

# Analysis of Chinese Image in Japanese Mainstream Media Reports

## -- Taking Asahi Shimbun as an Example

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### Abstract

The construction of national image needs "self shaping" and "other shaping". When Japanese media report on China, they are influenced by Chinese media's dissemination and output. Through the epidemic, Chinese image in the eyes of the Japanese media has been clearly displayed. This paper studies the reports related to China in the Japanese media Asahi Shimbun during the epidemic period, and summarizes the methods and strategies for improving China's image, which is conducive to developing Chinese image in the international community, and further promoting the exchange and cooperation between China and Japan.

### Keywords

Self Shaping; Other Shaping; Chinese Image; Asahi Shimbun.

## 1. Introduction

National image is an important embodiment of national soft power. With the rapid development of the Internet, the media plays an increasingly important role in shaping the national image. The media has a "self shaping" effect on the national image and a "other shaping" effect on the other countries' national image. Li Jue mentioned that China's image has been "shaped" for a long time in the international discourse pattern dominated by the western countries[1]. Therefore, the research on China's reports by major overseas media can be regarded as one of the basic paths to study China's image, which is receiving more and more attention.

As China's maritime neighbor, Japan has close economic and trade exchanges with China. The image of China created by Japanese mainstream media has a direct impact on the Japanese people's impression of China and the relations between China and Japan. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China's epidemic prevention and control have received great attention from the media of various countries. The mainstream media in Japan also have endless reports on China with a lot of viewpoints. This paper takes Asahi Shimbun, which has a wide influence in Japan, as an example, through analyzing the content and characteristics of its reports, interprets the image of China presented by Japan during the epidemic period, and summarizes the methods and strategies for building China's image.

## 2. The Characteristics of Asahi Shimbun

Japanese mass media are mainly newspapers. In today's information age, the circulation of Japanese newspapers shows a downward trend, but its total circulation and average household subscription rate are still among the highest in the world. Asahi Shimbun, as one of the representative newspapers in Japan, was founded in 1879. It is the second largest newspaper in circulation in Japan, second only to Yomiuri Shimbun. It is also known as one of the three major comprehensive newspapers in Japan together with Yomiuri Shimbun and Daiichi Shimbun. The Asahi Shimbun took the principle of "being impartial and impartial" as its running

policy. In 1888, it implemented industrial management and entered Tokyo for publication with the Tokyo Asahi Shimbun.

Asahi Shimbun has three characteristics, which are of great significance to this study. Firstly, Asahi Shimbun has a large circulation and has extensive influence in Japan. According to the data released by the Japan Audit Bureau of circulations, the circulation of Asahi Shimbun in the first half of 2020 was 5.16355. This figure has decreased compared with the previous year, but its circulation still ranks second in the industry and has a wide reputation in Japan. From the homepage of the official website of Asahi Shimbun, we can see that its columns are diversified, involving politics, finance, sports, international, social and other aspects. It is an important carrier of China's national image. Secondly, Asahi Shimbun is positioned as a mass newspaper oriented to the intellectual class, and has the courage to try new systems. In 2015, the PE (Public Editor) system was adopted, and the "reader representative" such as the public editor was introduced to ensure that the newspaper abides by the fair and selfless position and represents the interests of the readers, which enhances the trust of the readers and has a high evaluation and imitation in the newspaper industry. Thirdly, Asahi Shimbun emphasizes timeliness and constantly applies new technologies while seizing the advantages of traditional media brands. In the impact of new media, the circulation of newspapers is decreasing. Liu Shuliang and Zhang Nan pointed out that traditional paper media are actively seeking changes, and newspapers are gradually becoming electronic both national newspapers and local newspapers [2]. Asahi Shimbun has also actively explored ways of reporting other than paper media, launched digital services and clients such as paid electronic edition, and launched smartphone app reading, which has effectively realized the combination of new and old media, fully met the needs of readers, and has wide influence in the new media era.

