

Bad Image, Yet Still Convincing? Examining the Chinese Government's Image Repair Strategy in Responding to Accusations of COVID-19 Origin

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This study's purpose is (1) to examine the crisis response strategy that the Chinese government used to respond to the allegation of COVID-19's origin, (2) to discuss if officials' image repair strategies were effective, and (3) to explore the role of culture that led to the use of strategy and conflicts. Textual and content analysis of press remarks from the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs and related government departments were used in the study. In general, the officials' initial responses were accommodative, gradually shifting toward aggression. In response strategy selection, officials predominantly used bolstering, followed by attacking accusers and adaptive information, without issuing an apology in the whole process. Interestingly, although the response strategy generated a negative image in the United States and Australia, its image repair discourse was somewhat convincing. Drawing from Hall's high- *versus* low-context culture and Hofstede's culture dimension, the mismatch of two communication styles may exacerbate the conflicts. The study also points out experiments or surveys that can be done in future studies to validate current findings.

Keywords: crisis communication, Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, image repair strategy, media representation, COVID-19's origin

Recent scholarship has extensively explored image repair discourse in crisis management (Benoit, 1995, 2014; Coombs, 1995; Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005). Benoit (1997) emphasized that crisis response—what an organization says and does post crisis—is crucial to success. Coombs's (1995) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) introduced a framework based on crisis attribution, but Benoit (2014) criticized its optimism, arguing that crises are socially constructed by audience perception rather than predefined categories.

The COVID-19 origin debate highlights this issue: Can a global pandemic be classified as an internal or external crisis? Given the uncertainty surrounding its origins, SCCT application is challenging. This study,

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therefore, applies Benoit's image repair theory (IRT) to analyze the Chinese government's response and compare it with other crisis communication strategies.

In terms of the scope of research, we note that the center of literature in this realm is still Western dominant and rooted in American literature (Cai, Lee, & Pang, 2009; Zhang & Benoit, 2004). So this study is expected to widen the scope of IRT by exploring how culture plays a significant role in strategy used that explains the cultural conflict behind it. Although some studies delved into image repair strategy in the Asian context (Lyu, 2012; Siew-Yoong Low, Varughese, & Pang, 2011), this study aims to create unique contribution to the field by tapping on the intercultural crisis issue while using a combined method (i.e., qualitative and quantitative); it is expected that we can contribute to the field methodologically as well, unlike previous studies that have mainly relied on rhetorical or case analysis.

In short, this study investigates the Chinese government's image repair strategy selection and explores the role of culture play in intercultural conflict. It is hoped that this study can provide valuable implications for practitioners in the future when they establish a crisis communication plan in an intercultural context.

Literature Review

COVID-19 Origin as a Crisis for the Chinese Government

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). First identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, it has become an ongoing and wide-spreading global pandemic. By June 30, 2021, it had caused 182.5 million infections and 3.9 million deaths worldwide (Center for Systems Science and Engineering [CSSE], 2023). WHO suggested that one in 10 people globally may have had COVID-19 (WHO, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has become one of the—perhaps *the*—most severe health crises in human history, and it has profoundly changed our way of life, our international relations, and our politics (WHO, 2020; Wolf, 2020). China is at the center of the crisis and has faced much criticism in terms of how poorly it handled the pandemic, covered up the cases, and possibly produced the virus (Hessler, 2020; "Coronavirus 'cover-up' is China's Chernobyl," 2020). Among these allegations, COVID-19's origin is arguably the most controversial issue triggering a series of confrontations between China and other nations, specifically the United States (Wolf, 2020). The Trump administration accused the Chinese government of deliberately producing COVID-19 in a Wuhan laboratory and labeled it the "Chinese virus" (Bryant, 2020).

The Chinese government has made a series of efforts to repair that damaged reputation. About COVID-19's origin, the official's image repair discourse can be roughly identified in three stages: During the first stage (January 22, 2020, and before), China's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) asserted the virus's origin was from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan city (Gao, 2020). At the second stage (until February 27, 2020), Zhong Nanshan, China's top epidemiologist and president of the National Health Commission, suggested that although the virus was first identified in Wuhan, its origin might not

necessarily be China. He supported this claim by citing evidence that similar cases had been reported in other countries before the outbreak (Zhong, 2020). At the third stage (March 12, 2020, and onward), the Chinese government adopted a more aggressive tone. Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, suggested that the United States military might have introduced the virus to Wuhan during the Military World Games held there in late 2019 (Zhao, 2020).

This study examines strategies used by Chinese officials to repair its damaged reputation, explores the role of culture play in the strategy used and conflict, and evaluates its effect.

