Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal Of Communication
Https://Ejournal.Ukm.My/Mjc
Volume 42(3) 2026: 431-454

Heroes In White Coats: Media Framing of Doctors in China Daily's COVID-19 Coverage

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how *China Daily,* China's leading English-language state newspaper, framed doctors during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic using Ghanem's (1997) multidimensional framing framework. Employing a quantitative content analysis supplemented by illustrative excerpts, 286 news articles published in 2020 were systematically analysed across four framing dimensions: presentation, topic, cognitive, and affective attributes. The findings reveal a systematic framing pattern that elevated doctors' visibility through prominent news placement, extensive use of official sources, and sustained editorial attention. Thematically, coverage centred on doctor-patient harmony, medical professionalism, and collective efforts to combat the pandemic. Cognitively, doctors were constructed through six recurring images and one residual category, most prominently as authoritative leaders, selfless heroes, and dedicated professionals who embodied competence, sacrifice, and national responsibility. Affectively, reporting was overwhelmingly positive (98.3%), reinforcing doctors' moral legitimacy and projecting confidence in China's healthcare system and governmental response. We interpret these framing dimensions as an integrated narrative system aligned with institutional trust-building and China's international public diplomacy, although audience effects were not measured. This consistently positive portrayal left limited room for doctors' psychological burdens, workplace risks, and professional challenges. The study demonstrates that framing operates not as isolated textual devices but as an interconnected process through which state media construct professional legitimacy during crises. By extending Ghanem's multidimensional framing framework to the context of health communication, this research contributes to framing theory and offers practical insights into the role of state-led media in representing healthcare professionals during public health emergencies.

Keywords: *Doctor, framing theory, COVID-19, crisis communication, China Daily*.

INTRODUCTION

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) received reports of a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown origin in Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020). As the outbreak rapidly evolved into the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO characterized it as a global public health emergency (Ghebreyesus, 2020). As the virus spread rapidly across the world, so too did the dissemination of information by concerned citizens through various communication channels. During the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak, an overwhelming volume of information circulated, including accurate information, rumours, misinformation and disinformation. This highly complex and overloaded information environment, widely described as an "infodemic"

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E-ISSN: 2289-1528
https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2026-4203-23
Received: 17 August 2026 | Accepted: 30 September 2026 | Published: 30 September 2026

made it increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish reliable information from false or misleading content (Gallotti et al., 2020). In such circumstances, trusted medical professionals became increasingly important as authoritative sources of health information. Beyond providing clinical care, doctors played a critical role in public communication, pandemic governance and risk mitigation by helping governments and communities understand the evolving health crisis and encouraging appropriate preventive behaviour.

When a disease outbreak happens, doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers become the front liners who take care of patients, help control the spread of the disease and save lives. Studying how doctors are portrayed during a pandemic is important because media representation serves as a key site for the construction of institutional legitimacy, public trust, and social compliance. Recent research on COVID-19 communication highlights that media play an agenda-setting role by determining not only which issues receive attention but also how pandemic-related actors and responses are represented (Mokhtar et al., 2024).

Hubner (2021) examined early COVID-19 media coverage through news frames and source analysis, showing that media relied mainly on government officials and scientific experts while emphasizing risk, responsibility, and crisis management. The study demonstrates that framing and source selection shape public understanding by determining whose voices are prioritized and how crises are interpreted. Although not focused specifically on healthcare professionals, it provides useful insights for examining how *China Daily* constructs doctors as authoritative and trusted actors through framing strategies.

During health emergencies, effective crisis communication plays a critical role in reducing uncertainty and sustaining public trust, particularly as audiences increasingly rely on authoritative sources for credible information (Rahim et al., 2025). Recent studies further demonstrate that evidence-based and transparent communication enhances public trust and engagement, whereas fear-oriented framing may influence risk perceptions and shape public responses in different ways (Liu & Liu, 2023).

Existing research demonstrates that media systems construct divergent interpretive frameworks based on their political, cultural, and institutional contexts, utilizing specific thematic and emotional dimensions to report on health crises. Studies of past epidemics, such as SARS, indicate that the media frequently utilize frames emphasizing human interest, economic consequences, severity, and attribution of responsibility (Beaudoin, 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Western mainstream media coverage was frequently characterised by politicised and polarised narratives, reflecting divergent framing approaches to the pandemic and its management (Lu & Ngai, 2024). Such coverage often emphasised institutional shortcomings, attribution of responsibility, and, in some cases, stigmatizing representations of China and Chinese actors, thereby shaping international perceptions of the pandemic and its broader geopolitical implications (Xiao & Mittal, 2021).

In contrast, Chinese mainstream news media generally operate within a paradigm that prioritises social harmony, stability, and consensus-building. During public health emergencies, Chinese state media tend to emphasis positive coping strategies, government responses, and frontline workers while promoting narratives of solidarity and resilience (Ngai et al., 2022). Recent studies further show that Chinese domestic media construct "ordinary heroes" through emotion-laden narratives of personal sacrifice, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of state leadership and governance (Xie & Zhou, 2021).

Despite extensive research on media framing during health crises, important gaps remain in understanding how doctors are represented in China's international-facing media. Existing studies have focused primarily on domestic Chinese media narratives and Western

media portrayals of China, while the representation of doctors in China's English-language mainstream media has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Moreover, although framing theory has been widely employed in media studies, the Ghanem's (1997) framing framework has rarely been applied to examine the construction of doctors' media images during public health emergencies.

Accordingly, this study examines how China Daily portrayed doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing four interconnected framing dimensions: presentation, topic, cognitive, and affective frames. The analysis focuses on how the newspaper selected, highlighted, and presented information to develop particular narratives about doctors and their roles during the health crisis. In addition, the study discusses how these frames positioned doctors' professional identity, contributions to society, and moral significance throughout the pandemic. Guided by Ghanem's (1997) four framing dimensions, the study asks:

RQ1: How did *China Daily* present doctor-related news in terms of volume, sources, news type, page placement, and photographic shots (presentation)?

RQ2: What topics dominated *China Daily*'s coverage of doctors (topic of a news item)?

RQ3: What emotional valence characterised this coverage (affective attributes)?

RQ4: What images and professional roles did *China Daily* attribute to doctors (cognitive attributes)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of media image originates from Lippmann's (1922) notion of the "pseudo-environment," which suggests that individuals respond not to objective reality but to mediated representations constructed through communication processes. This perspective establishes the premise that media do not simply reflect reality but actively construct interpretive versions of social events. Building on this foundation, framing theory explains how media construct social meaning through processes of selection, emphasis, and exclusion. Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection and salience of particular aspects of perceived reality, which enhances their cognitive prominence in communication texts. Frames therefore function as interpretive structures that shape how audiences understand social actors and events. In crisis communication contexts, trust in media sources is associated with the adoption of preventive behaviours, supporting the argument that media credibility influences public responses during health crises (Li et al.,2023).

Empirical research demonstrates that media framing plays a central role in constructing social meaning across diverse contexts. Studies of COVID-19 news reporting further show that media employ different framing strategies to communicate health crises and shape public understanding (Ogbodo et al., 2020). Framing research has shown that media shape audience interpretations by emphasising certain aspects of reality while downplaying others (De Vreese, 2005).

Gao et al. (2023) examined how Chinese official media framed female medical personnel during COVID-19 through a gender perspective. Using news texts from the *People's Daily* WeChat and Sina Weibo accounts in 2020, the study applied deductive framing analysis to explore how media frames shaped the public image of female healthcare workers. Findings showed unequal representation: despite women's significant role in frontline healthcare, they received less media attention than male counterparts. Female medical workers were

mainly portrayed through human-interest frames, while male workers were associated with action frames highlighting professional expertise and contributions.