This paper chooses Asahi Shimbun as the research object among the five major Japanese newspapers, mainly based on the following two reasons. Firstly, in terms of the sales volume and distribution scope of newspapers, it can be seen from the data on the circulation of newspapers published by the Japan Audit Bureau of Circulations over the years that Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun rank first and second, and there is a big gap between Yomiuri Shimbun and Daiichi Shimbun. From the perspective of circulation, Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun are undoubtedly the most representative. Secondly, from the perspective of political stance, the Yomiuri Shimbun reports are highly subjective and biased toward the Japanese government. However, Asahi Shimbun's report tends to seek truth from facts. Song Gang pointed out that Yomiuri Shimbun, Sankei Shimbun and Japan economic news are conservatives with right thinking, while Asahi Shimbun and Daily News are mostly reformists or liberals [3]. Based on the above two reasons, this paper focuses on Asahi Shimbun, which is easy to extract and analyze the reports of Asahi Shimbun on China during the epidemic. Ding Haotian pointed out that the middle class accounts for a large proportion of the readers of Asahi Shimbun, which is easier to grasp the representative position of the mainstream media in Japan [4]. For the reports of specific events, newspapers have a great influence on the Japanese public, which can directly guide and ultimately form the direction of public opinion. Therefore, it is of far-reaching significance to study how the Asahi Shimbun reported China during the epidemic period and explore the image of China in the relevant reports of the Asahi Shimbun.

### **3. Content Analysis of China Related Reports in Asahi Shimbun During the Epidemic Period**

#### **3.1. Overview of Relevant Reports**

This paper collects the data from Asahi Shimbun's database. In terms of keyword setting, we selected to search corona virus, new pneumonia and China within the full text. The search date is limited to April 7, 2020 to May 4, 2020. According to Japan NHK's collation of relevant

situations of the first emergency declaration issued by Japan. With the spread of COVID-19 in Japan, the government announced on April 7, 2020 that it would implement the special measures against novel coronavirus in seven regions including Tokyo and Kanagawa, and on April 16, 2020, the scope of implementation was extended to the whole country. With the further expansion of the impact of the epidemic on Japan in May 4, the government announced that it would extend the implementation time of the Declaration on emergencies. During this period, China has won decisive victories in the defense war of Wuhan and Hubei, and China's epidemic prevention and control have been normalized. The Japanese media has paid more attention to the epidemic situation and epidemic prevention in China, and public opinion has further heated up. The thesis takes April 7, 2020 as the starting time point of corpus collection, and sets the ending time point on May 4, 2020. Based on this, the author retrieved 547 Japanese news reports in the Asahi Shimbun database. From the content, many reports include corona virus and new pneumonia. However, its theme has nothing to do with the reports on China during the COVID-19 epidemic. A total of 133 effective reports were obtained after deletion. Through the sorting and analysis of these 133 reports, it can be found that the contents of China related reports of Asahi Shimbun during this period mainly focus on the following aspects, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of main contents of China related reports

Main aspects of China related reports		Number of reports		Percentage
China's "mask diplomacy"		38		28.6%
International level	Confrontation between the United States and China	22	26	19.5%
	Other reports	4		
Epidemic situation in China	Infection	8	45	33.8%
	The unsealing of Wuhan and its domestic status	12		
	Economic situation and measures	15		
	Political related reports	4		
	Taiwan and Hong Kong related reports	6		
Relevant research reports and treatment experience in China		8		6.0%
Evaluation of China's coping measures and systems for covid-19		7		5.3%
Other reports		9		6.8%
Total		133		100%