Image Repair Theory

Benoit (1995) suggested that the idea of image restoration theory is simple: When a person or an organization is accused of wrongdoing, he, she, or it will respond and take action to repair that damaged reputation. Image is a metaphor for one's reputation, as when someone is accused, his or her image is likely to be damaged. The basic assumption of image repair strategy is to consider "communication as a goal-directed activity" and "maintaining a favorable reputation is a key goal of communication" (Benoit, 1995, p. 16).

Given the processes by which organizations attempt to change audience attitude and thereby repair their images, Benoit (1997) suggested that image repair strategy is essentially a type of persuasion. Discourse used in this is known as image repair discourse (Benoit, 1997). According to Benoit's IRT, most response strategies are classifiable into five main categories: (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) reducing offensiveness of event, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification. The framework is "crafted to understand the communication options available for those, whether organizations or persons, who face threats to their reputations" (Benoit, 2005, p. 407).

Extension of IRT: International Image Repair in Chinese Context

The rise of a transboundary crisis, such as the H1N1 pandemic or cyber or 9/11 terrorist attacks, goes beyond traditional crisis management realm and poses challenges for respondents (Ansell, Boin, & Keller, 2010). When a crisis spreads across geographical and policy boundaries, the discussion of image repair should not be restricted in domestic levels but also international. Benoit (1995) defined international image repair as a process in which the accused in one country attempts to persuade its audience in other countries to repair its image. Studies of international image repair often were cross-border, involving a series of culture clashes that attract special academic attention.

Several cases have elaborated different image repair strategies in various contexts. Peijuan, Ting, and Pang (2009) investigated the case of the Chinese government's image restoration strategy in response to low-quality "made in China" products in the United States. Another study (Wen, Yu, & Benoit, 2012) analyzed a series of image repair strategies by the United States in response to 2003 mad cow disease crisis. These studies have found ineffective outcomes because of differing cultural norms that complicate the situation. In this regard, IRT framework should be extended to effectively explore the culture clash issue and better capture of different cultural nuances in cross-cultural messages (e.g., Yaeger-Dror, 1996). On

top of the IRT dimensions, Huang, Lin, and Su (2005) suggested “face-saving” as one of prevalent rhetorical styles in Chinese context thus proposed “diversion” as one of the strategies for an extended form of IRT.

For the accurate elaboration of the Chinese government’s image repair strategy, this study also applied a “diversion” strategy (see Table 1); thereby, this study aims to enrich and enlighten the international image repair field in the Sino-Asian context.

Table 1. Benoit’s (1995) Image Repair Classification.

Strategy	Substrategy	Key Characteristic	Example
Denial	Simple denial	Reject the accusation	“I didn’t do it.”
	Shift the blame	Attribute responsibility to another party	“Someone else is responsible.”
Evading Responsibility	Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability to prevent the event	“I didn’t know this would happen.”
	Accident	Claim the incident was unintentional	“It was an accident.”
	Good intentions	Emphasize positive motives	“I was only trying to help.”
Reducing Offensiveness	Bolstering	Highlight good actions	“Look at the good things I’ve done.”
	Minimization	Downplay the seriousness of the event	“It wasn’t that bad.”
	Differentiation	Compare with worse situations	“This is nothing compared to others.”
	Transcendence	Place the act in a higher moral context	“It was for a greater cause.”
	Attack accuser	Discredit those making accusations	“They’re spreading false rumors.”
Corrective Action	Compensation	Offer something to reduce perceived harm	“We’ll compensate those affected.”
	Corrective action	Take measures to prevent recurrence	“We’ve implemented new policies to fix this.”
Mortification	Apology	Admit fault and ask for forgiveness	“I’m deeply sorry for my actions.”

The Role of Culture in IRT

Audience perception is critical in crisis management: understanding an audience’s cultural background is necessary to establish a crisis communication plan and understand the cause. Edward T. Hall (1976) introduced the concept of high *versus* low context as an attempt to understand cultural orientation in a different country. The concept is based on a continuum, with high- and low-contexts on two extremes. The position of a country in the continuum represents the extent to which “contexting” occurs in the culture.

Hall (1976) argued that people in the high-context (HC) culture are relational, collectivist, and contemplative. Members in HC culture live in a hierarchical community where maintaining relationships is a critical part of interpersonal relationships. Hence, the communication style is less directive but with high relational cues when interpreting messages. On the other hand; Low-context (LC) culture is rational, individualist, and alienated, being less hierarchical, having more directive communication style, and fewer relational cues. Hall avers that, HC culture is in China, South Korea, and Japan, whereas LC culture is typically in the United States, Norway, and Sweden.

