

# A Diachronic Study of German Media's Reports on China's Anti-epidemic Report

## -- Take the Online Editions of Die Zeit and Bild as Examples

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### Abstract

The reports of the German media, represented by Die Zeit and Bild, on China's anti-epidemic situation show multi-angle and multi-level features, which are very representative. From a diachronic perspective, this article analyzes the number, genre, tendency and content of relevant articles, and discusses the prejudice and position presuppositions reflected in German media reports. In response to this situation, China needs to restore the truth, break prejudice, and create a positive and three-dimensional image of China.

### Keywords

Media language; New crown epidemic; National image.

## 1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the new crown epidemic at the end of 2019, more than 400 million people have been diagnosed around the world, and the vast majority of countries are facing an epidemic crisis. As the first country in the world to report new crown cases, China has undoubtedly become the "protagonist" on the cusp of this battle against the epidemic. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, many places in China have launched first-level responses to public health emergencies, implemented multiple rounds of nucleic acid testing, and built makeshift hospitals to achieve effective isolation within a relatively short period of time. At the same time, Western media also launched a fierce "response" in China's anti-epidemic reports, attacking China from multiple perspectives such as virus traceability, isolation measures, and anti-epidemic policies.

## 2. Research Background

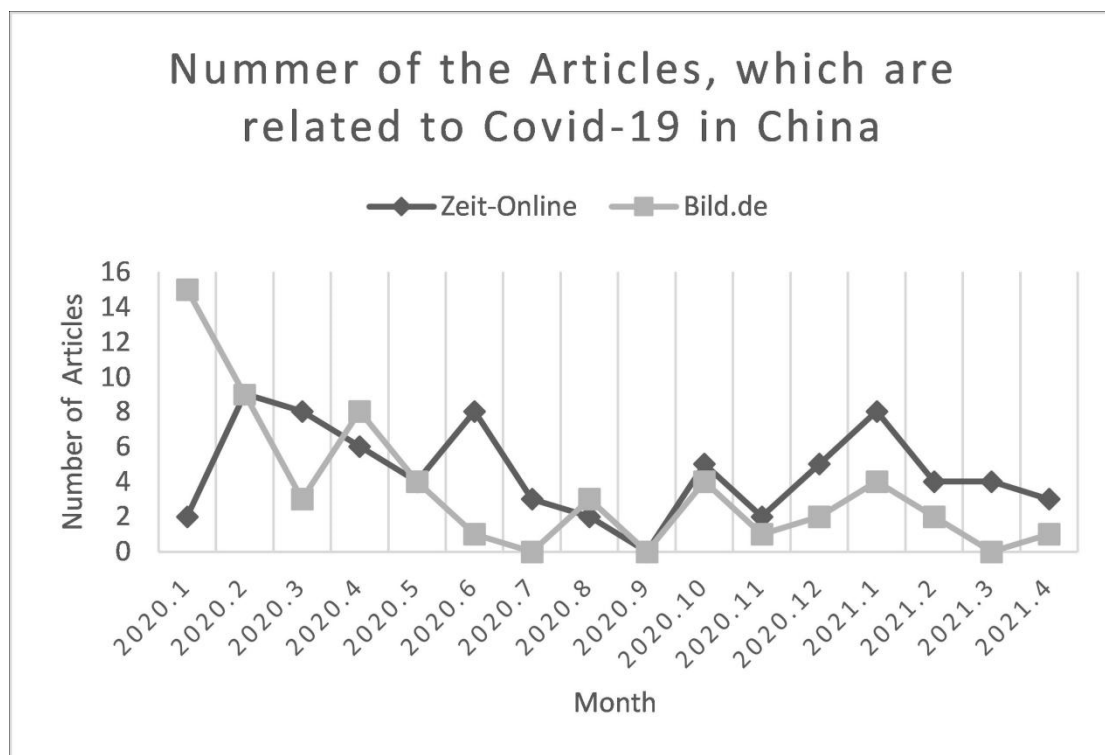
Die Zeit was founded in 1946 with the aim of taking a free and independent political stance. The target audience is mainly German citizens with higher education levels. With a circulation of about 600,000 in Germany, it is the most influential newspaper in Germany. One, its web version Zeit-Online had 75 million visits in January 2019 alone. "Bild" has long been Germany's largest daily circulation. The newspaper is a "street newspaper" targeting ordinary workers and low-income groups. Its average daily circulation in April 2019 was 1.18 million. According to data released by the German Association for the Certification of Information on Advertising Media (IVW), its online version Bild.de received a total of 490 million visits in January 2022. Based on the extensive influence of Die Zeit and Bild, an in-depth analysis of their reports on China's anti-epidemic situation from a diachronic perspective will help us understand how the German media shapes China's image.