The study further showed that gendered media framing shaped the professional identities of female medical personnel. They were frequently portrayed through narratives of sacrifice, emotional commitment, family roles, and personal hardship, emphasizing their courage but reducing the visibility of their professional expertise by presenting them as moral symbols rather than skilled practitioners. In contrast, prominent medical experts such as Li Lanjuan and Chen Wei were framed through their scientific expertise, research achievements, and professional authority, enabling them to transcend traditional gender stereotypes.

This study highlights how media construct the image of healthcare professionals during public health crises within broader social and cultural contexts. Although previous research emphasized heroic portrayals of healthcare workers, Gao et al. (2023) showed that heroization can coexist with gender stereotypes and the marginalization of professional identities. This finding provides a useful basis for examining how *China Daily* frames doctors through the interplay of professional authority, emotional narratives, and moral evaluations.

However, doctors as a professional group remain underexplored, particularly in crisis communication contexts. Existing research shows that media portrayals of doctors are shaped by institutional and sociopolitical conditions. An analysis of 325 newspaper articles from 2000 to 2020 found that positive portrayals declined over time, while negative representations increased alongside healthcare reforms in China (Zhuang, 2021). During public health emergencies, medical experts often become central media actors as the public relies on authoritative sources for information (Hart et al., 2020). Cross-national and corpus-based studies revealed distinct journalistic cultures, noting that Western media frequently emphasized uncertainty, fear appeals, and responsibility attribution, whereas Chinese state media, including *China Daily*, predominantly utilized defensive narratives, fending-off frames, and collective resilience to manage the crisis (Ittefaq et al., 2025; Wei, 2025; Wilson & McKee, 2024).

Despite these contributions, several limitations remain. Existing research has paid relatively limited attention to doctors compared with other social actors, has seldom adopted multidimensional framing approaches to examine how different framing elements jointly construct professional images, and has rarely investigated English-language Chinese state media such as *China Daily*. Accordingly, this study examines how China Daily represented doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building upon framing theory, this study adopts Ghanem's framing framework (Ghanem, 1997) as the analytical framework for examining media representations of doctors in China Daily during the COVID-19 pandemic. Developed within the second-level agenda-setting tradition, Ghanem's framework extends conventional agenda-setting research by arguing that media influence not only what audiences think about but also how they think about social actors and issues through the attributes attached to news coverage. Rather than conceptualising framing as a single textual feature, the framework views media meaning as being constructed through multiple interrelated dimensions.

Specifically, the framework comprises four framing dimensions: presentation, topic, cognitive attributes, and affective attributes. The presentation dimension concerns the structural prominence of news content, including visibility, placement, source selection, and visual presentation. The topic dimension captures the thematic organisation through which

events and social actors are represented. Cognitive attributes refer to the descriptive characteristics, identities, and professional roles assigned to social actors, whereas affective attributes represent the evaluative and emotional orientation embedded in media discourse. Together, these four dimensions conceptualise framing as an integrated process in which structural, thematic, cognitive, and evaluative elements jointly shape media meaning.

Ghanem's framing framework has influenced subsequent research within the second-level agenda-setting and framing tradition. For example, McCombs and Ghanem (2001) argued that framing and second-level agenda setting converge through the salience of issue attributes, demonstrating that audience perceptions are shaped not only by issue visibility but also by the cognitive and affective characteristics attached to media representations. Chyi and McCombs (2004), in their analysis of newspaper coverage of the Columbine High School shootings, further showed that framing attributes evolve across different stages of news coverage, highlighting the dynamic nature of media framing. Weaver (2007) likewise observed that framing research has increasingly focused on how multiple attributes interact to influence audience interpretation, reinforcing the analytical value of multidimensional framing.

Although these studies demonstrate the usefulness of attribute-based framing, existing applications have focused primarily on political communication, election campaigns, and public issues. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the media construction of professional identities during public health crises, particularly in English-language Chinese state media. Moreover, few studies have examined how structural prominence, thematic organisation, cognitive representation, and affective evaluation interact in constructing doctors' professional images. Subsequently, this study applies Ghanem's framing framework (Ghanem, 1997) to examine how China Daily constructed the professional image of doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic. By analysing presentation, topic, cognitive attributes, and affective attributes as an integrated framing system, the framework provides a systematic basis for understanding how multiple framing dimensions jointly shape media portrayals of doctors.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative content analysis, supplemented by illustrative excerpts, to investigate media portrayals of doctors in China Daily during the COVID-19 pandemic. Content analysis is widely recognised as a systematic and replicable method for analysing communication texts (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). The analysis was descriptive, reporting frequencies and percentages for all four dimensions; inductive coding was used only to develop the cognitive categories, and the excerpts in the Results illustrate these categories rather than forming a separate qualitative analysis.

China Daily was selected as the data source due to its role as one of China's leading English-language newspapers and a key platform for official discourse during public health crises. It reports a circulation of 600,000 copies overseas and 300,000 domestically, exceeding other Chinese English-language publications (Wei, 2025). The sampling period covered 1 January to 31 December 2020. This first year of the pandemic spans China’s initial response, from the Wuhan outbreak and the dispatch of medical teams to the shift toward routine epidemic control, and was the period when doctors were most visible as news actors (Figure 1). Later years brought vaccination and other policy phases to the fore, introducing different actors and frames. Articles were included if doctors were their central focus, that is, doctors

appear in the headline or lead and are the main actors or subject of the article, and excluded if doctors were mentioned only incidentally or the item was non-editorial. Of the 399 articles identified, 113 were excluded: 13 for incidental mentions, 83 for non-editorial items, and 17 for other reasons, leaving 286 for the review.

The presentation dimension was operationalised through number of news, news sources, type of news, newspaper page, and shots. The number of news reflects the level of media attention devoted to doctors; news sources indicate whose voices and perspectives are emphasised; type of news represents the journalistic format through which information is presented; newspaper page reflects editorial prominence; and shots indicate how closely readers are positioned to doctors. Shot size was coded for each photograph showing doctors: long shot (doctors small within a wide setting), panorama or full shot (full figures with immediate surroundings), medium shot (waist up), medium close-up (chest up), and close-up (face or a detail filling the frame). Of the 286 articles, several carried such photographs, yielding 332 shots (Table 5).

The second dimension, topic of a news item, captures the thematic contexts of doctors' representations. The coding framework comprised eight mutually exclusive categories, developed through a combined deductive and inductive approach and labelled as in Table 6: harmony between doctors and patients, paying tribute to doctors; science popularisation and interpretation; typical characters (doctors presented as role models); medical technology, medical environment, and treatment effectiveness; assistance provided by Chinese medical staff to other countries in fighting the pandemic; medical teams rushed to fight the pandemic; policies and regulations; and non-pandemic topics. Each article was assigned to one category (total = 286).

The affective attributes dimension was operationalised by coding the dominant emotional orientation of each article as positive, neutral, or negative. Positive valence refers to praise, admiration, or supportive representations of doctors. Neutral representations were coded when positive and negative evaluative cues co-occurred without a clear dominant emotional orientation. Negative valence refers to criticism or unfavourable assessments of doctors.

The cognitive attributes dimension captures the media representations of doctors in terms of recurring semantic roles and professional identities. This dimension was developed inductively to reflect emergent patterns in the dataset rather than relying on pre-established categories. The principal thematic keywords used to portray doctors were manually extracted from each news article and iteratively grouped according to semantic similarity and contextual meaning, resulting in seven categories (six recurring and one residual). The categories were refined through repeated comparison until conceptual consistency was achieved. Each article was subsequently coded according to the dominant cognitive representation reflected in the news text, so the article remained the unit of analysis (Table 8); keyword occurrences are reported only as an indicator of lexical salience, not as article counts.

