Research Article

Evidentiality in American Media's Coverage of China-related Epidemics from the Perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the major public health events of the 21st century and has attracted global attention from the press since its outbreak. This research focused on the analysis of news coverage of the China-related epidemic by American media, aiming at revealing the features of evidentiality in the discourse and elucidating the underlying ideologies. This study can help news readers develop an objective and comprehensive understanding of China. **Methodology:** This study selected 40 China-related epidemic news reports from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* during the pandemic. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the selected news were conducted through AntConc4.2.2 in light of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model. **Results:** The results of this study indicated the pervasive use of evidentiality in the coverage of the China-related epidemic by U.S. media, wherein distinct evidential markers demonstrated varying frequencies and served different functions. In terms of news sources, American media predominantly relied on hearsay evidentials to attribute information, thereby bolstering the credibility of the reports while subtly conveying a skeptical stance toward China. In terms of reporting modes, the reporting mostly used indirect discourse and employed deduction and induction evidentials to express negative attitudes toward China. All the results were highly related to the social context. **Conclusion:** Generally, the research underscores the widespread incorporation of evidentials in news discourse, employed to specify or obscure sources of information. Furthermore, evidentials embed certain ideologies and attitudes, which may mislead readers.

1. Introduction

As the fastest spreading and most severe public health emergency, COVID-19 and China where it first broke out have long been the focus of the media worldwide. The pandemic has not only changed the world landscape, but also altered people's vocabulary use, with expressions such as lockdown, bio-bubble, and shelter-in-place becoming frequently used in media (Jiang & Hyland, 2022). Print media reports also contributed to the construction of the public's understanding of the pandemic and the development of a narrative of coverage. Therefore, it is not surprising that many scholars attach great importance to

news discourse on the pandemic. The high level of politicization and polarization in initial COVID-19 coverage may have caused Hyland polarization in U.S. COVID-19 attitudes (Hart et al., 2020). Dong (2020) analyzed how different attitudes were expressed, encouraged, and emphasized in Western media's news reporting on the pandemic from a metaphorical reframing perspective. Liu (2021) carried out a diachronic analysis of China-related news in US web media in 2020 and uncovered the relationship between the longitudinal discourse change and the political social and ideological

background. Furthermore, COVID-19 has been politicized and used ideologically in a move to serve the ideologies of certain countries (Abbas, 2022). The above studies have mainly explored the ideology, power, and control behind epidemic reporting with diverse methodologies from different perspectives. However, most of these studies focused on the features of metaphorical language use and dynamic trends in the news discourse and a few studies were conducted regarding news source and authenticity to reveal the attitude in news discourse.

Therefore, this study ntegrated the concept of evidentiality, which refers to how language signals the source of information (Aikhenvald, 2004), with critical discourse analysis (CDA). The focus was on investigating the features and functions of evidentiality in China-related epidemics from American media to assess the distribution of evidentials and the reasons for their usage in these news discourses. Additionally, it seeks to analyze the roles played by different evidentials and how ideology is manifested in English news discourses, utilizing Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional approach. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of evidentiality in news discourse and provide readers with insights to discern evidentials that unveil the perspectives and ideologies embedded in news expressions.

1.1. Previous studies on evidentiality

Evidentiality refers to the phenomenon that almost all living languages have ways to indicate different sources of knowledge (Aikhenvald, 2004; Boas, 1911; Fang, 2006; Hu, 1994a). Since the 1980s, evidentiality has been studied from a wide range of dimensions, such as typological studies, cognitive linguistics, syntax, and pragmatics (Dendale & Tasmowski, 2001). Since Aikhenvald (2004) published the seminal work *Evidentiality*, great achievements and new breakthroughs have been made in both theoretical perspectives and research methods of evidentiality. Evidentiality research was mainly carried out from the perspectives of grammar, semantics, cognitive psychology, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. The scholars, represented by Dendale and Tasmowski (2001), mainly discussed the concept of evidentiality. Fetzer (2014) argued that evidence is a marker of the source and basis of information and that the evaluation and attitude to information are cognitive modality. Chafe (1986) and Willett (1988) made important contributions to the classification of evidential markers (evidential). Hu (1994a) brought the findings of evidentiality studies by Western linguists like Chafe (1986) and Willett (1988) into China and modified Chafe's classification model. Tosun et al. (2013) focused on the relationship between evidentials and memory. In recent years, evidentiality studies mainly focused on the pragmatic and textual functions of evidentials (Chung, 2010; Kwon, 2018; Lee, 2013; Rodríguez Rosique, 2015). In this context, evidential was taken as an entry point to deliver discourse analysis in which the attitude and emotional tendency can be revealed through the distribution of evidentials and the dynamic changes of a certain evidential in various contexts. Hence, a profusion of studies on evidentiality focused on the analysis of news discourse, political discourse, and academic discourse (Fetzer, 2014; Hsieh, 2008; Reber, 2014).

