MEDIA FRAMING, MORAL PANIC AND COVID-19: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA, SOUTH KOREA, AND THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is perhaps the single most impactful event defining 2020 globally. Drawing on theory on media typology involving freedom and responsibility, media framing and moral panic theories, this paper examines media coverage on COVID-19 in three countries, China, South Korea and the United States. Data were obtained from six news outlets, Xinhua News, South China Morning Post, Chosun, Hankyoreh, CNN and Breitbart, two from each of the three countries. More than 1,000 COVID-19 related reports, spanning six days (the last day of January to June, 2020) were selected and coded based on common priming themes such as tone, the othering, medical/science, economic consequences, attribution of responsibility, human interests, conflict, leadership, and denial/severity. The results will be interpreted based on the theory of freedom and responsibility, and the unique political and economic characteristics of each country. Implications of press freedom and responsibility, media's role and citizens' rights to be informed are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19, media framing, moral panic, comparative research, China, South Korea, United States

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was marked by the unprecedented global pandemic, COVID-19. Coronavirus, initially discovered in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, quickly spread across China and the world. Because it was a newly emerging virus, China took an extraordinary measure to lockdown the city of Wuhan, the epicenter where the virus was initially discovered, followed by the United States banning flights from China, and the WHO's declaration of COVID-19 as a Global Pandemic - all within a month or so.

Media plays a major role in transmitting information, especially with a global pandemic of such magnitude. Media's role is rooted in broader differences of the political and economic structure of a society. While authoritarian theory depicts that the press be subject to governmental control and be a servant of the state, the libertarian theory views the media's functions as to inform the general public, help uncover the truth, and serve as a watchdog over the government and the democracy (Siebert, 1963). Citing differences between Confucianism and liberalism, Yin's (2008) theory of the press – freedom and responsibility, helps to situate media's role in broader, comparative contexts; both political and economic context, as well as cultural traditions and institutions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Media framing, the narratives helping to shape public's perceptions and understanding about a particular event, is necessarily influenced by the larger political, economic, and social conditions and priorities. For example, the SARS pandemic was framed as a public health concern, a geopolitical issue, or a global economic concern depending on national priorities (Meng & Berger, 2008). Moreover, the news media does not simply replicate reality, it often

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helps to construe a “reality” that may deviate from the “truth”. Within this context of media bias and news as an artifact of a socially constructed reality, moral panic theory depicts how media could exaggerate and distort an event, thus create a chain of reactions and responses from the public to official policies in dealing with the socially constructed “crises”. In this vein, certain individuals, groups, or nations may be marginalized or labeled as “the other” and accompanied with policies designed to address the moral panic.

This study examines the media coverage of COVID-19 in China, South Korea (S.K. hereafter) and the United States of America (U.S. hereafter). The three countries differ in sizes, political system, economic developmental path, and social characteristics, although they have similarities in other aspects such as shared Confucian cultural roots of China and S.K., and a democratic political system of S.K. and the U.S. It is thus important to examine if the media type and framing converge or diverge, and if the media arouses moral panic and project a xenophobic undertone, among the three countries.

Data are derived from thematic content analyses of a total of 1,352 news reports, from six news outlets, two from each country, and on six days (the last day of each month from January to June 2020). It addresses several interrelated questions: 1) How does the media of each country frame COVID-19? 2) Does framing vary by press typologies, and further by the nature of a particular media outlet? 3) Does the media coverage have xenophobic/the othering undertone and arouse moral panic, and what are the possible implications?

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Research in media suggests that media is a dependent variable reflecting other aspects of social structures, and an exogenous variable impacting other political and social institutions. To understand media and its impact, we must understand the political and social structures within which the media operates. In this section, we describe the COVID-19 pandemic, and then the main political, economic, and social characteristics of China, S.K., and the U.S.