Prior to formal coding, the coding framework was reviewed by three scholars specialising in media and communication to improve the clarity, exclusiveness, exhaustiveness, and operational consistency of the coding categories. Based on their recommendations, operational definitions and coding procedures were further refined to minimise ambiguity. Two coders were subsequently trained using the finalised coding manual, which included detailed category definitions and decision rules. A practice coding session involving five sample articles was conducted before the pilot test to ensure coding

consistency. A pilot study was then carried out using a random sample of 30 articles. Both coders independently coded the same dataset without consultation. The pilot study was used to assess the feasibility of the coding scheme and further refine the classification rules where necessary.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa based on the independent coding of the pilot sample. The results indicated a very high level of inter-coder reliability across all coding categories, with Cohen's Kappa values ranging from 0.923 to 1.000. Number of news, type of news, newspaper page, shots, affective attributes, and cognitive attributes achieved perfect agreement (κ = 1.000), whereas news sources (κ = 0.944) and topic classification (κ = 0.923) demonstrated almost perfect agreement according to the criteria proposed by Landis and Koch (1977). Formal coding of the complete dataset commenced only after satisfactory inter-coder reliability had been established (Table 1).

Perfect agreement on the inductively developed, seven-category cognitive variable reflects two features of the procedure: the categories, definitions, and decision rules were fixed before the pilot, and coders assigned only one dominant category per article. Both coders had also helped develop the categories. Because the pilot covered only 30 articles (10.5%), a single disagreement would have lowered κ markedly, so these coefficients should be read with caution.

Table 1: Reliability analysis

Coding variables	Cohen's κ	Observed Agreement	Interpretation
A1. Number of News	1.000	100%	Perfect agreement
A2. News Sources	0.944	96.7%	Almost perfect agreement
A3. Type of News	1.000	100%	Perfect agreement
A4. Newspaper Page	1.000	100%	Perfect agreement
A5. Shots	1.000	100%	Perfect agreement
B1. The topic of a news item	0.923	93.3%	Almost perfect agreement
C1. Affective attributes	1.000	100%	Perfect agreement
D1. Cognitive attributes	1.000	100%	Perfect agreement

After the pilot, the trained coders coded the remaining 256 articles. The pilot's disagreements (one on news sources, two on topic) were resolved by discussion to consensus and decision rules were clarified before formal coding. We manually coded all 286 articles in Microsoft Excel, treating each article as the unit of analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were calculated for variables across the four framing dimensions. To complement the quantitative findings, representative news excerpts were qualitatively examined to illustrate how the dominant cognitive representations of doctors identified through content analysis were linguistically realised. Particular attention was paid to salient keywords, evaluative expressions, lexical choices, and metaphorical constructions that contributed to the discursive construction of doctors' professional identities.

RESULTS

This study analyzed 286 articles from *China Daily* using content analysis to map the strategic portrayal of the doctors' image across Ghanem's four framing dimensions.

1. Presentation (RQ1)

China Daily's coverage of doctors in 2020 exhibited a highly concentrated temporal distribution. As shown in Figure 1, this pattern indicates concentrated structural salience.

Coverage was heavily concentrated during the early phase of the pandemic, with 69.2% of articles (n = 198) published between January and April 2020. February represents the peak period of visibility, with 85 articles, accounting for 29.7% of the total annual output. In contrast, coverage declined sharply in the later stages of the year, with only 30.8% of articles (n = 88) published from May to December.

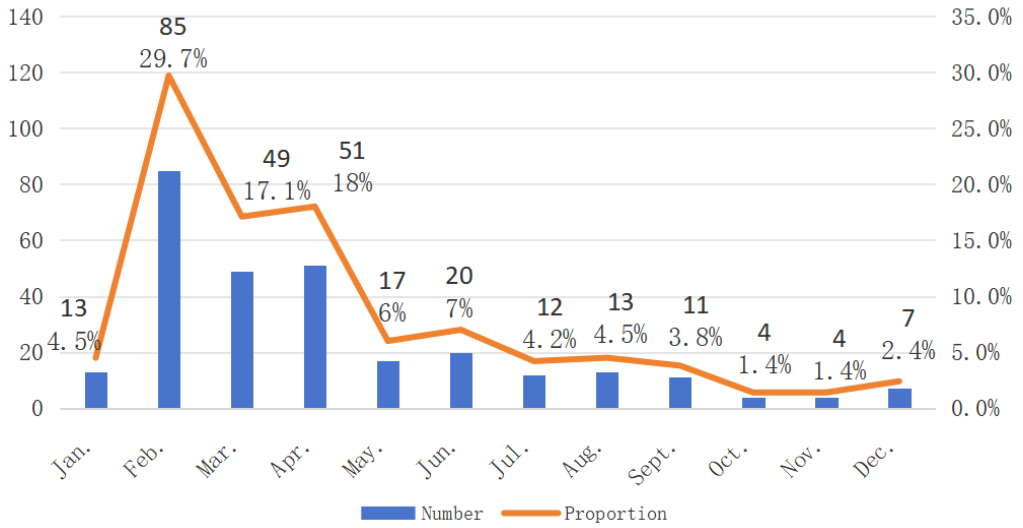


Figure 1: Number of Doctor-Related News Articles in China Daily, January–December 2020
Source: Authors' analysis of *China Daily* coverage, 2020.

In 2020, China Daily produced most of its doctor-related COVID-19 reports internally, from Xinhua, China News Service, and other major media. Of the 286 articles analysed, a news source could be clearly identified in 259; the remaining articles did not attribute information to a specific source. Table 2 shows that the primary source of information in doctor-related news articles is medical experts and doctors (68.3%, n = 177). This is followed by government sources (14.3%, n = 37), combined doctor–patient sources (6.6%, n = 17), other sources (5.0%, n = 13), patients (3.5%, n = 9), editorial authorities (1.9%, n = 5), and non-governmental organisations (0.4%, n = 1). These figures reveal a clear editorial preference for professional and institutional voices, with limited representation of patients and civil society actors, suggesting a controlled and authority-driven information structure in news portrayals of doctors.

Table 2: News Sources for doctor-related news articles

News Sources	Frequency	Percentage
Medical experts and doctors	177	68.3%
Government	37	14.3%
Both Patients and Doctors	17	6.6%
Others	13	5.0%
Patients	9	3.5%
Editorial authority	5	1.9%
NGO	1	0.4%
Total	259	100%

The results in Table 3 show that China Daily covered doctors through diverse genres. News articles accounted for the largest proportion (157 articles, 54.9%), followed by features (60 articles, 21.0%) and photo captions (53 articles, 18.5%), while comments constituted the smallest share (16 articles, 5.6%). Straight news reports were therefore the primary vehicle for constructing doctors' images, supplemented by features and photo captions, while commentaries were rarely used.

Table 3: Types of news for doctor-related news articles

Types of News	Frequency	Percentage
News	157	54.9%
Feature	60	21.0%
Comment	16	5.6%
Photo Caption	53	18.5%
Total	286	100%

Table 4 presents the page distribution of doctor-related news in China Daily (2020), revealing a strong concentration in the early pages of the newspaper. 79.0% (n = 226) of articles were placed within the first eight pages, indicating high structural prominence. Page 5, themed "China News," contained the highest number of articles (17.1%, n = 49), with a strong focus on domestic medical events during the Wuhan COVID-19 outbreak. Pages 3 and 4 also show relatively high concentrations, with 14.3% (n = 41) and 11.9% (n = 34) respectively, while Page 1 accounted for 8.0% (n = 23).

