Zero-COVID measures were “optimized,” a euphemism for relaxed or eliminated. As the COVID-19 caseload was surging, the *People's Daily* article published on December 30, 2022, reiterated the Chinese official position that “China's commitment to putting people, their lives first unchanged” (PD5). The article



continued to showcase the low COVID-19 mortality rate and growing life expectancy in the previous year to prove that the Chinese government “put lives first.” These examples and the Granger causality suggest that the *lives first* strategic narrative was implemented to justify the government decisions when the rising caseload might lead to doubts about the effectiveness of public health responses.

Second, the time series data of the strategic narrative *scientific Zero-COVID policies* was Granger caused by more daily new confirmed deaths in China in the OxCGR data, with borderline statistical significance ( $F = 3.81$ ,  $p = 0.051$ ), while the time series data of the strategic narrative did not Granger cause more daily confirmed deaths ( $F = 1.02$ ,  $p = 0.313$ ). It shows a possible trend that it is more likely for the Chinese media to project the *scientific Zero-COVID policies* narrative when the previous day recorded more COVID-19 deaths in China. The weaker statistical significance can be attributed to the lack of correlation between the two variables in 2020, where the strategic narrative saw two peaks, but the COVID-19 death counts remained low. However, both variables saw a peak in early 2020, pointing to a potential source of Granger causality. This hypothesis was supported by a subgroup analysis when only data from 2020 was used. Daily new confirmed deaths Granger caused the *scientific Zero-COVID policies* narrative ( $F = 5.29$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ) and the opposite direction was statistically insignificant ( $F = 0.60$ ,  $p = 0.441$ ). In 2020, the rise of COVID-19 deaths might have triggered the project of the *scientific Zero-COVID policies* narrative to convince the world that China was effectively dealing with the pandemic. For example, when COVID-19 induced more deaths in February 2020, the Chinese strategic narrative called for a scientific response. In a *Global*

*Times* article published on February 10, 2020, titled “Premier Li stresses scientific research to win battle against virus,” the Chinese Premier urged scientists to “race against time” to develop “effective drugs in curing patients and reducing mortality” (GT15). Early in the pandemic, the lack of cures and vaccines caused the casualty to rise. The Chinese government argued for a scientific policy response in the strategic narrative to reassure the world that Chinese pandemic control would be adequate.

#### U.S. strategic narratives responding to pandemic parameters

In the U.S. news media, the Granger causalities found suggested two paths that strategic narratives were addressing the changing pandemic situation. Both showed signs of externalizing the challenges brought by COVID-19. First, analyses showed that the OxCGRT Containment Health Index in China Granger caused the U.S. strategic narrative *Travel restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19* ( $F = 12.89, p < 0.001$ ) but the opposite pair did not show statistically significant Granger causality ( $F = 0.003, p = 0.96$ ). It means that when China imposed more stringent measures to contain the spread of the virus, the U.S. news media gave more coverage to this strategic narrative that justified travel restrictions. This phenomenon was especially prominent early in the pandemic when the strategic narrative reached its peak and the Chinese Containment Health Index climbed rapidly. It can be attributed to the U.S. travel policies that started to screen and ban travelers from China early in 2020. At that time, COVID-19 was more prevalent within China but the country had already implemented drastic pandemic control measures. An example from the *Washington Post*, published on January 24, 2020, titled “Travel ban halts flights between Wuhan and U.S., as airports prepare to screen passengers for

coronavirus,” described how U.S. travel policies were working in accordance with the tightened pandemic policies in China (WP14). It mentioned that the Chinese city of Wuhan shut down transportation networks, including suspending all flights. The U.S. authorities thus planned to screen passengers once the flights resumed, as “proactive preparedness precautions” (WP14). The strategic narrative suggested U.S. pandemic policies were working ahead of the virus. Chinese pandemic controls also were likely to be considered as signals of pandemic severity. A Fox News story on January 28, 2020, reported that “China has been scrambling to contain the virus,” with mass quarantine (FX13). A U.S. senator urged to impose a travel ban, arguing that the virus might have caused more infections and deaths than the official numbers from China, because of “the Chinese Communist Party’s history of covering up or minimizing disease outbreaks” (FX13). In this case, travel restrictions were a response to a policy signal rather than caseload or casualty figures released by the Chinese government.

Next, a statistically significant Granger causality was found between more daily new confirmed deaths in the U.S. and the *Wuhan lab leak theory* in the U.S. news media. When the U.S. casualty increased, the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was observed at a higher level in the news ( $F = 3.90, p = 0.048$ ). The Granger causality test of the opposite direction was statistically insignificant ( $F = 1.52, p = 0.218$ ). This observation shows a possibility that the U.S. government was projecting the Wuhan lab leak theory to divert attention from the deteriorating pandemic situation within the country. Especially early in the pandemic, when the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was largely contested by the mainstream media, the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was described as a way for the Trump administration to shift blame. For example, a *Voice of*

*America* item on April 30, 2020, titled “Coronavirus 'Not Man-Made,' US Intelligence Concludes,” quoted a critic of the Trump administration who argued that Trump was politicizing the intelligence apparatus in the investigation of the *lab leak theory* (VA8). The critic was quoted as saying, “It certainly is unusual, and reflects the politically charged nature of the topic as the Trump administration tries hard to deflect attention from its own performance during the pandemic” (VA8). Another *Washington Post* article published on April 16, 2020, titled “Trump, aides float outlier theory on origins of coronavirus,” made a similar point. It framed the *lab leak theory* as a “baseless conspiracy theory” that was “unsubstantiated,” and criticized both the U.S. and China for being “willing to use shaky theories and propaganda to divert attention from problems in their pandemic response” (WP15). This relationship was also picked up by the Chinese media and formulated the strategic narrative that the *lab leak theory* was *fabricated as a political weapon* to smear China. Although the U.S. media stopped spelling out that the *Wuhan lab leak theory* could likely be a diversion of public opinion, the Chinese strategic narrative continued to use this argument to refute the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, which gained more credibility in the mainstream later.

### *Remediation of strategic narratives*

Research question 3 seeks to understand the ways strategic narratives compete in a global crisis in an effort to reshape worldviews. The most direct way to evaluate the amplification of a strategic narrative is through assessing its remediation in the news media in another country, as research question 3.1 asks. Granger causality tests showed how likely the same strategic narrative would be covered in foreign news the

next day when it was projected in the news environment the current day. Strategic narratives can be relayed in various ways, such as outright adaptation, negotiation, or rejection. Since Granger causality tests only infer if strategic narratives were picked up by foreign news media, this subsection would illustrate with examples how the remediation took place. Overall, Chinese news media were likely remediating two issue-level strategic narratives and one on the identity level. The U.S. media were likely remediating one issue-level strategic narrative. The Chinese news media showed a tendency to cite the U.S. strategic narrative and provide a rebuttal. Analyses later in this chapter further showed that other Chinese strategic narratives were employed to respond to these U.S. strategic narratives. On the other hand, the U.S. also rejected accusations on the issue level and engaged in the contest using other strategic narratives. Regardless of the ways these strategic narratives were reframed, by stimulating more news coverage in foreign media, an agenda-setting effect might be triggered.

#### U.S. strategic narratives in Chinese news media

Granger causality test results showed that the U.S. strategic narrative *China struggled to contain COVID-19* Granger caused its next-day coverage in Chinese news media ( $F = 18.10, p < 0.001$ ). The time series data of the Chinese coverage of this strategic narrative did not Granger cause the time series measurement of the same strategic narrative in the U.S. media the next day ( $F = 1.62, p = 0.204$ ). A closer look into the news coverage in China suggested that the strategic narrative was rejected by Chinese news media. The Chinese strategic narrative would target foreign media and refute them directly. Sometimes, the Chinese media would generalize the criticisms from

the U.S. news media and other Western outlets to suggest that the West was amplifying negative news or even creating propaganda. For example, early in the pandemic, a *Global Times* opinion piece published on February 11, 2020, titled “Why the West is overreacting to coronavirus,” commented on how Western media was exaggerating the course of the pandemic in China (GT16). It argued that while Western media “acted out of their old habits as they demean China and its people,” “China has taken swift, effective and successful measures to curb the outbreak of NCP (novel coronavirus pneumonia)” (GT16). The exact accusation from the Western media was not spelled out but it can be inferred that the Western media suggested the outbreak was out of control in China. The same pattern persisted and can be observed throughout the pandemic. By the end of 2022, a *People’s Daily* article reported how the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson was “responding to some Western media outlets which have discredited China’s COVID policy shift and hyped that China’s epidemic fight has failed” (PD10). Sometimes, Chinese media were explicit about the arguments they were refuting. For instance, a *CGTN* item on February 8, 2020, titled “Normal & abnormal things about coronavirus outbreak in China,” complained about the reporting of alleged minor issues such as “some newspapers” that said China has not enough test kits” (CG6). Another *Global Times* opinion piece published on December 26, 2022, characterized what it identified as a coordinated anti-China tone in Western media:

The Associated Press on Sunday posted an article entitled “China’s COVID-19 surge raises odds of new coronavirus mutant.” A report by the Telegraph on the same day said China’s COVID-19 “catastrophe put the global economy

at risk.” An opinion piece by *Washington Post*'s editorial board brazenly attributed China's surge of infection to vaccines, claiming that “China unwisely eschewed the effective mRNA vaccines for less-effective Chinese-made shots.” For Western countries, especially the US, the matter has never really been related to the epidemic or how China responds at any time. (GT17).

Media articles from various sources were listed and exemplified the “malicious intentions” in the Western media that “badmouth” the pandemic situation in China.

Another U.S. issue-level strategic narrative that was very likely relayed by the Chinese media was the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, where the U.S. news Granger caused its coverage in Chinese news ( $F = 13.35, p < 0.001$ ) but not the other way around ( $F = 0.11, p = 0.737$ ). An analysis of the news coverage shows that the Chinese media was rejecting the *lab leak theory*. Since the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was discounted by the U.S. mainstream media early in the pandemic, Chinese media quoted them directly as sources. For example, the *New York Times* was quoted by the *People's Daily* on May 1, 2020, to support the argument that the Trump administration was claiming there was evidence to “link the coronavirus with a Chinese lab” (PD12). In addition, *CGTN* coverage on May 5, 2020, titled “Ample evidence to show Pompeo is lying,” cited four expert opinions in *Business Insider* to explain why a lab accident would be “extremely unlikely” (CG7). Nevertheless, as the U.S. mainstream media started giving more credence to the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, Chinese media stopped citing the U.S. media. Politicians and governments were then accused by Chinese media of promoting the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. On August 2, 2021, a *China Daily* article

reported that “U.S. politicians, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken” insisted on investigating the lab leak theory that had been deemed “extremely unlikely” (CD3). There were also instances when Chinese media was actively debunking the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. As the U.S. relaunched virus origin investigations in mid-2021, the *lab leak theory* reached its peak (see Appendix Figure J4). Chinese news sources such as this *CGTN* report on July 31, 2021, titled “Expert: Lab leak theory hinders global coronavirus origin-tracing,” raised the issue and tried to dismiss the *Wuhan lab leak theory* with expert opinion (CG8). The article scrutinized the evidence supporting the *lab leak theory* with analysis from Chinese scientists. This example demonstrates that the U.S. strategic narrative might have dominated the media environment, forcing Chinese media to engage in the argument. As a result, the strategic narrative was covered by the Chinese media to become a major dispute between the U.S. and China in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.S. strategic narrative on the identity level, *the Chinese government lacks transparency*, was likely covered by Chinese news media to be refuted as well. Granger causality tests showed that the time series data of this strategic narrative from Chinese news media likely followed their U.S. counterparts in projecting this narrative ( $F = 36.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The opposite direction shows no statistically significant relationship ( $F = 1.45$ ,  $p = 0.342$ ). The previous chapters showed that this U.S. strategic narrative was weaving the *lack of transparency* in the Chinese government storyline through various stages of the pandemic, from the unclear virus transmissions in early 2020, to the inconclusion on origin tracing since 2021, and the lack of data after China opened up in late 2022. A closer look at how Chinese media



relayed this U.S. strategic narrative shows how the Chinese media attempted to navigate this powerful narrative at every stage. To carry out this analysis, examples of how Chinese sources attempted to counter the *lack of transparency* narrative were taken from each of these stages in the pandemic coverage.

Early in the pandemic, a *Global Times* article published on February 19, 2020, titled “Does China show lack of transparency on coronavirus epidemic,” reported that “Some Western media and White House officials have recently made unnecessary and groundless claims saying that China has shown a ‘lack of transparency’ in dealing with information related to the novel coronavirus epidemic” (GT18). The article continued to list the information released by the Chinese government. On origin tracing, Chinese news media also make direct reference to the accusations from the U.S. government and media. A *China Daily* article published on August 11, 2021, quoted the allegation from Washington that “Beijing devoted ‘enormous resources to deceit and disinformation’” and the U.S. “vowed to continue to ‘demand transparency’” (CD6). Another *People’s Daily* article published on September 03, 2021, stated that “the United States has kept pressing the WHO to once again send investigators to Wuhan, citing the need for openness and transparency” (PD16). The U.S. demand for transparency from China was reported but refuted by Chinese media. Finally, Chinese media also reported the official response from the government against the lack of data allegations since late 2022. A *Global Times* article on January 4, 2023, quoted the response from the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson “when asked about the latest comment from US officials criticizing China for lacking transparency in COVID information,” “We truly hope the focus will be on tackling

the virus rather than politicizing the COVID issue” (GT19). The above examples showed that Chinese news media systematically pointed to the strategic narrative from the U.S. to negotiate against it. This effort was further enhanced by working with other Chinese strategic narratives, as analyzed in the next subsections.

#### Chinese strategic narratives in U.S. news media

The only Chinese strategic narrative that was likely systematically reported in the U.S. was the *Fort Detrick leak theory*. Its projection in the Chinese media Granger caused the next-day U.S. coverage, with statistical significance ( $F = 7.49$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ). The Granger causality test in the reversed direction was not statistically significant ( $F = 1.45$ ,  $p = 0.229$ ). A more in-depth analysis of the examples from the U.S. media that carried this strategic narrative showed that there were two major patterns in the ways the *Fort Detrick leak theory* was relayed. One was descriptive reports in international news. In this case, the U.S. news merely covered the speeches delivered by Chinese officials. For example, in a *Washington Post* article published on May 28, 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CMFA) press briefing was reported. The article largely quoted the remarks from the spokesperson, including his claims of a worldwide network of U.S. biological labs,

Describing Fort Detrick in Frederick, Md., as “full of suspicion,” Zhao said the United States needed to open it up to international scrutiny. “There are more than 200 U.S. biological laboratories scattered around the world. How many secrets are there?” he said. (WP16)

The same descriptive style was also found in *Fox News*, on similar occasions. A *Fox News* item on February 15, 2023, reported another CMFA press briefing, quoting words from the spokesperson who was commenting on the virus origin trace,

Many have raised questions and concerns about U.S. bio-military bases at Fort Detrick and around the world. The WHO and SAGO should take a close look at these clues, effectively cooperate with these relevant countries and share research findings with all parties in a timely way. (FX14)

*Fox News* did note that this was a “debunked theory” but provided no further explanation. These examples showed that the official strategic narrative projected through media events can gain foreign media coverage to a certain extent, without being reframed.

The U.S. media relayed and negotiated the *Fort Detrick leak theory* more in the form of media analysis that scrutinized why China was advancing the *Fort Detrick leak theory*. The *Fort Detrick leak theory* was cited from Chinese news media and the U.S. coverage criticized its rigorousness. For example, in a *New York Times* article published on August 25, 2021, titled “Rejecting Covid Inquiry, China Peddles Conspiracy Theories Blaming the U.S.,” The CMFA and the *Global Times* were referenced for their “unproven ideas that the coronavirus may have first leaked from a research facility in Fort Detrick” (NT12). The article then contextualized the Chinese strategic narrative as part of a continuous “disinformation campaign” and its consequences on scientific origin tracing and U.S.-China relations. On the same day, a *Fox News* item titled “China criticizes US ahead of COVID origins report, peddles conspiracy theories,” scrutinized *CGTN* coverage on virus origin tracing where they

“published a number of articles that aimed to paint the U.S. as desperate to ‘scapegoat’ China while simultaneously pushing conspiracy theories that COVID-19 instead originated at labs in the U.S” (FX15). *Fox News* continued to argue that the U.S. investigations were to “resolve disputes” about virus origin. As the upcoming subsections discussed, these media analyses would lay the groundwork for a direct contest on strategic narratives on virus origin, between the *Wuhan lab leak theory* and the *Fort Detrick leak theory*.

### Responding to issue strategic narratives

The previous subsections illustrated how strategic narratives were relayed by Chinese and U.S. news media. As the in-depth analyses of the Granger casualties suggested, the main purpose of remediating foreign strategic narratives was to refute them, particularly in the Chinese news environment. Put into the context of strategic narrative competition, naming and rejecting foreign narratives could only be the first step. To reshape the meanings in the international news environment, counter-narratives or offensive strategic narratives could be deployed to retake the high ground in the strategic narrative contest. Research question 3.2 asks, how did national media in the U.S. and China respond to each other’s COVID-19 strategic narratives? This comparison probes the projection of an alternative strategic narrative to respond to a foreign competitor. Specifically, this section examines the role of issue-level strategic narratives from the U.S. and China provided alternative storylines to explain the foreign strategic narratives that they rejected. Findings suggest that Chinese strategic narratives were responsive to U.S. accusations. Chinese strategic narratives tried to frame its own pandemic control policies as effective and discredited U.S.

travel restrictions in late 2022 and early 2023 as unjustified. Meanwhile, the U.S. only engaged with China on the virus origin debate.

#### Effective and moral Chinese containment policies

The U.S. strategic narrative *China struggled to contain COVID-19* was relayed and rejected by Chinese media. Granger causality tests suggested that this U.S. strategic narrative Granger caused the Chinese strategic narrative *scientific Zero-COVID policies* ( $F = 38.31, p < 0.001$ ). The Granger causality test in the opposite direction was statistically insignificant ( $F = 0.78, p = 0.377$ ). The analysis shows that the Chinese media was arguing that China put adequate policy response to control the pandemic effectively. The analysis in the previous chapter showed that the storyline of this Chinese strategic narrative was not only rallying support using a frame of “science,” but also trying to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Chinese pandemic response as “scientific.” They served as counterarguments to the U.S. storyline that claimed that Chinese policies were not stopping the spread of COVID-19. The “scientific” frame was especially prominent in late 2022 when the U.S. media reported that the relaxed pandemic control and new virus variants caused an uncontrollable COVID-19 surge in China.

For example, in a *Global Times* article published on November 15, 2022, the Chinese strategic narrative argued that new policies were “optimizations” but not “lying flat” (GT20), which has the meaning of doing nothing in Chinese. The “optimizations” were considered “sticking to dynamic zero-COVID,” which were “more scientific and precise measures” (GT20). In the discussion of possible policy outcomes, Chinese epidemiologists were referenced and argued that “the infection

curve could be flattened only by sticking to strict prevention methods” (GT20). In a *People’s Daily* article published on January 13, 2023, it was reported that the “science-based adjustments” were praised by scholars globally (PD17). The article cited a commentator from Taiwan and a British scholar who was working at a Chinese university to justify that these were claims by ‘global’ scholars. They justified the Chinese policies by pointing to the past performance of the COVID-19 response, which was considered the best in the world “if you look at the statistics” (PD17). Increasing life expectancy, which was “significantly higher” in China than in the U.S., was used as an indicator of successful public health policies, and the article concluded “the COVID situation in the world's second largest economy is improving and some provinces and cities have already passed their infection peaks, and life and work are returning to normal at an accelerated pace” (PD17). This Chinese strategic narrative asserted that the pandemic situation in China was controllable and would further improve because of the scientific approach in policymaking, and this was supported by objective measurements in statistics. Compared to the U.S. strategic narrative, the opposite picture was portrayed: scientific policy decisions helped China overcome the pandemic.

The U.S. strategic narrative *China struggled to contain COVID-19* also Granger caused the Chinese strategic narrative *China puts people’s lives first* ( $F = 24.19, p < 0.001$ ). The Granger causality test in a reversed direction was statistically insignificant ( $F = 0.254, p = 0.614$ ). Similar to the previous strategic narrative, the argument made here is to paint a different picture of the pandemic situation in China. As the analysis in a previous chapter showed, this Chinese strategic narrative weaves

together a storyline that suggests the underlying philosophy of the Chinese pandemic response was to prioritize human life. This noble concept justified the costs of strict containment policies. Thus, life during the pandemic was portrayed as more positive than in the U.S. strategic narrative. The importance of saving human lives was highlighted early in the pandemic, as the mortality rate was relatively high due to the lack of vaccines and cures.

