

# **Portraying the Enemy: Sino-US Relations in the Chinese Media**

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## I. Introduction

The United States and China have experienced a significant decline in their relationship over the last decade since the official establishment of diplomatic relations. The trade war's economic sanctions, constant accusations of human rights violations in China, and US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan accelerated the deterioration of relations. As Sino-US relations worsen, surveys show that Chinese and American public attitudes toward each other have become increasingly negative. The Pew Research Center reports that the percentage of people in the United States who hold an unfavorable opinion of China rose from 35 percent to 82 percent between 2005 and 2022. This means that approximately eight out of ten people in the United States dislike China. (*Pew Research Center*, 2022). Similarly, according to the *US-China Perception Monitor*, 29 percent of Chinese citizens surveyed in 2021 had "unfavorable" views of the United States, and 33 percent had "very unfavorable" views (The Pulse, 2021). In light of intensifying tensions, how has the Chinese media portrayed the United States? Previous research has shown patterns of the "China threat" media coverage by the American media (Yang & Liu, 2012). However, the framing of the US by Chinese state-owned media received comparatively less attention.

Unlike media in the West, Chinese media are strongly controlled and regulated by the government. Recent studies described the role of the authoritarian media<sup>1</sup> and the intentions of its media posts as strengthening ruling legitimacy, sustaining authoritarian rule, shaping public opinion, and affecting political attitudes (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Adena et al., 2015; Huang, 2015; Szostek, 2017; Pan et al., 2022). Researchers also identified specific tactics used by authoritarian media in different circumstances. For example, during the Hong Kong protests in 2019, state-owned media framed the protests as a national security threat backed by the West.

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<sup>1</sup> Authoritarian media, in this research equivalent to State-controlled media, state-owned media in China.

This framing successfully rallied the masses against the protesters and the West while demobilizing support for the protests (Ma & Weiss, 2022). Strict censorship and regulations mean that citizens in China have limited options for obtaining information about events in the world, with state-owned media serving as their major source of information. As a result, the media in China plays a more significant role in shaping public opinion than in the West (Zhang & Boukes, 2019).

In contrast to domestic news, which is relevant to people's daily lives, international news about other countries is distant for most audiences. People do not typically have easy access to resources to verify the accuracy of news about foreign countries, nor do many of them have the political knowledge to understand the facts of the events reported. Therefore, public opinion is largely shaped by what elites allow them to see in the media (Zaller, 1992).

Authoritarian media not only help to shape public opinion and strengthen regime legitimacy but also has a specific impact on people's perceptions of foreign nations, which can, in turn, affect their perceptions of China. When citizens estimate the quality of life and economic situations of other countries highly, they may be inclined to assess their own country's quality of life and economic situation more poorly. Conversely, if they estimate other countries' quality of life and economic situations poorly and perceive those countries as enemies, nationalism may increase and lead to unnecessary conflicts. Importantly, research shows that authoritarian media in China has always been aligned with Chinese national interests in the global economy, foreign policy, and US–China relations (Yang, 2003; Ji & Liu, 2022).

The puzzling questions are the following: given its role in strengthening legitimacy, shaping public opinion, balancing between “underestimation” and “overestimation” of foreign countries, and aligning with Chinese national interests, how has authoritarian media in China

shifted its portrayal of the United States as Sino–US relations have worsened, and how does the choice of portrayal help us understand the intentions of the autocrats?

To answer these questions, I conducted a pilot study of the relationship between US-Sino relations and the prevalence of Chinese media’s negative coverage of the United States. I drew on evidence from the People’s Daily’s Weibo accounts. The People’s Daily, the largest newspaper group in China, is owned by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is seen as the “tongue and throat” of the CCP, not only because it represents the official stance of the party’s leadership but also because it provides direction to the rest of Chinese media on what can and cannot be covered and how news should be framed (Ma & Weiss, 2022). By analyzing the coverage of the United States in the People’s Daily, we can obtain an overall picture of how the Chinese media portrays the US. Importantly, this coverage also reflects the narrative that the Chinese state wants Chinese individuals to absorb, and it influences all other media outlets in China.

This research contributes to the [A1] literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of how Chinese state-owned media shifted its portrayal of the US in the context of deteriorating Sino–US relations under the Xi–Trump and Xi–Biden administrations from 2012 to 2022. Using quantitative text analysis to identify frames and tone in media posts, I offer a possible explanation for the underlying factors driving each country’s increasingly unfavorable public opinion toward the other. This approach not only adds new empirical evidence to the literature but also sheds light on the mechanisms that state-owned media in authoritarian regimes use to shape public opinion and influence foreign policy.

This paper is organized as follows. Section II summarizes the role of authoritarian media in shaping public opinion, including the impact of foreign news coverage in China and the framing of international events to align with Chinese national interests. Section III elaborates on the research hypotheses. Section IV details the data collection and the definition of negative coverage. Section V presents the empirical analysis of the data. Section VI presents conclusions drawn from the results of the research.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Authoritarian Media and Public Opinion**

Since the 1960s, political scientists have studied the role of media in an authoritarian state with a focus on regime durability. Many have argued that increased media creation can potentially play a critical role in destabilizing authoritarian governments. Lerner (1964) contends that expanding access to media encourages citizens to become more politically engaged, eventually leading to democratization. However, Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) suggest that not all authoritarian regimes are on a path toward democratization. Countries such as Russia and China are instead using media to consolidate their authoritarian rule.

In contrast to studies that emphasized the liberalizing role of media, some research suggests that unelected leaders actively utilize authoritarian media to maintain their grip on power and bolster the legitimacy of their rule (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Furthermore, a large body of literature supports Stockmann and Gallagher (2011)'s argument that state-owned media have broad influence in authoritarian states. Authoritarian governments use media to shape people's political attitudes, outcomes, and behaviors (Zaller, 1992; Adena et al., 2015; Huang, 2015; Bleck & Michelitch, 2017; Szostek, 2017; Pan et al., 2022).