Table 4: Newspaper page on doctors in China Daily (2020)

Newspaper Page	Frequency	Percentage
1	23	8.0%
2	23	8.0%
3	41	14.3%
4	34	11.9%
5	49	17.1%
6	21	7.3%
7	20	7.0%
8	15	5.2%
9	0	0.0%
10	1	0.3%
11	4	1.4%
12	6	2.1%
13	0	0.0%
14	0	0.0%
15	0	0.0%
16	3	1.0%
17	2	0.7%
18	16	5.6%
19	1	0.4%
20	1	0.4%
Multiple layouts	26	9.1%
Total	286	100%

In contrast, coverage beyond Page 8 declined sharply. Pages 9–17 together account for only a small proportion of articles, indicating reduced visibility in inner sections of the newspaper. Interestingly, a secondary clustering appears in Pages 18–20, which collectively account for 6.3% (n = 18), along with 9.1% (n = 26) of articles appearing in multiple-page layouts. The distribution suggests a consistent editorial emphasis on front-section visibility, reinforcing the structural salience of doctor-related news during the pandemic period.

The results in Table 5 show that China Daily depicted doctors using a variety of shot types. The 332 shots came from the several articles carrying photographs of doctors, some of which had more than one. Medium shots were most common (122, 36.7%), followed by medium close-ups (90, 27.1%), panoramas (71, 21.4%), and close-ups (49, 14.8%); no long shots were found. Close-range framing (medium close-ups and close-ups, 41.9%) thus outweighed scene-setting panoramas, suggesting an emphasis on minimising visual and emotional distance between doctors and readers.

Table 5: Shots for doctor-related news articles

Shots	Frequency	Percentage
Long Shot	0	0.0%
Panorama	71	21.4%
Medium Shot	122	36.7%
Medium Close-Up Shot	90	27.1%
Close-Up Shot	49	14.8%
Total	332	100%

2. Topic of a News Item (RQ2)

The analysis of news topics provides insight into the thematic representation of doctors in China Daily's coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight major themes were identified in the dataset. Table 6 presents the thematic distribution of doctor-related news in China Daily (January–December 2020). The findings indicate that the most prominent topic is "harmony between doctors and patients, paying tribute to doctors," which accounts for 23.1% (n = 66) of all articles. This is followed by "science popularisation and interpretation" at 19.9% (n = 57) and "typical characters" at 19.6% (n = 56), indicating a strong emphasis on humanistic and educational framing.

Mid-ranked topics include "medical technology, medical environment, and treatment effectiveness" (12.6%, n = 36) and "assistance provided by Chinese medical staff to other countries in fighting the pandemic" (9.8%, n = 28), reflecting both domestic professional narratives and international cooperation discourse. Lower-frequency categories include "medical teams rushed to fight the pandemic" (8.0%, n = 23) and "policies and regulations" (4.2%, n = 12). "Non-pandemic topics" are minimally represented, accounting for only 2.8% (n = 8) of the total coverage. The distribution suggests that doctor-related news is predominantly framed through themes of harmony, heroism, and knowledge dissemination, while policy-oriented and non-pandemic content remains marginal.

Table 6: Topic of a news item on doctors in China Daily (January to December, 2020)

Topic of a news item	Frequency	Percentage
Harmony between doctors and patients, paying tribute to doctors	66	23.1%
Science popularisation and interpretation	57	19.9%
Typical characters	56	19.6%

Medical technology, medical environment, and treatment effectiveness	36	12.6%
Assistance provided by Chinese medical staff to other countries in fighting the pandemic	28	9.8%
Medical teams rushed to fight the pandemic	23	8.0%
Policies and regulations	12	4.2%
Non-pandemic topics	8	2.8%
Total	286	100%

3. Affective Attributes (RQ3)

The analysis of affective attributes examines the emotional valence of China Daily's coverage of doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Table 7 presents the distribution of affective attributes in China Daily's coverage of doctors in 2020. The findings indicate a highly imbalanced emotional orientation. Positive affect dominates the dataset, accounting for 98.3% (n = 281) of the articles. In contrast, neutral affect represents only 1.4% (n = 4), while negative affect is minimal at 0.3% (n = 1). These percentages suggest that the coverage overwhelmingly constructs a favourable emotional representation of doctors.

Table 7: Affective attributes on doctors in China Daily (2020)

Affective attributes	Frequency	Percentage
Positive image	281	98.3%
Neutral image	4	1.4%
Negative image	1	0.3%
Total	286	100%

4. Cognitive Attributes (RQ4)

The analysis of cognitive attributes examines how China Daily constructed the professional identities of doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the thematic keywords extracted from each news article, seven image categories were identified: six recurring categories (professional and authoritative leaders, defenders of medical excellence, individuals willing to dedicate themselves, guardians who care about patients, individuals enjoying policy support and social care, and workers under occupational stress) and one residual category (doctors lacking medical ethics). Table 8 reports the dominant category per article (N = 286) alongside keyword occurrences (748 in total), which indicate lexical salience; one article can contain several keywords.

Table 8: Dominant cognitive attributes of doctors in China Daily (2020)

Cognitive attribute	Keyword occurrences
Professional and authoritative leader	404
Defender of medical excellence	101
Willing to dedicate oneself	125
Guardian who cares about patients	55
Enjoying policy support and social care	48
Worker under occupational stress	12
Lacking medical ethics (residual)	3
Total	748

Note: One dominant attribute was coded per article; keyword occurrences are not article frequencies.

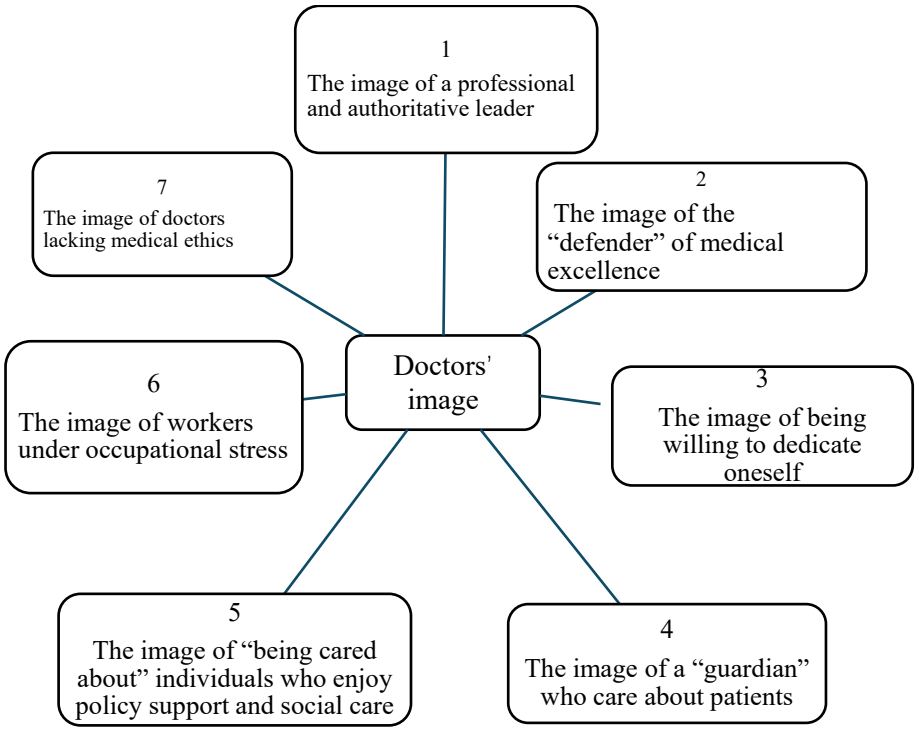


Figure 2: Thematic Categories of Doctors' Image in China Daily Coverage
Source: Authors' analysis of *China Daily* coverage, 2020.