1.2. Previous critical discourse analysis studies on news discourse

News plays a crucial role in modern society and becomes a window through which people acquire knowledge about the world. Meanwhile, some news discourse is always inbred with ideological content, which may impact public opinion and sometimes may mislead the audience. To uncover the ideologies behind the news discourse, it is therefore imperative to investigate and analyze news discourse. Critical discourse analysis is one of the most influential methods to analyze news discourse. Ruth Wodak (2009) defined it as "an interdisciplinary approach to language study with a critical point of view" for the purpose of studying "language behavior in natural speech situations of social relevance." (p. 264)

Van Dijk (1984) introduced CDA into news discourse analysis and attended to the cognitive side of discourse analysis. His works of news discourse analysis focused on the role that language plays in racial prejudice. He emphasized the social function and ideology of news articles that are implanted by the press in ethnic relations.

Since then, an increasing number of scholars have carried out various CDA studies on news discourse with a wide range of topics through various methodologies. Teo (2000) explored the ideological construction of racism within the structure of newspaper reporting and revealed the stereotyping of the ethnic community by the white majority through general characterization and discussion of the evidence of "Racism in the News". Baker et al. (2008) first conducted a diachronic analysis on the issue of refugees and migrants under the discourse-historical approach and CDA and integrated the social-cultural context into interpretation, improving the reliability of the interpretation. Joye (2010) combined CDA and Chouliaraki's theory on the mediation of suffering (2006) and unraveled the underlying discourses of power, hierarchy, and compassion within the discourse of SARS outbreak. These previous studies demonstrated that power, ideology, and stereotype tend to be implied in news discourse, and more and more theories are combined with CDA to unravel the ideology behind news discourse.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection

In order to analyze the evidentiality in American media's China-related epidemic reporting, 40 relative articles from two American newspapers, namely, *The New*

York Times and *The Washington Post* were selected in this study (see Appendix A for the list of articles). According to the keywords "China" and "COVID-19", 40 articles were selected randomly from the main websites of the two newspapers, which were released between February 2020 and December 2022. A self-built corpus made up of 40 articles, which were mainly about the COVID-19 epidemic in China, was created to explore the features of evidentials and how evidentiality suggests intentions.

2.2. Theoretical framework

Fairclough (1989) states that language is entangled with ideology and is oriented on power and the struggle for power. To find out how language, ideology, and power are interrelated, Fairclough proposed a three-dimensional model made up of text, discourse practice, and social practice. In this model, text emphasizes the linguistic features of discourse, such as vocabulary, grammar, and coherence. Discourse practice focuses on the production, distribution, and consumption of the text. Social practice is related to the social properties of discourse, such as the context in which discursive events are organized, how discursive events engage in discursive practices, and the effects it has on the construction of social life. Fairclough (1992) further outlined three processes in the analysis, namely description, interpretation, and explanation on the basis of the two previous models. Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model is shown in Figure 1.

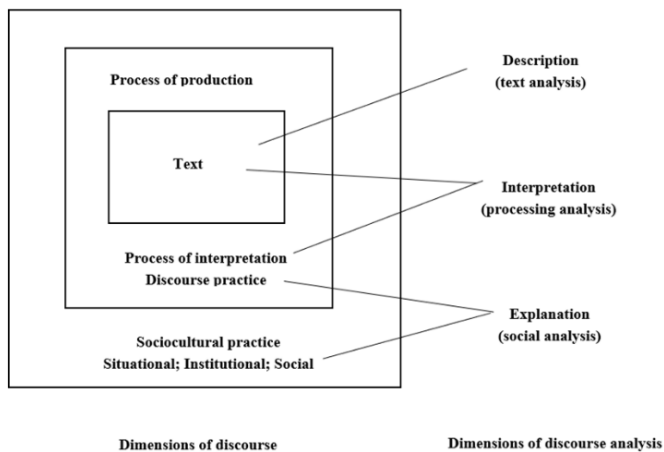**Figure 1.**
Fairclough's (1992) Three-dimensional Model

2.3. Hu's (1994a) classification of evidentiality

Hu (1994a) made further modifications to Chafe's (1986) model of evidentiality. Evidence is divided into seven categories by Hu (1994a), including belief evidentials, induction evidentials, hearsay evidentials, deduction evidentials, reliability evidentials, verbal

resources evidentials, and expectation evidentials. Hu's classification not only integrates Willet's (1988) narrow definition and Chafe's (1986) broad definition, but also made up for the lack of clarity in Chafe's classification of evidentiality. Hu clearly classified evidentiality into seven categories, which is a more complete classification, and therefore, Hu's classification was adopted in this study.

2.3. Analytical procedures

In order to explore the features and functions of evidentiality in the American media's China-related epidemic news discourse, this study adopted Hu's classification of evidentials (1994a) to analyze the evidentiality under the framework of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, including description, interpretation, and explanation. Therefore, the current study was carried out using qualitative and qualitative analysis in the three stages.