For example, Adena et al. (2015) studied the role that radio played in a dictatorial regime in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany and found that the pro-Nazi information spread by the radio not only helped the Nazis consolidate their rule but also allowed them to attract more new party members. Pan et al. (2022) examined the effectiveness of authoritarian media when the government needs to switch or flip positions on issues and found that different portrayals of an issue in the media can help authoritarian regimes push public opinion to align with the official stance. Furthermore, propaganda in the media can signal the strength of an authoritarian regime and discourage political dissent. According to Huang (2015), when governments engage in explicit propaganda, people who are more exposed to it are likely to believe that the government is robust in maintaining social order and that political disagreement is unlikely to succeed.

Zaller (1992) argued that people do not have pre-formed opinions but rather construct their opinions based on readily available information. This means that people's opinions are heavily influenced by the political discourse presented to them by elites in the media. When people are asked to express their opinions, they tend to rely on the most recent exposure to news received from media elites. Therefore, the formation of public opinion largely depends on the discourse presented by media elites.

## **2.2 Coverage of Foreign Nations in the Past**

Because of authoritarian media's role in helping sustain legitimacy, shape public opinion, and shape citizens' assessments of their own nations, media coverage has often been found to be aligned with national interests in both the US and China.

Zhang and Boukes (2019) claim that the media often take two paths in their coverage of foreign countries: 1) the relationship between the host country and foreign countries and 2) the

development of a foreign country. In taking the first path, the media tend to describe a foreign country as a friend, partner, or cooperator or conversely as an enemy, threat, or rival of the home country, with “friend” and “enemy” often being the most visible terms in media discourse.

The framing of China by the Western media has been widely studied (Golan & Lukito, 2015; Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017), and the framing categories of “friend” and “enemy” have been very visible in these studies. Furthermore, the framing of China by the West has changed over time according to national interests. Yu and Riffe (1989) found that when China was a strong ally of the USSR during the Cold War era, it had always been negatively portrayed as “Red Communists,” and when Sino-USSR relations worsened and Sino-US melted the ice, China was actively framed as a partner. The authors contend that the U.S. media portrayal of China has successfully been aligned with US foreign policy toward China and reflected the American national interest

A large body of literature shows that the Chinese media coverage of foreign nations and conflicts has always been aligned with Chinese national interests in political relations, economic ties, and foreign policy (Yang, 2003; He et al., 2012; Pan et al., 2020; Ji & Liu, 2022). Yang (2003) conducted a frame analysis to compare how the Chinese and US media covered the NATO air strikes in 1999 and found that while the Chinese media framed the air strikes as a violation of Yugoslavia’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the US media framed it as being humanitarian aid to Albanians to stop ethnic cleansing, Yang’s (2003) study reveals that national interests are crucial in international news coverage.

He et al. (2012) examined the image of the United States in the main Chinese newspapers from 2008 to 2010 and found that the Chinese media followed the Chinese foreign policy of

“bide and hide” (*tao guang yang hui*)<sup>2</sup>. “Bide and hide” is a strategy of non-assertiveness that was first proposed by Deng Xiaoping when the US became China’s major threat at the end of the Cold War. Deng proposed this strategy to avoid conflicts with other countries in exchange for peaceful economic development. The strategy guided China for decades under Jiang and Hu and guaranteed the considerable cooperation and development seen in China. Consistent with “bide and hide,” the image of the US in Chinese media was relatively neutral and balanced. One of the most important factors influencing the coverage was the economic collaboration between the two nations. In the examination of the coverage of Trump’s America, Pan et al. (2020) contended that Chinese media practiced a strategy of “othering offensive” to portray Donald Trump as a negative and racist figure, framed the American society and political system as hopeless and dysfunctional, and finally portrayed the United States as a declining global power amid anti-globalization. By adopting this strategy and characterizing the United States as a negative other, China indirectly constructs a positive and hopeful self, which aligns with the China-US relationship and Chinese “wolf warrior”<sup>3</sup> diplomacy. Ji and Liu, (2022) add that Chinese media coverage also aligns with national interests in the global economy, and that countries with strong economic ties with China tend to receive more favorable coverage.

In conclusion, authoritarian media has been shown to significantly influence public opinion and political attitudes, sustaining authoritarian rule, and strengthening regime legitimacy. This influence extends to how people compare their own country to foreign nations, with past research demonstrating that “rosier” news about foreign countries led to more positive views of foreign nations and a lower assessment of China. However, with rising confidence and economic

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<sup>2</sup> 韬光养晦, It means to hide our talent and bide our time which was a Chinese diplomatic strategy first proposed by Deng Xiaoping, under this strategy, China focused on economic development and kept a low profile on the international stage.

<sup>3</sup> 战狼外交, describes an aggressive and confrontational style of foreign policy, first adopted by Chinese diplomats under Xi Jinping’s administration.

growth in China, there has been a shift toward viewing foreign nations more poorly and an emergence of aggressive nationalism. Therefore, even distant foreign coverage can impact how people assess their own nation.

Despite the importance of media coverage, the literature on Chinese media coverage of foreign nations has several limitations. Previous studies have analyzed media coverage during different time periods but have tended to focus on specific events or time periods such as the NATO air strikes in 1999 or coverage of Trump's Administration, providing snapshots that may not offer a complete picture of media coverage of the United States. Furthermore, most of the research has focused on traditional media sources such as TV and newspapers, overlooking the importance of social media platforms such as Weibo. Studies on how the US is framed in Chinese coverage tend to lack nuance in their analysis, classifying posts as either friend or foe. However, the complexity of Weibo posts requires a more nuanced analysis, which is what my research aims to provide. While previous research has made important contributions to understanding the relationship between media coverage and national interests, my research offers a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis by examining Weibo posts from the People's Daily over a ten-year period.

### **2.3 Domestic Impact of Foreign Nation Coverage**

Understanding how authoritarian media coverage of foreign nations shapes public opinion and national identity has become increasingly important in China's current political climate. Previous research suggests that when authoritarian media provide information about a foreign nation to its people, the population can use it to make comparisons with their own nation

and form opinions (Dong et al., 2013; Fong, 2011). This is because people tend to evaluate their own country in comparison to other countries. (Easterlin, 1995; Stouffer et al., 1949).

In an authoritarian state with media censorship, the main way that people acquire information about a foreign country is through state-owned media (Dong et al., 2013; Fong, 2011). Huang (2021) adds to our understanding of how information about the world can change people's opinions about their countries and international relations. He found that overestimating foreign countries can lead the Chinese population to lower their assessment of their nation and be more dissatisfied with the government. Huang (2021) also noted that Chinese people have shifted from overestimation of foreign countries to underestimation of foreign countries because of China's rising economic and political power and the government's propaganda, and this may lead to rising nationalism that causes conflicts with foreign countries.