Figure 2 illustrates these seven thematic categories of doctors' images. These seven categories capture the multidimensional construction of doctors' professional identities in public discourse. Among these, the most salient portrayal during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic was that of the professional and authoritative leader. Doctors were frequently portrayed as professional and authoritative leader, with particular emphasis on high-profile medical experts such as Zhong Nanshan, Zhang Boli, Li Lanjuan, and Zhang Wenhong (404 keyword occurrences). This representation was constructed through repeated emphasis on institutional affiliation, professional expertise, and authoritative voice.

Media discourse frequently highlighted leading medical experts in key roles within national response teams. For example, Zhong Nanshan was prominently featured for his involvement in investigating the pneumonia outbreak and contributing to early scientific assessments during the COVID-19 crisis.

As a central medical authority during the early pandemic response, Zhong Nanshan was consistently portrayed as a key expert in epidemic investigation and public health communication, reflecting the prominence of medical expertise and leadership in pandemic reporting.



Expert: Tighten control over imported cases

By LI WENFANG in Guangzhou
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Zhong Nanshan, a prominent expert in respiratory diseases, said that there still exists the possibility that the COVID-19 outbreak could end in June, but this hinges on all countries taking full and active measures to tackle it.

"If some countries do not pay full attention to the infectious nature and harm of the disease or intervene forcibly, (the outbreak) may be prolonged, Zhong, one of the leading specialists tackling the outbreak in China, said at a news conference on Thursday in Guangzhou, Guangdong province.

The virus should become less active in the high temperature in the summer, thus slowing the outbreak. However, should the outbreak extend any longer, it would have an enormous impact on the society and the economy of a country, he said, adding that the previous assessment was based more on the situation in China.

The relatively high mortality rate in some foreign countries indicates the strain on medical resources brought by the sudden increase in patients and the need for state-level attention in those countries.

Zhong called on all countries to follow the instructions of the World Health Organization, which declared COVID-19 a pandemic on Wednesday.

He said he was happy that countries like Italy and South Korea had taken significant measures, pointing to a marked drop in new cases in South Korea.

The outbreak in China, including the hardest-hit Hubei province, had been brought well under control with high-level measures for prevention and control, with temporary hospitals playing a role by separating patients and non-patients, Zhong said.

China has passed the climax of the outbreak, with the number of new infections continuing to decline, the National Health Commission said on Thursday.

Hubei had eight new coronavirus infections on Wednesday, all in its capital, Wuhan. Other parts of Hubei have reported no new infections for a week.

Elsewhere on the Chinese mainland, seven new cases were reported on Wednesday, including six cases imported from abroad.

The problem in China has now shifted to imported cases, Zhong said.

Some infected people did not show symptoms, such as fever, when entering China but later tested positive, Zhong said.

Since people coming from foreign countries may be required to be quarantined for 14 days, those who need to enter China quickly should take a virus test, which serves the interest of both themselves and the country, he said.

Zhong has held a number of online meetings with foreign medical professionals, and he said such exchanges between Chinese and foreign professionals and the public should be increased to reduce possible mistakes and the mortality rate in foreign countries.

Although it is impossible to develop effective medicines for treating the disease very soon, there are ways to prevent the situation from deteriorating.

Health workers and the public in foreign countries need to become more aware of the risks posed by COVID-19, he said.

On the cases of cured patients who have again tested positive for the virus, Zhong said they do not seem to be contagious, with no person having close contact with them being infected so far.

Zou Shuo in Beijing contributed to this story.

Inside

See more, **page 5**

Excerpt 1: "Expert: Tighten Control Over Imported Cases"
Source: *China Daily*, 13 March 2020, p. 1.

The second thematic category concerns the portrayal of doctors as "defenders" of medical excellence. During the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors were prominently framed as key defenders of public health, whose professional expertise and clinical experience were mobilised in diagnosis, complex medical procedures, and treatment innovation under highly demanding conditions. China Daily consistently portrayed doctors as competent guardians of clinical practice whose contributions were essential to the national pandemic response.

This "defender" image was reinforced through recurrent lexical items such as "experience," "Leading the fight," "miracle" "recovered," and "survive," which collectively appeared 101 times. A notable example is Chen Jingyu's performance of the world's first double lung transplantation on a recovering COVID-19 patient in Wuxi, Jiangsu. Such representations foregrounded medical breakthroughs as symbolic evidence of professional competence, thereby strengthening the framing of doctors as defenders of medical excellence and public health during the crisis.



Former coronavirus patient gets new lungs

By **CANG WEI** in Nanjing
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Doctors in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, performed the world's first double lung transplant for a patient once infected with the novel coronavirus on Saturday, potentially giving more hope to critically ill people suffering from lung damage after the virus clears, a top surgeon said.

Chen Jingyu, one of China's top lung transplant experts and vice-president of Wuxi People's Hospital, posted news of the transplant on the Sina Weibo microblog on Sunday, writing that the five-hour surgery was successful.

The patient, 59, would have died from severe lung damage if he had not had the procedure, according to Chen.

He showed symptoms on Jan 23 and was diagnosed with novel coronavirus pneumonia on Jan 26.

Doctors used endotracheal intubation on Feb 7 and extracorporeal membrane oxygenation on Feb 22. The patient was transferred to Wuxi to receive further treatment on Feb 24.

"For a very few patients with critical symptoms, they might suffer from pulmonary fibrosis for a long time."

Zhan Qingyuan, director of the respiration and critical illness department at China-Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing

Zhan Qingyuan, director of the respiration and critical illness department at China-Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing, told a news conference held by the National Health Commission on Jan 31 that the coronavirus mainly affects lungs.

"There should be no sequelae for those patients with mild symptoms, but those with severe symptoms might have lung damage for a period of time," he said.

"Most lungs having pulmonary fibrosis can repair themselves gradually, but for a very few patients with critical symptoms, they might suffer from pulmonary fibrosis for a long time."

Even though repeated nucleic acid tests for the infection were negative, both the patient's lungs had been seriously damaged.

To save the patient, Chen and his team performed the surgery after experts from Jiangsu confirmed that a lung transplant could be performed on him.

The lungs, donated by a brain-dead patient, were transferred to Wuxi by high-speed train within seven hours.

Chen said performing such a surgery posed challenges to the medical workers both physically and psychologically.

"The team was well prepared before performing the surgery," he said. "All the surgeons and nurses wore protective suits all through the surgery, which was undertaken in a negative pressure room that could contain potential contaminants."

Chen said that in order for novel coronavirus pneumonia patients to qualify for such surgery, both their lungs must fail to work after being maintained by ventilator and ECMO, and their bilateral pulmonary respiratory failure must be irreversible.

In addition, the patients' nucleic acid tests should show negative results repeatedly, and their other organs should function normally to withstand lung transplantation.

The patient in Saturday's surgery met all those prerequisites. He woke up from the operation on Sunday, with his transplanted lungs functioning well and his vital signs stable.

"We will strictly monitor the patient's recovery and gain experience to help critically ill patients in the future," Chen said.

Excerpt 2: "Former Coronavirus Patient Receives New Lungs"
Source: *China Daily*, 2 March 2020, p. 5.

The third thematic category constructs the image of doctors being willing to dedicate oneself. *China Daily* represents doctors' commitment through recurrent lexical items such as "assisting Wuhan," "volunteered," "assistance," and "devoted," which appear a total of 125 times across the dataset. This linguistic pattern highlights doctors' willingness to prioritize collective responsibility over individual interests in their participation in frontline pandemic response efforts.

This framing emphasises sustained professional sacrifice and constructs doctors not only as healthcare providers, but also as moral agents associated with altruistic service during crisis conditions.

To Wuhan boy, his doctor mom is a superhero

By **ZHOU LIHUA, LIU KUN** in Wuhan
and **LI HONGYANG** in Beijing

In the eyes of 5-year-old Youyou, his mother is like the Ultraman cartoon superhero who fights bad guys every day.