Building on Hall's (1976) idea, Geert Hofstede (2001) conceptualized five basic dimensions of culture: masculinity-femininity, individualism-collectivism, long-term orientation, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede (2001) suggested that masculinity-femininity refers to the role of gender in society, whereas individualism-collectivism addresses the relationship between individuals and society. The long-term dimension, proposed by other scholars, was integrated into Hofstede's (2001) framework. Michael Harris (2002) noted that long-term societies value thrift and perseverance, whereas short-term cultures emphasize tradition, obligation, and social order. Power distance index (PDI) measures the extent to which powerless people accept unequal power distribution in a society. In high PDI countries, there is potential conflict between powerful and powerless members, with the powerful holding more resources and prestige, whereas in low PDI countries, powerless members have low tolerance for inequality and are unforgiving when the powerful err (Taylor, 2000). The uncertainty avoidance index measures how much a society accepts unpredictable situations (Frith & Mueller, 2003).

Hall's (1976) and Hofstede's (2001) concepts have been found to be useful and comprehensive models to describe and analyze intercultural communication with robust theorization (An & Kim, 2007; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988); their works offer a useful lens into culture's role in image repair strategies and potential intercultural conflict. The power distance index has also been found to be the most applicable dimension in the analysis of crisis communication efforts (Siew-Yoong Low et al., 2011); the study used PDI to analyze the difference of crisis management strategies used by Taiwan's and the U.S. government in response to the allegation of an ineffective response to natural disaster, filling the gap between IRT and Hofstede's cultural dimension theory.

Based on the literature, these research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What image repair strategies were employed by the Chinese government in response to the accusation of COVID-19's origin?

RQ2: In general, was the Chinese government's image repair effective?

RQ3: What role did culture play in the strategy used and conflict?

Method

To investigate China's official's image repair strategy (a common and primary method in the study of IRT; Benoit, 2000), this study conducted textual and content analysis. Qualitative research enables

researchers to interpret text in depth, and comprehensively (Garyantes, 2006). Also in this study, quantitative research and content analysis, which are based on image repair categorization, enable researchers to grapple with media complexity, nuances, and contradictions through selection and emphasis on the text (Durham, 2005).

Data Collection

To investigate the Chinese official image repair strategy, this study analyzed the official spokesperson's remarks from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) conference. On one hand, those remarks were official in tone and reflected official ideology to an international audience, so the dynamic interaction between Chinese officials and international society can be observed (MFA, 2020). On the other, daily press remarks covered various ongoing issues in addition to the spokesman's response to accusations, which provided sufficient materials for the study of image repair discourse. This study also collected statements from the Chinese CDC. The CDC statement provided more scientific details of COVID-19's origin (Chinese CDC, 2020).

The period from January 1 to July 22 covered the known outbreak in a series of official responses. We used the keyword search function on the websites of our data sources. Specifically, we applied the keyword "COVID-19 origin" in each website's search bar (<https://www.mfa.gov.cn/> and <https://www.chinacdc.cn/en/>). Despite numerous press remarks being retrieved, our analysis focused only on virus origin-related statements.

Additionally, although the spokesperson's speech was made in Chinese, the analysis was based on the English version from the official website; this minimizes nuances of language differences in interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on three aspects.

The first was to identify the key response/discourse (e.g., shut down the seafood market, claim that the virus may not have originated from China, and say that the U.S. Army may have brought the virus to Wuhan). Official statements were read carefully and sorted into the IRT classification.

The second was to tease out the crisis phase based on the crisis. To investigate how issues developed over time, three stages were identified. Furthermore, attention was paid to what image repair strategy was used in each crisis stage.

The third was to examine and evaluate the strategy. Examination was based on norms of IRT, which enabled research on the relationship between message and context. This allows researchers to evaluate important elements of the message, not only frequency but also prominence in a specific context (Zhang & Benoit, 2004).

Result

Q1 investigates what image repair strategies were employed by Chinese officials in response to virus origin accusations. Fifty-eight official statements (drawn from the Chinese MFA conference and the CDC) were selected in the analysis, and three phases were identified. The predominant strategy in phase 1 was a corrective action, which was supposed as an accommodation strategy. Later, officials employed denial, defeasibility, and new-agenda building, considered as a moderate manner. Finally, the official response became more aggressive, attacking accusers, shifting blame, and bolstering.

In frequency, bolstering (22 times, 18.54%) was used predominately, followed by attacking accusers (18 times, 15.25%) and adaptive information (18 times, 15.25%). In addition, denial (15 times, 12.71%) and blame shift (15 times, 12.71%) were also heavily used in the rhetoric. Officials barely employed showing regard (twice, 1.69%) and corrective action (once, 0.85%). Interestingly, the government did not use apology in response.