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nuanced analysis of the frames used to describe the United States on the social media platform Weibo. By examining posts from the People's Daily, a state-owned media outlet, over a ten-year period, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How has the Chinese state-owned media portrayed the United States on Weibo, and how have these portrayals changed over time? This study's findings can provide insights into how the Chinese government shapes public opinion and national identity, as well as how the Chinese population perceives the United States.

### **III. Hypotheses**

Previous studies suggest that authoritarian media serves a vital role in shaping public opinion, strengthening ruling legitimacy, sustaining the regime, aligning with national interests, and constructing a negative view of foreign nations that encourages Chinese people to assess their own country more positively.

In serving this role, authoritarian media is an effective tool used by the Chinese Communist Party to strengthen the most important pillars it relies on to claim legitimacy, and to emphasize economic growth and nationalism. As the relationship between the two superpowers worsens, these pillars may be greatly impacted.

After the decline of communism and the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, the CCP saw the decline of communist ideology and the salience of nationalism as its source of legitimacy. Nationalist campaigns and propaganda are sent out through various means, and the media is one of the most important channels. The CCP commonly uses two strategies: First, it emphasizes the lessons learned from the failure of weak government and brutal Western aggression to justify the necessity of a centralized/authoritarian government (Zhao, 2004). Second, the CCP often uses

rhetorical propaganda to brag about the power of contemporary China and the success of the CCP's leadership in providing the Chinese people with socioeconomic justice and then report the failure of foreign governments to do the same for their people. Thus, nationalist messages often appeal to domestic audiences as they believe they need to have a tough government to prevent or respond to sometimes “constructed” aggression.

As US–China relations have worsened because of US-initiated events such as the arrest of a Huawei official and Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, tough and aggressive rhetoric has increasingly been used on both sides. US aggressiveness can pose great legitimacy challenges to the CCP both materially and ideologically. Acting too tough—going to war, for example—would be costly, as it would jeopardize economic growth and stability. On the other hand, acting too soft could damage legitimacy (Weiss, 2014). Therefore, when a country faces international conflict and wants to maintain economic growth and stability, media coverage can be a safety valve to defend nationalism. To maintain and strengthen legitimacy, authoritarian media need to cover “aggression from abroad” or “Western imperialism” to incite nationalism and use rhetoric to condemn the US as the “foe” to appeal to nationalism and prove that the government is speaking up and acting tough. Lastly, coverage of other negative aspects of the US can appease nationalists and help them claim superiority over the US and worry less about hostility from the US. Negative coverage of the US is an optimal solution to US–China conflicts because, on the one hand, it can show to domestic audiences that the government is speaking up against the US and that this country is a failure in comparison to China. On the other hand, it gives China the room to avoid physically engaging with the US. Therefore, the first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: *In light of the worsening relationship between China and the US, the US is increasingly negatively portrayed in People's Daily, the Chinese state-owned media*

However, inciting nationalism and increasing the negative coverage of the US can still be harmful to the economy, as it leaves little room for cooperation and excessive nationalism pushes for more aggressive foreign policies. In an authoritarian context, the government has the choice and the power to control political discourse and censor information regarding the conflicts between the United States and China, and therefore leaves more wiggle room for diplomacy and constrains rising nationalism. This is even less harmful to the economy than speaking negatively of the U.S. in the media. If hypothesis 1 were true, why and under what conditions would an authoritarian government choose negative portrayal over censorship? I argue that the choice to increase negative coverage or censor information reflects the national interests of an authoritarian country and sometimes the personal interests of the autocrats.

In recent decades, the Chinese economy has grown significantly. Economic and political reforms such as market openness and institutionalization of power succession guaranteed this dramatic growth. This process also decentralized the power of the president in China. However, in China today, Xi shows great ambition to be the second Mao, and has amended constitutions and changed laws to allow his third term, exercise tighter social control, and eliminate political opponents.

In consolidating power, autocrats usually need to eliminate political opponents and justify the need for a strong central government. This process can be challenging and unsightly for the party if it receives too much attention. The citizens may also be unwilling to give away power and have unfavorable opinions of the government. Therefore, the media can be of great use in



helping justify their actions, shift attention by increasing foreign coverage, and incite nationalism.

By increasing foreign coverage, the media distracts citizens' attention from domestic leaders' illegitimate power consolidation and shifts it to foreign affairs. More specifically, different ways of framing a foreign country may have various effects. Media descriptions of the suffering and poor conditions in foreign countries may make citizens view the domestic situation more positively, believe in the superiority of an authoritarian regime, and support the current leaders and their political agendas more. When describing foreign aggression or threats, the media can help incite nationalism and justify the need to consolidate power and have a tough leader. By making foreign threats salient in political discourse and inciting nationalism, the media can make citizens more inclined to give away their own power willingly in exchange for a stronger and more unified central government for protection. Constructing such scenes seems to have lower costs for autocrats than implementing policies that work and benefit the masses and confronting foreign nations or taking coercive action against the public and forcing them to obey.

I argue that when an authoritarian seeks to centralize and consolidate power by eliminating political opponents and inciting nationalism, the media help by increasing the negative coverage of foreign countries. My second hypothesis is thus the following:

*H2: Authoritarian media increases negative coverage of foreign countries when autocrats seek to consolidate power and transfer domestic attention.*

#### **IV. Data**

In this study, I investigated changes in the portrayal of the United States in Chinese media, using data from the People's Daily on Weibo. Because news consumption has shifted

from print to digital media, I have focused primarily on the People’s Daily’s Weibo account, which posts instant daily news, official statements about foreign affairs, and speeches from the Communist Party. Weibo is one of China’s largest social media platforms, boasting 252 million active users as of the first quarter of 2022 (Weibo Corporation, n.d.), with People’s Daily alone having 150 million followers. Using Weibo, individuals can easily access the most up-to-date news and share it with their social media communities, including friends and family. People’s Daily is widely regarded as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China, and its coverage sets the tone for other media outlets. Therefore, analyzing posts from People’s Daily can provide insight into how other media will cover the same issues. In fact, many other media outlets quote or retweet content from People’s Daily on Weibo. Because Weibo is the Chinese equivalent of Twitter and the primary news source for many Chinese people, data were collected from the People’s Daily’s Weibo account.