This project takes the web version of Die Zeit and Bild as the research object. The main research time period is from January 19, 2020 to April 30, 2021, with "China" and "Corona" as the key Search by words, summarize and organize the collected articles, extract valid chapters, and sort them according to the timeline. On this basis, a total of 130 articles were analyzed by content analysis. As early as the 19th century, scholars began to quantify the content of newspapers. This approach requires us to objectively, systematically and quantitatively describe the content of overt communication [1]. Today, this research method has become one of the most used methods in mass communication research methods.

### 3. Research Results

#### 3.1. Statistics

Through the sorting and research of the webpage versions of Die Zeit and Bild, we can draw the trend of the number of articles published by the two media on China's anti-epidemic content, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Number of Articles, which are related to Covid-19 in China

In general, the number of articles published on the web pages of Die Zeit and Bild shows a trend of declining while fluctuating over time. Die Zeit has paid more attention to China's anti-epidemic efforts than Bild, and the total number of articles published is more than 20 in Bild.

This trend chart is also in line with the respective social positioning of the two media. As a national weekly newspaper with intellectuals as its main audience, "Time" has given steady and continuous attention to the topic of China's anti-epidemic, while "Bild" has carried out very intensive coverage of the incident at the beginning, but with the As the people's attention shifted, they soon turned to other international hot events.

In July-September 2020, there was an obvious trough in the trend chart, and related reports were significantly reduced. Even in September, the number of reports on both sides was 0. It should be pointed out that this does not mean that the German media has lost interest in the

topic of "China", but that after the US closed the Chinese Consulate General in Houston in July, the attention of the German and even the world media was completely attracted by the Sino-US conflict, which directly led to a reduction in the number of reports related to the outbreak in China during that time period. Some reports will mention the latest epidemic situation in China at the beginning or end, which only exists as a background for the Sino-US conflict, so such reports will not be included in the scope of this study.

### 3.2. Genre Analysis

The online edition of "Times Weekly" is generally divided into three categories: medium-length news reports (Nachricht), investigative reports (Reportage) and reviews (Kommentar), as well as four interviews. As a weekly newspaper with strong credibility, Die Zeit's news reports are mainly from world-renowned news agencies such as Agence France-Presse, Deutsche Presse-Presse and Reuters. Investigative reporting comes from journalists stationed abroad, such as Taiwan-based reporter Katharin Tai, Beijing-based reporter Fabian Kretschmer, and Chinese-German journalist Yang Xifan also stationed in Beijing. The authors of commentary articles are mainly columnists and individual special commentators. For example, Franka Lu, who has published many sharp and critical comments, has long been responsible for a series of special topics called "Lu erklärt China" (Xiao Lu talks about China). report. This self-proclaimed objective and truthful commentator once denounced the "racism" of the Chinese in a comment, but such a non-existent and comical statement once became a "hot article" of the German media. Among the relevant publications of "Times Weekly", there are 32 news reports, accounting for 43.8% of the total number of publications on China's anti-epidemic content, 23 investigative reports, 7 reviews, and 11 other genres (such as information science, short news) Wait). Bild mainly focuses on short news (meldung) and news reports, including 18 short news articles, 28 medium and long-form news reports and 11 investigative reports.

It is worth mentioning that the German media is good at digging into the lives of the interviewees through the method of "seeing the big from the small", expressing the reporter's own views through the words of the interviewees, and trying to portray the negative aspects of China. National Image. This phenomenon is mainly reflected in investigative reports and interview articles, which Chinese experts also call "guided" interviews [2]. It is undeniable that the lives of ordinary little people can indeed help readers understand the life of the people. However, one-sided reporting without an overall vision of China's anti-epidemic facts can easily lead to a lack of information and mislead readers.

Especially in German media reports on China's fight against the epidemic, journalists often emphasize conflicts and contradictions, highlight or even deliberately shape the dark side to achieve their ideological output. For example, in an interview on March 21, 2020, psychological counselor Du Mingjun talked about how to intervene in suicide for the quarantined. When it published the interview, Die Zeit deliberately emphasized how the isolation has brought psychological trauma to "proud and independent people", leading to suicidal tendencies among residents, but did not mention how isolation has ensured the safety of people's lives. There is also no mention of how the Hubei Psychological Counselor Association opened the epidemic psychological hotline in the first place after the "closed city". Deliberately ignoring the positive results of China's anti-epidemic efforts and unilaterally emphasizing the negative effects are a common method used by German media. Using similar methods, they attempt to demonize China's anti-epidemic policy and create a "rigid and terrifying" image of the country.