A *People's Daily* article published on March 10, 2020, interviewed multiple foreign experts who praised China. A Canadian epidemiologist was quoted, “‘If I had COVID-19, I'd want to be treated in China,’ he said. ‘They know and they care about keeping people alive, and they do it successfully’” (PD3). The article continued to cite the lower mortality rate in China (outside Wuhan) compared to the rest of the world, 0.7% and 3-4% respectively (PD3). The “lives first” philosophy was described as producing a positive outcome for the people. The same storyline persisted as the low mortality rate was maintained. The “live with the virus” approach was rejected and the comparison between China and the U.S. on casualty count was highlighted, where China had “not reported a single death since January” (2021) and the U.S. “lost more than 754,000 lives” respectively (PD4). This strategic narrative was stable until late 2020 when the infection numbers and death count were on the rise amid the “optimization” of Zero-COVID. The interpretation of “people’s lives” was thus reframed to include social and economic life. For example, in a *Global Times* article published on November 29, 2022, titled “Epidemic control measures should be lifted in a timely manner to minimize inconvenience to people: NHC,” it was stated that “China announced optimized policies to reduce the impact of epidemic on people's

life” (GT21). The article used a risk management concept to justify how the new policies can protect lives and “minimize the impact of the epidemic on people's lives” at the same time (GT21). Overall, the strategic narrative showed the adjustment of pandemic policies was made based on the changing pandemic situation, under the principle of “lives first” (CG2).

#### New travel restrictions were unjustified

In late 2022, the U.S. and other countries reimposed COVID-19 testing requirements on travelers leaving from China. The U.S. strategic narratives suggested that there was a lack of evidence from China about the pandemic situation and potential virus variants (as explored in the previous chapter). This strategic narrative Granger caused the Chinese strategic narrative *U.S. discriminatory travel restrictions* ( $F = 10.31$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) in a subgroup analysis that only included data from 2022-2023, representing the timeframe covering the new policy. The reversed Granger causality was statistically insignificant ( $F = 2.78$ ,  $p = 0.096$ ). As illustrated in the previous chapter, this Chinese strategic narrative claimed that new travel restrictions were biased against China, aligned with the U.S. attempt to undermine the country. The Granger causality here indicates that the Chinese strategic narrative was likely responding to the U.S. accusations on data availability. It suggests that the Chinese strategic narrative might have tried to dismantle the validity of the reason to impose new testing policies, to prove that there were other motives behind it. A *Global Times* article published on December 29, 2022, titled “Travel curbs targeting China 'discriminatory,' against trend,” described the Chinese effort in monitoring and sharing the data on virus variants; a health official was quoted, “in recent weeks, we



have monitored thousands of samples, but we did not detect an original strain, or Delta variant, nor any new variant, as the US, Japan and some other countries claimed” (GT9). The official further argued, “China, just like other parts of the world, has suffered the impact of COVID-19, thus, if we detected a new variant, there's no reason we would hide any alarming signs from the public” (GT9). Another *Global Times* article further pointed out that “from a scientific perspective, danger of new variants emerging from China is very little”; and “specimens submitted to international database GISAID by China shows China's COVID outbreak is being driven by existing strains and there is no evidence of new important variants” (GT11). By demonstrating that China was sharing data and the risk of new variants was low, the Chinese strategic narrative highlighted that the new travel restrictions were unnecessary. It opened up the opportunity to frame these travel restrictions as political, and as analyzed in the previous chapter, connected to the history of the U.S. in “othering” and discriminating against Asians (PD11).

Similarly, the U.S. accusation was likely refuted by another Chinese strategic narrative, *scientific Zero-COVID policies*. The U.S. strategic narrative *lack of scientific evidence from China* Granger caused this Chinese strategic narrative in the subgroup analysis ( $F = 42.90, p < 0.001$ ). The opposite direction of the Granger causality test was statistically insignificant ( $F = 2.11, p = 0.146$ ). Taken word for word, the Chinese strategic narrative was directly arguing the opposite – the pandemic responses were scientific, to falsify the ground for new travel restrictions. A *People's Daily* report on December 29, 2022, covered the official response from Chinese officials on the measures against travelers leaving China, “This [COVID

policy shift] is scientific, timely and necessary. The purpose is to maximize the safety and health of the people and minimize the impact of the epidemic on economic and social development” (PD10). A smooth transition from tight COVID-19 control to normality was described, citing a passing epidemic peak (PD10). This example shows that the Chinese strategic narrative tells a story of successful policy change based on science, but “some Western media deliberately hyped up or even distorted the adjustment” (PD10). Another *Global Times* article published on January 30, 2022, titled “China achieves smooth transition as COVID wave ebbs despite US, Western media smears,” targeted the U.S. criticism of Chinese data availability,

When claiming that the current COVID-19 epidemic wave in China is nearing its end, the Chinese CDC cited a load of statistics. It cannot be ruled out that these media will once again accuse these data of not being true. (GT22)

The strategic narrative suggests that China did provide statistics but was ignored by Western media. It was claimed that “China has delivered a satisfactory answer sheet” where “dynamic zero-COVID policy and China's rapid pass of the infection peak in just more than one month can be seen as triumph” (GT22). Again, by compiling evidence to prove that Chinese policies were scientific, and based on data, it created the space to interpret the true intention of the U.S. strategic narrative, which will be discussed in a later subsection.

#### Lab leaks

The topic of virus origin was heavily contested by the U.S. and Chinese strategic narratives. Granger causality tests show that not only did the U.S. *Wuhan lab leak theory* Granger cause the Chinese *Fort Detrick leak theory* ( $F = 7.58$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), but

the test in a reversed direction was also statistically significant ( $F = 4.01$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ). This means that the two strategic narratives were highly interactive. When either one of the *theories* was covered more frequently in the news, the other *lab leak theory* would be more likely to be projected in the news environment the next day. A self-propelling loop was formed in which the narrative and the counter-narrative appeared to ‘feed’ off the other.

In the Chinese news media, the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was relayed and rejected, as analyzed in the above subsection. In response, the *Fort Detrick leak theory* was projected as an alternative story for virus origin, along with another strategic narrative that claimed *the U.S. fabricated the lab leak theory as a political weapon*. Granger causality tests found that this narrative was also Granger caused by the *Wuhan lab leak theory* ( $F = 7.97$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) but not the other way around ( $F = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.839$ ). Together, the Chinese media suggested that not only was the *Wuhan lab leak theory fabricated to blame China*, but it was also done to cover up a potential *Fort Detrick leak*. For example, a *China Daily* opinion piece that argued for more transparency in U.S. labs. It first dismissed the *Wuhan theory* and highlighted the ill intention behind it,

The White House's recent ‘Chinese lab theory’ has been widely rejected, and even US’ allies have distanced themselves from the groundless slander, despite US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has changed his tone, admitting the US cannot be certain the coronavirus outbreak originated in a Wuhan lab.

(CD5)

Next, it cited figures claiming that there were 1500 lab incidents in U.S. labs from 2006 to 2013, leading to the conclusion that suggests “it is reasonable to be highly suspicious that the security at the US' vast biological laboratories is substandard, and that there are a lot of ‘dirty tricks’ going on inside for fear that the outside world will find out” (CD5). Another *People’s Daily* online article published on January 29, 2021, titled “WHO's 3rd field work in China starts. So, who is impeding COVID-19 global study?” employed a similar logical sequence (PD18). It cited the “fact sheet” published by the U.S. government that proved “the virus might have emerged from the Wuhan Institute of Virology” and rejected it by referencing a U.S. ecologist who worked in the Institute previously, who said that “it was impossible that the virus came from the lab in Wuhan” (PD18). The article then moved on to report that “the Fort Detrick lab was abruptly shut down in August 2019, which aroused doubts among many Americans, with some demanding that the US government disclose more information on the closure of the lab” (PD18).

The same pattern continued as the virus origin debate heated up in mid-2021. A *CGTN* coverage on May 27, 2021, titled “Biden order to review COVID-19 origin revives conspiracy theories,” quoted a U.S. epidemiologist who argued that the origin of COVID-19 was “highly unlikely a lab accident,” and then quoted a Chinese immunologist who called the lab leak theory a “pure fabrication” (CG9). Next, a comment from the CMFA spokesperson was mentioned, “while some people in the U.S. talk about ‘facts,’ what is really on their minds is political manipulation” (CG9). Finally, a Dutch virologist was quoted, who suggested that further virus origin tracing “should be a combination of studies that start where the WHO-China joint team left

off, so that means studies in China and outside of China,” while the CMFA spokesperson urged the U.S. to invite WHO experts to investigate Fort Detrick. These examples show how Chinese strategic narratives were working together to refute the *Wuhan lab leak theory*.

In the U.S. news media, the *Fort Detrick theory* was treated as a fringe conspiracy from China to divert attention. As discussed in the previous subsection, U.S. media responded to the *Fort Detrick theory* with the style of descriptive reporting and media analysis. The former reported how Chinese officials used the *Fort Detrick theory* to accuse the U.S. government of launching virus origin investigation. This is exemplified in a *Los Angeles Times* article published on May 27, 2021, titled “China: Biden playing politics with coronavirus origin probe,” which recorded the sequence of events (LT6). It mentioned how the Biden administration was asking U.S. intelligence agencies to “redouble their efforts to investigate the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, including any possibility that the trail might lead to a Chinese laboratory”; then covering the response from the CMFA spokesperson who claimed, “the U.S. must open itself up to investigations into its biological laboratories, including at the military's Fort Detrick base” (LT6). This type of reporting reciprocated the Chinese official strategic narrative, which amplified the media attention on both *theories*. The U.S. media rebutted the *Fort Detrick theory* in the media analysis-type of coverage but did not directly falsify the “evidence” that pointed to the *Fort Detrick theory*. For example, a *Fox News* item on June 11, 2021, titled “China resurfaces false COVID-19 origin theory linked to Fort Detrick” described,

Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Wang Wenbin ripped the Biden administration for enlisting the intelligence community to further investigate the Wuhan lab leak theory. His remarks echoed a baseless claim pushed for months in Chinese media and government. Officials have argued without evidence that the outbreak was somehow linked to Fort Detrick. (FX16)

After the *Fort Detrick leak theory* was discounted as baseless and without evidence, a State Department spokesperson was then quoted, “The pandemic began in China, yet China continues to obfuscate, not allow access to WHO scientists and experts...” (FX16). Another article from the *New York Times*, published on August 25, 2021, titled “Rejecting Covid Inquiry, China Peddles Conspiracy Theories Blaming the U.S.” (NT12), analyzed how Chinese media promoted the *Fort Detrick leak theory*. First, it explained the efforts by the *Global Times* in conducting an online petition to push for investigations into Fort Detrick and how pop culture was employed to popularize the *Fort Detrick theory*. Next, the *New York Times* scrutinized a Chinese research publication that claimed that “the pandemic may have started in the United States” with the evidence of Fort Detrick lab incidents and “deaths at a nursing home in Virginia in July 2019” (NT12). Finally, it described that “never mind that such claims have been widely dismissed by scientists,” the state media was pushing the conspiracy theory, citing how the Chinese TV series and media reports exaggerated the problems in Fort Detrick. Overall, it gave a comprehensive overview of how China was promoting the *Fort Detrick leak theory* against the *Wuhan lab leak theory*, where the former was assumed to be false.

### *Relationships between identity and issue strategic narratives*

Research question 3.3 probes into the narrative interactions between identities of political actors and policy issues: What were the relationships between strategic narratives on the issue, identity, and system level in the news coverage? The narrative-centric perspective proposed in this study argues that strategic narratives were not only tools for political actors to justify unpopular policies, but also a method of identity construction. By telling stories about policy events, the characteristics of a political actor can be highlighted. This subsection investigates the ways issue-level strategic narratives were constructing and responding to strategic narratives that point to the morals of political actors and the current international system. In this study, previous analyses suggest that the U.S. and China both projected a critical identity narrative about each other. While no specific system narrative was isolated from the corpus, the identity narratives did suggest that both the U.S. and China accepted the assumption of a U.S.-dominant world system. The U.S. strategic narrative *the Chinese government lacks transparency* suggests China was a challenger in the liberal world order, while the Chinese strategic narrative *the U.S. smears China* portrays the U.S. as trying to prevent China from developing into a global power that can change the current global power balance. Under this assumption, the motivations of the two countries were exemplified by issue-level strategic narratives. In the Chinese news media, the identity strategic narrative was responsive to U.S. strategic narratives, which were likely demonstrated as evidence of the U.S. trying to undermine China. In the U.S. media, identity strategic narratives were likely

supported by U.S. issue strategic narratives, showing the efforts of identity construction through policy stories.

#### Responsive Chinese strategic narratives

Chinese identity narrative *the U.S. smears China* was likely employed to discredit the motivation behind criticisms from the U.S. government and news media. First, the Chinese identity narrative was Granger caused by the U.S. issue narrative *China struggled to contain COVID-19* ( $F = 5.91, p = 0.015$ ). The Granger causality test in a reversed direction was statistically insignificant ( $F = 0.004, p = 0.977$ ). As the previous subsection shows, this U.S. issue narrative was relayed and rejected by the Chinese news media. This Granger causality test results demonstrate that Chinese news media might have further refuted the U.S. accusation by highlighting the ill-intentioned motivation of the U.S. Early in the pandemic, the U.S. media was voicing concerns over the deteriorating pandemic situation in China, which was contested by the Chinese news media. For example, a *Global Times* published on February 2, 2020, titled “Using virus to smear China will ‘backfire’,” questioned the intention of U.S. media in judging the effectiveness of Chinese anti-pandemic efforts,

“It is really absurd for the Western media to blame China or Chinese government on the coronavirus” because it is just like “the Black Death in Europe and Hurricane Katrina in the US,” and it is nonsense to blame any government or nation for these kind of crisis. (GT6)

As discussed earlier in the previous chapter, this article contextualized the U.S. accusations as “dirty tricks” that were trying to “smear and demonize China,” stemmed from “Sinophobia” in the West (GT6). In another *Global Times* opinion



piece, published on February 11, 2020, titled “Why the West is overreacting to coronavirus,” the author argued,

No matter what happens in China, the West leaves no stone unturned to mislead the world as it spreads negative, twisted falsehoods. The West has already proven its vindictive and anxious mentality with a large-scale propaganda war against China.” (GT16)

Rejecting the U.S. strategic narrative that suggests COVID-19 was spreading uncontrollably in China, the author referenced the WHO, claiming that,

The WHO also believes that China will effectively contain and eventually defeat the epidemic. But the West and its media remain unhappy with China's measures to fight the epidemic. They are fishing in troubled waters and overreacting to NCP (novel coronavirus pneumonia). (GT16)

By the end of 2022, Western news media again reported the surge of COVID-19 cases as China opened up. Chinese news media again attributed that to the intentions to smear China. An example from the *People's Daily*, published on December 11, 2022, shows that the claims from the U.S. media were first mentioned,

They claimed China's decision was based “on impulse” and was made “with no preparation,” which “risks 1 million COVID deaths in ‘winter wave’.”

They argued it would “cause economic disruption” and “push up global inflation,” posing risks to the whole world. (PD8)

Next, the claims were dismissed by contrasting how the previous tight Zero-COVID was also criticized by the West. The morals of the West were challenged,

The reason for their constant criticism is the entrenched arrogance and prejudice of some Western media outlets. To them, no matter whether it is the anti-epidemic approach, or a development or governance model, as long as it is ‘different,’ it is wrong and bad. (PD8)

The same “double stand” in Western media was raised in another *CGTN* coverage as well. Published on December 24, 2022, titled “Human rights crisis as U.S. COVID-19 cases surpass 100 million,” it contrasted how Western media “loudly denounced China's dynamic zero-COVID policy” in the past years but “all of a sudden U.S. journalists and politicians are concerned for the people of China” when China “optimize” pandemic control (CG10). *CGTN* attributed that as coming from an “imperialist mind.” The U.S. narratives were framed as “China-bashing” for the purpose of “incessant deflection and diversion” of problems in the U.S. Overall, the negative reporting of China on the surge of COVID-19 was embedded into the storyline that suggests the U.S. as an immoral actor, trying to scapegoat and undermine China.

Granger causality tests also showed that the Chinese identity strategic narrative was Granger caused by the U.S. identity strategic narrative that *the Chinese government lacks transparency* ( $F = 14.13, p < 0.001$ ). The Granger causality test in the opposite direction was statistically insignificant ( $F = 0.08, p = 0.774$ ). It suggested that the Chinese media might be trying to contest with the U.S. in reshaping their international images. The Chinese strategic narrative engaged the U.S. in all three stages that the U.S. strategic narrative was employed, as illustrated in the previous chapter. Early in the pandemic, the criticism about the lack of transparency stemmed

from the alleged cover-up of the virus outbreak. The Chinese media carried the official narrative to reject it. As exemplified in a *CGTN* item on April 7, 2020, titled “Chinese embassy refutes ‘cover-up’ allegations on COVID-19 outbreak,” a Chinese Minister rejected the lack-of-transparency allegations on British TV, “China has been sharing information on COVID-19 in an open, transparent and responsible manner with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the international community including the U.S. and the UK” (CG11). The minister then called for cooperation, “all parties should work together to overcome the difficulties rather than use groundless accusations and spread false information without reason” (CG11). Another *China Daily* opinion piece published on February 20, 2020, titled “Coronavirus not China's Chernobyl,” refuted an analogy of Chernobyl that suggested the Chinese government was covering the pandemic. It accused Western media of being “anti-China” and defended that “China maintained transparency as far as releasing information and updating data on the epidemic were concerned” (CD7). The author then interpreted the motives behind the analogy,

...some Western media outlets are trying to create panic across the world and giving a bad name to China's political institutional measures when they should be focusing on working together to contain the epidemic.

It's a pity that their Cold War mentality is prompting some Western media outlets, especially those in the United States, to hype up the epidemic as part of their ‘China threat’ fallacy even in these trying times. (CD7)

This strategic narrative, as analyzed in the previous chapter, connects the history of the Cold War to suggest that the U.S. might have situated U.S.-China relations in the

context of a bipolar competition, coupled with the “China threat” theory. The storyline thus considered these U.S. accusations as political tricks to undermine China.

Chinese news media also negotiated the *lack of transparency* image on virus origin investigations. For example, a *Global Times* editorial published on August 9, 2021, titled “US further smears China as own epidemic worsens,” dismissed the transparency allegations on origin investigations as a political maneuver to rally support for elections (GT). The editorial argued that the U.S.-China conflict was created to “make people forget about the anti-virus failure,” and,

It also wants to exploit the conflict to show that it takes a tougher stance toward China than the Republican government and gain an advantage over the Republicans in this absurd competition. This is a weird tactic to suppress and smear China. The current US administration is as incompetent as the previous one in every aspect. The only ‘highlight’ of the Biden team is to woo US allies to make trouble for China. (GT23)

The editorial portrayed China as a victim of political manipulation that hindered the actual anti-pandemic effort.

At the final stage, criticisms of the lack of transparency after reopening in late 2022 were refuted. A *People’s Daily* article published on November 30, 2021, titled “COVID-19: What could have gone wrong if China had opened up?” wrote,

When some people in the US and some other developed countries accuse another country of not reporting daily number of infections, they probably ignore the fact that the US itself stopped reporting daily COVID-19 cases

since October last year, and miserably failed to curb the spread of the deadly variants of the virus, which raised the death toll in the US to more than 1 million — the highest in the world. (PD19)

This contradictory behavior by “some Western politicians and media outlets” was interpreted as “resorting to bizarre policies to cover up their own countries' failures by disparaging China's spectacular achievements” (PD19). Overall, the Chinese strategic narrative projected the image of the U.S. as leveraging the pandemic to blame China, for political purposes such as shifting attention and rallying support for elections. A selfish and immoral identity of the U.S. was shaped.

U.S. issue narratives supported identity narratives

Meanwhile, the U.S. was likely mobilizing issue strategic narratives to reinforce the offensive identity narrative *the Chinese government lacks transparency*. Two pairs of Granger causality tests suggested this observation. To commence with, the U.S. issue strategic narrative of *the Wuhan lab leak theory* Granger caused the identity narrative *the Chinese government lacks transparency* ( $F = 4.39$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ). The Granger causality test in a reversed direction was statistically insignificant ( $F = 1.59$ ,  $p = 0.209$ ). As analyzed in the previous chapters, the Trump administration praised China for being transparent early in 2020 (FX5). However, this message changed as COVID-19 spread across the U.S. in April 2020, and the Trump administration popularized the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. The origin of the virus then became a source of questions about the transparency of the Chinese government. For example, *Voice of America* coverage published on April 30, 2020, reported that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “questioned China’s transparency, and hinted Beijing may be

continuing to put the world at risk” (VA8). Although the U.S. mainstream media discounted the *Wuhan lab leak theory* at that time, including in this *Voice of America* coverage, the concerns over information from China were consistent. *Voice of America* suggested an “informational fog” in the conclusion, quoting a former CIA officer, “is only compounded by China’s refusal to quickly and transparently come forward with all of the information it has on the origins of the virus” (VA8).