In determining whether a post represented positive or negative coverage of the United States, I adopted Zhang & Boukes (2019)’s identification of frames, described as follows/ “Friend” refers to news about cooperation, dialogue, and friendly actions between the two nations. “Success” refers to news that describes the US’s accomplishments, achievements, and overall success. “Enjoyer” refers to reports that describe the high standard of living in America and the enjoyment of daily life by its citizens. “Foe” refers to news about aggression by the US and confrontation toward the US or US-aided countries. “Sufferer” refers to news about the hardships experienced by American citizens, such as discrimination, police violence, and gun violence. “Failure” refers to news about the inability of the American government to manage domestic affairs effectively.

Attitudes	Frame	Examples
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Positive	Friend	<p>Reports of cooperation, agreements, or peaceful dialogue between two countries.</p> <p>【王岐山脱稿演讲:为中美关系增加“正能量”而来】“最近习近平总书记提出,中美双方要不畏艰难,勇于创新,积累正能量。我这次到美国来就是为中美关系增加正能量。”中新社消息,19日,国务院副总理王岐山出席美国商贸团体主办晚宴时发表近20分钟脱稿演说,赢得全场掌声与笑声。王岐山脱稿演讲:为中美关系增加“正能量”而来</p> <p>Wang Qishan’s off-the-record speech: “I am here to add positive energy to Sino–US relations”] “Recently, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed that the US and China should brave hardships, be innovative, and accumulate positive energy. I came to the United States this time to increase positive energy for China–US relations.” - Vice Premier Wang Qishan delivered a nearly 20-minute off-the-record speech at a dinner hosted by a US trade group on the 19th, winning applause and laughter from the entire audience. Wang Qishan’s off-the-record speech: he came to add “positive energy” to US–China relations.</p>
	Success	<p>News about the nation’s achievements, such as scientific and technological breakthroughs, Nobel Prizes, gold medals at the Olympic Games, and research accomplishments.</p> <p>【美发射“龙”飞船首向国际空间站运货】美国太空探索技术公司7</p>

	<p>日向国际空间站发射了“龙”货运飞船, 装载了约454公斤货物, 包括实验器材、衣物、食品等。这是目前唯一能从空间站安全返回地球的货运飞船。俄罗斯的“进步”货运飞船以及欧洲、日本的货运飞船在返回大气层时都会烧毁。 via新华社 .</p> <p>The United States launched the “Dragon” spaceship to carry cargo to the International Space Station. US Space Exploration Technologies launched the “Dragon” cargo spacecraft to the International Space Station on the 7th, loaded with approximately 454 kg of cargo, including experimental equipment, clothing, and food[A1]. This is the only cargo spacecraft that can safely return to Earth from the space station. Russia’s “Progress” cargo spacecraft and European and Japanese cargo spacecraft would burn up on return to the atmosphere. via Xinhua</p>
Enjoyer	<p>News about American people enjoying their lives.</p> <p><b>【新闻史上的今天】</b>1933年6月6日, 世界上第一家汽车电影院在美国新泽西开张, 人们在汽车里观看户外银幕, 用车内收音机播放电影对白。该影院广告语是“欢迎全家光临, 这里不怕孩子们吵闹”, 带动了全美汽车电影院的发展, 成为一种流行的休闲方式。</p> <p>Today in News History: On June 6, 1933, in New Jersey, the world’s first drive-in movie theater, where people watched outdoor screens in cars and played movie dialogues on car radios. The advertising slogan</p>

		<p>of the theater was “Welcome to the whole family, no fear of children’s noise here.” Drive-in movie theaters were opened across the United States and became a popular form of leisure.</p>
<p>Negative</p>	<p>Foe</p>	<p>Reports of verbal or physical confrontation, aggressiveness, and hostility toward China, such as Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan and US Congress members' support for Taiwan.</p> <p>【#你好，明天#】继打压TikTok后，美又威胁朝微信下手。无理打压中国企业，这是赤裸裸的霸凌行径；一再践踏市场原则和国际规则，公信力赤字必然攀升。背信弃义，目无法纪，谁敢与这样的国家打交道？穷凶极恶，任性妄为，如此大开历史倒车注定不得人心。以清洁网络为名行肮脏行径，最需先清洁自身灵魂！</p> <p>[#Hello, Tomorrow] After suppressing TikTok, the US threatens to go after WeChat. It is a naked bullying act to suppress Chinese enterprises unreasonably, repeatedly trampling on market principles and international rules. The credibility deficit is bound to grow. Who dares to deal with such a country, which is treacherous and lawless? The country is so vicious and capricious that it is destined to be unpopular for such a great reversal of history. In the name of cleaning the network to do dirty deeds, the most important thing is to clean their own souls first!</p>

	Sufferer	<p>News about American people’s suffering from natural disasters or human-made incidents such as gun shootings and government irresponsibility.</p> <p><b>【#美新冠患者出院后收到巨额账单#, 约合人民币52万元】</b>感染新冠肺炎的珍妮特在入院治疗一个月后出院。近日, 她在受访时称, 出院前家中就已陆续收到医院账单, 目前除去医疗保险支付部分, 她仍需支付7.5万多美元(约合人民币52万元)。珍妮特表示, 账单还没开完, 她预计还将为救护车、急救费用等支付6000至16000美元。珍妮特表示自己很惊讶, 政府曾说别担心, “会帮你支付医院的账单”。(央视) 说好的政府承担呢? 美国新冠患者出院后收到巨额账单</p> <p><b>【#US COVID Patient Receives Huge Bill After Discharge, About RMB 520,000】</b>Janet, who contracted COVID-19, was discharged from the hospital after a month of treatment. Recently, she said in an interview that she had received one hospital bill after another at home before her discharge and that she still has to pay more than \$75,000 (approximately RMB 520,000), excluding the part paid by her health insurance. Janet said the bill is not yet paid; she is expected to pay \$6,000 to \$16,000 for the ambulance, emergency treatment, and other costs. Janet said she was surprised that the government had said not to worry and that it “will help you pay the hospital bill.” (CCTV) What about the promised government coverage? US COVID-19 patients</p>
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		receive huge bills after discharge
	Failure	<p>News about the government’s failure to maintain its people’s well-being, such as failure to regulate guns, overturning Roe v. Wade, and the shortage of masks during the pandemic.</p> <p>【美官员提醒加州气候变暖, #特朗普说等着瞧加州会变凉快的#】  当地时间9月14日, 加州山火简报会, 加州自然资源部长强调天气变暖趋势造成不良影响, 特朗普“打消”了他的担忧, 表示“天气会变凉的, 你等着瞧吧”, “事实上, 我认为科学啥也不懂”。</p> <p>The California Secretary of Natural Resources stressed the adverse effects of the warming trend, and Trump “dispelled” his concerns, saying “the weather will get cooler, you’ll see” and “in fact, I don’t think science understands anything.”</p>