### 3.3. Analysis of Stance

Western media have long advertised themselves as "objective neutrality" and "freedom", but in fact, as the mouthpiece of the government, the media has always had a strong political inclination and a pre-set position. In many social events, especially China-related events, it is

difficult for the German media to maintain its own objectivity. Through semantic analysis of reports related to China's anti-epidemic, it can be concluded that among the 73 related articles in the online edition of "Times Weekly", there are 8 positive content and 24 negative content, and the largest proportion is neutral. (56.2%) of the articles, a total of 41 articles. Among the 57 articles published in the online edition of Bild, there are no articles that agree with the position, 19 are critical, and 38 are neutral, accounting for 66.7%. On the whole, it can be seen that the image of China created by the German media tends to be negative, which is related to its own prejudice against China's political system and governance methods.

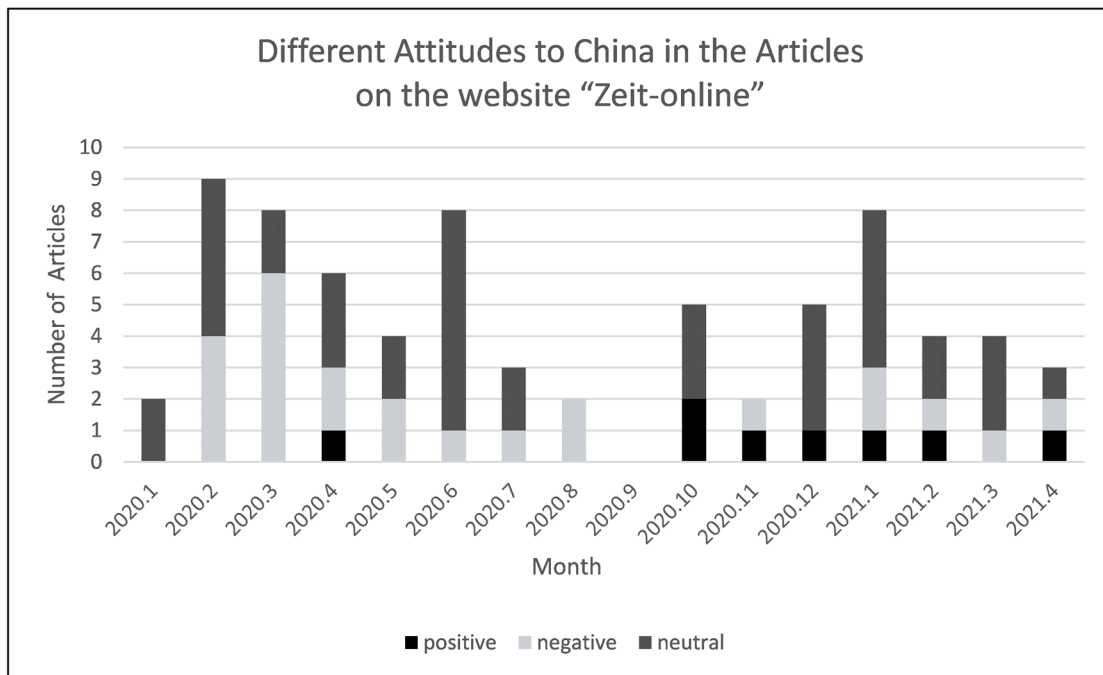


Figure 2. Different attitudes to China in the Articles on the website "Zeit-online"

Referring to Figure 2, it can be seen that the German media's attitude and position on the reporting of the Chinese epidemic has changed over time. First of all, at the beginning of the outbreak, most of the German media took an objective position, focusing on the epidemic itself, such as the number of infected people, transmission methods and prevention methods. However, due to differences in political systems and ideology, the inherent prejudice and stereotype of Western countries towards China led to the fact that at the beginning of the outbreak, the German media repeatedly criticized the Chinese government for "ineffective handling" and "opaque information" in comments and investigative reports. . They also oppose and criticize the measures taken by the Chinese government, such as quarantine and "closure of cities", and believe that the Chinese government "trample human rights", while the closure of cities in Italy and the United Kingdom is an "effective policy". In a report on February 13, 2020, some experts even asserted that "the possibility of China's containment of the epidemic is getting smaller by the day". At the same time, the threat of the virus has caused panic among ordinary people, the lack of understanding of the virus itself, and the fake news spread on social media has also affected the attitude of the German media.