Phase 1—Accommodation (January 1–27, 2020)

Corrective Action (1 Time)

The Chinese government undertook a series of corrective actions in this stage, including shutting down Wuhan Seafood Wholesale Market on January 1 and legislating against wildlife trading on February 24 (Buckley & Myers, 2020; “China’s Legislature Adopts,” 2020).

Additionally, a Chinese official made one of the earliest virus-origin claims at this stage. Dr. Gao Fu, director of the Chinese CDC, claimed the coronavirus likely originated from the Wuhan Seafood Wholesale Market. He acknowledged a human-to-human transmission and a community transmission (Gao, 2020). He said also that although much work remained to investigate the virus origin, current evidence showed virus links to wild animals sold in the seafood market.

Phase 2—Moderate (January 28–March 11, 2020)

Denial (15 Times)

During this phase, Chinese officials began using denial as an image repair strategy. On one hand, Dr. Zhong Nanshan, a leading Chinese epidemiologist, argued that although COVID-19 was first detected in China, this did not necessarily indicate that it originated there (Zhong, 2020). He elaborated that the virus existed before the outbreak and was introduced to the seafood market rather than originating there. To support this claim, he referenced a study published on ChinaXiv, an open-access Chinese research repository, which suggested that the novel coronavirus was transmitted to the seafood market from another location before spreading further between markets. Although Dr. Zhong distinguished between the concepts of outbreak and origin, he also acknowledged that the question of the virus’s source could only be definitively answered through further investigation and tracing efforts (Zhong, 2020).

On the other hand, when Zhao Lijian, spokesman for the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, was asked whether the virus was man-made in a Wuhan laboratory, he denied it, adding it is “irresponsible” to so claim, as the virus origin was then still under an ongoing investigation (Zhao, 2020).

Defeasibility (13 Times)

As accusations against China escalated during this phase, Chinese officials employed defeasibility as an image repair strategy. On March 5, when spokesperson Zhao Lijian was asked to respond to claims from a *Fox News* television program suggesting that China should issue a formal apology for the outbreak, he dismissed the demand, stating that there was no valid basis or justification for China to apologize (Garcia, 2020). He further emphasized that the origin of the virus remained undetermined and that, regardless of its origin, both China and other affected countries were victims facing the challenge of containing its spread (Zhao, 2020).

Compared with Phase 1, despite the virus’s origin remaining unclear, the Chinese government became more determined on this issue, undermining the accusation’s legitimacy by claiming no scientific evidence existed for it.

Building a New Agenda (8 Times)

A frequently used strategy by Chinese officials during this phase was agenda-building, a form of diversion. One of the primary narratives introduced was framing accusations about the virus’s origin as an “information virus.” On March 4, in response to renewed claims that COVID-19 was a man-made virus, Chinese officials dismissed these allegations by labeling them as both an “information virus” and a “political virus” (MFA, 2020, para. 1). Additionally, after President Trump referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus,” spokesperson Zhao Lijian argued that such terminology was misleading and driven by rumors and prejudice (“Not Racist at All,” 2020, para. 1). He further emphasized that the global community should adopt a scientific and rational approach to controlling the virus rather than assigning blame (MFA, 2020, para. 1).

The second key agenda introduced was collaboration, emphasizing the need for global cooperation as the virus continued to spread worldwide. Zhao (2020) stressed that the pandemic posed a global challenge, making international collaboration essential in efforts to combat it.

In short, to help repair its damaged reputation, Chinese officials pushed wording such as “information virus” or “political virus” and “collaboration” in fighting the pandemic, exactly according to the Chinese government’s attempt to shift focus from one issue to another.

Phase 3—Aggressive (March 12–July 20, 2020)

Attack Accuser (18 Times)

A major strategy the Chinese government employed during this phase was attacking the accuser. Chinese officials took a more aggressive stance, and on March 13, spokesperson Zhao (2020) amplified an

unverified claim from a Canada-based website, suggesting that the U.S. Army could have been responsible for bringing the virus to Wuhan.

The allegation was based on the U.S. Army's involvement in the 2019 International Military World Games held in Wuhan (Zheng, 2020). Although the claim was unverified, spokesperson Zhao (2020) questioned the United States about the virus's origins on his Twitter account. He raised concerns by asking when the first U.S. patient was identified, how many were infected, and which hospitals were involved, implying that the virus may have existed before China's outbreak. Zhao also urged the U.S. government to be transparent and disclose its data, further stating that the United States owed an explanation for the pandemic (Zhao, 2020).