COVID-19

China was purportedly reluctant to report the initial outbreak and suppressed the information. After acknowledging the person-to-person transmission on January 20, it began to take some of the most aggressive measures, beyond the requirement of WHO, to contain the virus (e.g., lockdowns, electronic surveillance and contact tracing, mandatory mask wearing, building two dedicated hospitals in Wuhan within 10 days, and mobilizing healthcare workers from all over China to support Wuhan). Its aggressive approach has altered the course of a rapidly escalating epidemic. Nevertheless, China’s political mobilization with extreme measures to gain public compliance were criticized in the West (Kupferschmidt & Cohen, 2020).

S.K.’s response to COVID-19 involved three pillars. First was fast and free testing. One week after its first case emerged, officials urged medical companies to develop test kits. Six hundred testing centers were opened with the world’s first drive-through stations, due to the infectious-disease-prevention law’s authorization of using unapproved diagnostic kits during a public-health emergency. Second was expansive tracing technology. The law allows health agencies to have warrantless access to CCTV footage and the geolocation data from the new patients’ phones and require local governments to disclose recent whereabouts of new patients to alert the public. Based on this law, the government ordered the church that initially had the breakout to turn over its membership list, identified thousands of churchgoers, and ordered them to self-isolate. Third was mandatory isolation. S.K. divided people into three groups. Those with serious cases were hospitalized, those with mild symptoms were placed in special facilities, and those who may have been exposed to the virus yet without symptoms were required to self-isolate at home while being checked in twice daily by health-service officials. As a result, daily new cases dropped from 800 at the peak of Feb. to less than 100 in March (Thompson, 2020).

In March, the U.S. and S.K. had the same number of deaths (approximately 90) caused by COVID-19; in April, S.K.'s death toll was 85 whereas the U.S.'s number reached to 62,000. The U.S. lost the initial six weeks to control virus due to the CDC's flawed test kits, tight regulation preventing private labs from processing the tests, lack of airport screening and isolation measures, and messaging from the White House minimizing the disease. By mid-March, more states began initiating social distancing rules and lockdowns to flatten the curve, while struggling with shortages of testing kits, ventilators, PPE supplies, and hospital capacity. Meanwhile, President Trump's shifting messages about the severity of the virus, masks, conspiracies, and overhyped treatment/vaccines created confusion about the current state of coronavirus (Cheng, 2020; Zurcher, 2020).

By the end of June 2020, the total number of people tested positive for COVID-19 globally surpassed 10 million, among them, more than 83,000 in China, 12,000 in S.K. and 26 million in the U.S.; the total number of deaths globally was 502,278, and 4,634, 282, 126,360 for China, S.K. and the U.S. respectively.

China's Political and Economic System

China has undergone a dramatic economic transformation since 1978. The "socialism with Chinese characteristics" challenges liberal economic orthodox (Wang & Groot, 2018). China has had the fastest economic growth in history with its GDP averaging 9.5% through 2019 and lifted an estimated 800 million people out of poverty (Morrison, 2019). Consequently, a series of social transformation emerged: increasing choice in education, employment, housing, and health care; exposure to Western value such as rights consciousness; and legal reforms.

The one-party, non-democratic political system, was consolidated under President Xi as the "socialist consultative democracy". Xi also revived Confucianism and nationalism through calls for the "Great Renaissance of the Chinese people" and the "China dream". He linked China's rising economic, geopolitical significance to the Chinese exceptionalism (Bell, 2014; Lam, 2015), and expanded universal human rights with including economic and social rights. Its recent policies regarding Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang showed its priority of maintaining social stability and national security to achieve the total Party control (Wang & Groot, 2018).

S.K.'s Political and Economic System

S.K. is a democratic republic with a presidential system of government and legal opposition parties. Elected for a five-year term, the president is the head of the state, government, armed forces, and policy/law maker. President Moon, a liberal, has served as president since 2017. Unlike his conservative predecessor whose policies were anti-North Korea and plutocrat–friendly, the Moon government's policies show a softer stance on N.K., an economic democratization, and an innovation-driven economy.