Among the six frames, *Friend*, *Success*, and *Enjoyer* refer to positive coverage of the United States, and *Foe*, *Sufferer*, and *Failure* refer to negative coverage. In the *Friend* frame, posts reporting on positive cooperation between China and the United States, peaceful dialogue between officials, or friendly interactions are identified. The *Foe* frame contains posts that show the hostility of the United States toward China, such as military exercises with Japan and South Korea, unfriendly remarks by members of Congress about China, verbal attacks on China by the US President, and official speeches made by Chinese officials blaming the United States. In the *Sufferer* frame, posts about the American people suffering from natural disasters such as

tornadoes and floods or human actions such as gun violence are identified, as well as posts that may make people believe that Americans are living worse lives than everyday Chinese people.

To collect posts regarding the US on Weibo, I used search keywords such as “美” and “美国” using a webscraper. The first year for which data were collected was 2012 because that is the year that People’s Daily opened its Weibo account. I analyzed the content of the posts and categorized them according to their sentiments, guided by the frames mentioned above, and I mapped the trends in the coverage of the US.

In total, 9,626 posts containing “美” and “美国” were collected. I drew 100 random samples of posts from each year. After cleaning the data and only collecting posts related to the US, the number of US-related posts per year were as follows:

Year	Number of Posts
2012	46
2013	34
2014	19
2015	39
2016	22
2017	16
2018	41
2019	37
2020	76
2021	39
2022	32

## V. Empirical Analysis



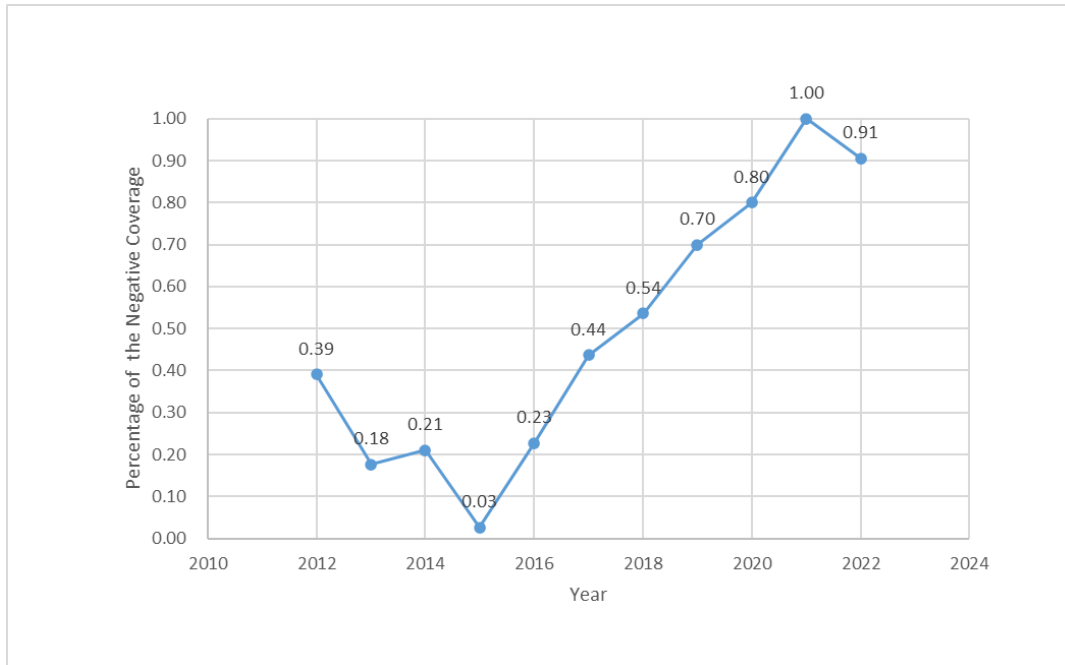
To test the hypotheses, I categorized each post as positive, negative, or neutral. Subsequently, I classified the posts according to the six frames previously mentioned, Friend, Success, Enjoyer, Foe, Sufferer, and Failure. This approach permitted a systematic analysis of the content and helped to identify patterns and trends in the data.

Following the data cleaning and coding processes, a set of statistical analyses were conducted to evaluate the hypotheses. Specifically, the following statistics were examined: A) the percentage of negative coverage of the US by year, B) the percentage of frames used to portray the US by year, and C) the percentage share of dominant frames in the US coverage by year. This approach enabled the examination of the data and provided insights into the patterns and trends in the representation of the US in Chinese social media.

In a total of 400 posts regarding the US, 217 were negative. In other words, in the past ten years, more than half of the coverage of the US in Chinese state media has been negative.

In 2012, the percentage of negative posts was high at 39.13% and declined in the next two years, reaching a low of 2.6% in 2015. The percentage of negative posts increased significantly to 22.73% in 2016, 43.75% in 2017, 53.66% in 2018, 70% in 2019, 80% in 2020, and 100% in 2021. In 2022, the percentage of negative posts decreased slightly to 90.63%. These percentages are shown in Figure 1. Overall, these results indicate a significant increasing trend in negative coverage of the US over the decade, with notable spikes in 2020 and 2021. This is consistent with my hypothesis 1 that the coverage of the US is becoming increasingly negative.

*Figure 1: Chinese Media Coverage of the U.S.*



*Source: Author's Database*

Why do we see a decline in negative coverage from 2012 to 2015 and sudden increase in negativity from 2015 onward? We need to look at both the worsening relations between the two countries and Chinese domestic politics—specifically, Xi's route to securing and consolidating power.