This is the first time China officially adopted an attack-accuser strategy on the virus's origin. After this, the government frequently used this response strategy. And yet another example is in a May 7 press conference where spokeswoman Hua Chunying's (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MFA-PRC], 2020b) lengthy speech rejected the U.S. allegation that COVID-19 was from a Wuhan lab, and that China had refused to show a virus sample. She firmly denied that the United States had any evidence to support its claims. She challenged U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo to provide proof, questioning the validity of his accusations and asserting that he was fabricating allegations against China. He argued that the claim was illogical and referenced the perspective of Dr. Jeffrey D. Sachs, a U.S. scholar and director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University, who stated that the U.S. administration's false accusation of China as the source of America's problems is reminiscent of the McCarthy era. She also referred to Dr. Rick Bright, director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, who on May 5 had filed a whistle-blower complaint that his early warnings about the virus were ignored and that he had been demoted because he was cautious when choosing certain drugs. "What is the U.S. government planning to do with that complaint?" asked spokeswoman Hua (MFA-PRC, 2020b, para. 1)

Bolstering (22 Times)

Along with attacking accusers, bolstering was a heavily used strategy, especially from March onward. For example, on March 12, spokesman Geng emphasized that China acted in an "open, transparent," and "highly responsible" manner to address the COVID-19 outbreak. He also claimed that China's approach was the most "comprehensive" and "rigorous," prioritizing people's lives and rights (MFA-PRC, 2020a, para. 3).

Chinese officials also highlighted China's active engagement in the global community's efforts against the virus, stating that China had made significant "sacrifices" and contributions (Geng, 2020). Additionally, Geng (2020) asserted that it was under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and that the nation united to fight COVID-19, buying crucial time for the global response (para. 17). Furthermore, Chinese officials emphasized their ongoing communication with WHO and their contributions to the United States, stating, "As of May 1, China has provided the US with over 5.3 billion face masks, 330 million pairs of surgical gloves, 38.85 million protective gowns, 5.98 million goggles, and nearly 7,500 ventilators" (Hua, 2020, para. 34).

On June 7, the Chinese government highlighted its efforts in combating COVID-19 over the past few months. According to the White Paper, "Fighting COVID-19: China in Action," China took immediate action to contain the virus, implementing coordinated prevention, control, and treatment measures while mobilizing millions of people to combat the outbreak. The report also emphasized China's role in fostering global cooperation in the pandemic response, reinforcing its commitment to contributing to worldwide efforts in controlling COVID-19 (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Blame Shift (15 Times)

Spokesman Geng also employed Blame Shift . . .

Geng (2020) criticized U.S. officials, arguing that they were attempting to stigmatize China through their rhetoric. On March 24, in response to Secretary Pompeo's remarks about the term "Wuhan Virus," Geng (2020) stated that the United States had initiated the controversy by claiming that the virus originated in China and by using labels such as "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus." Media reports indicated that as early as March 6, Secretary Pompeo had publicly used the term "Wuhan virus," after which various U.S. politicians and senior officials continued to employ the phrase in ways that Geng suggested were intended to cast blame on China (Geng, 2020).

On March 26, the United States surpassed China in the number of reported coronavirus cases (Allyn & Neel, 2020). In response, Chinese officials began using comparison as a rhetorical strategy, arguing that the United States had not managed the outbreak as effectively as China but instead sought to shift blame to avoid responsibility. For instance, on April 14, spokesperson Zhao (2020) stated:

Now they again are hyping the issue of origins, insinuating that the virus had something to do with the Wuhan Institute of Virology. It is not difficult to see through their tricks, which intend to muddy the waters, deflect attention, and shift blame to others. (para. 5)

This statement suggested that U.S. officials were deliberately redirecting attention from their handling of the pandemic by focusing on the virus's origins.

In this phase, given that confirmed cases from the United States surpassed China's, made Chinese officials more confident to respond to the United States.

Adaptive Information (18 Times)

Another strategy employed was adaptive information. One example occurred at a press conference on April 27, where Geng (2020) stated: "Infectious diseases are the common enemy of all mankind, and both the Chinese and American people are victims" (para. 17).

Geng's statement aimed to persuade the audience to recognize the shared impact of the pandemic. He further emphasized the importance of global unity, asserting: "Only through solidarity and cooperation can the international community win the war against the virus" (Geng, 2020, para. 17).

Another instance of this rhetorical approach took place during a press conference on July 9, when spokesperson Zhao (2020), in response to inquiries about the virus's origin, reiterated the complexity of the issue, stating: "Tracing the origin of the virus is a complex scientific issue, and it is up to scientists around the world to conduct international scientific research and cooperation" (para. 17).

These statements reinforced the message that international collaboration was essential in addressing the pandemic while shifting the focus from political accusations to scientific research.