As the epidemic continues to spread, Europe itself is also threatened by the virus. During this period, the focus of German media has returned to itself, focusing on the spread of the epidemic in its own country and other Western countries and the countermeasures. In the reports involving the epidemic in China, there will also be strong concerns about their own status quo. German media have also paid attention to the impact of the new crown epidemic on China and even the entire world economy. As the world's largest trading country and the world's second

largest consumer market, the economic impact of the new crown epidemic may spread to other countries, including Germany.

With the gradual stabilization of the epidemic situation in China, countries around the world have also begun to invest in the research and development of new crown vaccines. German media have begun to pay attention to the development and vaccination of vaccines, and their reports are mostly scientific. At this stage, while the vaccine has become a global anti-epidemic hotspot, it has also become a new weapon used by the German media to attack China. Related reports first questioned the effectiveness of China's vaccine and whether it has completed clinical trials, and secondly, China's vaccine assistance to other countries has risen to "expansionism", constantly exaggerating the political purpose behind it. In a report on March 30, 2021, although the reporter criticized countries that were reluctant to export vaccines, the reason was that "the opportunity for political expansion cannot be left to China and Russia." Its pre-set position seriously affects the rationality and fairness of the report, and is a complete departure from the principles of news reporting.

Nearly 6 months after the outbreak of the new crown epidemic, China's epidemic prevention and control measures have been successful. Wuhan and other cities have gradually lifted the lockdown and the number of new people has gradually decreased. The life of the Chinese people has begun to return to normal, and the attitude of the German media has begun to change from criticism to criticism. As a neutral wait-and-see state, I gradually began to pay attention to the recovery of China's economy under the epidemic. All in all, the reports of the German media are always closely related to their political themes on the overall road, and the evaluation of China's anti-epidemic measures is sharp and strongly biased. On the one hand, it is impossible for the mainstream media to really support China's actions. The reason why their later reports showed neutrality and even partial approval was only to urge the German government to take measures to protect the interests of the people by taking advantage of the fact that China's epidemic prevention was successful. In essence, it uses China to criticize Germany's fragile epidemic prevention mechanism with the help of public opinion and facts, in an attempt to awaken the German government's ambition to prevent epidemics. On the other hand, the German media has also continued to use the method of "secretly Chencang", presupposing positions at the beginning of interviews and investigative reports, fully criticizing China's political system, and advocating China's "vaccine diplomacy".

### 3.4. Content Analysis

Die Zeit, as a weekly newspaper with strong credibility, mainly comes from world-renowned news agencies such as Agence France Presse, Deutsche Presse Presse, and Reuters. In addition to clearly marking 18 of the articles, Bild has relatively vague treatment of other sources, with less than one third of the articles with reliable sources and authors. In a relatively positive article, the German media reported the outbreak of the new crown epidemic and the general situation of how China has responded. The main contents of its accreditation are: economic recovery and growth, the restoration of residents' living order, rapid vaccination, and the people's cooperation with the state in epidemic prevention and independent production of vaccines.

In the negative articles, the content of the report is more "colorful". First of all, since the beginning of the epidemic, the German media had no reason to believe that the virus originated in Wuhan, trying to arouse hatred towards China in Germany and even European countries. The later WHO traceability results proved that the origin of the virus could not be confirmed. At this time, the German media turned to attack China's public information was not timely, completely ignoring the international situation at that time. The second category focuses on attacking China's epidemic prevention situation: home isolation, makeshift hospitals, and zero-clearing policies are all questioned; at the same time, German media repeatedly doubt the number of

patients and treatment conditions announced by China. The third category of publications questioned the effectiveness of China's vaccines after the domestic epidemic had stabilized and vaccinations had begun. Subsequently, the new crown vaccine developed by China was approved by the WHO, and at the same time, China provided vaccine assistance to many developing countries. At this time, the German media began to advocate "conspiracy theories", believing that China's vaccine donation is not pure, there is an exchange of interests behind it, trying to smear China's international image, and describing China as a country that attempts to use vaccines as a "diplomatic tool". At the same time, Germany also criticized the US vaccine policy of "priority", which makes people wonder what kind of policy a country should adopt in order to be recognized by Germany. It is not difficult to see that under the default position of the German media, all China's actions are "politically incorrect".