Ranked at the 12th among the world's biggest economies, S.K. made a notable economic rise from one of the poorest countries to becoming a high-income country in one generation ("Projected GDP Ranking," 2020). Given intrinsic limitations in the small market economy, S.K. economy has relied heavily on exports, devoting special attention to technology development and innovation to promote growth. The main industries include textile, steel, car manufacturing, shipbuilding, and electronics, along with fast-growing service and tourism industries.

U.S.'s Political and Economic System

The U.S. is a federalist constitutional republic with three branches of government. Media is the fourth pillar serving as the watchdog. The two-party system presumably engenders competition and gives voters a choice of competing policies. In recent years, liberalism and conservatism have increasingly clashed over ideologies and fundamental economic, social, and cultural values. As the U.S. grew into the world's economic powerhouse since World War II, promoting democracy has been a staple element of its foreign policy (Bouchet, 2013).

The U.S. represents the largest economy in the world with the most technologically advanced economy, especially in computers, medical, aerospace and military. It is the world's largest importer and the second-largest exporter. With the abundance of natural resources, the U.S. continues to dominate the world economic system through rule setting and sanctioning power, albeit with its problems of recessions, unemployment, shrinking manufacturing jobs, and an increasing income gap.

THEORY OF THE PRESS, MEDIA FRAMING, AND MORAL PANIC

Four theories of the Press (Siebert et al., 1963) provided the foundation for comparative analyses of the media, including authoritarian (Press is an institution controlled by the government), libertarian (Press is a watchdog over the workings of government and hence democracy), social responsibility (Press's responsibility is to inform the public and provide the debate), and the Soviet Communist theory (Press is a propaganda tool for the government). Building on this theory and making these typologies applicable to non-Western countries, Yin (2008) proposed a two-dimensional coordinate grid: freedom and responsibility, arguing that these two concepts are culturally specific, particularly between liberalism and Confucianism.

The primary difference between liberalism and Confucianism is their conception of the individual and government. Liberalism depicts natural law, individual's inalienable rights, and social contract. The sovereign individuals place civil liberty as foremost importance, thus set out boundaries for legitimate interference by governments only for self-protection. Rule of law is thus essential. Democracy is the preferred form as each individual counts and rules ought to be established through a fair and open process. Media is thus regarded as an independent watchdog, responsible for holding the government accountable and keep the public informed. To do so, media must be free from governmental control, and the only limit of their freedom is the law.

In contrast, Confucianism treats governments as parents and rulers. Government assumes the paternalistic role under the hierarchical order of political system. Individuals shall naturally obey the governmental authorities. With the middle path approach, Confucius argued the importance of leading by examples and morality, not by force, and extols cooperative and harmonious relations. Hence, morality, not law, plays an important role in maintaining social order. Individuals are expected to be responsible for the group as they are viewed as a center of interdependent relationships with family, society and the government, thus if the family and the state are strong, the wellbeing of individuals can be realized. Social order and stability are considered the primacy of political order as they are vital to the strength of a country and welfare of its people. Governments expect respect and obedience to keep social order, in turn, they are expected to act benevolently, protect, and look after the welfare of the people. Government thus is measured by its efficiency and effectiveness, a much goal-oriented system, as compared to liberal democratic process orientation that values individual input. Instead of being a watchdog, media is regarded as a partner working with the government achieving common social goals.

Press freedom is a double-edged sword. A free press can effectively expose corruption and injustice, if abused, however, it may create chaos and harm. Press responsibility is thus critical to ensure professional and ethical reporting. Representing the liberal conception of press responsibility, Hutchins' report stresses media reporting being accurate, diverse and comprehensive, addressing issues of public concerns, and acting as a watchdog of the government and other powerful institutions, while avoiding invasion of privacy and sensationalism. Press responsibility, under the Confucian framework (Yin, 2008) is more appropriately formulated based on evolving, current community standards, as many Asian societies are developing, both with its economy as well as with the media.