When the Biden administration relaunched the virus origin investigation, the focus of the strategic narrative remained on the inability of China to provide convincing evidence. The argument was illustrated in a *New York Times* article published on May 27, 2021, titled “The Lab-Leak Theory,” which suggested that the reason why the lab leak theory gained credibility was because of the reluctance of the Chinese government to cooperate (NT8). The *New York Times* wrote that, “Chinese officials have refused to allow an independent investigation into the lab and have failed to explain some inconsistencies in the animal-to-human hypothesis” (NT8). Again, despite the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was still contested in 2021, the argument over the *lab leak* was attributed to the information control in China. The lack of conclusion over the credibility of the *lab leak theory* in turn fueled the transparency problem of the Chinese government. Thus, the argument was further reinforced when the *Wuhan lab leak theory* became mainstream as the Energy Department report came out in 2023. U.S. officials were reported to have urged Beijing to be “more forthcoming about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic” (VA6). The argument was made stronger when Beijing took down the data previously shared with the WHO on a website. As *Fox News* reported on March 19, 2023, titled “WHO blasts China for

withholding info on COVID origin after data pulled offline,” China took down the data after evidence may suggest that the virus origin contradicted the Chinese government's claims (FX17). The WHO Director General was quoted,

Access to the data could help finally shed light on the origin of the pandemic, a mystery that has resulted in several plausible explanations but no definitive answer. Ghebreyesus called for China to be transparent with the information, saying the missing evidence “needs to be shared with the international community immediately.” (FX17)

The above examples suggested that although the *lab leak theory* was contested in the U.S. news media, the debates consistently supported the identity narrative that showed the *lack of transparency of the Chinese government*. Both the uncertainty in the *lab leak*, and the alleged refusal to cooperate with the virus origin investigation reinforced the offensive strategic narrative that targeted China.

Finally, the strategic narrative about new travel restrictions in the U.S. appeared to have contributed to the *lack of transparency* image as well. Granger causality test showed that, in a subgroup analysis of data since 2022, the issue narrative *COVID-19 tests required because of the lack of scientific evidence from China* Granger caused the identity narrative ( $F = 15.42, p < 0.001$ ). The reversed Granger causality test was statistically insignificant ( $F = 1.43, p = 0.23$ ). As the previous chapters analyzed, this issue narrative pointed to two problems in the reopening of China in late 2022: the unknown pandemic situation in China amid the COVID-19 surge and the lack of information on potential new virus variants. Like the negotiations of the validity of the *lab leak theory* in U.S. news media, the new travel

restrictions were also contested, mainly on their effectiveness (see Chapter 4 for details). Nevertheless, these debates stirred up public deliberation, which led to different interpretations of the policy itself. The example from a *Los Angeles Times* article on December 29, 2022, titled “Lack of info on China's COVID-19 outbreak stirs global concern,” highlighted the flexibility of strategic narratives in talking to one another. It quoted an infectious disease expert to suggest that “the move by the U.S. may be more about increasing pressure on China to share more information” (LT5). Thus, while the news negotiated the issue narrative, the identity narrative was reinforced. In other words, by setting the news agenda on the issue narrative, it could have already stimulated the projection of an identity narrative.

#### Chapter summary

This chapter examined the relationships between strategic narratives, as well as with pandemic parameters, with Granger causality tests to address research questions 2.3 to 3.3. Granger causality tests show how time series can predict one another. This study aggregated time series data using day as a unit, which measures the prevalence of a strategic narrative in a day in either the U.S. or Chinese media. The pandemic parameters from OxCGRT (Hale et al., 2022) were daily measurements that were merged with the time series data of strategic narratives. Stationarity of the data was examined by the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test and the Kwiatkowski–Phillips–Schmidt–Shin (KPSS) test (Cheung and Lai, 1995; Kwiatkowski et al., 1992). Test results suggested that data should be detrended, which was done by differencing to ensure stationarity. Granger causality tests with statistical significance were presented and in-depth analyses of the relationships showed how strategic narratives were likely



responding to or reinforcing one another, illustrated with examples. Findings demonstrated the ways strategic narratives were contributing to the negotiation of policy perspectives and state identities.

The Granger causality tests between strategic narratives and pandemic parameters demonstrated the different narrative strategies in responding to the pandemic between the U.S. and China. Findings suggest that the Chinese strategic narrative *China puts people's lives first and scientific Zero-COVID policies* were responding to daily COVID-19 cases and deaths, respectively. It was likely that the Chinese strategic narratives were playing a defensive position to justify Chinese pandemic responses, as the government might need to reassure its people and the world that it was putting effort into containing the pandemic when the situation deteriorated. Meanwhile, the U.S. strategic narratives *travel restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19*, and the *Wuhan lab leak theory* were Granger caused by the OxCGRT Containment Health Index in China and more daily new confirmed deaths in the U.S., respectively. Both showed the tendency of U.S. strategic narratives to externalize the threats from the pandemic. The former demonstrated policy responsiveness and preparedness to foreign pandemic developments in the form of narratives, while the latter might have attributed the responsibility for the deteriorating pandemic situation in the U.S. to an external actor.

Next, this chapter examined the narrative contest between the U.S. and. First, Granger causality tests examined the remediation of strategic narratives. Findings suggested that the Chinese media likely relayed the U.S. strategic narratives *China struggled to contain COVID-19*, *Wuhan lab leak theory*, and *the Chinese government*

*lacks transparency*. The U.S. only likely relayed the *Fort Detrick leak theory*. In-depth analyses suggested that the remediation of strategic narratives was the first step to rejecting and negotiating the meanings of certain policy issues or national images. As the following analyses demonstrated, all these relayed strategic narratives were challenged by other strategic narratives in their home country.

Second, Granger causality test results showed the projection of alternative strategic narratives against hostile strategic narratives on the issue level. Chinese strategic narratives were more responsive. *Scientific Zero-COVID policies* was likely responding to *China struggled to contain COVID-19*, and *COVID-19 tests required because of the lack of scientific evidence from China* (in the subgroup analysis of data since 2022); *China puts people's lives first* likely responded to *China struggled to contain COVID-19*; and *U.S. discriminatory travel restrictions* specifically targeted *COVID-19 tests required because of the lack of scientific evidence from China* (in the subgroup analysis of data since 2022). In-depth analyses showed that Chinese media were providing different storylines to portray a different picture of the pandemic situation and policy effectiveness of Chinese containment policies. They aimed at invalidating the U.S. strategic narratives. As the analyses above demonstrated, these efforts were to open up the spaces to interpret the true intention behind the projection of “false stories” from the U.S. media, which were often described as spreading “misinformation.” On the other hand, the U.S. media likely only reciprocated the *Fort Detrick leak theory*, as it was competing with the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. The upcoming analysis suggested that the debate on lab leak theories was a significant

contributor to the U.S. offensive identity narrative, and might have explained why the *Fort Detrick leak theory* gained attention in the U.S. news coverage.

Finally, Granger causality tests examined how the identity narratives were engaged. Findings again pointed to two different approaches from the U.S. and China. The Chinese identity strategic narrative *the U.S. smears China* was building on the efforts of refuting U.S. accusations to “unveil” the true intention in U.S. politicians and news media. It was likely responding to the U.S. issue narratives *China struggled to contain COVID-19* and the U.S. identity strategic narrative that *the Chinese government lacks transparency*. The Chinese offensive identity narrative suggested that the U.S. was trying to leverage the pandemic to undermine China, which was a continual practice in previous years, and to scapegoat China for the ineffective U.S. pandemic control policies. The U.S. was described as an immoral actor who tried to achieve political gains, domestically and internationally, by smearing China. On the contrary, the U.S. strategic narrative *the Chinese government lacks transparency* was likely built on U.S. strategic narratives of *the Wuhan lab leak theory* and *COVID-19 tests required because of the lack of scientific evidence from China*. In-depth analyses suggested that although the two issue strategic narratives were contested in the U.S. media environment, the debates themselves could have driven the identity narrative. In other words, the lack of conclusion in the virus origin search and the discussion to better monitor risks carried by travelers from China post-2022 were attributable to the *lack of transparency* narrative of the Chinese government.

The findings in this chapter highlight the characteristics of the U.S. and Chinese media in projecting strategic narratives. In the case of COVID-19 and related

travel policies, the U.S. was playing offense while China was in a defensive position. The U.S. actively built on pandemic situations in China and strategic narratives around travel policies to reinforce the identity narrative that told the story of a non-transparent, authoritarian China. China, busy refuting the accusations from the U.S., was putting effort into projecting the picture of Chinese expert pandemic control – where tight containment policies and travel restrictions were conducted scientifically and for the noble goal of saving lives. By telling a story of the U.S. employing discriminatory travel policies and baseless accusations, the Chinese identity narrative projected a coherent story of the U.S. suppressing China with unethical means. The strategic narrative resonated with the history of U.S.-China competition and the “China threat theory” to emphasize an East-West conflict.

This chapter shows that strategic narratives and policy tools can be complementary. For example, the new U.S. travel restrictions on travelers from China post-2022 might not only be pushing forward the goals as suggested by its issue strategic narrative, but also as a measure to push for the identity narrative on transparency in China, which could, in turn, put a pressure on the Chinese government to release more data. On the other hand, Chinese strategic narratives demonstrated their stability in explaining policy tools. For example, the *scientific* and *lives first* narratives were woven through policy tools such as the “circuit breaker” flight-ban policy and the reopening of borders in late 2022, two seemingly very different policy approaches. The U.S. and Chinese ways of strategic narrative projection both exhibited their advantage and challenges. The U.S. case demonstrated the flexibility in the media system which allows for a shift in the position on a

strategic narrative, but it could compromise the coherency and power of specific narratives to justify policies. The Chinese case showcased a coherent projection of strategic narratives through heavy state involvement in its media system, but this stability and control could be slow to respond to a needed change in policy or swift challenge from the U.S. government and media. The next concluding chapter will discuss these implications in greater detail, as well as present how this study contributes to the literature on political communication, international relations, U.S.-China relations, and the communication of global health issues.

## Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

This study has presented an in-depth analysis of the strategic narrative projections between the U.S. and China amid the COVID-19 pandemic. With a focus on travel policies, this study shows the ways strategic narratives on travel restrictions, pandemic policies, and virus origin interacted with the characterization and values of the U.S. and China. The findings demonstrated different dimensions in the case of the U.S.-China strategic narratives contest to illustrate the complexity of strategic narrative projection in the contemporary media environment. This study contributes to both the theoretical literature and overall understanding of this phenomenon by proposing a narrative-centric perspective, in which we can understand the choices in constructing and projecting particular narratives in a global crisis to shape worldviews and values. This concluding chapter discusses the findings in the context of the theories presented in this work and highlights the contribution of the narrative-centric approach and human-in-the-loop machine learning in studying international news coverage of a global crisis. The conventional policy-centric approach illustrates how strategic narratives on the issue level justify policies advanced by political actors; the narrative-centric approach complements it by considering the ways storylines in issue-level strategic narratives characterize political actors to support identity-level strategic narratives that describe the motivations and morals of political actors. In terms of methodology, the human-in-the-loop machine learning process in this study showcased the potential to scale up the analysis of strategic narratives, as well as retaining the thick analytical approach traditionally employed.

This study engaged with the literature on various fronts. First, strategic narrative projections were evaluated alongside the contemporary conceptualization of the narrative paradigm. Second, the discussion on narrative opportunities examines the shock COVID-19 brought to the world and how this crisis opened up a gap for new storylines to possibly reshape the identities of political actors. Third, the policy-centric and narrative-centric approaches can shed light on how strategic narratives are employed to persuade political audiences. The literature on propaganda and public diplomacy informs the discussion by considering the dimensions of both factuality and manipulation in analyzing the persuasive nature of strategic narratives. Fourth, this dissertation addresses the role of strategic narratives and international communication in global politics. This study argues that strategic narratives projected in the global media environment have the potential to have tangible policy influence and renegotiate global values and norms.

In summary, this study provided a multidimensional analysis of the strategic narratives contest between the U.S. and China amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on travel policies and the characterization of the U.S. and China through these narratives. Chapter 1 introduces the puzzle of COVID-19 travel policies, which were shown to be inefficient in controlling the spread of the virus but were repeatedly employed and publicized by both the U.S. and China. The chapter also discusses the theoretical framework of strategic narratives as a way to guide the analysis of the international news coverage of the pandemic and related travel policies. Strategic narrative provides a way to understand how the U.S. and China engaged in the interpretative contest in the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 2 continued this

exploration with an analysis of the intersection of theories between journalism studies, political communication, and international relations. This highlighted how narrative as the unit of analysis incorporates the element of media frames, which is useful for analyzing the perspectives a piece of information is presented. The constructivist literature in international relations was reviewed to trace the roots of the strategic narratives framework and the role of narrative in international politics. This review of this literature led to a synthesis of how to theoretically approach the measurement of how countries attempt to shape worldviews with strategic narratives and proposed a narrative-centric approach to analyzing strategic narratives.

Chapter 3 presented the data and methods employed in this study. News data were gathered through the GDELT COVID-19 dataset (The GDELT Project, 2020) and the internet archive (Internet Archive, n.d.). After reviewing the literature on using natural language processing to analyze large news data, this study introduced a human-in-the-loop machine learning analysis to identify strategic narratives as well as a follow-up analysis using Granger causality tests to analyze the time series relationships between strategic narratives.

Subsequent chapters showed the results of the analysis. Chapter 4 analyzed Chinese strategic narratives of interest identified from the news data, which was discussed alongside the strategic narratives identified from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs data (Mochtak and Turcsanyi, 2021). Chinese strategic narratives were projected with high consistency. Issue-level narratives engaged in justifying extreme containment policies and refuting U.S. accusations, while the identity-level narrative portrayed the U.S. as an immoral actor who leveraged the pandemic to



undermine China and divert attention from its failure to contain COVID-19 domestically. Chapter 5 analyzed U.S. strategic narratives from the news data, accompanied by the analysis of strategic narratives identified from the U.S. Presidency Project data (Woolley and Peters, 1999). U.S. strategic narratives were found to be less coherent, in particular as storylines were often contested in U.S. media. However, it also means that these narratives were more flexible and responsive, adapting to the changes in the pandemic.

U.S. strategic narratives portrayed China as struggling to contain the virus while trying to hide unfavorable information. The U.S. employed new testing requirements for travelers from China in 2023 and kept investigating the virus origin. The U.S. identity narrative highlighted the lack of transparency in Chinese political institutions and China's reluctance to reveal the facts that could have helped global pandemic control. Chapter 6 presents Granger causality test findings to analyze the interactivity among strategic narratives and pandemic parameters. Test results show China likely utilized strategic narratives to reassure the public when the pandemic worsened, while the U.S. might have been externalizing COVID-19 threats by justifying travel restrictions when China signaled more pandemic controls. China systematically responded to U.S. accusations by remediating offensive U.S. strategic narratives and refuting them by projecting alternative strategic narratives. The identity-level strategic narrative also responded by contextualizing U.S. accusations as a way of undermining China. Meanwhile, the U.S. actively utilized issue-level strategic narratives on travel restrictions and virus origin tracing to reinforce the identity narrative that China lacked transparency.

### *Studying strategic narratives in the 2020s*

Scholars across academic disciplines have been paying more attention to the role of news and media in international affairs. While the theoretical basis of the strategic narratives framework was built on the conceptualization of soft power amid the narrative turn in the field of international relations, scholars recently brought up the concept of “sharp power” to describe the ways states project influence abroad (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). In the realm of soft power, states influence the world by “winning hearts and minds” with persuasive means, or non-coercive means that influence through identity and values (Roselle et al., 2014). Nevertheless, sharp power was presented as a more comprehensive concept to capture the aggressive engagements that project soft influence. Specifically in the global media sphere, sharp power influence comes in the form of information manipulation to disrupt political environments (Walker, 2018). Instead of the conventional soft power engagements that seek to gain agreement from the target audience, sharp power seeks to reshape the information dynamics abroad. Sharp power is harder than soft power in a way that it penetrates foreign information environments and forces public deliberation to change accordingly (Nye, 2018). Scholars argue that sharp power is not the opposite of soft power and states can wield both at the same time (Walker, 2018). It means that, for global media engagements, they can be projecting a favorable story persuasively but disrupting foreign media landscape simultaneously.

This study examines the use of narratives in the first global crisis since the sharp power turn. The projection of strategic narratives not only publicizes a favorable interpretation of the reality, but also competes with rival alternatives in the

media environment. This study identifies both, specifically the use of offensive strategic narratives by the U.S. and China. While this study is not trying to argue if the U.S. and China were aiming to meddle with foreign information environments using strategic narratives, the sharp power concept adds another dimension to the potential of these strategic narratives in influencing global politics. Findings in this study show the utility of the strategic narratives framework in providing a thick analysis of storylines; in terms of their constructions that connect actors, events, behaviors, and their characterization, as well as the contestation and transformation within storylines.

To return to the question raised in the introduction to this dissertation, why would political actors employ a seemingly inefficient travel policy, and what is the role of strategic narratives in the process? In short, this study argues that strategic narratives were working side-by-side with other policies. Travel policies such as new testing requirements in the U.S. or the “circuit breaker” in China not only serve their own proclaimed purposes for infection control, but they also contribute to strategic narratives projection. In other words, it’s important to understand both the real-world effect and the communicative effect of the choice of specific policies. This study employs a narrative-centric perspective, which considers reshaping the identities of political actors as a goal, to conceptualize the interactions between strategic narratives and policies. For example, U.S. strategic narratives that justified new testing requirements on travelers from China in early 2023 reinforced the identity narrative that China lacks transparency. In response, China projected a strategic narrative that portrayed this policy as discriminatory and wove it into the identity narrative of the

U.S. smearing China to prevent its post-pandemic recovery and development. The following subsections in this chapter discuss these findings through various theoretical lenses. The contribution to methodology and implications to the policy realm is presented, followed by a discussion of the limitations of this study. Finally, this chapter ends by proposing future research directions.

### *Understanding and evaluating strategic narratives*

In this section, the case of the U.S.-China strategic narrative contest over the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions is discussed in the context of the literature on strategic narratives, political communication, and international relations.

#### Evaluating strategic narratives

The narrative paradigm provided the criteria for evaluating the quality of strategic narratives. Conventionally, scholars examine narrative probability and fidelity, which are the coherence of stories and their “truthfulness” according to the perceived reality (Fisher, 1984). The concepts were echoed in the study of strategic narratives, where successful narrative projection was considered to have relied on the consistency of issue-level narratives and their alignment with the suggested worldview from a political actor (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). Findings in this study show that both the U.S. and Chinese strategic narratives exhibited high narrative fidelity. In the Chinese strategic narratives, pandemic policies and travel restrictions such as the “circuit breaker” were described as a part of a scientific response that aimed to save the lives of the people. At the same time, the U.S. was portrayed as incorrectly accusing China of lacking transparency and applying travel restrictions in a

discriminatory fashion. These issue-level strategic narratives match with an offensive identity narrative that argues the U.S. was an immoral actor who has been smearing and undermining China to earn political support. On the other hand, the U.S. strategic narratives also showed narrative fidelity. The U.S. issue-level strategic narratives suggested a China that was incapable of handling the pandemic while trying to hide related evidence. U.S. policies such as travel restrictions and virus origin tracing were thus employed to protect American citizens and force more transparency from China. These stories fit well into the worldview that China lacks transparency, which can jeopardize the safety of the U.S. and the world.

The U.S. and China performed differently in terms of narrative probability and consistency. Chinese strategic narratives were consistent throughout the pandemic. Early in the pandemic, the Chinese news media projected a scientific pandemic response storyline, which argued that tight containment policies that heavily disrupted daily activities were formulated based on science. The scientific rigor was supported by the effectiveness of policies such as the so-called “close-loop management” that isolated the risks of importing foreign COVID-19 cases. The early success of these Zero-COVID policies gave credence to the scientific health response storyline that suggested that it was a superior policy choice. The same strategic narrative was continuously employed into the later stages of the pandemic in 2022, when new virus variants were causing a surge in caseload amid the struggle to maintain stringent policies. Later, policy changed, including the relaxation of containment policies and travel restrictions, were also framed under the same strategic narratives that used terms such as “dynamic zero” and “policy optimization”

to present new measures as scientific. The storyline did not change despite the fact that health policies had completely shifted.

Meanwhile, the U.S. news media did not project strategic narratives as coherently as in the Chinese news. In the free media market in the U.S., strategic narratives about policies often saw negotiations between various stakeholders as opposed to faithful adherence to state messaging. One of the prime examples is the reporting on travel restrictions such as the screening and quarantine early in the pandemic and the new testing requirements in early 2023. On the one hand, it was common for the U.S. news to reiterate official justifications for these measures. As found in many examples, U.S. news would introduce an event with descriptive information and then interview sources to comment on the event. Thus, the storylines from government officials could be amplified merely by the getting quoted. On the other hand, opinions from expert sources could contest the official narrative. As the analyses in previous chapters show, the efficiency of travel restrictions was questioned, prompting the risk of delegitimizing these policies, which could undercut the persuasiveness of the strategic narrative.

However, the literature on the narrative paradigm later pointed out that narrative probability and fidelity are not entirely accurate for judging the quality of narratives as incoherence and contradictions can introduce new ideas to the narrative, and values in the audience can be negotiated through alternative storylines (Stroud, 2002). Sometimes, narratives can maintain persuasiveness through transformation or reinterpretation (McClure, 2009). The findings in this study demonstrated the other side of narrative probability – flexibility. The effort to maintain narrative *probability*

could hurt the *flexibility* of a political actor to adapt to a changing policy situation. For the Chinese government in late 2022, it was difficult to maintain a scientific policy narrative. As the infection numbers went up and public discontent grew because of the tight Zero-COVID measures, the “effectiveness” logic in the scientific policy narrative was challenged, if not invalidated. Nonetheless, the Chinese strategic narrative reiterated that the policy change was based on science but continued to rely on the previous effectiveness early in the pandemic to justify it. “Science” was thus rendered into a catchphrase to evoke support, even as the actual situation in the pandemic situation deviated from the projected storyline.