In the description stage, according to Hu's classification of evidentials (1994a), this study summarized and listed a variety of expressions of different evidential categories that were commonly used in English news reports. Each type of evidentials in the target corpus was retrieved through AntConc4.2.2, and the instances and frequencies were presented in the form of pie charts and tables. Such a quantitative analysis intended to identify the tendency and frequencies of various types of evidentials in relevant texts, and provided data support and an analytical basis for the qualitative analysis in the interpretation and explanation stage.

At the interpretation level, a qualitative analysis of evidentiality was conducted to identify the attitude behind the news discourse, focusing on the news sources and reporting modes of selected news reports. Specified examples were analyzed to explore the implicit attitude towards China.

At the explanation level, this study analyzed the social factors that may influence the use of evidentiality in American news coverage of China-related epidemics based on the results of description and interpretation. It also attempted to demonstrate the relationship between power and ideology in the American media as reflected by evidentiality in the social context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Frequencies of different evidentials

Among the 40 selected American news articles, a total of 1650 evidentials were identified. In addition, the distribution of each type of evidential varied in the selected news reports. Among them, the hearsay evidentials appeared 607 times, accounting for the highest proportion of the seven types of evidentials, with a 37% share. Next, deduction evidentials accounted for 25%, with 404 occurrences. Belief evidentials did not appear in the
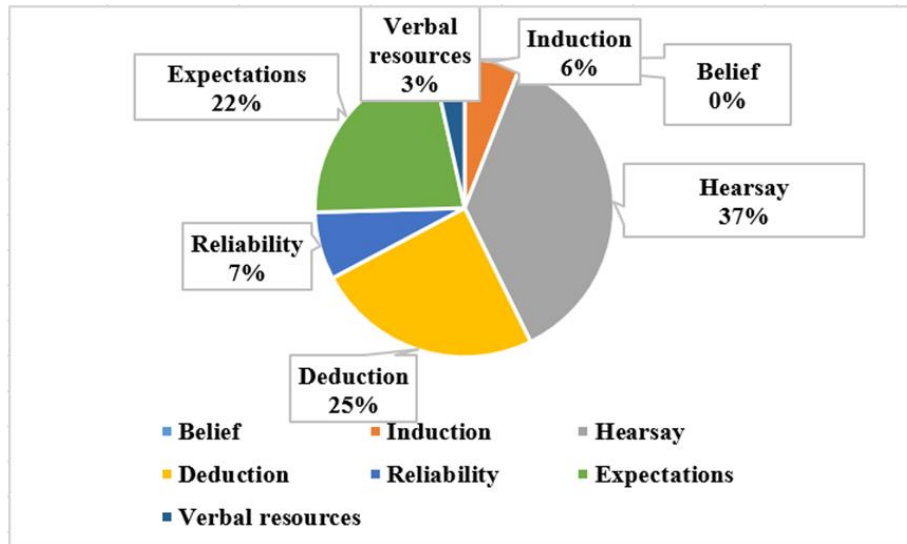
Figure 2.
The overall Distribution of Seven Evidential Types in the Corpus

selected news discourse. The overall distribution of various types of evidentials in the corpus is shown in the following Figure 2.

3.1.2. Frequencies of belief evidentials and hearsay evidentials

In Hu's (1994a) definition, belief evidential and hearsay evidential are both considered modes of knowledge. However, they differ in their source of knowledge. Belief evidentials derive from people's subjective experiences and are subjective in nature.

According to Hu's (1994b) study on English debate discourse, expressions like "I believe", "I think", "I propose", "In my opinion" and so on were used as belief evidentials, which can express the speakers' position about the certain event. In news discourse, however, belief evidentials were often less likely to be used to provide objective and credible reporting. In this study, there were no belief evidentials containing the author's direct viewpoint, which may reflect the journalists' sense of responsibility to provide objective and truthful reporting, which is consistent with the findings in Fan et al. (2023) that belief evidential such as "I think" and "I propose" were less used in official news on the epidemic.

Hearsay evidential refers to information obtained from others, which is to say that information is second-hand or even third-hand (Hu, 1994a). In news discourses, most information is obtained from others rather than the writer's own experience, since a writer cannot experience all the reported events. Hearsay evidentials appeared most frequently in the selected news, ranking first among the seven types of evidentials for 607 times. Hearsay evidential can be a noun, a verb, or a prepositional phrase. Some common forms of hearsay evidentials in this study were "say", "report" and "according to" which were used to show the objectivity. The use of hearsay evidentials in this self-built corpus is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1.
Frequencies of hearsay evidentials