First, the increasingly negative coverage of the United States can be attributed to rising geopolitical tension between China and the US. China's dramatic increase in economic and political presence over the past few decades has challenged US dominance in the Asia-Pacific region, leading to tensions in areas such as trade, technology, and military strategy.

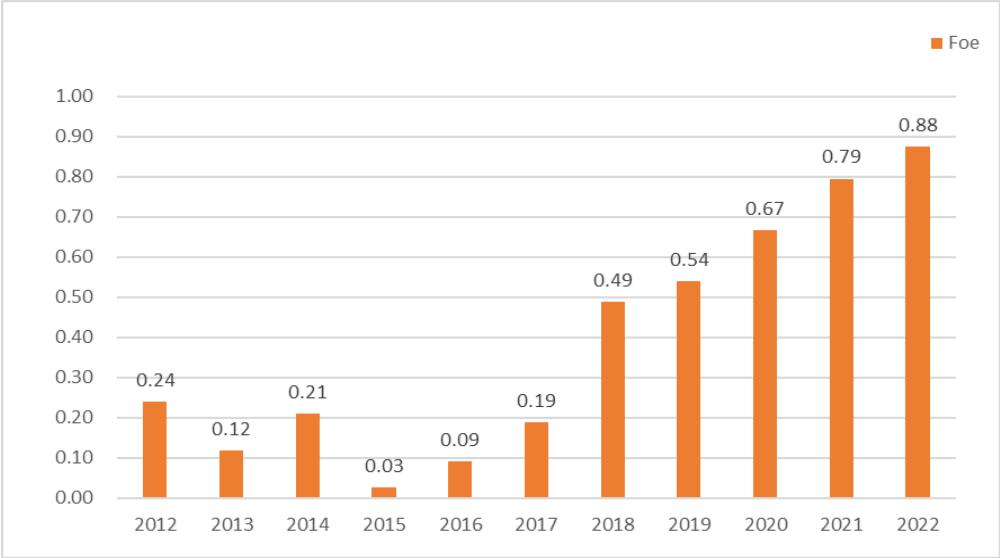
One highly controversial action by China was the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea in 2015. This action caused great concern among neighboring countries and the United States, with many seeing it as evidence of China's expansionist ambitions and a direct

challenge to American hegemony. In response, the US began conducting freedom-of-navigation operations and military exercises to challenge China’s claims over the islands, marking the beginning of a more confrontational relationship between the two countries.

This tension extended to other areas during Donald Trump’s presidency. Trump was vocally critical of China and its perceived unfair trade practices, resulting in a trade war in 2018 during which the US imposed tariffs on Chinese imports and China retaliated with its own measures. Chinese media covered Trump’s tough stance on Chinese technology companies such as Huawei extensively, while his negative comments about China and racist remarks about the Corona virus further strained the relationship between the two countries.

While these events are not comprehensive, they indicate the complex and the increasingly confrontational relationship between China and the United States. Why has the media increased its negative coverage? What is the mechanism driving it to do so?

Figure 2: Percentage share of the Frame "Foe"



Source: Author’s Database

Figure 2 shows that the framing of the United States as a “foe” has become more salient since 2015, rising from 9.09% to 87.5% in 2022. As discussed previously, authoritarian media align with national interests, which is to say, Xi’s interests in the context of China. When relations worsen between two countries such as the United States and China, authoritarian media align with its government’s interests and policy. Therefore, the media can signal an authoritarian country’s incentives and intentions. In China’s case, it has the ability and sometimes the incentive to censor information regarding international conflicts and tensions with the United States. What drives Xi’s China to report these conflicts and tensions actively? What does the upsurge in negative coverage tell us? I argue that it reflects the changing national interests and policies in China under Xi since 2015. Increasing the political salience of negative coverage of the US reflects a shift from the “bide and hide” strategy to the “wolf warrior” strategy. Portraying the US as a “foe” surely bolsters nationalism, but it undermines economic growth, which has been China’s top priority since Deng. It shows that China is shifting from a focus on the economy to a focus on nationalism as a top legitimacy source. What caused and incentivized this shift? To answer this question, we need to look at Chinese domestic politics and why Xi needs this shift to secure his power.

Xi was elected as the general secretary of the CCP in 2012 and as the president in 2013. In his early first term, he was still a new figure to the general public and did not have his power consolidated. He was still constrained by Chinese elite politics because many in his administration were from a different faction (the Youth League), and he was from the Shanghai faction. Therefore, he initially sought stability and cooperation with the United States while launching an anti-corruption campaign to eliminate opponents. His purpose was quite clear: to maximize and secure his power. He visited the United States in 2015, and People’s Daily used

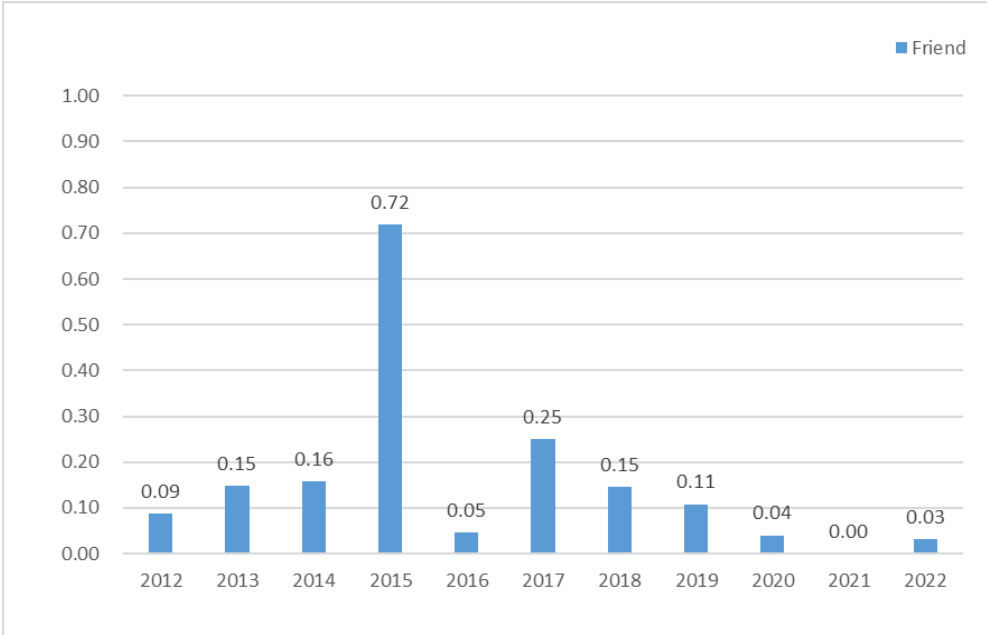
hashtag 跟着习大大去美国 (Follow Uncle Xi to America) to feature positive frames of the United States. This helped to show the domestic audience that Xi could handle diplomatic affairs with ease. Domestically, in 2015, the intensification of anti-corruption reforms marked the start of his efforts to eliminate opponents and secure power, as well as increasing negativity toward the US. In 2018, he removed term limits from the constitution, breaking with the institutionalization of power succession established by Deng Xiaoping. In 2022, he removed all other factions from the Politburo Standing Committee, replaced them with his own allies, and started his unprecedented third term as the secretary of the CCP and president.