What Chinese officials did in this stage was to employ an adaptive information strategy to put direct accusation to rest and propose or discuss another topic, for example: emphasizing that many of us are "victims" and that we should fight against viruses together (i.e., mutually adapt to the situation, thereby becoming allies rather than opponents).

Other Strategies

Other strategies also include transcendence (5), showing regard/sympathy (2), and minimization (1).

Transcendence was employed during the press conference on April 28, where Geng (2020) emphasized China's commitment to global cooperation, stating: "China stands ready to work with other countries with stronger cooperation and mutual assistance through difficulties and make contributions to the health and wellbeing of all mankind" (para. 1).

This statement aligned the Chinese government's actions with principles of virtue, reinforcing its image as a responsible global actor.

On May 7, Hua (2020) showed sympathy to the U.S. people by saying: "We are truly saddened by those lost lives in the US and we sincerely hope that they can bring the outbreak under control as soon as possible" (Hua, 2020, para. 12).

Finally, minimization was used on May 8 as the Chinese government faced much criticism on spokesman Zhao's previous claim (i.e., his insinuation about the U.S. Army bringing the virus to Wuhan). Hua (2020) defended his claim by emphasizing it had been merely a "citation" from a Canada website. The Chinese government was just trying to express concern, and she was attempting to minimize the seriousness and integrity issue behind the claim (see Table 2).

Table 2. Image Repair Strategies by Chinese Government.

Crisis Stage	Image Repair Strategies
Phase 1 (January 1–27, 2020)	Corrective action
Phase 2 (January 27–March 11, 2020)	Denial, defeasibility, building new agenda
Phase 3 (March 12–July 20, 2020)	Attacking accuser, bolstering, shifting the blame, adaptive information, transcendence, showing regard/sympathy, minimization

Discussions

Chinese society has undergone significant changes in recent decades, with new communication methods, media landscapes, and public relations emerging in crisis communication (Huang, Wu, Cheng, & Lyu, 2016). Most studies focus on the interaction between China's authoritarian political regime and its evolving crisis communication strategies (Meng & Qian, 2008). Past research on China's response to the SARS outbreak (Ernst, Scartozzi, Thomas, & Wang, 2022; Schwartz & Evans, 2007) provides valuable insights for the present study.

The initial response of the CCP was to exert full control over society and the media, resulting in widespread domestic and international criticism. The communication failure was attributed to China's decentralized public health system coupled with its top-down political structure. Consequently, China initially employed denial, evasion, and offensiveness reduction, ultimately transitioning to corrective action, which was more accommodative (Zhang & Benoit, 2004).

In contrast to previous responses, this study found that Chinese officials adopted a more aggressive strategy, shifting from an accommodative approach to using denial, defeasibility, and agenda-building as time progressed. By the end, the strategy became more offensive, involving attacks on accusers, blame-shifting, bolstering, and empathy. An interesting finding was the absence of apology—typically seen as an effective image repair strategy. Instead, Chinese officials relied heavily on denial, possibly because, as Coombs (2007) suggested, the government viewed the crisis as unwarranted and thus felt no need to assume responsibility.

Another reason might be that the Chinese government considered some other factors (e.g., supporting its centennial objective; i.e., Chinese Dream [中国梦], Zhongguo meng), as a goal rather than an image repair. The essence of China Dream is to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中华民族伟大复兴, zhonghua minzu weida fuxing).

Specifically, China's foreign policy has a well-defined strategic objective that focuses on strengthening national prosperity and confidence both domestically and internationally. It aims to position itself as a leading power in a multipolar world, particularly as a dominant force in Asia. Additionally, its

strategy includes efforts to challenge the U.S.-led global order and reshape international structures in alignment with its interests (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2018).

Therefore, when image repair efforts conflicted with the lawsuits and national interests, China needed to weigh pros and cons and arrive at a trade-off. According to Tan (2020), individuals and organizations in many countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia, called for compensation and filed lawsuits against the Chinese government, asking officials to be held accountable for the mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Chinese government had to consider the litigation even more seriously, evaluating the consequences of image repair and avoiding lawsuits. In this case, refusing to apologize may further damage China's image but could help the Chinese government avoid lawsuits and damage to the Chinese Dream, which can be even more harmful for officials (Benoit, 2021).

Evaluation of Chinese Government's Response Strategy

Investigating RQ2—the effect of the Chinese government's response strategy—is challenging, but Chang's (2020) study on Western media portrayals and Pew Research Center's (2020) survey provide some insights. These studies suggest that Chinese officials' image repair efforts were ineffective, as they led to a negative image overseas.