Hearsay evidentials	Count	Frequencies
say	350	57.7%
report	81	13.3%
show	34	5.6%
tell	27	4.4%
according to	26	4.3%
announce	23	3.8%
agree	14	2.3%
claim	13	2.1%
argue	10	1.6%
decide	10	1.6%
add	6	1.0%
declare	4	0.7%
hear	3	0.5%
mention	3	0.5%
indicate	2	0.3%
quote	1	0.2%
Total	607	100.0%

As is shown in Table 1, the most frequent form of hearsay evidential was "say" (including "said" and "says"), which appears 350 times. In addition, there were also verbs like "report" and "show" which were also used frequently. Besides verbs, hearsay evidential can be realized by the prepositional phrase "according to ". But on the whole, verbs were still the main realization of hearsay evidential in selected news, which can increase the distance between the writer and the content of the discourse, so as to enhance the objectivity of the news discourse (Hu, 1994b).

3.1.2. Frequencies of induction evidentials and deduction evidentials

The use of induction evidential and deduction evidential reflect two processes of logical reasoning. Deduction is the process by which a conclusion can be drawn after deliberating a hypothesis (Chafe, 1986). Induction, according to Hu (1994b), is a type of reasoning derived from

Table 2.
Frequencies of Induction Evidentials

Induction evidentials	Count	Frequencies
seem	20	20.4%
see	19	19.4%
appear	19	19.4%
must	17	17.3%
important	13	13.3%
feel	4	4.1%
necessary	3	3.1%
feel like	2	2.0%
obviously	1	1.0%
Total	98	100.0%

sensory experience, which means that the speaker gains knowledge from first-hand sensory experience and generalizes information according to his or her awareness of the social and cultural environment. The frequencies of induction evidentials are presented in Table 2.

According to Table 2, "seem" was the most frequently used induction evidential in the corpus. "see" and "appear" are next to "seem", appearing 19 times, respectively. In addition, "feel", "feel like" and "obviously" were the least used evidentials. Induction is based on facts but with different levels of reliability (Chafe, 1986; Hu, 1994b). Less certain evidentials like "seem", "see" and "appear" occurs more frequently than evidentials of high reliability such as "must" and "obviously", which showed that in the American reporting of China-related epidemics, the news discourse used more induction evidentials of high reliability than those of low reliability.

Deduction evidential means that information is the author's hypothesis or reasoning based on the implied conditions in previous discourses. In English, deduction evidentials usually exist in conditional sentences and can be implemented by words such as "if", "would", and "could". The number of deduction evidentials was 404, accounting for 25% of the seven types of evidentials. The manifestations of deduction evidential in the target corpus is presented in Table 3.

As is shown in Table 3, the most frequent form of deduction evidential was "would" which appears for 102 times, followed by 79 occurrences of "could". In addition, "if", "will", "can" occur relatively frequently. "should" ranks the lowest with a total of 24 occurrences in the corpus. According to the above results, modal verbs ("will, would, can, could") and conjunctions "if" were the most commonly used deduction evidentials. Wang and Yu (2011) compared evidentials in Chinese and English news discourse and found that the deduction evidence is not the real experience of the text producer, nor is it hearsay. The source of deductive knowledge is reasonable fiction based on reality. News

Table 3.
Frequencies of Deduction Evidentials

Deduction evidentials	Count	Frequencies
would	102	25.2%
could	79	19.6%
if	69	17.1%
will	69	17.1%
can	61	15.1%
should	24	5.9%
Total	404	100.0%

discourse emphasizes authenticity, so the frequency of deduction evidential is not high in both Chinese and English news discourse (Wang & Yu, 2011). However, the deduction evidential is the second most frequently used evidential in this study, expressing the speaker's hypothesis-based inference in American mainstream media's discourse on China-related epidemic reports.

3.1.3. Frequencies of reliability evidentials and expectation evidentials

Reliability evidential and expectation evidential both imply the evaluation of speaker. Expectation evidential reveals whether the actual information is consistent with the speaker's expectations. "Reliability evidential" refers to the speaker's evaluation of the reliability of information. Due to the varying levels of information authenticity, several presentations are adjusted to demonstrate the reliability of information. This degree of authenticity is usually achieved through the use of specific adjectives, modal verbs, or adverbs. In news discourse, reporters usually use some reliable evidence to enhance the credibility of news reports. For instance, there were some reliability evidentials like "sure", "certain", "actually" and so on indicating high reliability, and other markers like "may", "maybe", "probably" and "possibly" show the uncertainty of the information. Table 4 displays the frequencies of the reliability evidentials in the corpus.

From the above results, "may" was the most frequently used word among all the reliability evidentials, appearing 45 times in the corpus, followed by "likely" 20 times. However, "sure", "officially", "especially" and "certainly", evidentials with less certainty, appeared less frequently. Hu (1995) discussed evidentiality in Chinese and found that different reliability evidentials could express more or less reliability and have semantic differences. The evidentials in Table 4 can be divided into two categories: high credibility and low credibility. The percentage of high-reliability evidentials (sure, certainly, especially, essentially, and officially) was calculated to be 21%, and low reliability evidential (may, probably, possibly, likely, and mostly) accounted for 79%. The latter was considerably higher than the former. It can be inferred that the American mainstream media mostly used less reliable evidential in their China-related epidemic reporting, and the authenticity and credibility of their reports were rather ambiguous.