On the other hand, the incoherence in the U.S. strategic narratives allows the transformation of the once-considered fringe *Wuhan lab leak theory* into a plausible scenario. As discussed above, the free media market gave space for contradictory frames of the *Wuhan lab leak theory* to compete. Early in the pandemic, the *Wuhan lab leak theory* that emerged from far-right sources was not welcomed by the mainstream media, despite the Trump administration and *Fox News* suggesting its likelihood. The *Wuhan lab leak theory* made a comeback in 2021 when the Biden administration relaunched virus-origin investigations. Fueled by the lack of a conclusion and the strong reaction from the Chinese government, the *Wuhan lab leak theory* slowly entered the mainstream. By the time the U.S. Energy Department report in 2023 suggests that COVID-19 was likely leaked from the Wuhan lab, the tide in mainstream media had turned to support the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. Although various U.S. government agencies gave contradictory assessments of the virus origin theories, that did not stop the strategic narrative from favoring the *high likelihood* frame but

not the *low confidence* frame for the *Wuhan lab leak theory*. It should be noted that some news reports and the White House still maintain that the source of the virus was unknown. The freedom in the U.S. media environment means that complete narrative coherence would be unlikely, but that also provides a fertile ground for public deliberation to happen and shape strategic narratives according to the changing policy situation. These examples show the added dimensions of narrative transformation and reinterpretation thickened the analyses of narrative probability and fidelity.

#### Strategic narrative opportunities

The theoretical framework of strategic narratives explains that storylines are built from various narrative elements, which are more abundant in times of crisis and uncertainty (Kluver et al., 2019; Miskimmon et al., 2013b). Furthermore, the global COVID-19 pandemic was an emerging crisis where conventional authority, the science community, had yet to explain the deteriorating pandemic situation (Nielsen et al., 2020). This void presented an opportunity for political actors to more freely utilize raw narrative material to assemble strategic narratives that can promote their own policy goals. This can be particularly helpful when political actors are trying to formulate offensive strategic narratives that aim to redefine status quo universal values, identities, and the construction of the current international system (Yang, 2021). Findings in this study show that uncertainty in COVID-19 gave rise to various possibilities to support strategic narrative projections, to the extent that political actors could be deliberately maintaining the murkiness in policy issues to sustain a storyline. In the U.S. news media, the strategic narratives projected in late 2022 and early 2023 on the new testing requirements for travelers from China were constructed



on the uncertainty of the COVID-19 surge in China. As the world had limited knowledge of the actual public health situation in China, U.S. strategic narratives were able to project some likely scenarios with the storylines, namely the risk of triggering new waves of infections and the likelihood of virus mutation. The former was based on the unknown caseload from China and the latter pointed to the lack of virus genome information.

Another prominent example is the narrative contest on lab leak theories. On one hand, both the U.S. and China projected a version of the lab leak theory into the media environment without disclosing concrete proof. The *Wuhan lab leak theory* was picked up earlier in the pandemic by the Trump administration who suggested that there was evidence, but it was not disclosed. The *Fort Detrick theory* was propagated by Chinese officials and entered the Chinese news media. It did not directly claim that COVID-19 was leaked from the U.S. lab, but pointed to some suspicious incidents that aligned with unknown infections in nearby places. Neither the U.S. nor Chinese governments officially confirmed the lab leak theories. By maintaining the uncertainty, the U.S. strategic narrative was able to reiterate the Wuhan lab leak theory to call for more investigations, reinforcing the identity strategic narrative that the Chinese government was not transparent. Chinese strategic narratives reciprocated by adopting a similar storyline which demanded investigations in U.S. labs if the Wuhan lab was to be examined.

On the other hand, both the U.S. and China did not clarify the lab leak theories with strong evidence. For the U.S., it was likely because the *Fort Detrick theory* was treated as disinformation. U.S. news media did not take it seriously and it was widely

dismissed. From the Chinese perspective, although the complete falsification of the *Wuhan lab leak theory* was unlikely, it created an opportunity for projecting the identity narrative that portrayed the U.S. as an immoral actor who tried to use the pandemic to smear China for political purposes. This argument was particularly strong early in the pandemic when the Trump administration first brought up the *lab leak theory*. The U.S. mainstream media framed the *Wuhan lab leak theory* as politically mobilized by the far right, which used the *Wuhan lab leak theory* to gain political support for elections as the pandemic worsened. The Chinese news media borrowed this argument and integrated it into their strategic narrative, referencing U.S. news sources (as discussed in previous chapters). Therefore, the uncertainty created both challenges and opportunities for Chinese strategic narratives. Chinese news media grasped the chance early on but failed to transform the strategic narrative when the U.S. mainstream turned to adopt *the Wuhan lab leak theory*. It implies that narrative opportunities might be easier to be captured in media systems that have more flexibility. The coherent control over strategic narratives showed its limits in embracing new opportunities that emerged in the changing policy situation, whether from changes in the situation on the ground or from competing narratives projected by other nations.

#### Strategic narratives as persuasion

The literature review discussed two approaches to conceptualizing strategic narratives. The conventional policy-centric perspective considers strategic narratives as tools to rally support for policies (e.g., Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2016; O'Shea, 2019; Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). This study, however, proposed a narrative-centric

perspective that considers the use of strategic narratives to purposefully shape the identities of political actors and worldviews. From the policy-centric perspective, findings from this study show the U.S. and China both justify their extraordinary public health measures and their effectiveness through strategic narratives.

Qualitatively, Chapters 4 and 5 describe in detail how containment and travel policies were legitimized by the need to curb COVID-19 transmission. For example, both the U.S. and China externalized the pandemic risk to support policies such as testing requirements and inbound quarantine. The U.S. strategic narratives were more based on a risk mitigation storyline which explained the policies as lowering the likelihood of importing the virus. It should also be noted that the U.S. government in particular securitized its strategic narratives to highlight the pandemic threat to the country and rallied for a patriotic campaign against COVID-19.

In China, the strategic narrative projection was coherent in both the news media and the government. Tight border policies such as the "circuit breaker" were portrayed as scientific because of their effectiveness. The anti-pandemic effort was also framed as a "war," where the Communist Party was described as leading China to victory. The Granger causality tests showed the strategic narratives of *scientific policy* and the *lives first philosophy* were responding to the deterioration of the pandemic situation. These narratives were employed to convince the audience to trust Chinese health policies, drawing on previous success. Internationally, Chinese strategic narratives were Granger-caused by U.S. strategic narratives that portrayed a grim reality in China. Chinese strategic narratives refuted those accusations and remained the *scientific policy* and *lives first philosophy* narratives to frame policies as

a continuation of Zero-COVID. The policy-centric perspective helps delineate how storylines facilitate the implementation of policies and support the policies when the situation deteriorates.

Meanwhile, the narrative-centric perspective considers identities and values-related engagements as the “outcome” of strategic narratives. In other words, it concerns how strategic narratives were employed to contest soft power (Miskimmon et al., 2017; Roselle et al., 2014). This study found that in the case of COVID-19 and related travel policies, the U.S. was in an offensive position while China was playing a defensive role. Granger causality test results in Chapter 6 showed that U.S. issue-level strategic narratives were contributing to the identity narrative that suggested the Chinese government lacked transparency. Both the *Wuhan lab leak theory* and the *new testing requirements* point to information censorship in China, consistent with its authoritarian image perceived in the liberal world. The *new testing requirements* example further implied that policies themselves might carry latent utilities that work with strategic narratives, on top of the policy goals they claimed. At least, in this case, the *new testing requirements* were aimed at preventing the unknown COVID-19 spread from China to the U.S., as well as understanding the evolving virus genome. From health expert opinions at that time, and from the contemporary perspective, these *tests* could not yield their intended outcomes. Nevertheless, they served as a signal that indicates the lack of reliable information from China. While the tangible policy impact on the Chinese government might be negligible, it created pressure on the national image of China as a transparent and professional part of the international

community. The policy and accompanying strategic narratives amplified the characterization of China, as lacking transparency altogether.

Although China was in a defensive position, it does not mean that Chinese strategic narratives were only trying to falsify U.S. strategic narratives. Findings in Chapter 6 show that Chinese news media systematically remediated and refuted U.S. strategic narratives, employed alternative strategic narratives, and utilized them to project an identity narrative that suggests the U.S. exploited the pandemic to smear China. Criticisms from the U.S. and Western media were remediated and framed as “badmouthing” with “malicious intentions.” Thus, alternative strategic narratives were provided to explain the intentions. The Chinese news media linked the “blame” to the history of racial discrimination in the U.S. and suggested that the “blame” was to provide distractions from U.S. domestic politics and the incapability of the U.S. government. Finally, the identity strategic narrative elevated the discussion to the U.S.-China rivalry, pointing to the “China threat” theory. The storylines were then woven together to align with the Chinese worldview that sees the U.S. as an “imperialist” (CG10) that was preventing the recovery and development of China. It is also worth noting that the Granger causality tests showed these responsive narrative efforts from China were followed by the projection of U.S. strategic narratives, meaning that the Chinese counteractions ran in parallel. This all-out responsive pattern was different from the stepwise pattern observed in the U.S. news media, which saw Granger casualties within the U.S. news environment. Future research may investigate the causes and consequences of the two patterns.

The literature on propaganda and public diplomacy provides frameworks for analyzing the use of information for political persuasion. The former concerns the manipulation of information to achieve political goals (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). In the news environment, political actors will try to deceive the audience by fabricating information or presenting selective facts (Zollmann, 2019). Later, scholars argue that public diplomacy is a better concept for capturing international political communication that does not rely on false information but persuades through identity and value appeals (Gregory, 2008; Melissen, 2005). Nevertheless, the two concepts overlap (Guth, 2009), particularly when messages are heavily framed and present a one-sided story. The propaganda model would consider it as “white” propaganda that does not use false information but shows a biased favorable picture (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). The practice had been observed in the Chinese news media previously (Rawnsley, 2015). This study also found similar patterns in the news coverage of the virus origin tracing from both sides. In the U.S., the propaganda-like news coverage was perpetuated by *Fox News* in early 2020, where the U.S. mainstream media framed the *Wuhan lab leak theory* as political manipulation by the Trump government. Arguably, this triggered a propaganda response from China, which tried to flood the information environment with a similar storyline with a different antagonist. At that time, both lab leak theories were largely treated as propaganda by the U.S. news media, which generally assumed that both lab leak theories were fabricated. Nonetheless, the propaganda properties of the *Wuhan lab leak theory* became unclear when it gained traction later in the pandemic. In other words, the *theory* was not considered propaganda later in the pandemic because

investigations suggested the likelihood of its authenticity. As mentioned above, the virus origin remained inconclusive, as both sides failed to give concrete evidence.

Should the *Wuhan lab leak theory* be considered non-propaganda because the U.S. mainstream media started to endorse it later when more evidence emerged? Alternatively, can the Chinese-propagated *Fort Detrick theory* be considered public diplomacy? This situation presents the limitation of the propaganda-public diplomacy construct. While the lab leak theories contribute to both propaganda and public diplomacy objectives, the “truth” was fluid and unclear. Thus, both concepts might not accurately represent the contest between the two *lab leak theories*. The changing properties made it difficult to define the contest as a propaganda or a public diplomacy competition. The strategic narratives framework better captures the dynamics between the two storylines not only because the constructivist perspective does not enforce a truthfulness judgment on the *theories*, but also because it situates storylines within the boundaries of perceived worldviews projected by political actors to explain the construction of identities and values. It can reconcile the seemingly contradictory behavior of the U.S. news media picking up a story once considered as “fringe propaganda” in a narrative transformation. Looking beyond this case, the theoretical implications can be applied to other cases in international political communication, particularly when events manifest uncertainties in the “facts” being presented.

#### The role of international communication in global politics

In the international relations literature, foreign policy issues can be analyzed through a two-level game framework in which political actors handle international affairs and

domestic politics at the same time (Putnam, 1988). It means that in the international bargaining process between political actors, they must consider the consequences of foreign policies on audience reception at home. Internationally, the bargaining process is affected by the capability of the domestic audience to hold the government accountable as it determines the credibility of signals sent between political actors (Fearon, 1994; Slantchev, 2006). Bridging the two levels, news in a country plays an important role in informing the domestic audience as well as demonstrating public deliberation in front of a global audience. It shows the amalgamation of official perspectives imposed on the foreign policy issue and the negotiations in the public sphere (Entman, 2003; Potter and Baum, 2010), telling the stories that represent the country as a political actor in the international media environment (Kluver et al., 2019). The findings in this study shed light on the two-level games that happened in both the U.S. and China.

Domestically in the U.S., two-party politics was especially salient. From the early travel ban during the Trump administration, to the Wuhan lab leak theory, and finally with the new testing requirements imposed on travelers from China, U.S. strategic narratives were saturated with incoherence related to partisanship. International actors can observe and leverage these internal disputes in the U.S. to formulate strategic narratives against U.S. policies. Chinese media were able to capture the pushbacks from U.S. mainstream media on the Trump administration to delegitimize the travel ban that was not recommended by experts and the WHO, as well as the virus origin tracing in the Wuhan lab that was considered a politized conspiracy. The political chaos signaled through the U.S. news allowed Chinese



strategic narratives to discredit U.S. policies that are targeted at China, weakening the authority of the U.S. in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With significant state involvement, the Chinese news environment did not allow public deliberation as in the U.S. news media. On the one hand, this suggests that the world may find it more difficult to observe the domestic-level game unfolding within China. Chinese state media often reiterate the official narratives, such as frequently quoting the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Chinese pandemic responses. The lack of opposition signals within China might have made it more difficult for China to change pandemic policies. The most prominent example is the relaxation of Zero-COVID in late 2022. Because it was inappropriate for the Chinese media to cover the public outrage and protests against containment policies, the government could not justify the policy turnaround as responding to public opinion. Therefore, it likely encouraged the strategic narratives to cling to the original scientific storyline, which reframed the new policies as “dynamic-Zero” that went through an “optimization” in a way that may sound unnatural to the international audience. On the other hand, the Chinese news coverage did partially reveal the dynamics of the domestic level game in China. Granger causality test results show how Chinese strategic narratives were responding to the pandemic parameters of COVID-19 caseload and casualties. This may imply that the strategic narratives were signaling the challenges of containing the pandemic efficiently, because the *scientific policy* narrative was arguing for trust in Chinese public health policies. Meanwhile, the *lives first* strategic narrative resorted to nationalism, which could signal a “rally 'round the flag” as the crisis was worsening. These signals might be less obvious but

could have provided essential reference points for foreign political actors to formulate policies and strategic narratives when bargaining with China.

In addition to tangible foreign policies, the constructivist perspective also considers the construction of global norms and values. This study provides a narrative-centric approach to understanding the negotiation of world order in the news environment. For example, Chinese strategic narratives tried to establish itself as a credible player who followed a scientific policymaking process in the international system by leveraging the authority of the World Health Organization under the United Nations system. Especially early in the pandemic, the WHO was cited for its support of Chinese health policies and international cooperation. The WHO also advised against travel bans and acknowledged the pandemic containment efforts in China. Later in the virus origin debate, the findings of the WHO-China investigation served as evidence to argue against the Wuhan lab leak theory, which was deemed “highly unlikely.” It put the U.S. in an awkward position when the U.S.-led international norms and systems were working against policies such as the early travel ban in the Trump administration.

To counteract the Chinese strategic narratives that leveraged support from the WHO, Trump analogized the Organization as the “PR agency” for China (FX7). In the Biden administration, the new virus origin search was led by intelligence agencies, creating an opportunity for Chinese strategic narratives to accuse the U.S. of politicizing the investigation and not being “science-based.” U.S. strategic narratives ignored the WHO most often and questioned its credibility, which was crippled by the alleged influence from China. Whether or not the WHO was

socialized to be a Chinese “PR agency,” these strategic narratives dismantled the image of the post-Cold War U.S.-led liberal international system. Successful or not, Chinese strategic narratives projected its regime as integrating into the rules-based current world system. U.S. strategic narratives might have tried to portray China as manipulating pandemic information and the global health system, but at the same time could have jeopardized the global order that the U.S. had been dominating. It shows the potential of strategic narratives in negotiating international norms that shape the legitimacies of policy behaviors.

### Methodology

This study provides thick findings of strategic narratives spanning three years using a human-in-the-loop machine learning analysis to examine a large dataset. This method strives to balance the width and depth of the output provided by natural language processing and qualitative content analysis. The former helps researchers to efficiently uncover patterns in large text-based datasets (Liu et al., 2016; Wilkerson and Casas, 2017); the latter gives meaning to the text categories in context (Guest et al., 2012). The qualitative step is particularly important in this study, because, unlike conventional computational framing analysis which is aimed at identifying frames that can be unbounded by events (Walter and Ophir, 2019), strategic narratives are space-time-specific stories that are only meaningful under their designated context. Therefore, this study analyzed Topic Modeling results to identify strategic narratives qualitatively and built a labeled dataset through content analysis. Next, the entire dataset was analyzed and labeled through supervised machine learning trained by the labeled dataset. Finally, the time series data aggregated by date were further analyzed

quantitatively, which shows Granger causality between strategic narratives and other key variables.

First, this study scaled up strategic narrative identification while delivering detailed analyses of the storylines. Conventionally, the constructivist study of strategic narratives favors a thick analysis of the meanings construed in text. The qualitative-heavy approach sometimes must make compromises in the sample size. While some recent studies tried to expand their analyses by employing significantly more labor resources or relying on purely computational approaches to pick up traces of narratives, the former was less efficient while the latter could overlook meaningful details in the text. Therefore, the unsupervised machine learning step in this study produces topic models as units for qualitative analysis. It reduced the labor needed to read through all the documents to consolidate meanings, while retaining the human involvement in interpreting meanings in context. Computational methods provided quicker access to the structure of a large corpus, boosting the efficiency of qualitative strategic narrative identification.

Second, the computational method allows for an analysis of data spanning a longer period, showing the transformation and coherence of strategic narratives. Not being confined to a smaller sample size means that researchers can examine a longer timeline without being limited to multiple cross-sectional samples. A continuous sample will yield more information to uncover the inner workings of strategic narrative transformation.

Third, the continuous time series data generated by consolidating supervised machine learning results opens other analytical opportunities. In this study, the

responsiveness of strategic narratives to shifting pandemic events and the interactions between strategic narratives were examined. These analyses demonstrated a broader picture of the relationships between variables, thus providing a deeper analysis of how political actors use strategic narratives. The quantified data connects the study of strategic narratives with other analytical tools, encouraging the integration between academic fields and methodological thinking to better understand the flow of international political communication.

### Implications

#### International politics

The findings of this study point to two major implications for international relations. First, the strategic narratives from the U.S. and China were based on very different perceptions of the world and global events. The storylines constructed reality bubbles that were not built on rival opinions, but incompatible “facts.” Unlike a framing contest where rival political actors depart from a shared understanding of the situation but apply different interpretations, competing strategic narratives can point to parallel storylines that describe different “truths” in an international event. The most prominent example of this was the virus origin tracing, where strategic narratives from the two countries promoted contradicting theories of a potential *lab leak* in the other country. Meanwhile, the constructed reality bubbles can be observed in other aspects of pandemic policies as well. After the reopening of China in late 2022, the ways to calculate COVID-19 caseload and casualties were changed and became unavailable, prompting the U.S. to impose new testing requirements on travelers from

China. The uncertainty created by the policy change became a fertile ground for competing strategic narratives. The China narratives pointed to a “normalization” in the post-COVID world, while the U.S. narrative suggested a worsening pandemic situation. As the “reality” diverged when political actors adopted different policies that were justified by strategic narratives in their own constructed reality bubbles, the possibility of reconciliation and cooperation declined.

In the context of U.S.-China relations, strategic narrative contests could exacerbate alternative realities that force political audiences to pick a side. Recent events such as the high-altitude balloon incident showed the consistency in how China employs strategic narratives. While the U.S. claimed a balloon that drifted over its skies in early 2022 as a Chinese spy balloon, China promulgated an alternative storyline that described it as a stray weather airship; both countries accused their rival of being the top-spying country on Earth (Wong and Mulupi, 2023). The strategic narrative projection approach that the Chinese government adopted left very little leeway for bargaining and making compromises. Thus, the use of strategic narratives based on diverging facts could have sent signals of escalation with little ground to back down.

Another implication lies in the persuasiveness of strategic narratives to different political audiences. A nonsensical story to one can be music in another’s ear. On the one hand, political audiences in the liberal democratic world could overlook Chinese strategic narratives and perceive them as propaganda or disinformation. It could lead to an underestimation of the power of strategic narrative. This is not only because strategic narratives that were once conceived as disinformation such as the

*Wuhan lab leak* can eventually win the “hearts and minds,” but also because the presumption of propaganda could dismiss a narrative too early based on a relatively subjective perception of ill intentions in political rivals. Thus, the potential of seemingly fringe storylines should also be taken seriously for their possibility of narrative transformation. On the other hand, the reception of strategic narratives depends on existing worldviews and values in the political audience. Chinese strategic narratives can align with political audiences who share similar beliefs and experiences. For example, China has been expanding its media influence into the developing world (Gagliardone, 2013). By bringing in a new paradigm of news reporting, Chinese news media were reshaping the ways people in other parts of the world perceive the ideal form of journalism (Madrid-Morales and Gorfinkel, 2018). The colonial history and antagonism with the West also mean that Chinese strategic narratives could align with worldviews in some countries in the global South. The potential of an alternative reality bubble constructed by strategic narratives, as opposed to the one constructed by liberal news media, should not be ignored.