From a linguistic point of view, German media often refer to China with a derogatory "Regime" (Regime) or even a "dictator" (Autokraten), and use the exaggerated "Geisterstadt" (Geisterstadt) to describe the city of Wuhan in the early stage of the epidemic. These terrible words all reveal the long-term negative and dark attitude of the German media towards China, trying to influence readers' attitude towards China[3].

#### 4. Conclusion

In recent years, Sino-German relations have become increasingly complex. Germany's introduction of the "Supply Chain Law" in 2021, the dispatch of frigates to patrol the Indo-Pacific region, the hype of Confucius Institutes, and the publication of reports of China's epidemic prevention measures either agreeing or denying them all show that the ideological barrier of Sino-German relations still exists. The political systems of China and Germany are very different. For a long time, Germany did not agree with China's national system. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Germany even regarded China as its biggest enemy. These were conveyed in the form of "values diplomacy".

The German media are mainly opposed to the coverage of China's fight against the epidemic, but there are still weak voices of affirmation. Even in an interview with Germans in China in the early days of the epidemic, the respondents affirmed the active cooperation between Chinese residents and the government. These reveal sensitive political issues. Weak countries have no diplomacy. It is precisely because China's current economic production capacity is developing rapidly and its strength cannot be underestimated that it has gradually gained a firm foothold in the world, which will attract many different voices. At the same time, this also reflects an indisputable fact that no matter how cleverly you use to guide public opinion, the truth cannot be covered up forever.

Comparing Die Zeit's reports on China's anti-epidemic in 2020 and 2021, it can be clearly seen that although the German media is critical of China's anti-epidemic in the early stage, when China's policies have a significant effect, those opposing voices are also relatively weakened, and some German media even pointed the finger at the herd immunity policy implemented by Germany, believing that the inaction of the German government led to the large-scale outbreak of the new crown epidemic. This reveals the negligent attitude of the German government in responding to the epidemic, and reflects that the possibility of countries under capital control wanting to take rapid and effective epidemic prevention measures is very small.

Against the background of China's remarkable achievements in fighting the epidemic, the German media still practice double standards and slander China with aggressive rhetoric. The long-standing political system differences between China and Germany, Germany's prejudice against China, and the long-term "discourse power" of the Western media are the fundamental reasons for this problem.

China has developed rapidly in recent decades, but the media of many Western countries still view my country's achievements with colored glasses. The breakthrough of China's international image cannot be achieved only by economic and scientific development. Against the background of the global new crown crisis, China's approach can better demonstrate China's international image and status. There are indeed stereotypes about China in German media reports, and we cannot change this fact in the short term. But we can start with ourselves and minimize the impact of negative reports as much as possible. First of all, China should restore the truth to the content of reports that are rumors or lack real evidence. In recent years, China has become increasingly assertive in its diplomacy. For false and offensive content, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will spare no effort to refute with a clear position. For example, on the issue of "vaccine diplomacy", Foreign Minister Wang Yi once gave a strong response in the interview. fight back. Second, for the problems that did exist, China has made continuous improvements to fill in the loopholes in the fight against the epidemic. Compared with the early stage of the epidemic, the current anti-epidemic policy is relatively mature, and the scheduling arrangements are more reasonable. At the same time, efforts are made to establish more accurate discharge standards, and to provide a wide range of oral drugs and home testing reagents that the public can afford. This shows that the government A more moderate and durable epidemic prevention policy is being explored. These measures have laid a solid foundation for the promotion of my country's international image by pragmatically solving the existing problems. Finally, China should strive to grasp the international discourse power, tell China's stories well, and innovate international communication. For a long time, the German media and even the entire Western media, which advertised "objectivity and neutrality", have been mainly negative in their China-related reports. Unfortunately, this has been accepted by their audiences. Under the impact of the epidemic, countries are in an international public opinion field where cooperation and confrontation coexist. Therefore, in this period, China needs to use the knowledge of communication science to analyze the current trend of public opinion and social situation in Germany, build its own discourse system, and strive to seize the initiative, so as to better show Germany and the world a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China.

## Acknowledgments

Project Information: Changshu Institute of Technology's 2021 University-level Innovation Training Program for College Students: "A Diachronic Study of German Media's Reports on China's Anti-epidemic (Project No.: XJDC2021199)".

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