His mother, Lu Jingjing, a dermatologist at Wuhan Children's Hospital, is now working at the mobile cabin hospital at the Wuhan International Conference and Exhibition Center, taking care of novel coronavirus-infected patients.

Since Lu left home for the cabin hospital on Feb 4, Youyou has kept asking his mother through video chat: "Mom, how many viruses did you beat today?"

Lu, who also has a 1-year-old daughter, was sent to do support work at a community quarantine center on Feb 2 and then to the cabin hospital two days later.

While she was packing to leave for the cabin hospital, Youyou cried and tried to stop her from leaving, knowing he would not see his mother for a long time.

Lu patiently explained to him what the virus is and told him that she would fight it with the cartoon superhero, Ultraman.


Lu Jingjing

"He then calmed down and let me go because in his mind, Ultraman is the strongest in the battlefield and could definitely help me win," Lu said.

Since then, her son has asked her every day through video chat how many viruses she has killed and helps her add them up.

"He may not know clearly why I'm away from home, but he knows that I'm fighting against the super virus with the weapons of doctors," she said.

"He told me that he had planted a cherry tree and would reward me with cherries when I get back. Every time he said 'Mom, I miss you', I couldn't stop bursting into tears."

Lu and her husband had planned to visit her parents in their hometown in Shandong province during Spring Festival, but after the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, they chose to stay.

Her husband, who is serving in the army, is taking care of the children at home now and voluntarily helps with disinfection around their residential community.

Lu did not let her parents know she is now working with novel coronavirus-infected patients.

"I am a dermatologist, so my parents think that the virus has nothing to do with my department and that I'm staying away from infected patients," she said.

When they asked for a video chat, Lu would say she was working in the dermatology clinic and instead let her husband and children chat with them.

"We should win the battle with the virus as soon as possible, so that medical staff and patients can go back home," she said.

Lu is one of the 24 medical staff from Wuhan Children's Hospital now working as support at other hospitals. Besides working at the mobile cabin hospital at the exhibition center, others are at different quarantine centers.

The Wuhan Children's Hospital is receiving children that are infected with the novel coronavirus.

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Excerpt 3: "To Wuhan Boy, His Doctor Mom Is a Superhero"
Source: *China Daily*, 14 February 2020, p. 5.

Doctor on front line dies from coronavirus

By **LI HONGYANG**
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A doctor from Wuhan, Hubei province, who postponed his wedding ceremony to help treat patients with the novel coronavirus, has died of the virus himself.

Peng Yinhua, 29, who had worked at the First People's Hospital of Jiangxia District, died of respiratory failure on Thursday.

The doctor and his pregnant wife had planned to have their wedding ceremony on Feb 1. Though they had registered their marriage two years ago, it is common in China to celebrate the wedding later on a special date.

But in January, when Wuhan became the center of the virus outbreak, Peng offered to return to treat patients, and put his wedding ceremony on hold.

On Jan 24, the eve of Chinese New Year, his colleagues let him rest at home and spend more time with his wife. He declined, saying he was young and should take over more work from other colleagues.

He treated more than 150 patients a day, Huanqiu.com reported.

The next day he felt unwell and was hospitalized. On Jan 30, he tested positive for the virus and was sent to a designated hospital for treatment, but his condition worsened around Feb 10.

Zhong Xin, Peng's wife, told The-Paper.cn that her husband was a great doctor, as well as a hero.

"His parents are quite emotional now and I will take care of our baby and raise him or her up in good health," Zhong said in a trembling voice.

Ling Yun, a nurse at the Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, who had been taking care of him, said on her Sina Weibo that Peng had always been positive. "However, around Feb 10, his lungs developed acidosis and his kidneys needed dialysis. We used plasma therapy but things didn't get better," she said.

"He was too young, only 29 years old. We had always believed that he would recover... I am sorry to see what happened to him and hope his unborn baby will grow up healthy and happy."

Excerpt 4: "Doctor on Front Line Dies from Coronavirus"
Source: *China Daily*, 22 February 2020, p. 2.

Excerpts 3 and 4 narrate dedication through personal sacrifice. In Excerpt 3, dermatologist Lu Jingjing is compared by her five-year-old son to the superhero Ultraman, and her work is described as "fighting against the super virus with the weapons of doctors";

leaving two young children and hiding her posting from her parents become evidence of commitment. Excerpt 4 reports the death of 29-year-old Peng Yinhua, who postponed his wedding and declined rest. That he treated more than 150 patients a day is presented as devotion rather than as a question of workload or protection. In both excerpts, risk and loss are absorbed into the dedication frame.

The fourth thematic category constructs doctors as "guardians" who care about patients. China Daily represented this role through recurrent expressions such as "care," "warmest," and "lifts patients' spirits," which appeared 55 times in the dataset. Within this narrative framework, doctors are constructed not merely as skilled clinical practitioners, but as compassionate caregivers who deliver humane emotional support alongside medical treatment. The front-page photo caption "Discharge Day" (10 April 2020) depicted an 87-year-old patient being accompanied by a doctor to watch the sunset during treatment, while the accompanying report, "Elderly Patient Seen in Sunset Photo Released from Hospital," further elaborated this narrative.



Discharge day

Left: Wang Xin, an 87-year-old COVID-19 patient who has recovered, bids farewell to medical workers after he was discharged from Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University in Wuhan, Hubei province, on Thursday. **Right:** Wang attracted attention after a photo of him, accompanied by a doctor, watching the sunset at the hospital on March 5 became popular online.

PHOTO BY ZHAO SIWEI AND GAN JUNCHAO / FOR CHINA DAILY **See story, page 5**

Excerpt 5: "Discharge Day"
Source: *China Daily*, 10 April 2020, p. 1.

Through textual and visual representation, the report emphasised doctors' humanistic care and emotional engagement, positioning them as compassionate caregivers whose professional roles extended beyond clinical treatment.

The fifth thematic category constructs the image of doctors as "being cared about" individuals who enjoy policy support and social care. Although this framing is not always explicitly stated in the news discourse, it is implicitly constructed through references to government initiatives and collective social support mechanisms. During the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, China Daily frequently employed terms such as "protect," "donate," and "protect doctors," which appear 48 times across the dataset.

This discourse positions the state and society as providing institutional protection for frontline doctors, while emphasising collective responsibility for their welfare. In this sense, doctors are constructed not only as caregivers, but also as recipients of structured social and

political support, reinforcing an image of professionally valued and publicly safeguarded medical workers.

Medical workers will receive more support

State Council acts to improve working conditions on front line of epidemic

By XU WEI
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China unveiled measures on Tuesday to beef up support for medical workers devoted to curbing the novel coronavirus pneumonia outbreak, including steps to improve their working conditions and ensure their mental and physical health.

The government will offer stronger support so they can work under better conditions, get more rest and receive better payment as they work to contain the NCP outbreak, the General Office of the State Council said in a notice.

The country is in a critical period in curbing the outbreak, and a vast number of medical workers are faced with difficulties including heavy workloads, high risk of infection and stressful and constrained working conditions, the notice said.

The measures, rolled out by the National Health Commission and two other departments, came after President Xi Jinping inspected NCP prevention and control efforts in Beijing on Monday.

Xi commended medical workers nationwide for responding to their call for duty and racing against time to fight the epidemic. He called for authorities at different levels to offer better care to medical workers, solve their practical problems and offer them more support in their daily life, safety and psychological support.

The notice called for local authorities to step up renovation of facilities in healthcare institutions so that their facilities and equipment provide the medical workers with better protection against the contagion.

The workers must be offered more support so that they have access to adequate food and rest, it said, adding that local authorities can requisition hotels near hospitals to provide accommodation for them.

The notice called for heightened measures to protect medical workers against infections inside hospitals, saying that authorities must explore every possibility to equip the workers with sufficient protection materials and equipment.