How does his power consolidation require a shift from economy to nationalism? How is the media helping?

First, we need to think about how the Chinese economy benefitted. “Reform and Open-up” marked the beginning of the Chinese economic miracle that featured economic and political reforms. Even though China did not democratize by Western standards, there were reforms in politics, such as the institutionalization of power. Both economic and political power were decentralized to maximize Chinese economic growth, allowing locals to improvise and choose whatever benefitted the economy. To fuel this economic growth at the same rate, reforms would have to continue, but this goes against Xi’s agenda to centralize power. We can say that Xi chooses nationalism over the economy, or we can say, in other words, that he chooses centralization over decentralization. In this situation, the media helps to distract and justify: by increasing the negative coverage of foreign affairs, the media help Xi to distract attention from domestic politics and power centralization because, on the one hand, his anti-corruption campaign helped remove dissenters, but on the other hand, too much attention on it would damage the credibility and reliability of the Chinese Communist Party among its people.

Furthermore, increasing the “foe” frame can increase citizens’ will to support the government, leading to demands for a tougher and more centralized government. Consequently, autocrats can justify and implement measures typically associated with times of war, such as centralizing power, taking tough actions, and even amending the constitution. As we can see in Figure 2, the rising trend in “foe” frames began in 2016, and a big jump occurred from 18.75% in 2017 to 48.75% in 2018, which is also the year that Xi amended the constitution and removed term limits. This constructed aggression abroad to appeal to nationalism and justify the need for centralized government is also illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the diminishing representation of the US as a “friend” in Chinese media.

*Figure 3: Percentage share of the Frame “Friend”*

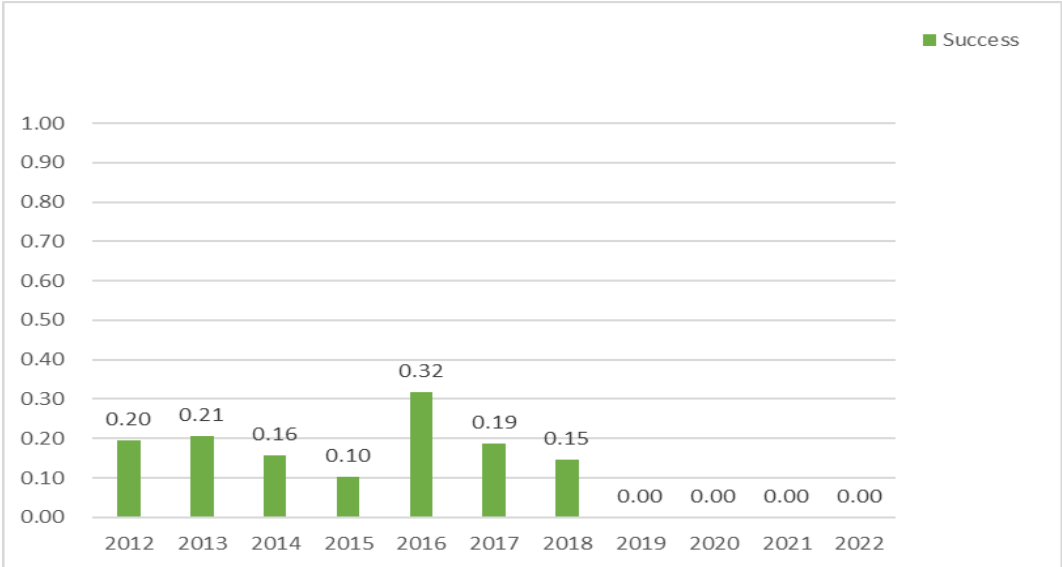


*Source: Author’s Database*

Xi’s consolidation and centralization of power, as well as his aggressive actions on the international stage, have not come without a cost. Since the implementation of reform and open-up policies, China has benefited from openness and free innovation within the country and internationally. However, under Xi’s leadership, tighter control over society and the implementation of “wolf warrior diplomacy” have undermined the mechanisms that facilitate economic growth. As discussed in the literature review, citizens often make comparisons between countries to evaluate their own nation. Thus, the image of a successful foreign country, such as the United States, may lead citizens to have a rosier view of foreign countries, and this may be harmful to domestic support for the CCP.