Framing

Media framing refers to the specific narrative properties that shape perceptions and understanding of particular events. News account tends to be selective and support dominant perspectives, suggesting government's ability to influence the news output, and journalists' tendency to self-censor and perceive events through political or cultural prisms (Beaudoin, 2007; Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Robinson, 2001).

Luther & Zhou (2005) used five news frames when assessing media coverage of SARS in China and the US. They include 1) economic consequences (economic impact of actions or events on individuals, groups or nations); 2) responsibility (blame or credit for actions or events); 3) human interest (individual lives are featured to personalize the story); 4) conflict (clashes, competition or war-related rhetoric); and 5) leadership frame (political leadership). They found that major news frames in the US press were also present in the Chinese news, particularly the human-interest stories (even there, the U.S. focused more on human struggles whereas China focused more on heroic actions), suggesting Chinese journalists adopting Western media values. Significant differences were found along the lines of economic consequences, responsibility, leadership, and conflict frames between the two countries; while the U.S. were more negative on the economic consequences the SARS has, and blaming China for it, China media focused on the positive economic initiatives, and avoided discussing conflict.

Moral Panic and the Othering

Moral panic is an exaggeration or distortion of some perceived deviant/criminal behavior, a result of a complex interplay of behaviors and responses involving some key stages in constructing a moral panic: 1) someone or something is defined as a threat to social norms; 2) media orchestrates the threat into a recognizable symbol; 3) the portrayal of this symbol raises public concern and garners public support against the threat; 4) politicians and authorities band together in enacting or enforcing the rule; and 5) the moral panic precipitates some sort of social change (Cohen, 2011).

Moral panic is different from normal concerns over social issues. Moral panic generates heightened concerns and disproportionate societal reaction that creates volatility and hostility (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994; Rothe & Muzzatti, 2004). This process of panic and overreaction does not happen spontaneously, but rather resulted from a complex interplay of behaviors and responses (Muzzatti, 2005). Media's portrayal of the "other" (e.g., immigrants, disease) tends to play a big part in arousing feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, or hatred, particularly during times of economic crises and political turmoil. Studies found that this othering of illness was present in media report in SARS via selective, exaggerated, or xenophobic undertone (Muzzatti, 2005).

Below is the summary of the nature of the media, in terms of its freedom and responsibility, in China, S.K. and the U.S. to lay the foundation for the current study.

China's Media

Traditionally classified under the Soviet communist press theory, China's media can be put in the "not free but responsible" category with certain qualifications. Freedom House (2004) ranked it at the 177th out of 187 countries, noting widespread restrictions on press freedom through laws, censorships, and criminal penalties (Beaudoin, 2007). The media becomes freer due to greater choices, diversity, and independence. The transformation, from a few strictly state-owned media outlets to thousands of newspapers, magazines and radio and TV stations, is driven by Westernized university journalism education that supply a large number of trained journalists, and by market competition with decreased state subsidy (Luther & Zhou, 2005).

China's media is responsible from the perspective of the Confucian hierarchical political order that serving the Party's interest trickles down to the well-being of individuals. However, it becomes messier without clear professional standards. Rarely in history, the media is influx with such diverse, yet conflicting, goals and expectations (e.g., is the media's role providing news, information, entertainment, diverse voice, criticisms of the powerful, or serving as an instrument to achieve developmental and political goals of the state?) (Zhang & Fleming,2005). Driven by ratings and profits, tabloids, staged news, and sensationalism in media coverage becomes more common, albeit that more serious news reporting such as investigative journalism remains in demand, particularly when scandals happen (e.g., the Focal Point, a CCTV news magazine program) (Kurtenback, 2002).