From a media representation perspective, Chang (2020) examined how Western media (e.g., the United States) portrayed the Chinese government's response to virus-related accusations, based on 60 major news articles from the United States and Australia. The study found that 50% of U.S. media and 46.7% of Australian media used negative tones to represent the Chinese government's response, while only 3% of U.S. reports and 10% of Australian reports were positive. From a public-opinion perspective, a Pew Research Center (2020) survey (June 16 to July 14, 2020) revealed that 64% of Americans considered China's efforts in managing COVID-19 "poor," with only 31% viewing China's efforts as "good." The survey also showed that 73% of Americans held an "unfavorable" view of China, the highest on record, whereas the "favorable" view dropped to a new low of 22%. These results suggest that most people perceived the Chinese government's response negatively, indicating the ineffectiveness of its image repair efforts.

Interestingly, although the official response generated a negative image, the defensive discourse appears somewhat convincing, particularly about the attribution of the virus's origin—did it really come from the Wuhan Lab? Chang (2020) found that most media coverage, whether from the United States, Australia, or China, did not "imply that the virus was man-made by or at the Wuhan Lab, nor associate it with the Chinese government" (p. 53). Instead, media from all three countries tended to attribute the virus's origin as unknown (United States = 46.7%; AU = 40%; CN = 63%). His findings also echoed Pew Research Center's (2020) survey on the virus's origin, which suggested that 64% of Americans still believe the virus came from an unknown source or nature.

The Role of Culture in Image Repair Response

RQ3 examines the role of culture in shaping strategy use and conflict. Although a direct correlation between cultural dimensions and strategy choices would require a quantitative approach, such as

experiments; qualitative analysis allows for meaningful inferences through the frameworks of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (2001; see also Siew-Yoong Low et al., 2011). Integrating Hofstede's framework into the study of IRT provides valuable insight into why certain image repair strategies fail, revealing underlying cultural conflicts that contribute to these failures. Specifically, high-context cultures, such as Japan, China, France, Spain, and Brazil emphasize the underlying meaning, tone, and relational aspects of communication (Hofstede, 1983). In contrast, LC cultures, such as Australia and the United States, prioritize explicit, direct communication with minimal ambiguity (Hofstede, 2001). As a result, although the Chinese government's reliance on abstract and patriotic rhetoric may resonate with domestic audiences, it is often ineffective in countries with LC communication styles, where direct and transparent messaging is expected.

Hall's (1983) high- versus LC culture framework helps explain the varied international responses to the Chinese government's crisis communication strategy and why it failed in certain contexts. The Chinese government frequently employed diversion as an image repair strategy, which aligns with Huang and colleagues' (2005) findings that Chinese communication tends to be indirect, ambiguous, and relationship oriented. This was evident in official statements, where adaptive information was used 18 times to shift the focus from blame to collective responsibility. For example, spokesmen repeatedly emphasized that the pandemic was a threat to all of humanity, urging global unity in combating the virus rather than assigning blame (MFA, 2020).

In addition, building a new agenda was used also as a diversion strategy. For instance, spokesman Zhao (2020) framed the accusation as an "information" and "political" virus, advocated international society to attach more attention to the pandemic rather than blaming. Chinese officials used diversion strategy to divert public attention, and avoided response to the accusation directly. As Huang (2010) argued, diversion strategy is rooted in a Chinese high-context communication tradition. Use of the diversion strategy reflected that Chinese people consider communication as a way of maintaining a relationship, while Western people tend to communicate in an LC setting, which considers communication is a way of information exchange.

It can be inferred that the mismatch of different communication styles widens the gap between rhetor (i.e., Chinese official) and audience (i.e., American). Intentionally or not, an indirect response made the Chinese official's image repair efforts less likely to succeed, as it was unfavorable to the American audience.

Hofstede's power distance index (PDI) provides a useful framework for analyzing failure in different cultural contexts. According to Hofstede (1983), PDI reflects a society's perception of power inequalities and the extent to which these disparities are accepted. In countries with a high PDI, such as China, those in power enjoy greater privileges, while those with less power tend to rely on authority figures and expect leadership that is more directive, assertive, and autocratic. In contrast, low PDI nations, such as the United States, emphasize a more egalitarian approach to leadership and decision making (Hofstede, 1998).

It can be inferred that the mismatch of two distinctive cultures explains the failure of the Chinese government image repair strategy in the United States. In China, the massive use of aggressive response strategies (i.e., attacking accusers, shift blame, denial) reflected how high PDI nations respond to a crisis. It resembles another crisis response case, namely, the Chinese government attempted to repair the image of "made in China" product in the United States in 2007 (Peijuan et al., 2009). In that case, the Chinese

government predominantly employed denial, blame shift, and attacked accusers as image repair discourse. It claimed that the public should not attribute a corporate's mistake to a national level ("Chinese Food Exports are Safe," 2007; "Chinese Government Attaches Importance," 2007; "China Gets Tough With Substandard Foodstuffs," 2007), and warned the U.S. government not to worsen problems ("China Warns U.S. Against 'Smear Attacks,'" 2007). Similarly, when accused of covering up numbers in SARS 2003, Chinese Health Minister Zhang employed an aggressive response strategy such as denial, blame shift, and three cases embodied the Chinese government's tough, autocratic, and aggressive response style in response to the crisis.