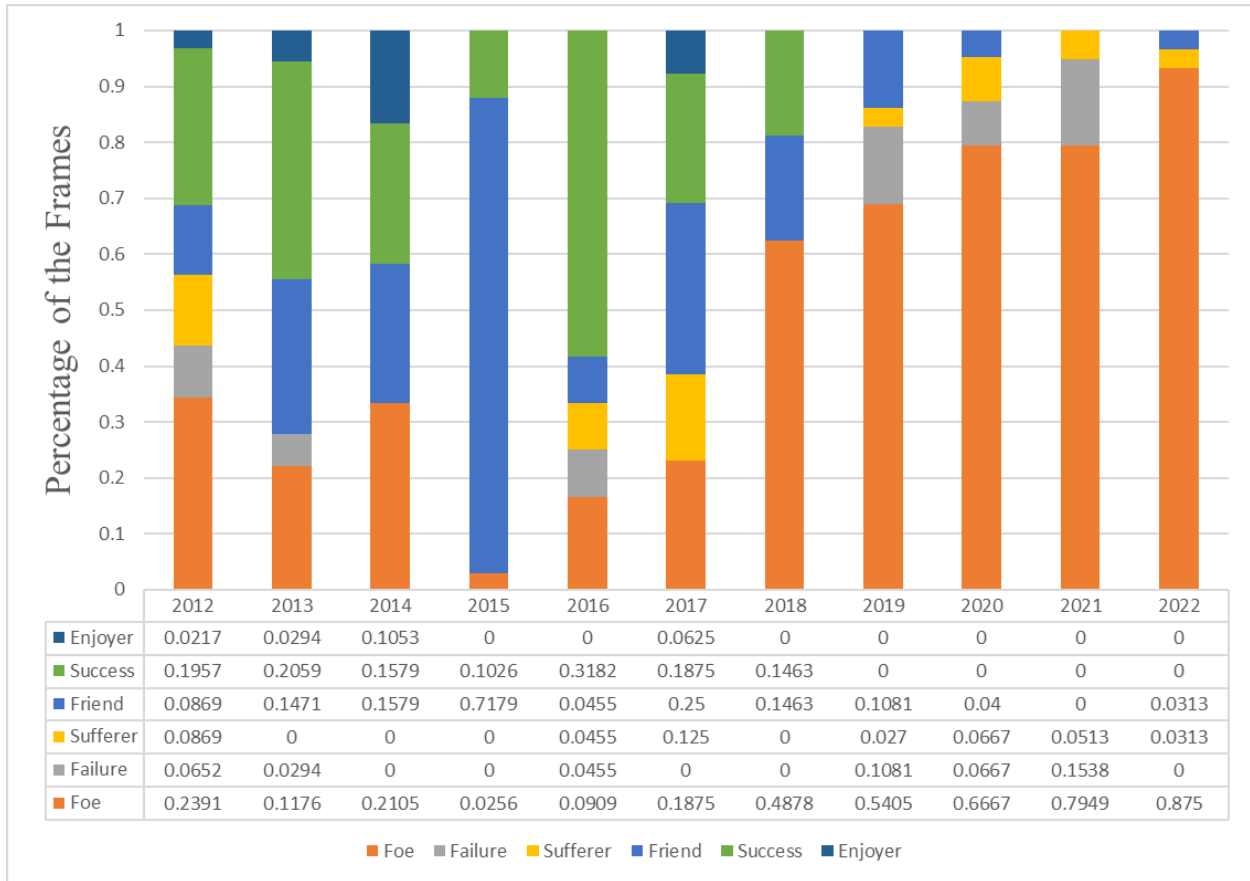
Therefore, to compensate for the negative effects of tighter social control and the shift from economy to nationalism, the authoritarian media helps Xi establish an image of a failing US government that is worse than China, especially in light of China’s slowing economic growth, so that Chinese people’s assessment of their own nation will improve.

Figure 4: Percentage share of the Frame “Success”



Source: Author’s Database

Figure 5: Frames in the Coverage of the United States



Source: Author's Database

As Figure 5 shows, reports of the success of the United States and the friendship between the two countries have been diminishing in Chinese media, while reports of the US as a failing and suffering foe have been increasing. Because a successful friend does not demonstrate the need for a stronger central government, a successful foe does not demonstrate the superiority of absolute authoritarianism, whereas a failing and suffering foe do demonstrate these needs.

Why is this a story of Xi's power consolidation not social coercion? It is because of the media's choice of frame and the intention behind each frame. As discussed previously,



constructing a “foe” incites nationalism, while the “failure” and “sufferer” frames improve people’s assessment of their own countries. The “failure” and “sufferer” frames make people happier about their current situation and less likely to demand change. On the other hand, “Foe” frames the threats posed by foreign aggression and the need for a strong centralized government. Therefore, when the media is impacted by social coercion and seeks to compensate for the loss from social coercion, it chooses the “failure” and “sufferer” frames instead of the “foe” frame. However, if state media is impacted by autocrats’ agenda to consolidate power, it will help by justifying a need for a stronger government and hinting at the need for change.

## **VI: Conclusion**

This study did not directly investigate Chinese public opinion of the US but rather studied what everyday Chinese people are exposed to in the media that may shape their views of the US and what that tells us about the authoritarian Chinese government’s intentions. The findings of this research can help experts and Americans to understand that unfavorable attitudes toward the US held by Chinese people are often the result of not only objective tension but also a political agenda pursued by autocrats. To truly understand Chinese public opinion, it is important to focus not only on “what” but also on “why.”

As discussed earlier, authoritarian media is crucial to autocrats as it helps shape public opinion, align with national interests, and foster nationalism to serve the purpose of sustaining autocrats’ rule. This study offers valuable insights into Chinese media and authoritarian rule. Extensive research and analysis show that Chinese media is becoming increasingly negative toward the United States, portraying it as a failing foe, in alignment with CCP’s interest in winning popular support, appealing to nationalism, and helping Xi consolidate power. I argue

that the increasingly negative coverage of the US in Chinese media is attributable to the following: 1) the objective tensions between the two countries and 2) Xi's agenda to consolidate and secure power while distracting the domestic audience from this agenda. These findings have important implications for experts studying Chinese media and authoritarian legitimacy and durability, as they provide insights into how Chinese public opinion toward the US is molded and how it can be changed. The research results show that China's foreign policy has shifted from a defensive stance represented by the "bide and hide" agenda to an offensive and confrontational stance guided by the "wolf warrior" agenda. The results reveal Xi's need to use nationalism instead of economic prosperity to sustain his rule.

It is important for the wider audience to care about this research because media manipulation exists not only in China but also in other authoritarian countries and even in some democratic countries where there is more freedom of speech. By understanding the implications of these findings, we can gain deeper insights into how media can be used by leaders to influence everyday people and how specific frames can be used to serve different purposes. We can also learn about the autocrats' intentions by studying authoritarian media.

Because the time frame for this project was limited, other topics we hoped to investigate could not be addressed. In future research, I hope to provide a more sophisticated categorization of how Chinese media frames the United States and apply the analysis method to larger datasets that are not limited to the US but include other countries as well. By continuing to build on the findings of this project, I hope to contribute to building mutual understanding between citizens of China and the US and help them understand the "unnatural" nature of the formation of Chinese public opinion.

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