One rule directly related to the current study is the law on emergency management passed after SARS, which requires media outlets receiving an approval before reporting the story regarding a pandemic. Studies on SARS coverages showed patterns of initial censorship, controlled information, and more positive reporting (Beaudoin, 2007; Liebman, 2005; Luther & Zhou, 2005). Studies also identified nationhood, globalization and economic edge are common themes in SARS coverages, suggesting deep-seeded nationalism and a genuine desire for international integration (Luther & Zhou, 2005). With the proliferation of social medias in the current time, the dynamics of media reporting, and official control and censorship may be quite different, despite President Xi's intensified grip over media control (Zhang & Fleming, 2005).

S.K.'s Media

President Moon (2017- present) has improved media freedom after years of oppression from the conservative governments. The S.K news medias are generally free and competitive, serving as a watchdog of government. The liberal Moon administration supports a major press freedom initiative by Reporters Without Borders, also known as RSF ("Moon declares," 2019). According to the RSF's World Press Freedom Index, S.K.'s ranking increased from the 70th in 2016 to the 42nd in 2020. S.K. now has the freest media environment among Asian countries.

While S.K. seems to have the concept of a libertarian press, an authoritarian style remains in practice due to the long history of authoritarian rule. The press can cover aggressively government policies, corruption and corporate wrongdoings, but some self-censorship is expected due to a defamation law that can impose up to a seven-year imprisonment (Freedom House, n.d.). Journalists' independence remains questionable as the media outlets' leadership positions are filled by presidential appointment (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.), and the media industry has long allied itself with the government and major corporations (Heo, Uhm, & Chang, 2000). While media censorship is generally restricted, the National Security Law can censor reports involving North Korea (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). In fighting the growing 'fake news', the government also risks violating free speech (Freedom House, n.d.). Overall, the S.K. media is characterized as development journalism, with focus on the educational function of the news, stories about social needs and self-help, and the priority of nation building. Its strong emphasis on social responsibility puts its media in between Confucianism and liberalism.

S.K.'s media coverage of the H1N1 pandemic showed that S.K. has been an authoritarian, capitalist country, in which journalists conformed to the prevailing political worldview; especially in the conservative mass press (Oh et. al., 2012). While lacking either the attribution of responsibility or action frame, most Korean coverage focused on monitoring the flu's trend and delivering news based on sources released from the conservative government. This tendency was a result of the Korean governmental control over freedom of the press with multiple measures, such as policy enforcement and financial support.

U.S.'s Media

The U.S. media falls in the category of free and responsible. Operating largely under the liberal ideologies that the press as a source of information, education, and a watchdog of the government, the U.S. media is largely independent from governmental influence (Briggs, 2004). The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects press freedom, grants journalists access to information, and narrows the scope of libel cases against the press, with some governmental and legal restraints on defamation, obscenity, indecency, wartime sedition, and national security issue such as the war on terror (Beaudoin, 2007).

Journalist code of ethics has been passed down generations of journalism students, despite of mostly privately funded, the media provides mostly quality information and often a public service such as addressing crime and voter turnout issues, without having to worry about market competition as well-developed, free media markets tend to assure responsible media of market support with the public demand of factual information. In recent years, however, partisan politics became more polarized, and media's credibility and relevance are slipping as it allows itself used as a political and ideological tool of partisan fight, rather than adherence to factual reporting. To deflect the growing COVID-19 crisis at home, for example, the Trump administration has intensified the rhetoric of the "fake news" media attack and the China virus bashing, against the international rules of not labeling a virus with a nation or a region.

Studies show that the U.S. media coverage of SARS was characterized by sensationalisms and xenophobic fear-mongering, projecting images of the "yellow peril" reminiscent of the past racial bigotry (Muzzatti, 2005). Its media coverage of SARS was also accompanied by criticizing the Chinese political system and its one-party, authoritarian system that censors media and information (Luther & Zhou, 2005).