It can be seen from the table that the Asahi Shimbun reported on China from April 7 to May 4, 2020. In addition to covering the status and measures of various aspects of the epidemic in China, it reported on the "US China confrontation" and China's "mask diplomacy" at the international level. It involved 8 reports on China's Research Report and treatment experience on COVID-19, and 7 reports on China's institutional reflection in coping with covid-19, which accounted for a small proportion respectively. In the process of sorting out these 133 news reports, the author found that there were 6 editorials. The editorial is a style of writing that expresses opinions on valuable news facts and social phenomena to guide practice, which reflects the main topics and basic positions of the newspaper editorial department. Lin Zibo and Xie Jinwen believe that editorials are called the soul of newspapers. They not only occupy an important position in newspapers, but also have a certain degree of influence on the formation of public opinion [5]. After the opening of Wuhan on April 8, China overcame

difficulties and continued to provide medical materials like foreign aid. In response to relevant news, the editorials of Japanese media pointed out that China provided assistance to other countries to conduct diplomacy, and the international community's most expectation was the disclosure of the epidemic information. If China is suspected of concealing the epidemic situation and has not improved, it is difficult to call it a "responsible big country". Of the six editorials involved by Asahi Shimbun, two editorials mentioned the issue of "information disclosure". Two editorials believed that China and the United States have shirked their responsibilities in this virus disaster, pointing out that it is not an opportunity to compete for international hegemony. Among the remaining two editorials, one editorial pointed out the relative complexity of Chinese politics through the handling of relevant responsible persons by the Chinese leadership. Another editorial pointed out that the United States wants to transfer the responsibility of the largest infected country to China from the perspective of the world economic crisis caused by the expansion of novel coronavirus infection, and believed that the world economy needs international mutual assistance. From these six editorials, we can see that Asahi Shimbun's evaluation of China was one-sided, taken out of context, and also relatively objective when Japan implemented the first declaration of emergency. Meanwhile, through the analysis of editorials related to China, we can find that the Japanese media in this period paid more attention to the many problems exposed by the pandemic, and emphasized that the long-term struggle against novel coronavirus is a common topic faced by all countries in the world.

### 3.2. Specific Contents of Relevant Reports

On the basis of grasping the general situation of China related reports, the author analyzes the specific contents and characteristics of relevant reports. Firstly, there are 38 reports on China's "mask diplomacy", accounting for a considerable proportion. Among them, 36 reports are positive news, and the other two reports are long reports on the relative doubts of "mask diplomacy". Among the 36 positive news articles, the Japanese media pays full attention to the relationship between China and Japan's friendship. For example, the report "sending protective clothing to Shaoxing City and Xigong city" (2020-04-07) introduces the history of Shaoxing City and Xigong city becoming sister cities. The Japanese people are grateful for the donations and encouragement in the report of Friend and mask gratitude from China(2020-04-16). In these reports, the non-governmental exchanges between China and Japan are frequent and friendly. Among them, 8 articles mentioned that China's rescue is to repay Japan's rescue. The purpose of China's donation is multi-layered, which is not only to alleviate the material emergency in Japan, but also to repay Japan's assistance to China. However, the Asahi Shimbun's reports on this issue are not all positive and supportive, and some reports are cautious about China's assistance. "Mask diplomacy" means in Japanese media that China uses its strong medical material production capacity to provide masks and other medical supplies to other countries to enhance its international influence. In the remaining two long reports, it is pointed out that China has launched an offensive through "mask diplomacy", and some western media and institutions have made negative comments on China's "mask diplomacy". One of the reports, with the subtitle "high impact countries alert" (2020-04-15), pointed out that Europe and the United States believe that China has the dominant power in the international order, which has damaged the image of China's "mask diplomacy". It is not conducive to the Japanese people's acceptance of China, and changes their understanding and attitude towards China. Secondly, Zhong Kairong pointed out Japanese newspapers pay close attention to the dynamics between the United States and China when studying Sino US trade relations. In the relevant reports on the international level during the epidemic, the topics related to "the United States and China" occupied the majority. It can be seen that Sino US relations have always been the focus of Asahi Shimbun. Through analysis, it can be found that the Asahi Shimbun's report on "US China relations" includes reprinting the views of Western media and quoting the contents of Chinese media reports in addition to general factual reports. The contents of these 22 reports mainly