Table 4.
Frequencies of Reliability Evidentials

Reliability evidentials	Count	Frequencies
may	45	37.2%
likely	20	16.5%
might	18	14.9%
probably	11	9.1%
especially	9	7.4%
sure	4	3.3%
officially	4	3.3%
essentially	4	3.3%
certainly	4	3.3%
mostly	2	1.7%
Total	121	100.0%

Table 5.
Frequencies of Expectation Evidentials

Expectation evidentials	Count	Frequencies
but	197	54.3%
even	56	15.4%
more than	48	13.2%
expect	12	3.3%
hope	12	3.3%
although	11	3.0%
instead	11	3.0%
however	7	1.9%
actually	5	1.4%
rather than	4	1.1%
Total	363	100.0%

Expectation evidential is a reflection on whether the reality is consistent with the speaker's or writer's expectations (Hu, 1995). There was a wide range of ways to compare facts with expectations. For example, "of course" indicates that things are as expected, and things that were not expected are often expressed with phrases like "more than" and "in fact". To express facts that are contrary to expectations, "however" and "indeed" were often used. In the news reports selected for this study, the expectation evidentials are realized as shown in Table 5.

From results in Table 5, it can be seen that the most frequent occurrence of "but" in the target corpus was 197 times, and the second most frequent occurrence was 56 times for "even". "more than" also appears relatively frequent. Next, there were "expect", "hope", "actually", "however" appear less frequently than 20 times. Expectation evidentials appeared less frequently and were mainly distributed in critical articles, and most of them exhibited correspondence to writer's expectation (Wang & Yu, 2011). However, the statistics of this study showed that there were more evidentials in the target news reports that were contrary to expectations and fewer evidentials that were higher than the speaker's expectations in general.

3.1.4. Frequencies of verbal resources evidentials

According to Chafe (1986), individuals try to connect some experiences with knowledge that has already existed in our thoughts when we interpret them. This knowledge is organized and encoded in our minds, which then shows a pattern to explain our experience. In news discourse, the term "verbal resources evidential" indicated that the information conveyed to the reader may be contradicted by the speaker's intentional concealment or other purposes. Commonly, this was achieved by "a little", "nearly", "sort of" and so on. These expressions indicated that the event only seems to be correct. The frequencies of the verbal resources evidential in the corpus are shown in Table 6.

Table 6.
Frequencies of verbal resources evidentials

Verbal resources evidentials	Count	Frequencies
about	23	40.4%
nearly	14	24.6%
a little (bit)	9	15.8%
kind of	6	10.5%
around	5	8.8%
Total	57	100.0%

3.2. Features in news sources and reporting modes

Interpretation is the second stage of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model. In this stage, the relationship between text and interaction will be focused on. In this section, a qualitative analysis of evidentiality is discussed, focusing on the news sources and reporting modes of news discourse. Since news sources and reporting modes also have an impact on the use of evidentials, and hearsay evidentials are commonly used to mark news sources in American media's relevant reporting, while induction and deduction evidentials were often used in the reporting modes, this section focuses on the use of hearsay evidential, induction evidential and deductive evidential in news sources and reporting modes and explores the ideology behind the news discourse.

3.2.1. Features in news sources

News sources refer to the provider of news, and reporters cannot experience all the events they cover, so they need to quote others, either directly or indirectly, so as to increase the authenticity and veracity of their reports. However, the choice of what is quoted is somewhat subjective and reflects the reporter's intentions, attitudes, and ideology, which can potentially influence the objectivity of the reports and the reader's thoughts. Therefore, studying the sources of news is essential to our understanding of the objectivity and truthfulness of reporting. Xin (2006) classifies the types of news sources as specified, semi-specified, and unspecified sources.

It was found that more than half of the news sources in the American reports on China-related epidemics were specified sources, followed by semi-specified sources, while the unspecified sources were the least frequent, appearing only twice. Specified sources were formally objective compared to semi-specified and unspecified sources, and the use of specified sources can increase the veracity of reporting from the reader's perspective, and some specific examples were shown below to further explore the reliability of different news sources.