#### Communicating health crises

The findings in this study also demonstrated the challenges to communicating global health crises as global politics complicated health information flow. One of the biggest hurdles in the COVID-19 pandemic was the difficulty in communicating accurate health information to the public. Scholars consider the overwhelming amount of information, much of it of poor quality or simply false, in the media environment as an infodemic (Cinelli et al., 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). Strategic narratives could have further exacerbated the problem. Early in the pandemic, the

Trump administration projected the *China virus* strategic narrative to blame China for not containing the virus. It might have nurtured more hate crimes against people of Asian ethnic origin, while simultaneously preventing an informed health response. More importantly, both the U.S. and Chinese governments showed signs of externalizing the virus threat, but in two distinct ways. The U.S. might have blamed China and projected the *Wuhan lab leak theory* when the pandemic situation in the U.S. worsened. It could be argued that these narratives were diverting public attention from the pandemic situation to the attribution of responsibility. While this could be a political move to manage public opinion, the much-needed discussions on local pandemic response could be attenuated.

In China, strategic narratives externalized the pandemic threat by dividing imported and domestic COVID-19 cases into two categories. It legitimized harsh containment policies that put people under long quarantines to isolate the external risks. Meanwhile, strategic narratives kept projecting an optimistic picture even when the COVID-19 caseload surged in late 2022. Both the Zero-COVID policy and strategic narratives had difficulty maneuvering in the new pandemic situation. It not only undermined the flexibility of health responses, but also possibly consumed social and medical resources inefficiently to maintain a Zero-COVID image. More importantly, nationalistic strategic narratives could have undercut the communication for adequate health behaviors in the population. Should the news media bring pandemic policies under public scrutiny amid the changing pandemic situation, proper public health responses could have been better reached to the public to buffer the spread of the virus. Internationally, China could send a clearer signal on a



systematic reopening of the country, which could be leveraged to formulate a strategic narrative that tells a story of successful policy adjustment under the current Chinese leadership.

### Limitations

While this study takes an exploratory approach to identify and examine the strategic narratives between the U.S. and China amid the COVID-19 pandemic, several limitations should be noted. First, this study is not meant to resolve the theoretical debates in framing or between propaganda and public diplomacy. Rather, the theoretical construct in this study attempts to reconcile the commonalities of the theories to bring a more comprehensive analysis of the international news flow. Therefore, the strategic narratives framework was not considered to be replacing other theories but provides a common ground for explaining the construction and quality of storylines being projected. In addition, the narrative-centric approach of strategic narratives proposed by this study was aimed at enriching the current discussion on the utility of strategic narratives. This study does not claim to have invented the idea, but rather synthesizes political communication literature and constructivist literature on the narrative approach in international relations. The narrative-centric approach does not displace the policy-centric approach. A strategic narrative can work for legitimizing policies and building identities at the same time.

It should be noted that the sample of major English-language news outlets from the U.S. and China do not represent the entire news environment in both countries. They only represented the news coverage that was more likely observable by a global audience. It does not mean that other news media in the U.S. and China

did not contribute to the projection of strategic narratives. For example, this study only covered *Fox News* as a representative of right-leaning news media in the U.S. While the sample represented the skewed media market, it could have ignored some meaningful right-wing perspectives that were less visible internationally. In terms of Chinese news media, language differences limit the reach of many Chinese news media to the international audience, and this was reflected in the lack of diversity of the news outlets in the sample. English language news was mainly state-controlled efforts to achieve public diplomacy goals. The homogeneity of Chinese news observed in this study does not represent the entire spectrum of news in China, which could have provided alternative storylines in the Chinese language, but that was unable to project to the outside world. However, it should be noted that the controlled nature of the domestic media system in China means that it would be difficult for meaningful coverage to publicly contest government narratives in the news.

It is also acknowledged that the official narratives referenced in this study do not represent the political communication efforts of entire governments. In the U.S., other government agencies played an important role in explaining policies. For example, the CDC was behind the new testing requirements in early 2023. Thus, many narrative elements in the U.S. strategic narratives in news media came from the CDC rather than the White House. In China, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was tasked to project official views to the world. Nevertheless, news media also rely on the speeches of prominent politicians to convey strategic narratives. Although Chinese officials often align their speeches with key Chinese authorities, the CMFA does not represent the same level of authority as that represented by the White House

data in this study. Therefore, the two datasets were not directly comparable, although they can serve as reference points for interpreting strategic narratives in the news environment.

In terms of method, it should be acknowledged that while the human-in-the-loop machine learning method gave nuances to big data analytics, in keeping with almost all quantitative computational methods, it was not free from error. This study employed a qualitative approach to analyze topic modeling results to extract strategic narratives. This approach is effective in uncovering salient narratives that surfaced in each topic, but it remains possible that some narratives could have spread across topics and shown low topic relevance. In particular, due to the inherent randomness in the computational process, the structure of topic models can vary despite efforts to balance exclusivity and semantic coherence. In addition, the supervised machine learning cycles inevitably made misclassifications. This study strived to lower the error rate by conducting three rounds of supervised machine learning to construct models that were relatively well-exposed to different types of text documents in a balanced manner. Nevertheless, given the large N nature of the dataset, it was likely that the training set could have missed some types of text structures, writing styles, or language use. The use of the Large Language model, the Universal Sentence Encoder, alleviated this problem by bringing in contextual awareness. The performance statistics show that the current choice of algorithms and language models yielded satisfactory, albeit not perfect, results.

The Granger causality tests performed showed how variables precede one another, but this method cannot show or even suggest direct causation. As the

definition of the test suggests, it tests whether one variable better predicts another variable compared to the other variable predicting itself on the time series (Granger, 1969; Granger and Joyeux, 1980). It serves as evidence of strategic narratives responding and prompting one another, but this method cannot speak to the logic behind strategic narrative interactions. This study enriched the analysis by providing in-depth analyses of the strategic narratives. Yet, it did not definitively prove the causal relations between strategic narratives although it does suggest high likelihoods.

Another acknowledged limitation in the study of strategic narratives is that this research design does not consider the reception or the efficacy of the narratives in reaching national communicative goals. A strategic narrative that its authors are convinced is relevant and persuasive can fail to convince in a particular context facing a particular audience. Conversely, a strategic narrative that would seem to have little logic or sense can be very powerful. As discussed, Chinese strategic narratives may sound less credible to citizens in the liberal world as they do not align with liberal democratic values and their perceptions of China. However, other parts of the world could give more credit to Chinese strategic narratives given their different experience with China. Thus, this study only provided an analysis of the innate quality of the strategic narratives (e.g., coherence and transformation) but not the interpretive qualities that depend on the contextual environment an audience is situated.

The final limitation lies in the positionality of the author. The author has striven to provide an unbiased analysis of strategic narratives. Nevertheless, as the literature pointed out, extracting the meanings of strategic narratives requires the

researcher to place narratives in a particular context and understand them through the values and worldviews of the audience. The positionality of the author should be noted. The author is an ethnic Chinese Hong Konger who has lived in the United States, China, and the United Kingdom. With an academic background spanning journalism and communication studies, international relations, and conflict studies, the author was aware of how these experiences could build into the analysis and presentation of strategic narratives. The author strived to present the findings as close to the social and political contexts in both the U.S. and China as possible according to the author's understanding. They were not the personal opinions of the author, but discussions based on the literature. Readers may find their own interpretations according to their specific context and point of view.

#### *Directions for future research*

This study expanded the scope of strategic narrative research and proposed the use of computational methods for analyzing large datasets, pointing to three major directions for future research. First, the human-in-the-loop machine learning narrative analysis can be applied to various research scenarios that involve large text data. While this study specifically focuses on strategic narratives, future research can apply the method to study other narratives in a different context. For example, it can be applied to examine social media content to identify the diffusion of narratives on social or political debates. Second, the machine learning cycles can be further enhanced by AI. In the process of interpreting the topic modeling results, AI can be employed to pre-process the findings of topic models. Large Language models (LLM) powered by AI can provide summaries of the topic, keywords, and their relevance. In the supervised

learning process, AI can be employed to build language models that classify text and data, potentially yielding higher accuracy than conventional algorithms. The development of multilingual LLMs also opens up the opportunity to employ this method to analyze media text across different media markets, forms, and national contexts. Third, this study demonstrates that the quantitative data produced in the supervised learning phase can be utilized for further analyses. Future research should leverage this process to examine the relationship between media text and other social or political data that measure social phenomena and policies. Thus, the effectiveness of media narratives can be estimated via statistical analyses along with other factors in the evaluation of policy outcomes.

This study provided an analytical framework that could be utilized in future research on strategic narratives more comprehensively. This dissertation examined the projection of strategic narratives and left many questions about narrative reception open for future research. On the one hand, the efforts of political actors in shaping worldviews were presented, as well as the potential influence of these strategic narratives on the political audience. On the other hand, the contextualized effects on specific populations of these strategic narratives can be examined through public opinion surveys and experiments. One area where strategic narrative identification can contribute is the generation of stimuli for experiments. While experiments were often criticized for their controlled setting that may not be representative of the real world, the methods in this study provided a solution to pick out the prominent storylines and relevant worldviews for further study. Experiments can test if an issue-level strategic narrative can shape the perceptions of participants toward a country or

political actor, and if that aligns with how the identity strategic narrative was projected. It will allow a better evaluation of the power of strategic narratives, in both the justification of policies and the construction of worldviews. Strategic narratives identified from the media environment may also contribute to the study of audience costs in international relations. Instead of relying on hypothetical situations to test audience responses to political commitments made by actors, lining up the experimental scenario to a strategic narrative study can present a more realistic case, where the values and pre-existing perceptions of political actors of the participants can be taken into account. Overall, future research should continue to bridge strategic narrative studies between adjacent academic fields to research the role of journalism and political communication in international relations and global events.

## Appendices

Appendix A. Average exclusivity and semantic coherence measurements of topic models of the news corpus.

| K  | Exclusivity | Semantic coherence |
|----|-------------|--------------------|
| 30 | 9.699522    | -58.796            |
| 31 | 9.708746    | -61.5537           |
| 32 | 9.718007    | -61.8038           |
| 33 | 9.727107    | -61.1032           |
| 34 | 9.731736    | -60.0346           |
| 35 | 9.726592    | -62.0236           |
| 36 | 9.739347    | -60.4704           |
| 37 | 9.747854    | -62.9226           |
| 38 | 9.758763    | -62.1247           |
| 39 | 9.764296    | -63.5877           |
| 40 | 9.767208    | -63.6305           |



Appendix B. Average exclusivity and semantic coherence measurements of topic models of the White House corpus.

| K  | Exclusivity | Semantic coherence |
|----|-------------|--------------------|
| 12 | 9.46331271  | -91.6086153        |
| 13 | 9.46341055  | -90.6342208        |
| 14 | 9.47749334  | -90.4061138        |
| 15 | 9.50279034  | -94.3171473        |
| 16 | 9.58715584  | -98.8179205        |
| 17 | 9.59399783  | -99.2807169        |
| 18 | 9.57680637  | -94.2891043        |

Appendix C. Average exclusivity and semantic coherence measurements of topic models of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs corpus.

| K  | Exclusivity | Semantic coherence |
|----|-------------|--------------------|
| 18 | 9.32023604  | -62.5090815        |
| 19 | 9.34344026  | -60.2364785        |
| 20 | 9.35077313  | -60.5511242        |
| 21 | 9.38347032  | -61.0755316        |
| 22 | 9.39376965  | -62.7703019        |
| 23 | 9.42208153  | -61.5823287        |
| 24 | 9.4541256   | -61.9916797        |
| 25 | 9.4399545   | -61.360982         |

Appendix D. Topic labels of the news corpus, derived from structural topic modeling.

| Topic # | Topic label                                                                         |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1       | Photos                                                                              |
| 2       | VOA embedded Tweets                                                                 |
| 3       | Demographic disparities in the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and life expectancy |
| 4       | The surge of U.S. COVID-19 cases and deaths                                         |
| 5       | Movie schedules and COVID-19 protocols in theaters                                  |
| 6       | New, discharged, and imported COVID-19 cases in China                               |
| 7       | Passage of National Security Laws in Hong Kong amid COVID-19                        |
| 8       | Book reviews and publication announcements                                          |
| 9       | COVID-19 situation and policies in California                                       |
| 10      | Chinese foreign relations in the COVID-19 pandemic                                  |
| 11      | Art and history                                                                     |
| 12      | Sports                                                                              |
| 13      | COVID-19 vaccine                                                                    |
| 14      | Military, war, and conflicts                                                        |

|    |                                                 |
|----|-------------------------------------------------|
| 15 | Provincial COVID-19 situations in China         |
| 16 | Video transcript                                |
| 17 | Workplace COVID-19 concerns                     |
| 18 | Police activity                                 |
| 19 | Stock market                                    |
| 20 | Face masks                                      |
| 21 | School closure, reopening, and virtual learning |
| 22 | COVID-19 complications and treatment            |
| 23 | Legal cases                                     |
| 24 | Economic performance of China                   |
| 25 | Food and catering                               |
| 26 | U.S. Elections                                  |
| 27 | Global pandemic response                        |
| 28 | U.S.-China relations                            |
| 29 | Personal stories                                |
| 30 | Fox News tag                                    |

|    |                                                  |
|----|--------------------------------------------------|
| 31 | International travel, travel ban, and quarantine |
| 32 | Policies to revive the economy                   |
| 33 | Internet and big techs                           |
| 34 | U.S. President                                   |

Appendix E. Topic labels of the White House corpus, derived from structural topic modeling.

| Topic # | Topic label                                                          |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1       | Financial support for various sectors that were affected by COVID-19 |
| 2       | Questions                                                            |
| 3       | Casualties in the Pandemic                                           |
| 4       | The spread of the virus                                              |
| 5       | International cooperation                                            |
| 6       | Major disaster declared                                              |
| 7       | Deploying National Guards                                            |
| 8       | Vaccines and treatments                                              |
| 9       | Travel ban                                                           |
| 10      | Vaccine protection                                                   |
| 11      | Economic relief bills                                                |
| 12      | Numbers of COVID-19 cases                                            |
| 13      | This means lowering infection risks                                  |
| 14      | Availability of resources                                            |

Appendix F. Topic labels of the CMFA corpus, derived from structural topic modeling.

| Topic # | Topic label                                         |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 1       | Vaccine availability                                |
| 2       | John Sudworth                                       |
| 3       | Other international relations amid COVID-19         |
| 4       | Taiwan and COVID-19                                 |
| 5       | Bilateral relationships                             |
| 6       | China blamed for spreading COVID-19                 |
| 7       | China dispatches medical teams to foreign countries |
| 8       | International trade                                 |
| 9       | Chinese effort in fighting COVID-19                 |
| 10      | Multilateral relations                              |
| 11      | Human rights                                        |
| 12      | Chinese economy                                     |
| 13      | Travel policies                                     |
| 14      | Chinese nationals overseas                          |

|    |                                                     |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 15 | Responding to U.S. foreign policies and accusations |
| 16 | Human Rights in the West                            |
| 17 | Virus origin                                        |
| 18 | Africa-China relations                              |
| 19 | China's pandemic response                           |
| 20 | Taiwan and Hong Kong affairs                        |
| 21 | Exports of medical supplies                         |



Appendix G. Shortlist of keywords that were related to U.S.-China travel policies for topic modeling analysis.

- Cooperation
- Vaccination
- Border
- Test
- Flight
- Mask
- Travel
- Lab
- Quarantine
- Wuhan
- Fort Detrick

Appendix H. Average precision and recall of supervised machine learning methods.

Table H1. Average precision.

|                        | Average Precision    |          |         |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------|---------|
| Classification Method  | Vectorization Method |          |         |
|                        | tf-idf               | USE-CMLM | USE-DAN |
| Logistic regression    | 0.553                | 0.801    | 0.711   |
| Random forest          | 0.875                | 0.772    | 0.840   |
| Naive Bayes classifier | 0.378                | 0.736    | 0.765   |
| Support Vector Machine | 0.789                | 0.853    | 0.854   |
| Majority Voting        | 0.696                | 0.821    | 0.871   |

Table H2. Average recall.

|                        | Average Recall       |          |         |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------|---------|
| Classification Method  | Vectorization Method |          |         |
|                        | tf-idf               | USE-CMLM | USE-DAN |
| Logistic regression    | 0.202                | 0.915    | 0.975   |
| Random forest          | 0.333                | 0.608    | 0.692   |
| Naive Bayes classifier | 0.982                | 0.880    | 0.911   |
| Support Vector Machine | 0.992                | 0.869    | 0.965   |
| Majority Voting        | 0.752                | 0.826    | 0.921   |

Appendix I. Samples quoted in qualitative analyses.

Table I1. Samples from Chinese news media.

| Sample ID | News outlet  | Date              | Title                                                                                                       |
|-----------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| GT1       | Global Times | February 4, 2020  | Keep faith in science to combat epidemic                                                                    |
| GT2       | Global Times | August 19, 2021   | US has 'no ground' to limit passenger capacity from China: FM                                               |
| GT3       | Global Times | November 10, 2022 | China's central leadership calls for optimized COVID response, precise measures amid dynamic-zero policy    |
| GT4       | Global Times | November 16, 2022 | China's 20 optimized measures a refinement on previous effective measures against COVID-19: health official |
| GT5       | Global Times | May 18, 2021      | Why can China confine flare-ups to dozens cases?                                                            |
| GT6       | Global Times | February 2, 2020  | Using virus to smear China will 'backfire'                                                                  |
| GT7       | Global Times | November 30, 2021 | Facing Omicron, CNN shows sour grapes mentality as China's COVID-19 control measures justified              |
| GT8       | Global Times | November 20, 2022 | Smearing China's epidemic control policies stems from US' inner fear                                        |
| GT9       | Global Times | December 29, 2022 | Travel curbs targeting China 'discriminatory,' against trend                                                |
| GT10      | Global Times | January 4, 2023   | Entry restrictions for travelers from China ineffective: IATA                                               |
| GT11      | Global Times | January 5, 2023   | Will travel restrictions on arrivals from China work? Here's what intl scientists say                       |
| GT12      | Global Times | February 28, 2023 | COVID origins tracing is on US' 'anti-China production line' again: Global Times editorial                  |
| GT13      | Global Times | May 29, 2020      | The Fort Detrick horror: a closer look at the US' largest biochemical weapons research center               |
| GT14      | Global Times | April 12, 2022    | Dynamic zero-COVID strategy 'the best choice' as infections surpass 325,000: chief epidemiologist of        |

|      |                |                   |                                                                                                        |
|------|----------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      |                |                   | China's CDC                                                                                            |
| GT15 | Global Times   | February 10, 2020 | Premier Li stresses scientific research to win battle against virus                                    |
| GT16 | Global Times   | February 11, 2020 | Why the West is overreacting to coronavirus                                                            |
| GT17 | Global Times   | December 26, 2022 | Western narrative on China's COVID response hypocritical, to appease domestic audience                 |
| GT18 | Global Times   | February 19, 2020 | Does China show lack of transparency on coronavirus epidemic                                           |
| GT19 | Global Times   | January 4, 2023   | China urges US to stop politicizing COVID issue                                                        |
| GT20 | Global Times   | November 15, 2022 | Shijiazhuang, Beijing's Chaoyang refine nucleic test rules after confusion stirred                     |
| GT21 | Global Times   | November 29, 2022 | Epidemic control measures should be lifted in a timely manner to minimize inconvenience to people: NHC |
| GT22 | Global Times   | January 30, 2022  | China achieves smooth transition as COVID wave ebbs despite US, Western media smears                   |
| GT23 | Global Times   | August 9, 2021    | US further smears China as own epidemic worsens                                                        |
| PD1  | People's Daily | February 18, 2020 | Let science build strong power against epidemic                                                        |
| PD2  | People's Daily | April 11, 2020    | Saving lives, economic growth, int'l cooperation: China responds to humanity's COVID-19 test           |
| PD3  | People's Daily | March 12, 2020    | Xi leads people's war on epidemic                                                                      |
| PD4  | People's Daily | November 9, 2021  | Stop questioning China's zero-COVID approach                                                           |
| PD5  | People's Daily | December 30, 2022 | China's commitment to putting people, their lives first unchanged: FM spokesperson                     |
| PD6  | People's Daily | February 1, 2020  | China criticizes "unfriendly U.S. comments" amid fight against novel coronavirus epidemic              |
| PD7  | People's Daily | May 9, 2020       | Can U.S. politicians really save lives by 'attacking China'?                                           |

|      |                |                    |                                                                                                                 |
|------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PD8  | People's Daily | December 11, 2022  | Wrong, wrong, and wrong again -- Some Western media's unprincipled criticism of China's COVID policy            |
| PD9  | People's Daily | December 29, 2022  | Whatever China does is wrong! Western media's hypocrisy and double standards on China's COVID response policies |
| PD10 | People's Daily | December 29, 2022  | Full of prejudice, political manipulation,' FM criticizes Western media smears on China's epidemic policy shift |
| PD11 | People's Daily | January 14, 2023   | Commentary: COVID restrictions on travelers from China another political farce                                  |
| PD12 | People's Daily | May 1, 2020        | U.S. intelligence analysts concerned over Trump officials' pressure to link coronavirus with Chinese lab: media |
| PD13 | People's Daily | June 9, 2021       | Ridiculous for U.S. to repeatedly hype up "lab leak" conspiracy                                                 |
| PD14 | People's Daily | May 4, 2020        | Five questions Washington needs to answer on coronavirus pandemic                                               |
| PD15 | People's Daily | June 5, 2021       | Blaming China for COVID-19 "groundless:" Russian media                                                          |
| PD16 | People's Daily | September 03, 2021 | Transparent research into COVID-19 origins needs to go beyond Wuhan, says observer                              |
| PD17 | People's Daily | January 13, 2023   | China's science-based COVID response effective, Western criticism untenable: experts                            |
| PD18 | People's Daily | January 29, 2021   | WHO's 3rd field work in China starts. So, who is impeding COVID-19 global study?                                |
| PD19 | People's Daily | January 6, 2023    | Bizarre policies to disparage Chinese pandemic fight                                                            |
| CG1  | CGTN           | November 30, 2021  | COVID-19: What could have gone wrong if China had opened up?                                                    |
| CG2  | CGTN           | December 27, 2022  | Expert: Conditions in place to downgrade COVID-19 management in China                                           |
| CG3  | CGTN           | February 16, 2020  | Rethinking COVID-19 media coverage: A call to humanize                                                          |

|      |             |                   |                                                                     |
|------|-------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      |             |                   | suffering                                                           |
| CG4  | CGTN        | May 3, 2020       | U.S. researcher in Wuhan virology lab says COVID-19 leak 'unlikely' |
| CG5  | CGTN        | June 24, 2022     | Finding True America: The veiled Fort Detrick lab                   |
| CG6  | CGTN        | February 8, 2020  | Normal & abnormal things about coronavirus outbreak in China        |
| CG7  | CGTN        | May 5, 2020       | Ample evidence to show Pompeo is lying                              |
| CG8  | CGTN        | July 31, 2021     | Expert: Lab leak theory hinders global coronavirus origin-tracing   |
| CG9  | CGTN        | May 27, 2021      | Biden order to review COVID-19 origin revives conspiracy theories   |
| CG10 | CGTN        | December 24, 2022 | Human rights crisis as U.S. COVID-19 cases surpass 100 million      |
| CG11 | CGTN        | April 7, 2020     | Chinese embassy refutes 'cover-up' allegations on COVID-19 outbreak |
| CD1  | China Daily | January 10, 2022  | Zero-COVID policy keeps pandemic under control                      |
| CD2  | China Daily | January 12, 2023  | ROK must lift entry curbs for own good                              |
| CD3  | China Daily | August 2, 2021    | Politicizing virus-tracing jointly opposed                          |
| CD4  | China Daily | March 15, 2023    | Experts slam US attempts to politicize origins of COVID-19          |
| CD5  | China Daily | May 16, 2020      | Opinion: US should make bio-labs more transparent                   |
| CD6  | China Daily | August 11, 2021   | Origin-tracing not tool for containing China                        |
| CD7  | China Daily | February 20, 2020 | Coronavirus not China's Chernobyl                                   |