focus on Trump's criticism of China on "the source of COVID-19" and "who's bias". For example, the report of Mr. Trump and the WHO criticized "China Central response (2020-04-09)" pointed out that Trump criticized WHO for "Taking China as the center" and favoring China in the response to COVID-19. The report also mentioned China's position, that is, "China expresses support for the WHO leadership". The report of "Initial infection, China's Institute of Malaria" and "who's negative" in China (2020-04-17) pointed out that the US regime believes that the initial infection of COVID-19 came from the Chinese Research Institute, and the Chinese side has clearly stated that it will only rely on the research of experts. Among these 22 reports, Asahi Shimbun pointed out that the US side was irresponsible and hostile to China by reprinting other people's opinions and the views of Western media. For example, on May 3, 2020, there was a report reading the headline of the Washington Post, pointing out that Trump's careless call of COVID-19 as "Chinese virus" is a dangerous attitude. Most of the reports on "China and the United States" tend to focus on the discourse of "China Responsibility Theory" made by the United States, ignoring the findings of the WHO on the source of COVID-19, and catering to the biased view of China in Japanese society.

In addition to focusing on China's international diplomatic situation, the Japanese mainstream media mainly focused on China's domestic situation and related developments. The news topics reported by Asahi Shimbun on China during this period include the development of the domestic epidemic, the latest measures of the government, the impact of economic development, and the relations between Taiwan, Hong Kong and the mainland. The number of reports also accounts for the largest proportion. Firstly, the reports on China's infection are basically objective and realistic. Among them, on April 7, 2020, the number of deaths infected with COVID-19 in China was zero. Since April 14, 2020, the number of infections among Chinese returnees has increased rapidly. On May 1, 2020, Hubei Province announced that the health alert level of infectious diseases was reduced from level 1 to level 2. There is no level 1 region in the country. However, two reports were skeptical about the number of asymptomatic infections announced by the Chinese government. Secondly, among the 12 reports on the release of Wuhan and related domestic developments, there were positive and objective reports, and relatively negative reports. The objective and positive reports mainly focused on the fact that the blockade of Wuhan was lifted, the high-speed railway and the plane operated normally, and the separated relatives were reunited. There are reports on the traces of struggle left by Wuhan temporary hospital. It also includes two relatively neutral reports on April 21, 2020 and April 27, 2020, both of reports mentioned the Chinese people's sense of restraint in going out and the government's relevant restrictive measures against COVID-19, and said that Japan might also take action to reduce going out. Negative reports mainly focus on the following three aspects. (1) The report on people's negative state after the release of Wuhan. For example, the report of blockade for two and a half months' wreck 'China Wuhan (2020-04-09)' has one-sidedly reported the pessimistic sentiment of the Chinese people about the epidemic. (2) There is speculation that the seafood market in Wuhan is still under blockade. (3) It is the evaluation and query on the events such as the discharge of all patients in Wuhan, the resumption of school in Heilongjiang and other places, and the long May Day holiday. These reports believe that it may cause another large-scale infection, and generally mention many disturbing voices on Chinese SNS. Secondly, reports on China's economic situation and the implementation of relevant measures account for a large proportion. The topics of such reports fall into two categories. One category report is to report the impact of the epidemic on China's economy. Among them, the total production of Wuhan decreased by 40%, the total production of Hubei decreased by 39.2%, and the GDP growth rate of China from January to March 2020 decreased by 6.8%. One report (2020-04-18) pointed out that China had taken strict measures to prevent infection at the expense of its economy. China's economy has experienced negative growth for the first time, and it will take some time to recover. Another category report is the measures