Medical workers also will have access to more psychological crisis intervention and counseling, and authorities will help elevate the mental health of the workers through such steps as psychological assistance.

It also pledged efforts to increase financial aid to workers on the front line of containing the outbreak, with steps to improve their compensation and to ensure the funds are issued on time and in full.

The government will organize volunteers to visit medical workers on a regular basis, learn about their needs and difficulties, and facilitate the establishment of communication channels between the workers and their families, the notice said.

It also vowed stronger measures to punish wrongdoers who harm medical workers during the process of epidemic control, saying that individuals and teams that have made outstanding contributions will be offered commendations.

Excerpt 6: "Medical Workers Will Receive More Support"
Source: *China Daily*, 12 February 2020, p. 3.

Cafe shows latte love for medics

A team of baristas in Wuhan is working hard to provide a much needed liquid pick-me-up for dedicated local medical staff, **Li Yingxue** reports.





Left: Staff of Wakanda Youth Coffee deliver hundreds of free cups of their Wuhan Latte to medical workers in the city, the epicenter of novel coronavirus outbreak.
Right: A flow line is created to make and package the coffee as quickly as possible at a branch of Wakanda Youth Coffee in Wuhan, Hubei province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Seven staff, two shifts, 500 cups of free coffee, delivery to the hospitals twice a day — that's been the daily routine for the team at Wakanda Youth Coffee since the novel coronavirus outbreak caused the lockdown of Wuhan, capital of Hubei province.

At 10 am, Jan 23, the city of Wuhan was officially cut off, with all catering and entertainment venues temporarily shut down. There were no people or cars on the streets, and the smell of disinfectant in each community was getting thicker and thicker.

Tian Yuzhen, the 30-year-old owner of Wakanda Youth Coffee, was worrying that if her cafe was closed, where would her regular clients — the doctors and nurses at Hubei Provincial Hospital of TCM — get their coffee?

Most of her 21 staff in seven branches had returned to their hometown for the Spring Festival and only six stayed in Wuhan.

Tian had a meeting with the remaining team members to discuss whether they should remain open and supply free coffee to the hospitals. With everyone in agreement, the meeting lasted for less than two minutes.

Li Jianghao, a Wuhan local staff member of Wakanda Youth Coffee, had flown to Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province, for the Spring Festival holiday. After hearing the news, he wanted to join his colleagues, but all flights and trains back to Wuhan had been canceled. Undeterred, Li took a train to as close to Wuhan as he could get and asked his family to drive there to collect him.

On the morning of Jan 25, all seven staff showed up at the Guangpu area branch of Wakanda Youth Coffee — named, incidentally, in homage to the fictional, but inspirational, African nation of Wakanda featured in the Marvel comics and movies as home to the superhero, Black Panther.

With face masks and gloves on, they use ethyl alcohol to disinfect themselves first, then the room before using food-grade sanitizer to clean the equipment.

There are two hospitals nearby which consume, on average, around 500 cups of coffee a day. After Tian communicated with both hospitals, she decided to send out the coffee twice a day — 300 cups in the morning, delivered before noon, and 200 in the afternoon, delivered before 5 pm — coinciding with the shift changes of the medical staff.

To reduce the risk of infecting families, all seven staff stayed in a community a few minutes' walk away from the cafe. Two of the team didn't even tell their family before going back to work.

"Their families later understood that, instead of being anxious at home, we can actually do something to help," says Tian.

Tian founded Wakanda Youth Coffee in July of 2018, focusing on low-priced, high-quality coffee. According to Li Fei, one of the team, to join Wakanda, regardless of position, one has to be a professional barista first.

One of the remaining team members is Sina, a barista from Iran. On Feb 2, Sina received a message from his embassy that Iran was evacuating its Wuhan-based citizens two days later.

At that point, there were already 4,109 confirmed cases in the city. However, he chose to stay.

The team was involved in the evacuation of other foreigners, though — some of their regular clients from Australia and the United Kingdom couldn't get a taxi to the airport, and after completing all the necessary procedures, Li drove them to the airport in time to catch their flights home.

"If they ask us for help, it means there is no one else they can turn to. They are in a foreign country," Li says. "We would like to help them as much as we can."

Since the reopening for the medical staff, all of Tian's staff soon became a production line making its signature latte — two in charge of grinding and extracting the coffee beans, one for milk foaming and one for packaging — three people working together can make three cups in 90 seconds.

To make a latte, the best temperature for foaming the milk is 60 C, Li and his colleague raised the temperature to 90 degree, so that when the doctors and nurses get the coffee, it's still hot.

"Even if the coffee is free, we want to present our best quality product to the medical staff," Li says.

The name of the drink, which the cafe called the China Latte, was changed to the Wuhan Latte on Feb 5. On each cup, the staff scribble handwritten messages of encouragement and thanks, such as "Come on Wuhan" or "Respect to You".

"We want the front line medical staff to feel warm when they drink our coffee, which is the least we can do," Li explains.

Li is responsible for delivering the coffee to the hospitals. He and his colleagues have tried many creative ways to fit 300 cups of coffee into the car.

When the fully loaded car arrives at the hospital, Li puts the coffee on a cart and steps two meters back as the volunteers of the hospital come and collect the hot beverages. While there is no conversation between them, the eye contact alone conveys respect and thanks.

"They are working on the front line to fight the coronavirus, if they are not afraid of facing it, what are the rest of us afraid of," Li says. "Instead of doing nothing at home, the past few days have been so fulfilling for us, it has taken me no time at all to fall asleep each night."

By Tuesday, they had delivered more than 7,000 drinks to the hard-working medical staff of Wuhan.

One medical worker commended Tian in a report, saying that the first coffee she had came after a seven-and-a-half-hour shift wearing a full protection suit and not a single drink.

"I finished the cup of coffee in one gulp, without having time to even enjoy the taste. Thanks for your coffee, when the outbreak is over, I'll visit your cafe and order one!"

The news struck a chord with people online and they found a creative way to donate — they pay through the check function of food service and review app. Dianping, even though they don't visit the cafe. Some pay 100 yuan ($14.3), some pay 200, and some choose to pay 28 yuan daily — the price of two cups of Wuhan Latte.

By Wednesday, Wakanda Youth Coffee had received donations of around 1 million yuan, as well as offers of help from milk and coffee bean suppliers. The team were surprised and extremely flattered by the donation.

They posted a letter on Wednesday, explaining that they will keep a public tally of the donations, and when the outbreak is over, after the cost of the coffee's ingredients have been covered, all remaining donation money will be put into a special Wuhan latte foundation for all of the front line medical staff in Wuhan.

Tian's team is now planning to invite more peers to join them, and their goal is "to supply coffee to all medical staff in Wuhan", she said.

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Excerpt 7: "Cafe Shows Latte Love for Medics"
Source: *China Daily*, 17 February 2020, p. 18.

Excerpts 6 and 7 show care coming from the state and from society. Excerpt 6 acknowledges "heavy workloads, high risk of infection and stressful and constrained working conditions," but introduces these problems through State Council measures announced to solve them, including more rest, better pay, protective equipment, and psychological support. Excerpt 7 describes a Wuhan café delivering free "Wuhan Lattes" to hospitals with messages such as "Respect to You." Together, they present medical work as hard but well supported.

The sixth thematic category frames doctors as workers under occupational stress. China Daily frequently depicts doctors working under duress in its reports on medical disputes, evidenced by 12 total instances of keywords "attack" and "danger". Its commentaries adopt a neutral tone to discuss structural hurdles confronting doctors in high-stress clinical settings.

This framing acknowledges occupational risks while maintaining discursive control over conflict narratives. Rather than amplifying confrontation, the coverage contextualizes doctor–patient tensions within broader systemic pressures, presenting occupational stress as a manageable, interpretable condition rather than an escalatory social conflict. While doctors are primarily portrayed prioritizing patient health and safety, media discourse also highlights violence against doctors and public misunderstandings, fuelling wider discussions of occupational pressure in the medical profession.