Table I2. Samples from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

| Sample ID | Date            | Spokesperson |
|-----------|-----------------|--------------|
| CMFA1     | April 30, 2020  | Geng Shuang  |
| CMFA2     | June 7, 2021    | Wang Wenbin  |
| CMFA3     | August 19, 2021 | Hua Chunying |

|        |                   |              |
|--------|-------------------|--------------|
| CMFA4  | January 24, 2022  | Zhao Lijian  |
| CMFA5  | August 19, 2022   | Wang Wenbin  |
| CMFA6  | November 11, 2022 | Zhao Lijian  |
| CMFA7  | December 29, 2022 | Wang Wenbin  |
| CMFA8  | May 8, 2020       | Hua Chunying |
| CMFA9  | October 9, 2020   | Hua Chunying |
| CMFA10 | May 13, 2022      | Zhao Lijian  |
| CMFA11 | December 10, 2021 | Wang Wenbin  |
| CMFA12 | July 28, 2022     | Zhao Lijian  |
| CMFA13 | March 9, 2020     | Geng Shuang  |
| CMFA14 | March 19, 2020    | Geng Shuang  |
| CMFA15 | April 9, 2020     | Zhao Lijian  |
| CMFA16 | March 13, 2020    | Geng Shuang  |
| CMFA17 | March 17, 2020    | Geng Shuang  |
| CMFA18 | March 31, 2020    | Hua Chunying |
| CMFA19 | April 30, 2020    | Geng Shuang  |
| CMFA20 | March 13, 2020    | Geng Shuang  |
| CMFA21 | May 8, 2020       | Hua Chunying |
| CMFA22 | July 14, 2021     | Zhao Lijian  |
| CMFA23 | July 26, 2021     | Zhao Lijian  |

Table I3. Samples from the U.S. news media.

| Sample ID | News outlet     | Date             | Title                                                            |
|-----------|-----------------|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WP1       | Washington Post | January 31, 2020 | US bars foreigners coming from China for now over virus fear     |
| WP2       | Washington Post | March 18, 2020   | US, Canada working on mutual ban on non-essential travel         |
| WP3       | Washington Post | January 29, 2020 | Coronavirus spread: Experts aren't sure containment will succeed |
| WP4       | Washington      | January 19, 2021 | China rushes to build virus quarantine                           |

|      |                 |                   |                                                                                                           |
|------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      | Post            |                   | center for 4,000 as it battles localized outbreaks                                                        |
| WP5  | Washington Post | November 7, 2022  | China won't relax its 'zero covid' policy despite worsening toll                                          |
| WP6  | Washington Post | December 29, 2022 | Italy and U.S. mandate covid tests of all passengers from China                                           |
| WP7  | Washington Post | January 9, 2023   | Opinion   Why the covid testing requirement for Chinese travelers is misguided                            |
| WP8  | Washington Post | April 16, 2020    | What caused the coronavirus? A skeptical take on the theories about the outbreak's Chinese origin         |
| WP9  | Washington Post | May 3, 2020       | Was the new coronavirus accidentally released from a Wuhan lab? It's doubtful                             |
| WP10 | Washington Post | March 29, 2021    | WHO Wuhan report leaves question of coronavirus origins unresolved                                        |
| WP11 | Washington Post | May 27, 2021      | Facebook will no longer remove content saying covid-19 is manmade                                         |
| WP12 | Washington Post | March 10, 2020    | How and why did local officials hide the truth in Wuhan?                                                  |
| WP13 | Washington Post | July 23, 2021     | Opinion   China is stepping up its deception and denial in investigations of covid-19                     |
| WP14 | Washington Post | January 24, 2020  | Travel ban halts flights between Wuhan and U.S., as airports prepare to screen passengers for coronavirus |
| WP15 | Washington Post | April 16, 2020    | Trump, aides float outlier theory on origins of coronavirus                                               |
| WP16 | Washington Post | May 28, 2021      | As U.S. calls for focus on covid origins, China repeats speculation about U.S. military base              |
| NT1  | New York Times  | February 4, 2020  | U.S. Officials Promise 'Aggressive Measures' to Contain Coronavirus                                       |
| NT2  | New York Times  | December 28, 2022 | U.S. Announces New Covid Test Requirements for Travelers From China                                       |
| NT3  | New York Times  | January 26, 2020  | China Virus Ability to Spread Getting Stronger                                                            |
| NT4  | New York        | December 2, 2022  | As Officials Ease Restrictions, China                                                                     |



|      |                  |                   |                                                                                       |
|------|------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      | Times            |                   | Faces New Pandemic Risks                                                              |
| NT5  | New York Times   | December 19, 2022 | From Zero Covid to No Plan: Behind China's Pandemic U-Turn                            |
| NT6  | New York Times   | April 28, 2020    | China Lab Rejects COVID-19 Conspiracy Claims, but Virus Origins Still a Mystery       |
| NT7  | New York Times   | March 30, 2021    | What We Know About the W.H.O.'s Inquiry on the Origin of Covid                        |
| NT8  | New York Times   | May 27, 2021      | The Lab-Leak Theory                                                                   |
| NT9  | New York Times   | March 8, 2023     | Covid Origins Hearing Opens With Arguments for Lab Leak Theory                        |
| NT10 | New York Times   | January 22, 2020  | As a Deadly Virus Spreads, China Controls the Narrative                               |
| NT11 | New York Times   | March 29, 2021    | The U.S. is concerned about China's influence over a report on the pandemic's origins |
| NT12 | New York Times   | August 25, 2021   | Rejecting Covid Inquiry, China Peddles Conspiracy Theories Blaming the U.S.           |
| VA1  | Voice of America | February 4, 2020  | Banning Travelers From China Won't Stop Virus, Experts Warn                           |
| VA2  | Voice of America | December 29, 2022 | Experts Weigh Risk of New COVID Mutations from China                                  |
| VA3  | Voice of America | March 15, 2022    | China Struggles with New COVID-19 Cases Despite 'Zero COVID' Strategy                 |
| VA4  | Voice of America | December 28, 2022 | China COVID Pivot Sparks Jitters Worldwide                                            |
| VA5  | Voice of America | December 29, 2022 | Lack of Information on China's COVID Surge Stirs Global Concern                       |
| VA6  | Voice of America | February 28, 2023 | US Ambassador: China Should Be Candid About COVID Origins                             |
| VA7  | Voice of America | February 14, 2020 | China Still Not Sharing Coronavirus Information, Experts Say                          |
| VA8  | Voice of America | April 30, 2020    | Coronavirus 'Not Man-Made,' US Intelligence Concludes                                 |

|     |                   |                   |                                                                                                         |
|-----|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| LT1 | Los Angeles Times | March 18, 2020    | Trump administration takes steps to close border to migrants, citing coronavirus                        |
| LT2 | Los Angeles Times | December 28, 2022 | U.S. will require COVID-19 testing for travelers from China                                             |
| LT3 | Los Angeles Times | December 8, 2022  | Ending China's extreme COVID policy could cause a health disaster                                       |
| LT4 | Los Angeles Times | March 9, 2020     | As Beijing claims credit for beating coronavirus, Chinese people are outraged: 'Fake! It's all fake!'   |
| LT5 | Los Angeles Times | December 29, 2022 | Lack of info on China's COVID-19 outbreak stirs global concern                                          |
| LT6 | Los Angeles Times | May 27, 2021      | China: Biden playing politics with coronavirus origin probe                                             |
| FX1 | Fox News          | April 12, 2022    | China's 'zero-COVID' strategy failing to hold back coronavirus in Shanghai as U.S. warns against travel |
| FX2 | Fox News          | January 5, 2023   | China defends its COVID handling after WHO, Biden say Beijing is under-reporting deaths                 |
| FX3 | Fox News          | December 28, 2022 | Biden administration announces new COVID test requirement on travelers from China                       |
| FX4 | Fox News          | January 6, 2023   | As COVID ravages China, US expands testing system for incoming travelers                                |
| FX5 | Fox News          | April 15, 2020    | Sources believe coronavirus originated in Wuhan lab as part of China's efforts to compete with US       |
| FX6 | Fox News          | April 18, 2020    | Bret Baier says 'more and more dots' point to Wuhan lab as origin of coronavirus pandemic               |
| FX7 | Fox News          | April 30, 2020    | Trump says he's seen evidence suggesting coronavirus emerged from Wuhan lab, compares WHO to PR agency  |
| FX8 | Fox News          | April 1, 2021     | Experts giving COVID 'lab leak' theory second look after mainstream media                               |

|      |          |                   |                                                                                                |
|------|----------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      |          |                   | cried it was 'debunked'                                                                        |
| FX9  | Fox News | February 27, 2023 | Former CDC director: People will come to realize COVID-19 came from a lab                      |
| FX10 | Fox News | January 22, 2020  | Coronavirus vaccine in 'early stages' as focus turns to China's transparency                   |
| FX11 | Fox News | June 7, 2021      | China's 'massive cover-up' on COVID still happening: WHO advisory board member                 |
| FX12 | Fox News | January 15, 2023  | China reports 60,000 coronavirus-related deaths from December after concerns of underreporting |
| FX13 | Fox News | January 28, 2020  | As coronavirus spreads, Tom Cotton calls for 'targeted travel ban'                             |
| FX14 | Fox News | February 15, 2023 | China shifts COVID origin blame after WHO abandons study into virus beginnings                 |
| FX15 | Fox News | August 25, 2021   | China criticizes US ahead of COVID origins report, peddles conspiracy theories                 |
| FX16 | Fox News | June 11, 2021     | China resurfaces false COVID-19 origin theory linked to Fort Detrick                           |
| FX17 | Fox News | March 19, 2023    | WHO blasts China for withholding info on COVID origin after data pulled offline                |

Table I4. Samples from the White House.

| Sample ID | Date             | Occasion                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WH1       | January 31, 2020 | Press Briefing by Members of the President's Coronavirus Task Force                                                                                                                         |
| WH2       | January 31, 2020 | Proclamation 9984—Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Nonimmigrants of Persons who Pose a Risk of Transmitting 2019 Novel Coronavirus and Other Appropriate Measures To Address This Risk |
| WH3       | October 25, 2021 | Proclamation 10294 Advancing the Safe Resumption of Global Travel During the COVID-19 Pandemic                                                                                              |

|      |                   |                                                                                                                                  |
|------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WH4  | January 3, 2023   | Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre                                                                             |
| WH5  | January 4, 2023   | Remarks in an Exchange With Reporters in Hebron, Kentucky                                                                        |
| WH6  | February 7, 2020  | Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters Prior to Departure for Charlotte, North Carolina                                          |
| WH7  | February 25, 2020 | The President's News Conference in New Delhi, India                                                                              |
| WH8  | April 30, 2020    | Remarks in a Meeting With Governor Philip D. Murphy of New Jersey and an Exchange With Reporters                                 |
| WH9  | June 15, 2020     | Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Efforts To Protect the Health and Safety of Senior Citizens and an Exchange With Reporters |
| WH10 | June 20, 2020     | Remarks at a ""Make America Great Again"" Rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma                                                               |
| WH11 | August 4, 2020    | The President's News Conference                                                                                                  |
| WH12 | August 18, 2020   | Remarks in a Briefing on Border Wall Construction in Yuma, Arizona                                                               |
| WH13 | March 23, 2020    | Remarks at a White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing                                                                   |
| WH14 | March 31, 2020    | Remarks at a White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing                                                                   |
| WH15 | February 3, 2021  | Proclamation 10146—National Black History Month, 2021                                                                            |
| WH16 | February 11, 2021 | Remarks to National Institutes of Health Staff in Bethesda, Maryland                                                             |
| WH17 | February 22, 2021 | Remarks on Remembering the 500,000 Americans Lost to COVID-19                                                                    |
| WH18 | May 1, 2020       | Press Briefing                                                                                                                   |
| WH19 | March 26, 2021    | Press Briefing                                                                                                                   |
| WH20 | March 26, 2021    | Teleconference                                                                                                                   |
| WH21 | May 25, 2021      | Press Briefing                                                                                                                   |
| WH22 | May 26, 2021      | Statement by President Joe Biden on the Investigation into the Origins of COVID-19                                               |
| WH23 | February 27, 2023 | Press Briefing                                                                                                                   |

|      |                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WH24 | April 14, 2020    | The President's News Conference                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| WH25 | August 10, 2020   | Fact Sheet - President Trump's Historic Coronavirus Response                                                                                                                                                                   |
| WH26 | January 18, 2021  | Proclamation 10138—Terminating Suspensions of Entry Into the United States of Aliens Who Have Been Physically Present in the Schengen Area, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and the Federative Republic of Brazil |
| WH27 | February 13, 2021 | Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan                                                                                                                                                                           |
| WH28 | August 27, 2021   | Statement on the Office of the Director of National Intelligence Report on the Investigation Into the Origins of the COVID-19 Pandemic                                                                                         |
| WH29 | December 9, 2022  | Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre                                                                                                                                                                           |

## Appendix J. Trends of strategic narratives

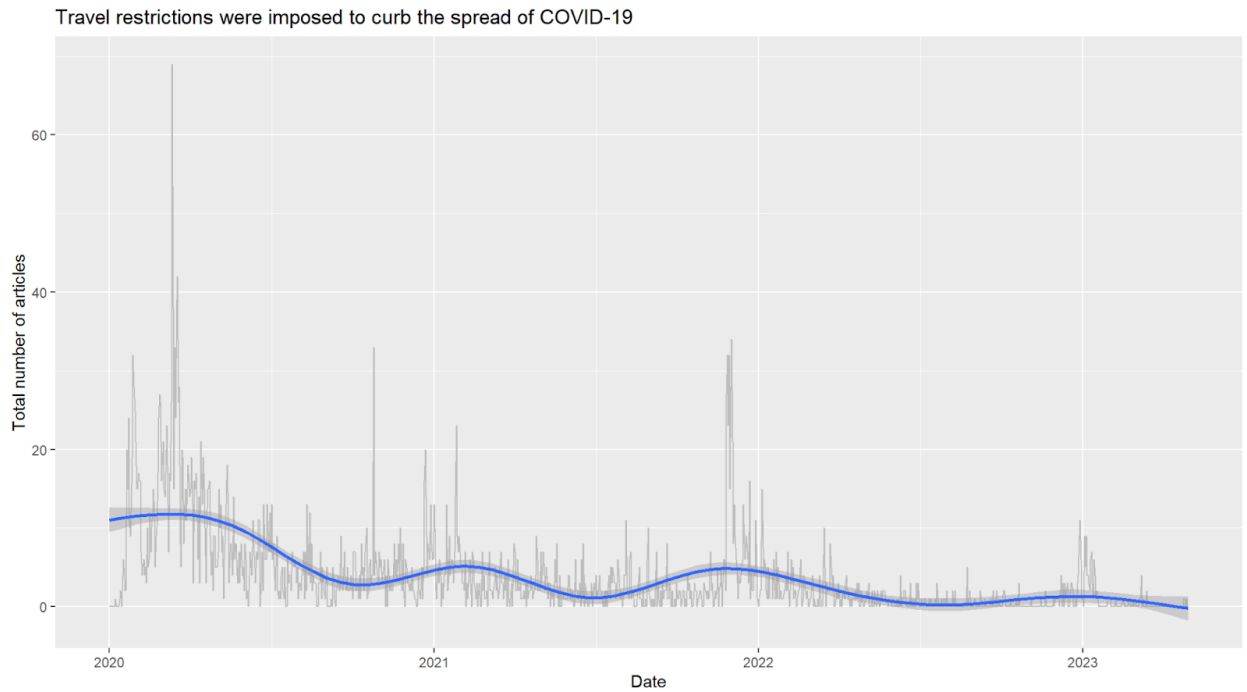


Figure J1. The trend of the U.S. strategic narrative: Travel restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19.

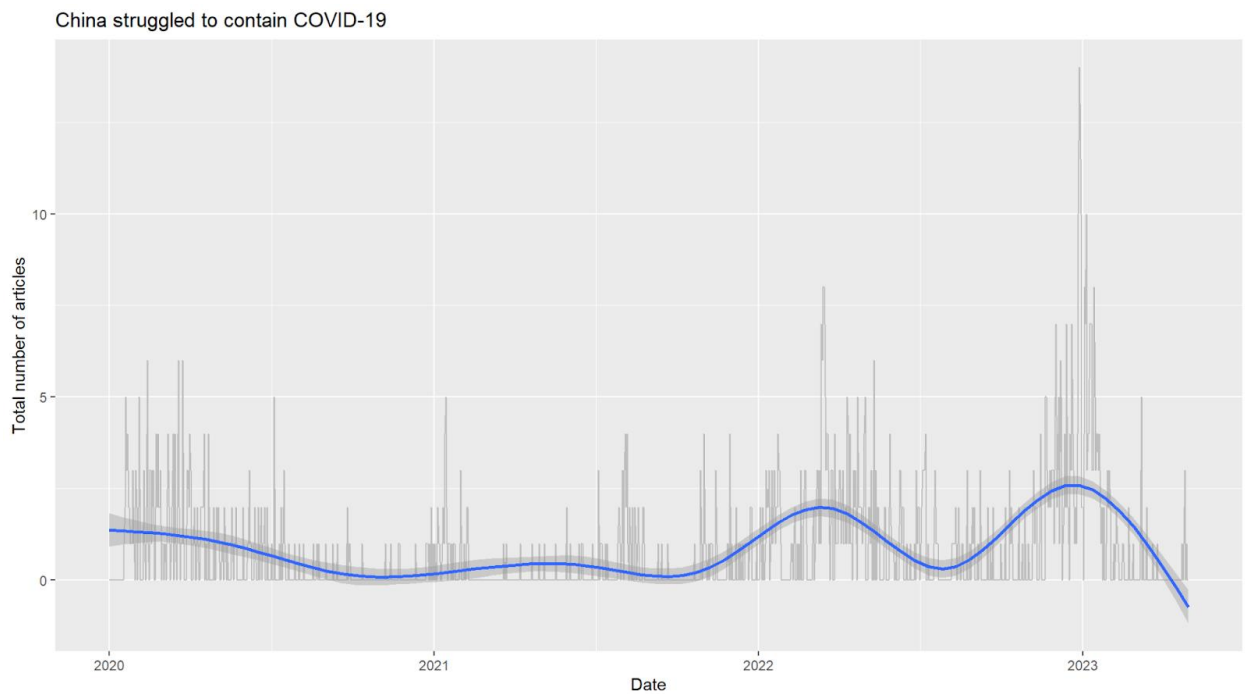


Figure J2. The trend of the U.S. strategic narrative: China struggled to contain COVID-19.