Example 1: Every relevant U.S. government agency endorsed it before its release. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referred to it indirectly Wednesday. "We greatly underestimated the degree to which Beijing is ideologically and politically hostile to free nations. The whole world is waking up to that fact," he <u>said</u>. (From *COVID-19 Sparks Unity on U.S. China Policy*)

Example 2: In China, the head of the country's Center for Disease Control and Prevention and prominent executives have <u>announced</u> they have received experimental doses of a COVID-19 vaccine. (From *China Skips Trials to Roll out Vaccine*)

Example 3: A Chinese pharmaceutical company on Wednesday said late-stage drug trials <u>showed</u> that one of its coronavirus vaccines was effective, delivering positive results that could pave the way for the global rollout of hundreds of millions of Chinese vaccine doses in the coming months. (From *A Chinese COVID-19 Vaccine Has Proved*

Effective, Its Maker Says)

Example 4: <u>The authors</u> argued that COVID-19 was a "purposefully manipulated" virus created partly through "gain of function" research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. (From *China Puts Even the Truth on Lockdown*)

Example 5: <u>Experts</u>, however, say there is another reason for the disparity: the way China counts Covid deaths. (From *Shanghai's Narrow Criteria Puts Covid Death Toll at 17*)

According to Liu (2021), in order to shape its "objective" and "justice" image, the U.S. media quoted a large number of formal official news in China-related reports, such as "Chinese government", and "Chinese Office", and also used some hidden expressions such as "China's virus". These words seemed objective. However, it indicated that China is the source of the virus, which involved a negative attitude towards China. Likewise, in the example sentences, Example 1 and Example 2 were specified sources, and from the reader's perspective, the sources seemed to be accurate and specific, convincing and credible; however, what was quoted in Example 1 and Example 2 is targeted. Example 1 quoted U.S. officials in a seemingly objective manner, but in fact implied a negative attitude accusing China of its epidemic prevention policies. Similarly, Example 2 used "announce" to add credibility to the report by quoting Chinese officials and trying to convince readers, but considering the context of the article, it was actually accusing China of skipping vaccine trials and promoting vaccination directly. Example 3 and Example 4 were semi-specified sources, and in semi-specified sources words like "experts", "authors", "economists" and "analysts" were usually used as authoritative sources to demonstrate the credibility of the information. Examples 3 and 4 showed that the quotations chosen by the authors imply a questioning of China.

3.2.2. Features in reporting modes

According to Xin (1998), news reporting serves as a medium between the reader and the event. While being expected to be objective, news discourse inherently carried emotions, views, or ideologies. Direct discourse and indirect discourse are the two primary forms of reporting modes. Direct discourse is a form of quote in which the original words are entirely preserved, usually enclosed in quotation marks, correctly quoting others while maintaining the same tense and content (Fairclough, 1992). Indirect discourse refers to the processing of the discourse quoted from others, in which the reporter decides the form of expression. As a result, during the quoting process, the reporter might include their own perspective. The examples from induction and deduction datasets are listed below.

Example 6: China's restrictions have been compounded by decisions on visas and entry requirements that can <u>seem</u> arbitrary to those trying to return. (From *In a China Walled Off from Covid, the Barriers to Entry Are Steep*)

Example 7: Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, said the decision <u>appeared</u> to be driven, at least in part, by recent criticism of China's pandemic response and questions about the safety of its vaccine trials. (From *China Joins Global Vaccine Initiative that U.S. Spurned*)

Example 8: Dr. Shi said what she <u>saw</u> as the politicization of the question had sapped her of any enthusiasm for investigating the origins of the virus. (From *Chinese Scientist Under Pressure as Lab-Leak Theory Flourishes*)

Example 9: But sticking with the current approach <u>would</u> transform China into a hermit nation that <u>could</u> be dangerous. (From *China Needs a New Covid Strategy*)

The reported speech in news discourse would reflect how ideology works on language use (Yang & Xin, 2022). News discourses from American media adopted a lot of methods of indirect reporting mode and used various induction evidentials and deduction evidentials while expressing their opinions. The examples showed that reporters have a tendency to add their own opinions to the quotes they selected, which also reflected the negative attitude of the U.S. toward China's response to the epidemic, such as stricter restrictions on entry, vaccine promotion, and zero infection. Such attitudes were partly expressed in the form of induction evidentials and deduction evidentials. Induction evidential refers to the speaker's inductive knowledge based on sensory experience, while deduction evidential refers to the author's reasoning about the implicit conditions of previous discourse. The U.S. quotation in the report showed that reporters accuse China of its arbitrary and disappointing response, which was inducted based on sensory and superficial information. In addition, the reporters' use of deduction evidentials like "could" and "would" suggest that it was based on assumptions that China's epidemic prevention policies may have put China at risk. Although these ideological transmissions were invisible, they could have a subtle effect on readers and may even be misleading.

3.3. Possible reasons for results

According to Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, language is a social practice. Society and language are so inextricably linked that the social context will have a profound impact on language use and language choice, especially in news discourse. Therefore, social factors are supposed to be taken into consideration in discourse analysis.