THE CURRENT STUDY

Drawing on theories of press typologies, media framing and moral panic, this study examines the media coverage of the COVID-19 in China, S.K. and the U.S. The purpose of this comparative analysis is to show how the same event, COVID-19, is framed by medias from three countries with diverse political, economic, and cultural traditions and whether it projects xenophobic undertones that stigmatizes a particular group or nation. The result can shed light on our understanding of media freedom and responsibility, and the underlying tension among different political, economic, and cultural systems.

Three inter-related questions will be addressed: 1) How does the media of each country frame COVID-19? 2) Does framing vary by press typologies, and further by the nature of a particular media outlet? 3) Does the media coverage have xenophobic/the othering undertone and arouse moral panic, and what are the possible implications?

Method, Data, and Variables

Data used in this analysis were derived from six news outlets, two from each county. Xinhua News and South China Morning Post are the two Chinese news media selected. Founded in 1940, Xinhua News is the official state-run news agency, regarded as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party by the West (Liebman, 2005), representing one of the most influential news outlets in China with about 200 bureaus worldwide and employing tens of thousands of people (Xinhua, 2005). South China Morning Post (SCMP) is a top English-language and joint-stock Hong Kong newspaper since it was founded in 1903 (Xie & Ding, 2016). The newspaper is highly ranked among HK newspapers and well known for its reports on controversial social events/policies regarding mainland China (Duan, 2007; Xie & Ding, 2015).

The S.K.'s two national newspapers, Chosun and Hankyoreh, were selected due to their contrasting ideological approaches. While Chosun is traditionally conservative, Hankyoreh is liberal leaning. Established in 1920, Chosun represents the interests of capitalists, vested interests, and relatively older generations, whereas Hankyoreh, launched in 1988 through public fundraising, is less intertwined with political power, and targets the young and low-class readers.

The two American news media, CNN and Breitbart, are on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum. Founded in 1980 as the world's first 24-hour news channel, CNN's primary viewership are largely left-leaning with its straight news reporting falls left-center through bias by omission, and its news reporting tends to be factually accurate (https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/cnn/). Breitbart was founded in 2007, a far-right syndicated news, opinion and commentary website. It is rated as a questionable source based on extreme right-wing bias, conspiracy theories and false claims (https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/breitbart/).

A total of 1,352 reports were generated based on keywords (coronavirus, corona, virus, and COVID-19) searches in google and over six days (the last day of January through June of 2020). These reports were coded via deduction based on frames identified in previous studies, including medical/science economic consequences, responsibility, human interest, conflict, leadership, and the denial/severity frame. In addition, to tap into possible moral panic, we coded tone and the othering (e.g., xenophobic undertone) (Luther and Zhou, 2005). The deductive approach is advantageous over inductive approach, especially in comparing news coverage between different news outlets, as it creates comparative indices of news content (Beaudoin, 2007).

Each news frame contains multiple coding statements, capturing both the content and the tone. For example, the economic consequences variable is measured by mentions of economic consequences for (1) home country, or (2) for the world, where no mention is coded 0, negative coded 1, mixed coded 2, and positive coded 3. The attribution of responsibility variable is measured by responsibility attributed to government of (1) China, (2) S.K., (3) the U.S., or (4) WHO, where no mention is 0, to be blamed for coded 1, mixed coded 2, and praised for coded 3. The human-interest frame is a composite variable of (1) individuals; (2) groups; (3) photos or adjectives capturing human interests; (4) quality of everyday life, with 0 no mention to 3 a positive portrait of human interests for each of the statement, making the range of value being 0-12 for this variable. The conflict variable is measured by (1) China domestic; (2) China international; (3) S. K. domestic; (4) S. K.

international; (5) U.S. domestic; (6) U.S. international, with no mention coded 0, negative tone (e.g., war rhetoric) coded 1, mixed tone (e.g., acute problem but work together) coded 2, and positive tone (e.g. fast building of hospital) coded 3. The leadership variable is measured by political leaderships of (1) China, (2) S.K., (3) U.S., (4) Who, or (5) other countries, where no mention is coded 0, lack of leadership coded 1, mixed leadership coded 2, and effective leadership coded 3. The denial/severity frame is measured by the coverage regarding the severity of COVID-19 where any mention of COVID-19 being severe coded as 0 and COVID-19 being extremely severe such as causing death, infection, and other major problems as 1. The medical/science frame is a composite variable, with a range of values between 0-12, which includes mentions of science/research about the virus, infection prevention tips, and quarantine measures.