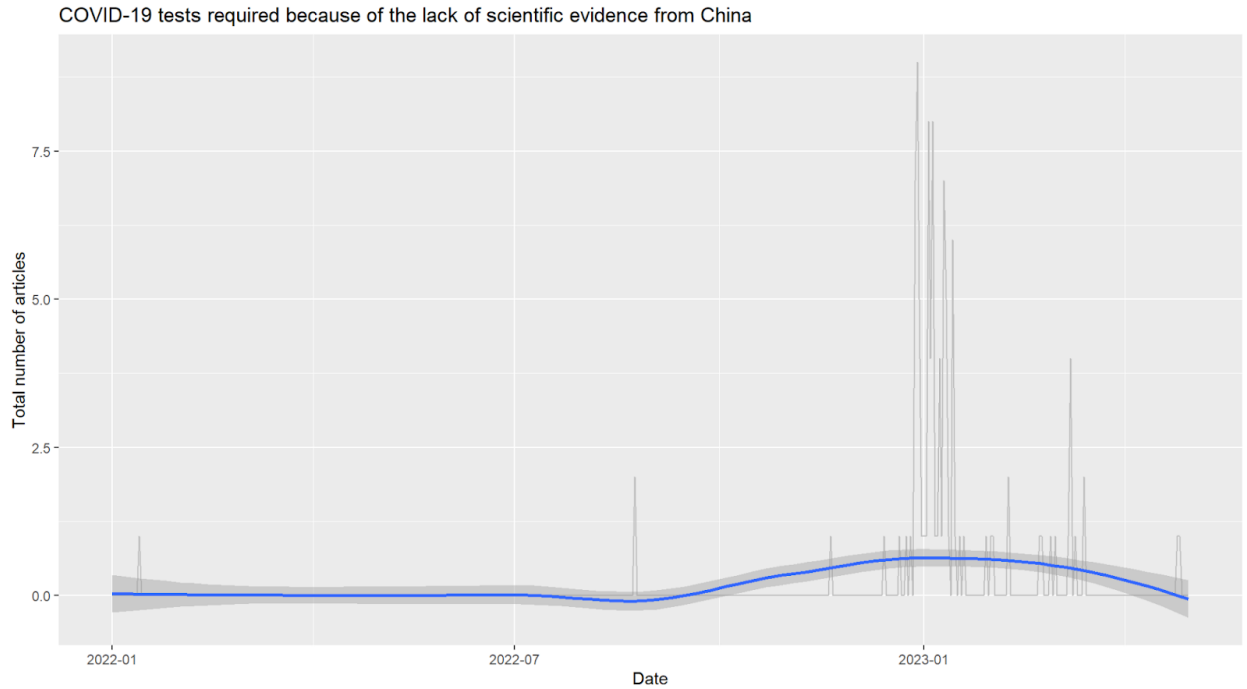


Figure J3. The trend of the U.S. strategic narrative since 2022: COVID-19 tests required because of the lack of scientific evidence from China.

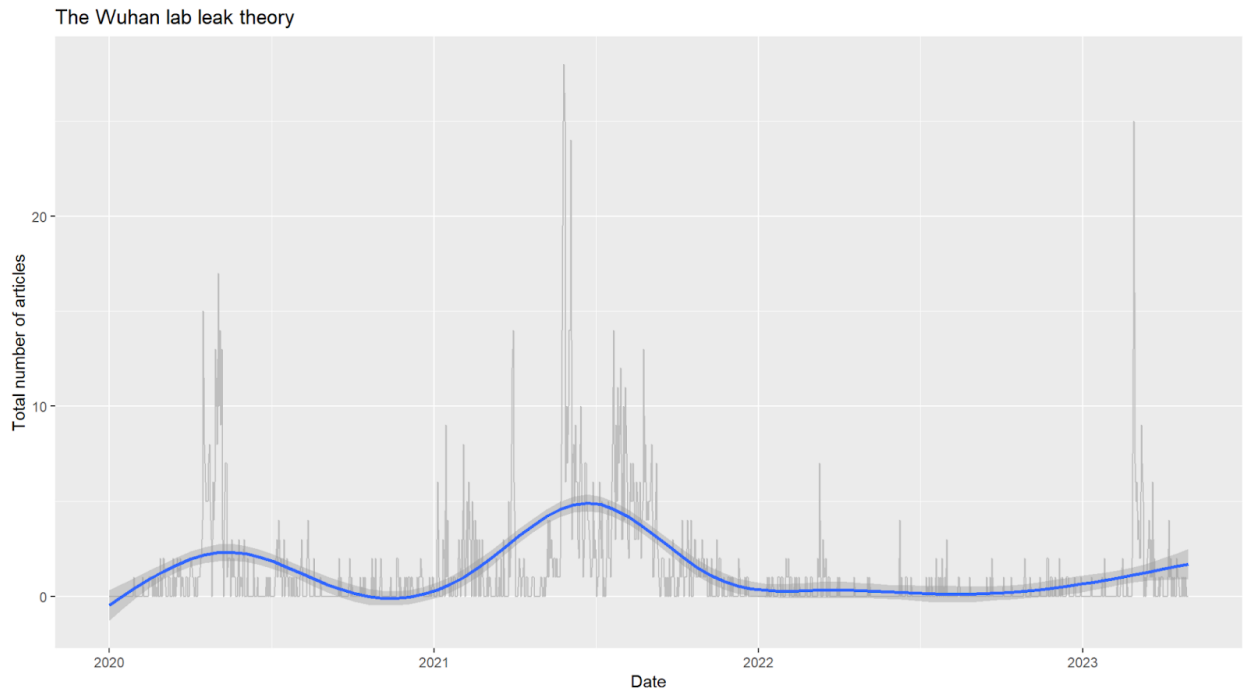


Figure J4. The trend of the U.S. strategic narrative: The Wuhan lab leak theory.

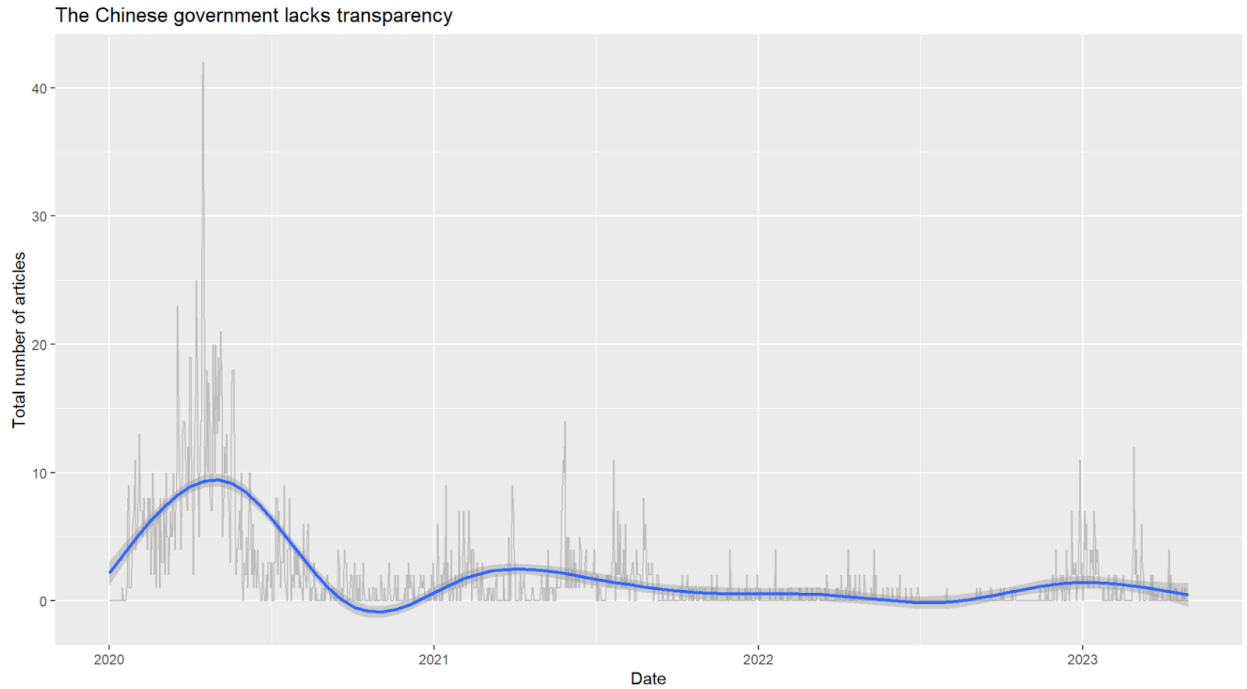


Figure J5. The trend of the U.S. strategic narrative: The Chinese government lacks transparency.

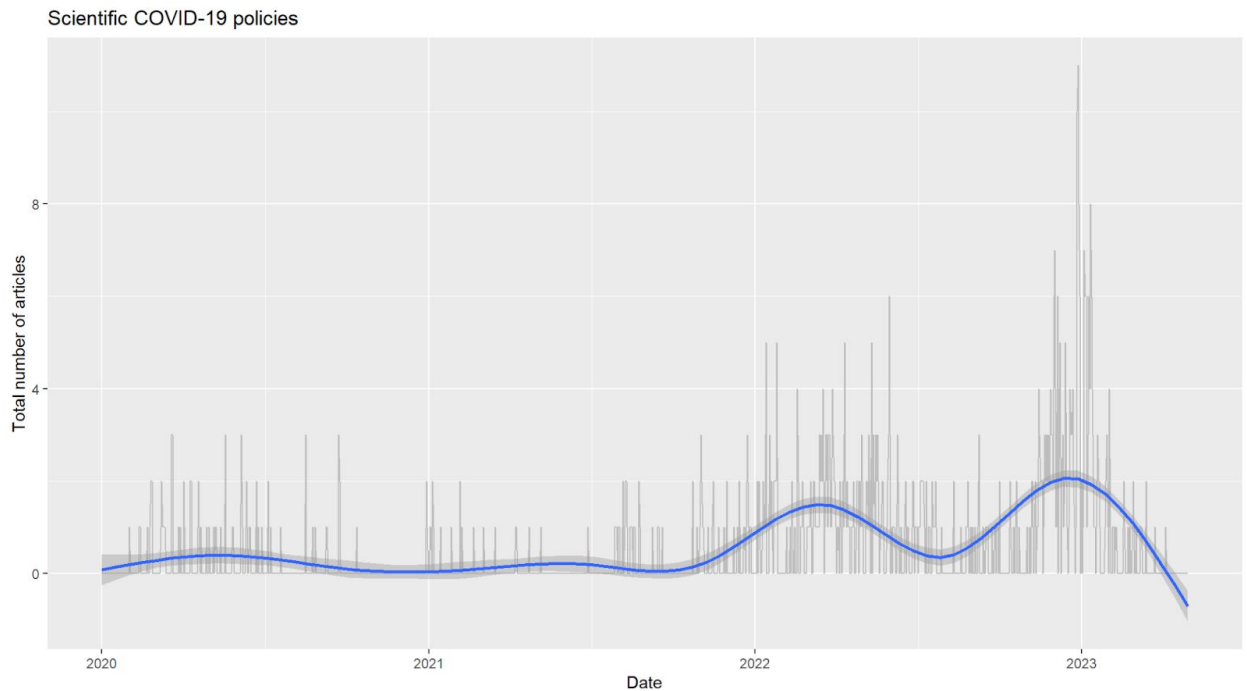


Figure J6. The trend of the Chinese strategic narrative: Scientific Zero-COVID policies.



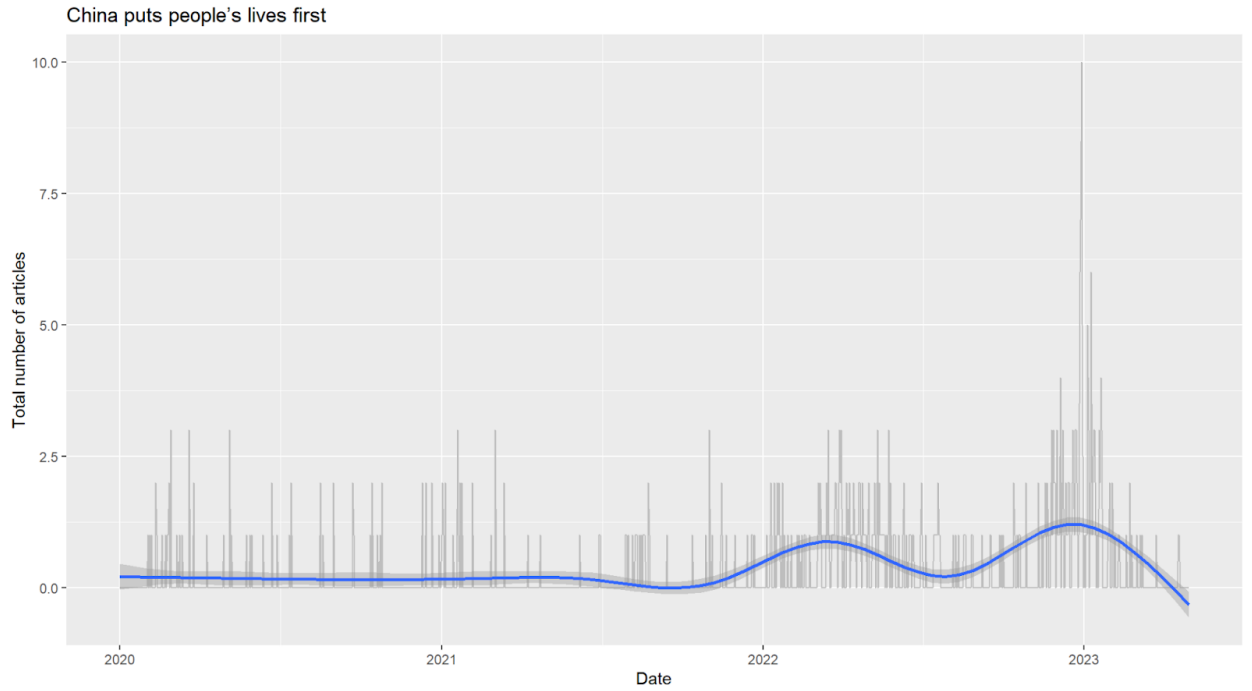


Figure J7. The trend of the Chinese strategic narrative: China puts people's lives first.

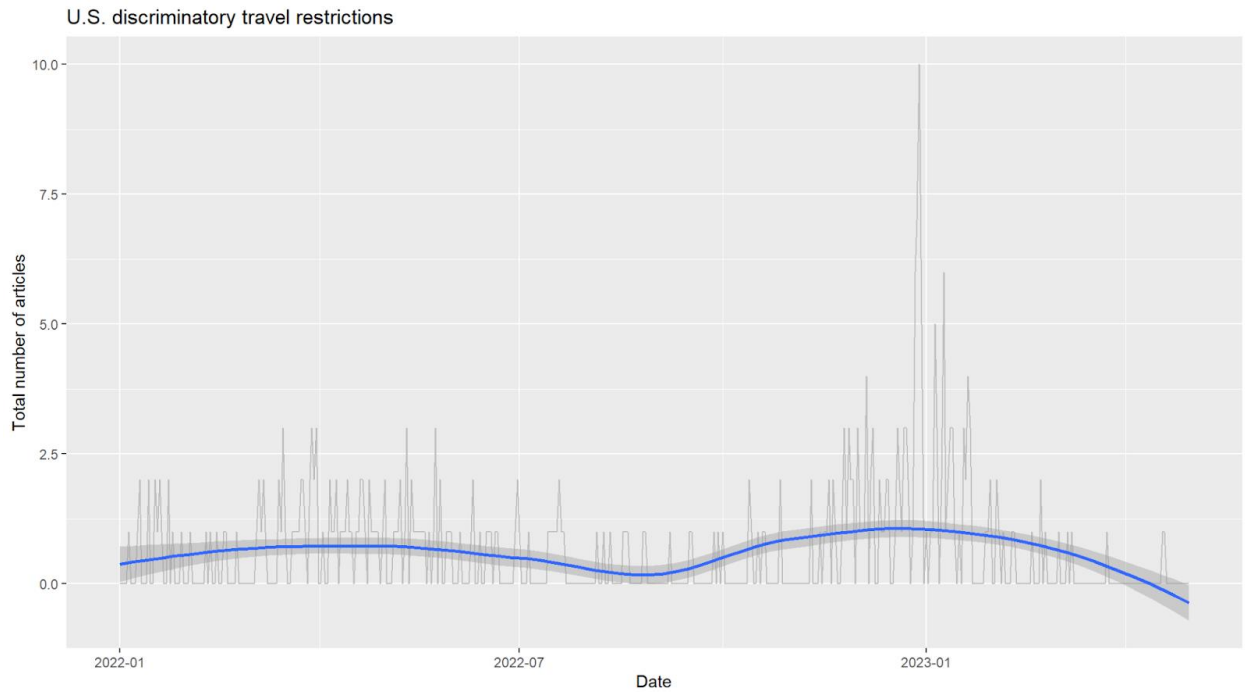


Figure J8. The trend of the Chinese strategic narrative since 2022: U.S. discriminatory travel restrictions.

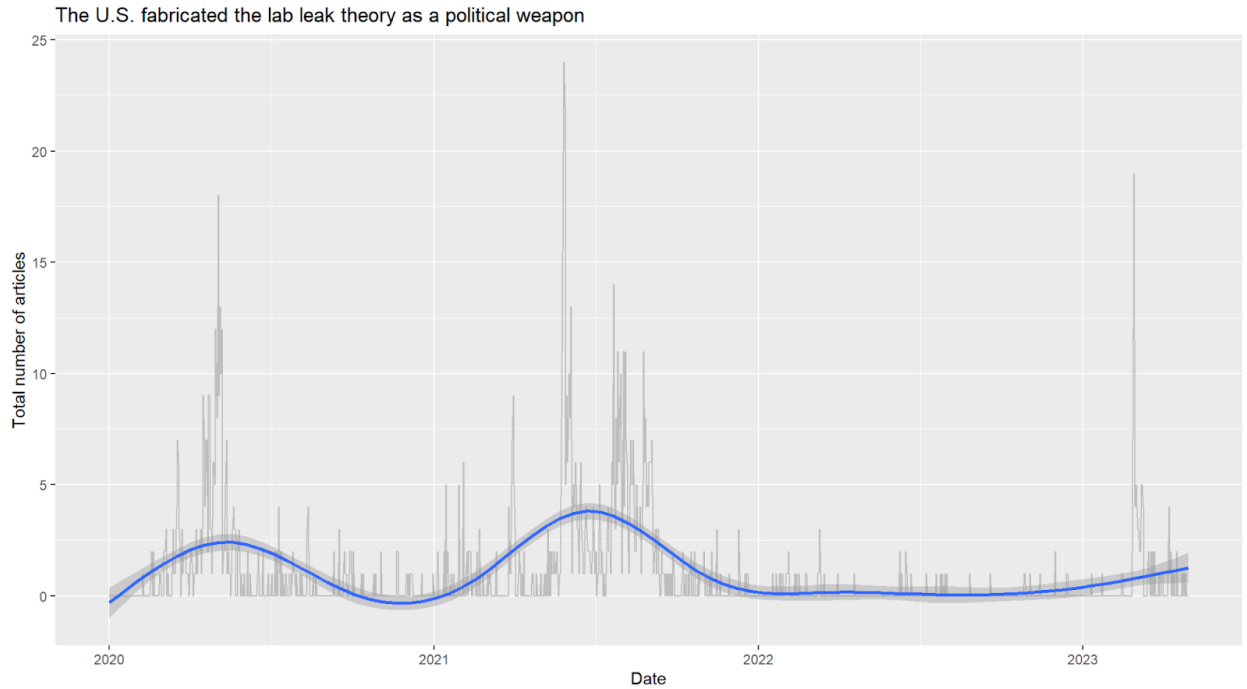


Figure J9. The trend of the Chinese strategic narrative: The U.S. fabricated the lab leak theory as a political weapon.