3.3.1. Social-cultural context

The news discourse is rooted in its socio-cultural context. As two major countries with different social systems, China and the United States hold different cultural values. While American culture pays more attention to individuals and freedom, traditional Chinese culture tends to be more concerned with collective interests. As a result, China and the U.S. took different approaches when confronted with the epidemic. In China, the Chinese government has taken strong and effective measures to control the outbreak, such as lockdown, restricting people from traveling and closing businesses. These measures were aimed at protecting public

health and controlling the spread of the outbreak. In the United States, however, the government has taken relatively weak measures, such as advising people to follow social distance measures and wear masks. These measures were designed to protect public health while maintaining economic activity as much as possible. This difference reflects the different cultural and historical traditions of the two countries. In China, the government has a larger influence on society and places a strong emphasis on social responsibility and collectivism. In the United States, individual freedom and autonomy are more important, and government intervention should be minimized. These differences were highlighted during the epidemic, as the Chinese government placed greater emphasis on public health and social responsibility, while the U.S. government placed greater emphasis on individual freedom and economic activity. Therefore, the U.S. blamed and attacked China's epidemic prevention policies from the perspective of its own perceptions and cultural values. For instance, the quarantine and the "lockdown" initiative are considered as violations of personal liberty, and China's epidemic prevention and control is described as authoritarian. While the effectiveness of China's fight against the epidemic and the possibility of the two countries working together to fight the epidemic are completely ignored.

Variations of language use in the media were often based on the representations of the world and social relations, giving rise to different versions of reality determined by the media's position and purposes (Xin, 2022). Therefore, hearsay evidentials were widely used in U.S. mainstream media reports on China-related epidemic, reflecting the attitude of U.S. news reports towards China's response to the epidemic. For example, in the sentence "The Chinese foreign ministry had said the pandemic has 'torn the emperor's new clothes' off American democracy", the use of "said" reflects the different understanding of democracy in China and the United States. The use of hearsay evidentials such as "said", "according to" and other quotations from authoritative sources showed that the reason behind the deterioration of Sino-US relationship and the U.S. misunderstanding of China is the difference in social and cultural traditions between the two countries.

3.3.2. Situational context

According to Fairclough (1989), the situational context is the immediate social setting in which news reports are produced.

Economically, the U.S. government has adopted a series of economic sanctions against China since 2018, including tariff hikes, restrictions on Chinese companies' investments and operations in the United States, and restrictions on exports of high-tech products. Specifically, the U.S. government began imposing tariffs on a range of goods imported from China since March 2018, initially in the form of steel and aluminum tariffs, which were later expanded to include multiple areas and products. In addition, the U.S. government has taken a number of measures to restrict the

enterprises from China, such as Huawei and TikTok. Despite the serious impact of the pandemic on the global economy, the trade war between the U.S. and China has not stopped, and the U.S. government continues to impose tariffs on Chinese goods. Rather than just keeping intact tariffs on imports imposed by the administration of President Donald Trump, the administration of President Joe Biden has been increasingly aggressive, going after Chinese technology companies, most recently by adding 36 more companies and institutions to its export blacklist on Dec 15, 2022. China firmly opposes these measures and has taken a series of countermeasures, including imposing tariffs on U.S. exports and restricting U.S. companies' investments and operations in China. In the process, cooperation and exchanges between the two countries have been affected, with a negative impact on global trade and investment.

Politically, the Sino-US relations, one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world, are currently facing its toughest test since the establishment of diplomatic ties. The Biden administration has pursued a wide range of strategic competition tactics against China, the most notable of which is the promotion of the Indo-Pacific strategy in order to undermine the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, the U.S. gradually created a new diplomatic alliance (G8) with itself as a core, collectively oppose China's Belt and Road Initiative and apply pressure to China over issues pertaining to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Xinbo, 2023). These political sanctions have exacerbated tensions and confrontations in Sino-US relations, causing discontent and backlash from the Chinese government and public. At the same time, these measures have deepened political differences and lack of mutual trust between the U.S. and China, affecting cooperation and exchanges between the two countries in other areas.

As is shown above in Figure 2, deduction evidential was the second most frequently used type of evidential in U.S. reports on China-related epidemic, and the use was also influenced by economic and political factors in China and the U.S. For example, as in the sentence "the United States would be better served by working with its partners to register objections to China's behavior than in making unilateral threats", the use of the deduction evidential "would" reveals the opposition to China's behavior in the current political context from the U.S. In addition, in "The Chinese government even threatened the U.S. government that it would withhold crucial supplies if the Trump administration did not shut up about China's early mishandling of the outbreak", the use of deduction evidential indicated that there are political and economic frictions between China and the United States. These suggested the attitudes and intentions of journalists towards China, and these may also influence the attitudes of readers.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study presented the distribution