taken by the Chinese government to restore the economy. Such reports tend to point out that the government has adopted a series of policies to stimulate consumption, and production in some areas has been restored. However, due to safety considerations, people's response is not satisfactory, and the operating rate also stays at a low level. The report of China's factory(2020-04-21) refers to China's attitude that "overcoming crisis is an opportunity". Asahi Shimbun's reports on China's politics, including the postponement of the National People's Congress, President Xi's inspection of Shaanxi, and the opening date of the National People's Congress, are basically objective reports. It is worth noting that the Asahi Shimbun reports on Taiwan and Hong Kong tend to focus on the contradictions between Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese government. This report of Political blinking in Taiwan (2020-04-08) directly praised Taiwan's "mask rationing system", saying that the mainland of China did not attach importance to public opinion in terms of the relevant restrictions on the response to the epidemic. We have a strong sensitivity to the Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The epidemic began to spread in Japan. During the implementation of the first emergency declaration, the Japanese media also paid more attention to China's relevant research reports and treatment experience on COVID-19. The Asahi Shimbun reported on this aspect from April 7, 2020 to May 4, 2020, involving 8 articles. We can see the reflection of the Japanese media. They realize that the epidemic has been controlled in many countries, but the long-term prevention needs to become a world consensus. Japanese media also hope to find ways to deal with the new normal from China's experience and research. Asahi Shimbun takes a cautious attitude towards the relevant reports on the coping and system evaluation of China's coronavirus. Basically, its reports are based on the comments of political science or historical experts. Among them, some pointed out that China's measures to deal with COVID-19 reflected institutional loopholes, while others praised China's restrictive measures and believed that only China's system could effectively deal with the crisis. In addition to the above aspects, Asahi Shimbun's reports on China during the epidemic period also include some references to China's environment, diet, and the dynamics of foreign students. The contents of these reports basically belong to objective general fact reports.

#### 4. The Construction of Chinese Image

With the development of the epidemic situation, the focus of public opinion of Asahi Shimbun tended to shift from China to Europe, America and developing countries when Japan announced the implementation of the declaration of emergency. When the Asahi Shimbun reports on China, it is easy to use its discourse power to selectively report the news, and even focus on the negative news of China in some aspects. There are not many reports on China's sacrifice at the cost of "closing the city" and its contribution to the international fight against the epidemic.

Qiu Xiaowei pointed out that news reports are not only the presentation of data, but also represent a tendency and an attitude [6]. From the reports of Japanese media on China, we can see that Japan, as a member of developed countries, is basically consistent with western countries in terms of public opinion on China. This has affected the relations between China and Japan, and is not conducive to the shaping of China's external image. The author believes that the following three measures should be taken to improve this situation and create a good and responsible image of China as a big country. Firstly, from Asahi Shimbun's reports on China, we can see that most of the reports on "mask donation" and "cultural exchange" between China and Japan are positive, and the Japanese media are also very concerned about China's research and experience on the epidemic. We can carry out all kinds of people to people and cultural exchanges and cooperation online or offline after the epidemic, promote the Japanese media to do a good job in this aspect of news reporting, and arouse more consensus between the Chinese and Japanese people on history, culture and the fight against the epidemic. Secondly, for

Japanese media coming to China, we should actively contact them, provide necessary conditions and convenience for their reporting in China, and show a confident China and a real China. For some untrue reports, we should actively communicate and explain to see the effect. Thirdly, in the information age of the rapid development of the Internet, many new online media such as youtube, twitter and tiktok play a pivotal role in information dissemination. We should make full use of them to show the real China and tell the Chinese story well.

## 5. Conclusion

China and Japan are neighbors separated by a strip of water. The two countries have close economic trade exchanges and frequent national exchanges. However, due to political, economic and cultural factors, there are differences in mutual understanding each other. As the "baton" of public opinion, the Japanese media's "other shaped" image of China is of great significance for the Japanese people to correctly understand China and reduce the differences in understanding between the two sides.

## Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

No data were used to support this study.

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