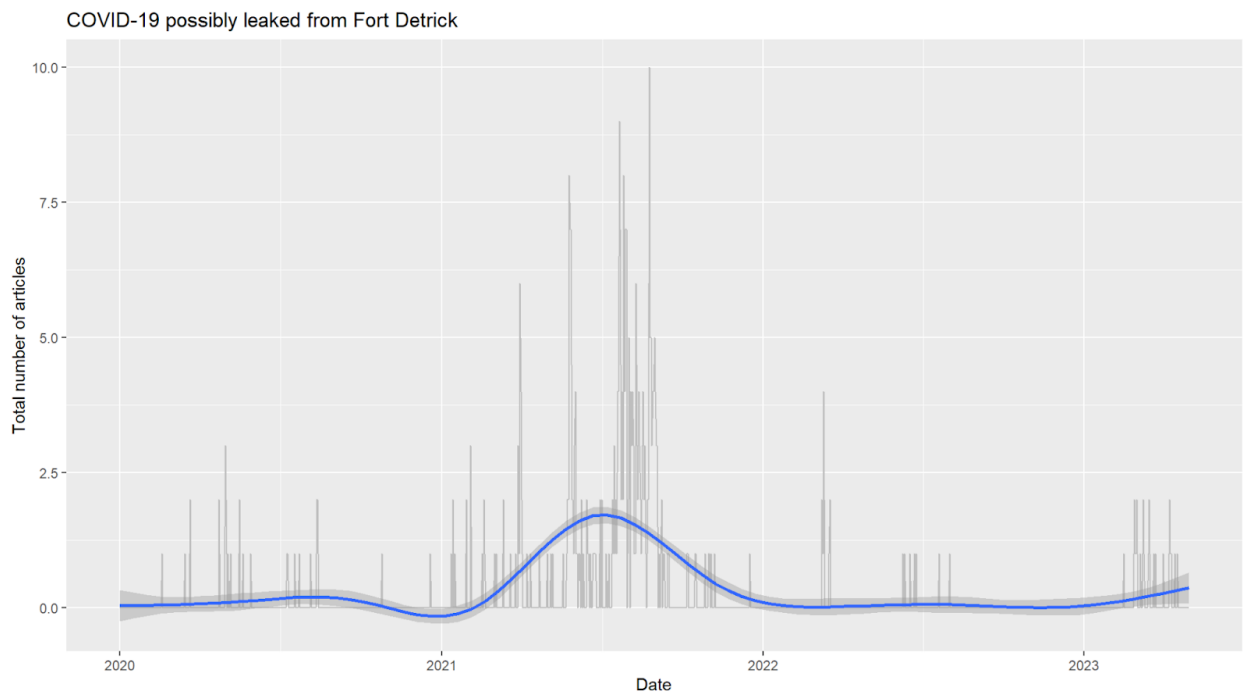


Figure J10. The trend of the Chinese strategic narrative: COVID-19 possibly leaked from Fort Detrick.

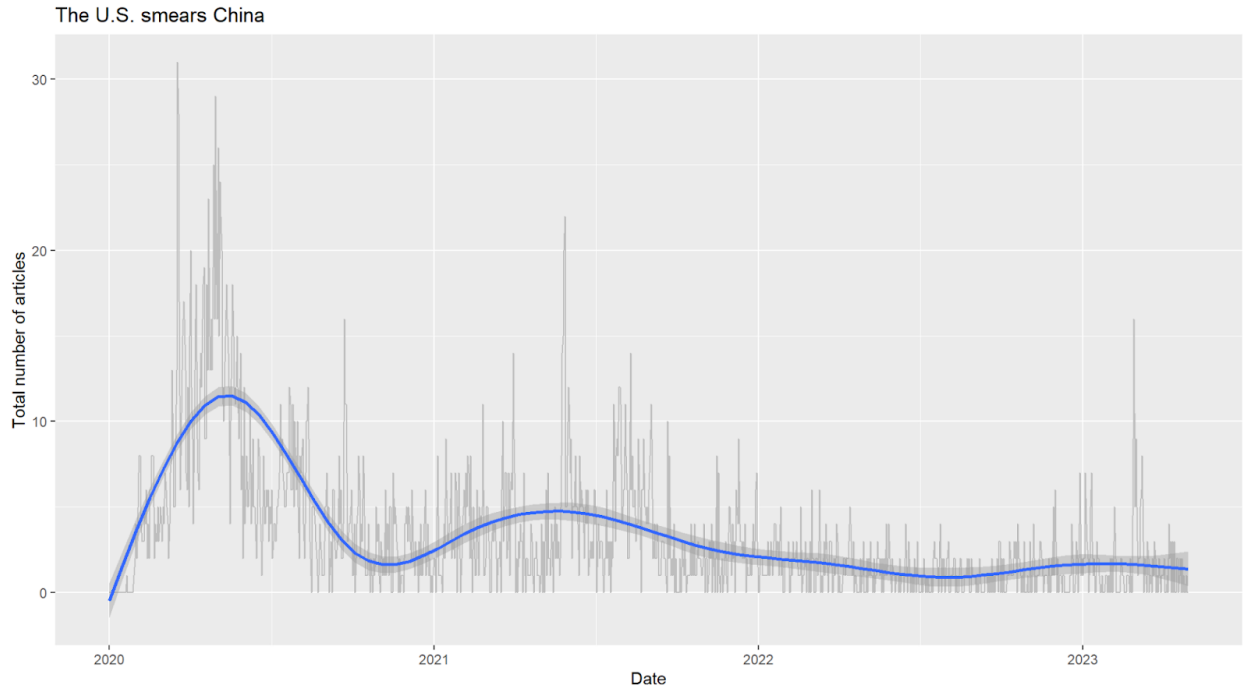


Figure J11. The trend of the Chinese strategic narrative: The U.S. smears China.

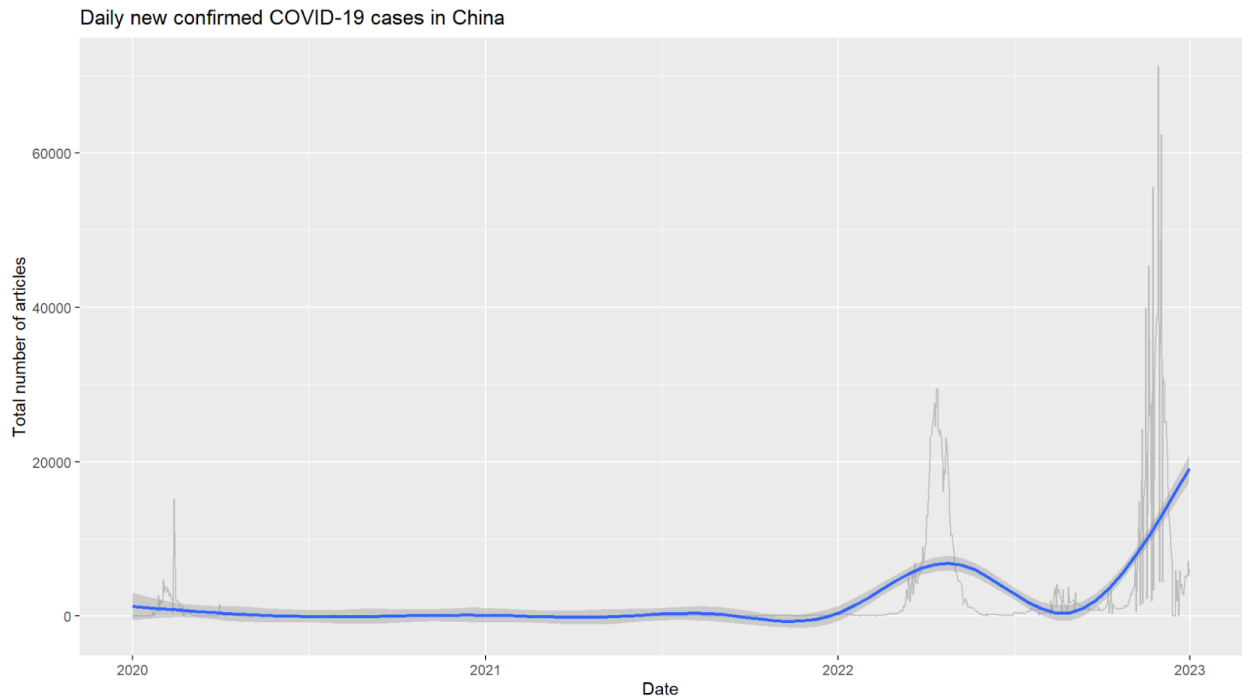


Figure J12. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases in China.

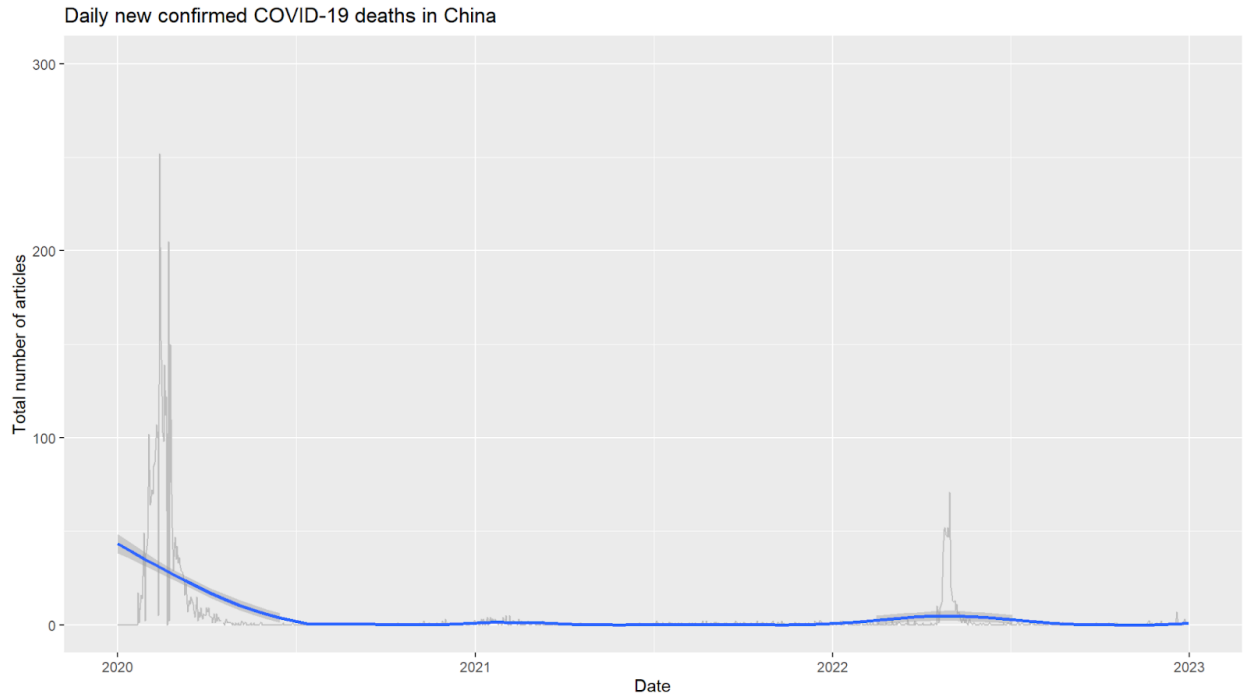


Figure J13. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths in China.

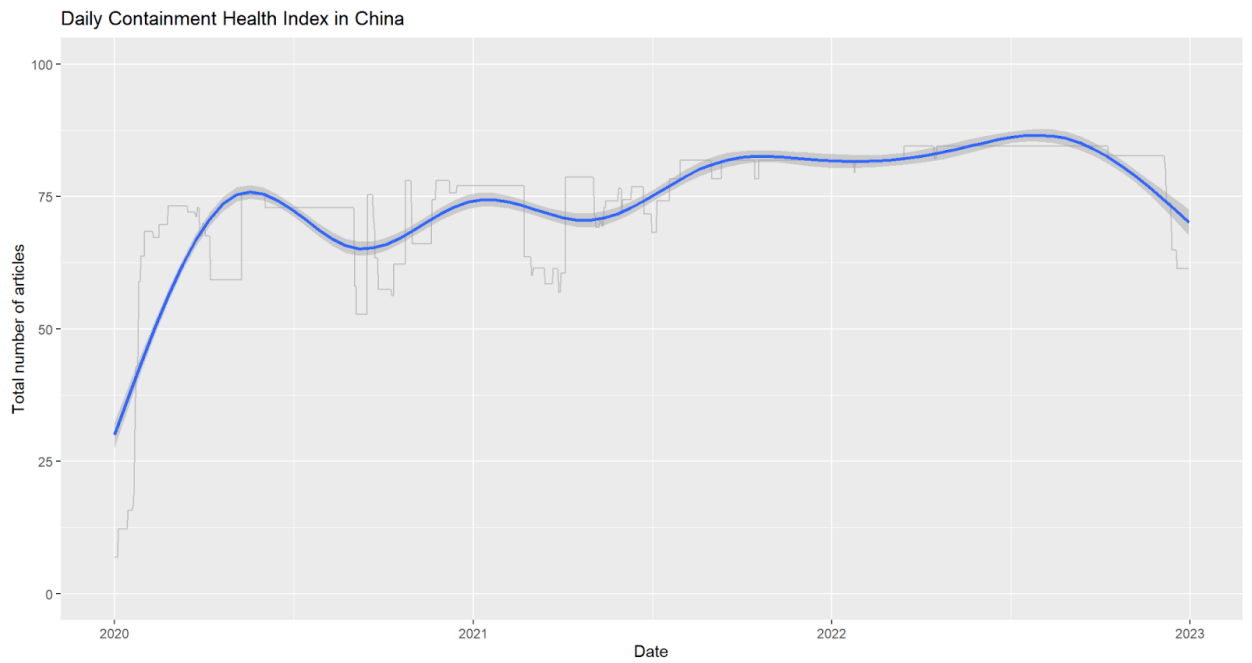


Figure J14. Daily Containment Health Index in China.

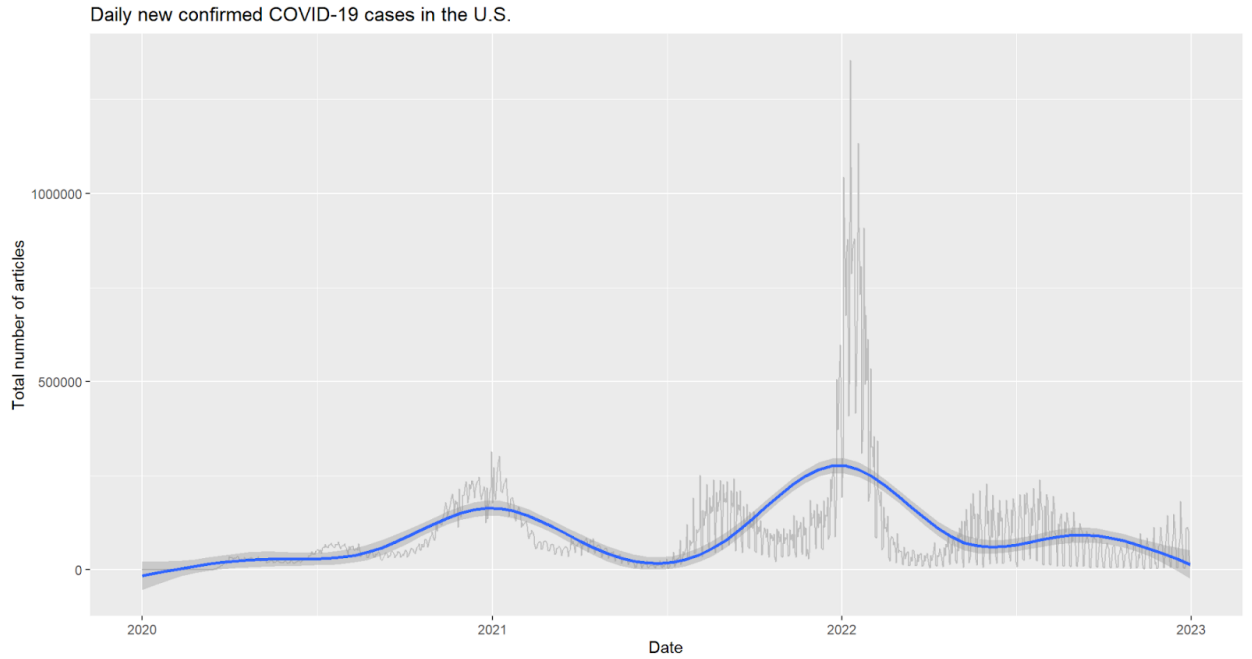


Figure J15. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases in the U.S.

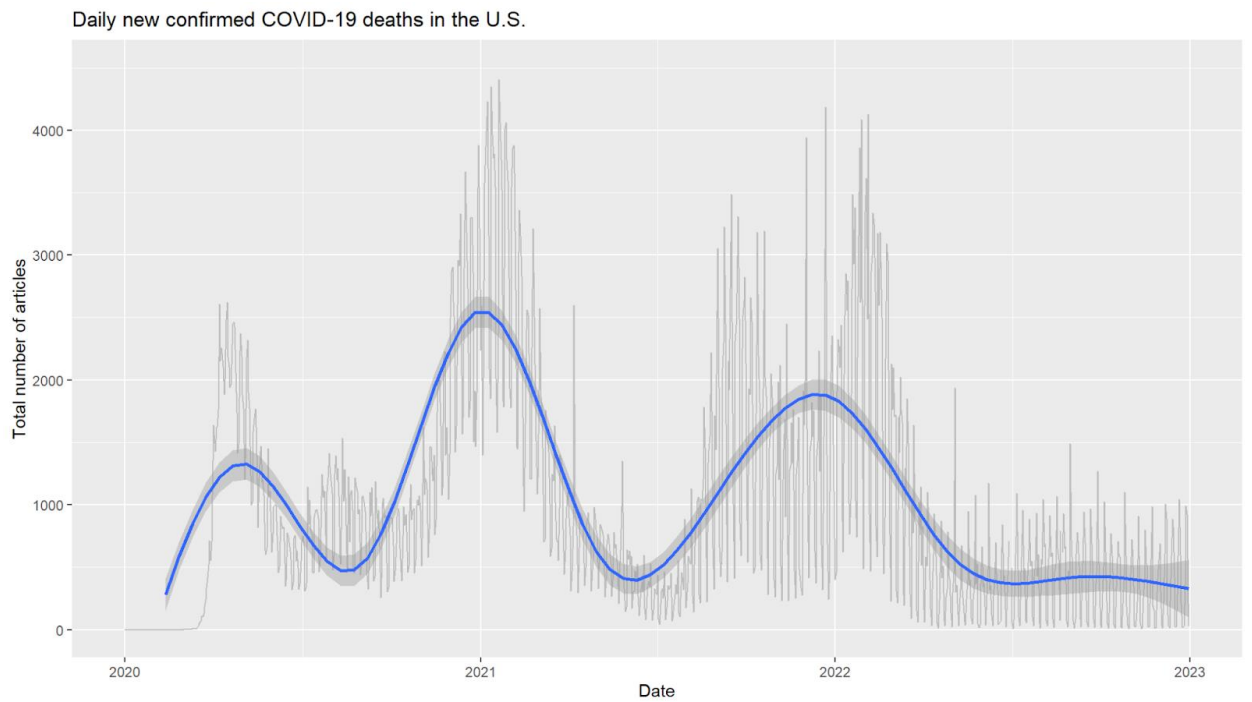


Figure J16. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths in the U.S.

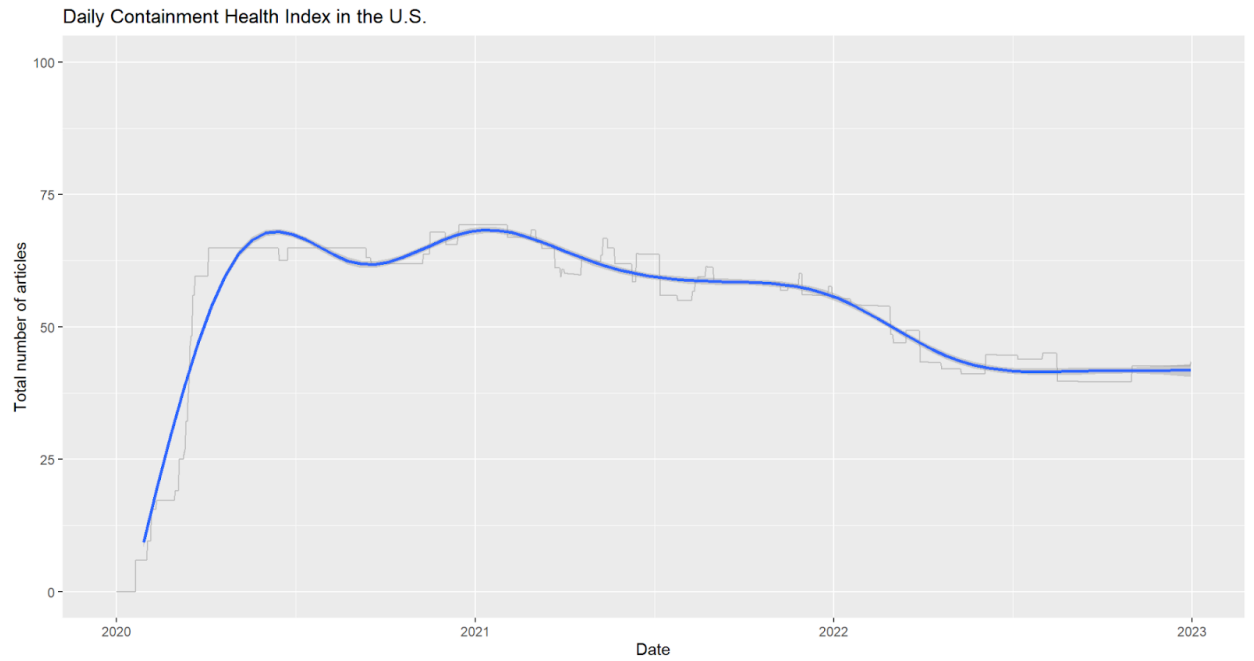


Figure J17. Daily Containment Health Index in the U.S.

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