patterns of evidentials and indicated that evidentials were widely used in American media's China-related epidemic reporting with various frequencies and lexical realization forms. In addition, this study also delivered a qualitative study of the certain evidentials employed in the reporting through the lens of the news sources and reporting modes at the interpretation stage. It indicated that the target news reports mainly used specified news sources, and there were no unspecified news sources, which seemed to be convincing. However, a closer look suggested that some in the coverage implied a negative attitude towards China. In view of reporting modes, reporters were likely to involve their own opinions in reporting, and some examples showed that they took a skeptical attitude toward China's anti-epidemic policy. Finally, at the stage of explanation, this paper analyzed the social-cultural context and situational context of China and America. The results indicated that there were a variety of factors ranging from social system to economy, accounting for the usage of evidentials and the ideology behind the news reporting of the United States. For instance, the social-cultural and political context had a significant influence on the frequencies of hearsay evidentials and the deduction evidentials in the reports, which may exert an impact on the readers' attitude.

Although this study has figured out some questions, it is far from perfect and has some limitations. On the one hand, the realization forms of evidential are various and cannot be listed out one by one. Therefore, there are definitely other forms of evidentials that have been left out. On the other hand, AntConc4.2.2 was the only used software in this study and the data collection mainly depended on manual retrieval. Therefore, it was inevitable that there were subjective factors existing in this paper. There are several suggestions for further research in light of the aforementioned restrictions. For instance, it is necessary to select more news discourse from reporting agencies and collect as many realization forms of evidence as possible. In addition, it would be more effective to use different types of software to deliver studies in evidentiality and CDA.

Declarations

Competing interest

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The author confirms being the sole contributor to this work.

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Appendix A.
The titles of news discourses in *The Washington Post*

1. Chinese Journalists Offer a Glimpse behind State's Propaganda on Covid-19 (2020.04.10)
2. China's Coronavirus Success (2022.04.11)
3. Trump *vs*. WHO Latest Twist in a Shifting China Policy (2020.04.16)
4. China Puts Even the Truth on Lockdown (2020.04.24)
5. Where Speech is Punished (2020.05.13)
6. China Reverses Course, Agrees to International Review of Outbreak's Origins (2020.05.19)
7. With Ultimatum, Trump Deepens Crisis with the World Health Organization (2020.5.20)
8. Covid-19 Sparks Unity on U.S. China Policy (2020.05.22)
9. Bashing China Doesn't Help Anyone (2020.05.30)
10. The WHO wasn't in on a Covid-19 Coverup (2020.06.07)
11. How China Earns a Better Relationship (2020.06.19)
12. Mr. Trump's Empty China Policy (2020.07.24)
13. China Skips Trials to Roll out Vaccine (2020.08.25)
14. China Joins Global Vaccine Initiative that U.S. Spurned (2020.10.11)
15. We Can't Ignore China's Vaccine Diplomacy (2021.04.23)
16. Covid Has Shown the World China's Secrecy and Stonewalling that Its Citizens Know Well (2021.09.13)
17. Hong Kong Imposes Emergency Covid-19 Measures (2022.02.23)
18. China Plows ahead with Its Zero-covid Policy (2022.08.26)
19. Beijing's Covid Failure (2022.11.29)
20. Models Predict 1 Million or More Deaths in China's Covid-19 Surge in 2023 (2022.12.19)

The titles of news discourses in *The New York Times*
21. Trump's Desperate China Gambit (2020.05.20)
22. For Some of the Sickest, Relearning to Walk or to Eat Without Choking (2020.06.18)
23. Disease Detective Puts Forth Pointed Questions (2020.07.14)
24. Looking at Glasses as a Virus Barrier (2020.9.22)
25. Authoritarian Strategy Effective, but Suffocating (2020.10.31)
26. A Chinese Covid-19 Vaccine Has Proved Effective, Its Maker Says (2020.12.30)
27. China's Dr. Fauci Answers as Few There Can Freely (2021.03.13)
28. In a China Walled Off from Covid, the Barriers to Entry Are Steep (2021.03.22)
29. How to Push 560 million Doses Try Free Ice Cream (2021.04.07)
30. Chinese Scientist Under Pressure as Lab-Leak Theory Flourishes (2021.06.15)
31. China Pledges to Provide 2 Billion Vaccines and Donate $100 Million to Covax Program (2021.08.07)
32. China Needs a New Covid Strategy (2021.09.09)
33. Wuhan Vendor Is Suspected as First Covid Case (2021.11.19)
34. China Goads Littlest Ones to Take Shot (2021.12.06)
35. Pair of Studies Say Covid Originated in Wuhan Market (2022.02.28)
36. Surge of Covid-19 Cases Prompts Lockdowns in China (2022.03.15)
37. Chinese Covid Lockdowns Hampering Supply Chains (2022.04.09)
38. China Data Hint at Cost of Strategy to Curb Virus (2022.04.19)
39. Shanghai's Narrow Criteria Puts Covid Death Toll at 17 (2022.04.21)
40. Beijing Tries to Stimulate National Economy Amid Lockdowns (2022.04.29)