Punish man who attacked medical staff

On Monday, as reported by local police, a man attacked three medical staff and a bystander at Chaoyang Hospital with a kitchen knife. The suspect has been detained. Although the condition of the three medics is not critical, one cannot overlook the damage the attacker could have caused.

Reports said one of the three medics, Tao Yong, is a senior ophthalmologist and has injuries on his hand, which if serious can make it difficult for him to even pick up a lancet again, which would be a loss to the medical profession as well as to patients. The same holds true for his two colleagues.

JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

An attack on doctors, nurses or other hospital staff should be considered an attack on the medical system. Many blame such attacks on the "doctor-patient conflict". But anyone who attacks a doctor, or any other person, deserves to be punished. The knife attack at Chaoyang Hospital has harmed not only the doctor but also all the patients who would need the doctor's services in the future. That best explains why an attack against a doctor is akin to an attack on the entire medical system.

Sun Wenbin, who killed a doctor at the Civil Aviation General Hospital on Dec 24, 2019, was sentenced to death on Jan 16.

We hope the person who attacked the three medical staff at Chaoyang Hospital will also receive exemplary punishment to deter potential assailants, as we cannot afford to lose one more doctor.

– ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

Excerpt 8: "Punish Man Who Attacked Medical Staff"
Source: *China Daily*, 22 January 2020, p. 8.

The final category, doctors lacking medical ethics, is best read as a residual observation rather than a dominant image. Although extremely limited in frequency, keywords such as "harassment" appear only three times in the dataset, primarily within commentary articles addressing specific ethical incidents. It is retained for exhaustiveness and because its near-absence is itself informative (see Discussion).

These isolated cases reflect discussions of professional ethics rather than a dominant negative framing pattern. For example, one commentary published on April 16, 2020 (Page 8) discussed an alleged case of misconduct involving a hospital department director and an

intern nurse, which was framed as an individual ethical violation rather than a systemic issue. Rather than constructing a sustained negative image, China Daily primarily uses these cases to acknowledge ethical concerns within the profession, while maintaining an overall discourse that is overwhelmingly positive and legitimacy oriented.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that China Daily predominantly relied on authoritative sources such as medical experts and government officials while marginalising patients and alternative voices, thereby constructing doctors as institutionally trusted actors. This pattern is consistent with framing theory, which emphasises the role of selection and exclusion in shaping interpretive reality (Entman, 1993). The reliance on authoritative medical experts observed in China Daily is consistent with research suggesting that media representations contribute to public trust in experts during health crises (Mihelj et al., 2022). Furthermore, the findings align with previous research on doctor-related news, where representations of doctors are closely shaped by institutional and sociopolitical contexts (Zhuang, 2021).

While China Daily predominantly constructed doctors through narratives of authority, competence, and dedication, Brune et al. (2023) revealed that doctors' lived experiences during the pandemic involved considerable emotional distress, occupational pressure, and challenges in doctor–patient relationships. This contrast suggests that, whatever its intended contribution to public trust and institutional legitimacy, positive media framing may also simplify the complexity of doctors' professional experiences by emphasizing symbolic meanings over everyday struggles.

Doctors were primarily constructed through narratives of professional authority, clinical responsibility, and selfless dedication, accompanied by strong positive emotional valence, while occupational stress and medical controversies received limited attention. This predominantly positive representation reflects the nature of crisis reporting, where media narratives often emphasise reassurance, social solidarity, and institutional legitimacy during periods of uncertainty. Such portrayals suggest that media representations of doctors extend beyond professional roles to construct broader meanings of trust, morality, and collective resilience during public health emergencies.

This finding is consistent with COVID-19 framing studies showing that media coverage shapes public understanding through dominant interpretive frames. Almahallawi and Abdul Rahim (2022) demonstrated that COVID-19 news was commonly structured around responsibility, human-interest, and morality frames, highlighting how media select particular meanings and actors to represent crises. Similarly, Rubyasih et al. (2023) found that the COVID-19 infodemic increased public reliance on credible information sources, reinforcing the role of media narratives in shaping trust and responses during health emergencies. The findings also correspond with Chinese media discourse studies, which indicate that doctors were frequently portrayed through heroic and sacrifice-oriented narratives during the pandemic (Xie & Zhou, 2021).

The most notable finding is the gap between what the coverage acknowledged and how it evaluated doctors. Occupational stress (12 keyword occurrences) and medical ethics (3) were present, yet 98.3% of articles were positive. The excerpts show how: difficulties were reported but contained. Violence against medical staff appeared as an individual offence to be punished (Excerpt 8), an ethics case as a single violation, heavy workloads and infection risk alongside state remedies (Excerpt 6), and a doctor's death as voluntary sacrifice (Excerpt

4). Frames work through omission as well as selection (Entman, 1993); here hardship was selected, but rarely examined as a structural problem.

This positivity is striking against the longer trend. Zhuang (2021) found that positive portrayals of doctors in Chinese mainstream media declined over the two decades to 2020 while negative portrayals rose. Allowing for differences in outlet and audience, *China Daily*'s 2020 coverage suggests that the crisis temporarily displaced the doctor–patient conflict narrative, which survives here only as residue. Hales and Tyler (2022) argue that the pandemic's hero discourse gave health and care workers a reified, rhetorical form of recognition that accentuated their precarity and weakened their capacity to contest it. The "ordinary heroes" narrative (Xie & Zhou, 2021) and gendered heroisation (Gao et al., 2023) suggest similar tensions in China. Content data cannot show such effects, but the scarcity of coverage on working conditions is consistent with this concern.

Overall, the results demonstrate that presentation, topic of a news item, affective attributes, and cognitive attributes function as an integrated framing system rather than isolated categories. This pattern is consistent with framing theory's assumption that meaning construction is structurally interdependent (De Vreese, 2005) and provides empirical support for applying Ghanem's (1997) framing framework in crisis communication contexts. Rather than operating as independent analytical units, these dimensions appear to work in a mutually reinforcing manner within crisis-driven media discourse.

Taken together, these findings suggest that China Daily constructed the professional image of doctors through interrelated framing processes involving presentation, topic, affective attributes, and cognitive attributes. By demonstrating how these framing dimensions operate as an integrated system in English-language Chinese state media, this study extends existing research on media representations of doctors during public health crises.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *China Daily* constructed doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic as authoritative, competent, and morally committed actors. These findings show that doctors were consistently represented as trusted professionals. We interpret this image as aligned with the projection of institutional legitimacy during the public health crisis; whether it affected public trust cannot be determined from content data. By applying Ghanem's (1997) framing framework, this study provides empirical support for multidimensional framing analysis in examining professional media representations during public health emergencies. The findings contribute to framing theory by demonstrating how professional images are systematically constructed in China's English-language state media.

The findings have practical implications. Newsrooms and health communicators can recognise doctors while also reporting on workload, protective equipment, and psychological strain, giving readers a fuller account of medical work in a crisis. Editors can widen sourcing beyond experts and officials to include patients, nurses, and frontline doctors. Health authorities planning for future emergencies can pair public recognition of healthcare workers with transparent information about the risks they face and the support available to them.

This study is limited by its focus on a single newspaper and a single year (2020), which constrains the generalisability of the findings across media systems and different stages of the pandemic. In addition, no audience data were collected, so interpretations concerning trust, legitimacy, and public diplomacy describe what the coverage was positioned to do, not its effects on readers. Reliability was also tested on only 30 pilot articles. Future research

could adopt comparative cross-national designs and incorporate audience reception analysis to further examine how media representations of doctors are interpreted across diverse sociocultural contexts.

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