While in contrast, the U.S. government was more mindful in response to a crisis. In a low PDI nation, people have less tendency to rely on authority, and less expect an authoritarian leadership (Hofstede, 1998). In a crisis, people would watch and wait for more evidence before response, thus government does not take an immediate or aggressive approach in response to a crisis. The G. W. Bush government employed defeasibility, bolstering, and corrective action in response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Siew-Yoong Low et al., 2011). When questioned about the delayed deployment of troops during Hurricane Katrina, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Director Michael D. Brown stated that the federal government had only become aware of the people stranded at the New Orleans Convention Center that day, despite widespread media coverage of the crisis (Lipton, Drew, Shane, & Rohde, 2005).

As Americans have less tolerance of autocratic leadership and tend to watch and wait until more evidence before the announcement (Tylor, 2000), it can be inferred that the Chinese government's tough, aggressive response style is less likely to be accepted in the United States.

Conflict between two cultures did not come from a vacuum, so to maximize the potential of exploratory research, one should consider cultural and contextual factors (see Table 3). Admittedly, although a qualitative method may not be able to draw a correlation relationship between culture and conflict, the use of Hall's (1976) high-low context communication style and Hofstede's culture dimension are still valuable to explain the rationale behind it. At least it offers a good starting point to understand the cultural conflict.

Table 3. Summary for Research Findings.

Research Questions	Findings
RQ1: What image repair strategies were employed by the Chinese government in response to the accusation of COVID-19's origin?	Table 2
RQ2: In general, was the Chinese government's image repair effective?	Ineffective, Pew survey suggested that overseas citizens' view of the Chinese government dropped to a historical new low level. Scholar's study also suggested that most western media represented China in a negative frame.
RQ3: What role did culture play in the strategy used and conflict?	Conflict between two cultures did not come from a vacuum. The mismatch of different communication styles & PDI widens the gap between rhetor (i.e., Chinese official) and audience (i.e., American).

Implication

Theoretically, this research contributes to the study of international IRT by challenging previous findings that suggest most image repair discourse concludes with an accommodative approach (e.g., corrective action, mortification, and apology). Instead, Chinese officials demonstrated a distinct pattern, shifting from an accommodative response to a more aggressive stance. This contrasts with previous crises, such as the Chinese government's handling of the "Made in China" product crisis in the United States in 2007, where it initially took an aggressive approach but later adopted an accommodative stance (Peijuan et al., 2009). Similar patterns were observed in other cases, such as Chinese Health Minister Zhang's response to SARS, Taiwan's Ma administration during Typhoon Morakot, and in the United States, the G. W. Bush administration's handling of Hurricane Katrina (Benoit, 1997; Siew-Yoong Low et al., 2011; Zhang & Benoit, 2004). This study highlights how an aggressive response can function within a defensive strategy and extends Spector's (2019) crisis-as-claim model, reinforcing the idea that a "crisis" is not an objective event but a socially constructed concept shaped by discourse.

Practically, this study offers insights for crisis communication practitioners, particularly in intercultural contexts. Image repair rhetoric, whether at the national or global level, is a persuasion strategy that requires a deep understanding of the audience to maximize its effectiveness (Benoit, 1997). Practitioners should consider not only cultural differences but also other influencing factors, such as political ideology, economic systems, levels of activism, and media landscapes, as these elements shape audience perceptions of crisis communication (Vercic, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996). Additionally, as Benoit (1997) pointed out, beyond restoring an image, organizations must also account for potential litigation issues, which may result in greater harm than reputational damage alone.

This study has some limitations. First, most findings are based on descriptive data rather than quantitative analysis. Future research could incorporate experiments or surveys to validate the results and examine the relationships between strategy use and audience perception. Additionally, although this study applies Hofstede's theory to offer insights, it provides only a partial explanation for the conflict, rather than a comprehensive understanding. Given that IRT heavily depends on audience perception, future research should employ audience-oriented methodologies, such as interviews, to explore the underlying causes of public reactions. Finally, more research focusing on the Chinese context could further enrich the literature on IRT. By "localizing" IRT, scholars and practitioners can develop more effective crisis response strategies for both domestic and global crisis management scenarios.

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