Two variables tap into the moral panic theory. The first variable is the overall tone of the news report measured on a five-point scale from extremely positive (1) to extremely critical/negative (5). The second variable involving “the othering”, which is a composite variable with a range of 1-12, which includes mention of elements of othering or xenophobic language, the deadly nature of the virus, contagion, fear, or general panic.

Following major framing themes of the past studies, we expect that Chinese media will be more positive when discussing economic consequences and giving credit to its own political leadership and responsibility as well as the international organization, whereas the S.K. and the U.S. media coverage will be more likely to report negatively due to the role of media as a watchdog under the democratic political system. Given the growing polarization in the world, particularly in the U.S., media coverage might also be driven by ideological affiliation. In comparison, China and S.K., under Confucian influence, might have a greater tendency to project solidarity and stability domestically, thus less likely to cover the conflict frame negatively, and less negative tones and xenophobic undertone. In contrast, as a world leader, and under President Trump’s slogan of America first, the U.S. media might be more driven by ideological divide and more aggressive and negative in portraying the virus as the “other” and shift responsibility and blame to the other.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1. Percent Frames by Press.

	Denial	Medical	Responsibility	Leadership	Human In.	Conflict	Economic	N
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Ch. Press	82	69	30	39	25	28	25	279
Xinhua	84	70	17	9	16	14	5	152
SCMP	80	69	46	75	35	44	42	127
S.K. Press	41	39	36	24	20	14	11	357
Chosun	37	33	34	24	15	13	12	182
Hankyoreh	45	45	38	23	25	16	9	175
U.S. Press	34	29	30	22	12	8	11	716
Breitbart	22	21	42	34	16	13	10	277
CNN	42	36	23	15	10	5	11	439
All	46	40	32	26	17	14	13	1,352

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Table 1 shows the frequency distributions of two variables, frame and press. The results indicate that the denial/severity frame, was mostly emphasized (46%) by the presses in all the three countries, followed by medical/science (40%), responsibility (32%), leadership (26%), human-interest (17%), conflict (14%), and economic consequences (13%). While the most used framing was denial/severity, the nature of the use of this framing is different. As China tended to express public health threats due to COVID-19 in other countries, both the U.S and S.K. had highest public health threat qualifiers within the severity framing for China. For both China and S.K., the second most used framing was medical/science. For the U.S., the second most used framing was responsibility, followed by medical/science. This perhaps contributes to the different uses of the moral panic/othering frames in which many U.S. news articles, at least from Breitbart, employ language which "others" and attributes a responsibility for the negative impact of the virus to the segment of people it has othered.

Denial/Severity Frame

This framing defines the scope and the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. It focuses on the numbers in terms of a global impact, additionally the use of phrasing such as "suffered the most" gives the numbers a sense of humanization. The severity of the problem is a world framing rather than just the framing of the severity on the home country.

Table 2. Mean Denial/Severity Frame*

	China	S.K.	U.S.	Others	N
Chinese Press	.55 N=111	.60 N=5	.65 N=14	.79 N=98	279
Xinhua News	.44 n=45	1 n=2	1 n=7	.88 n=73	152
SCMP	.62 n=66	.33 n=3	.29 n=7	.52 n=25	127
S.K. Press	.84 N=6	.22 N=110	.27 N=11	.42 N=19	357
Chosun	.67 n=3	.41 n=46	.3 n=10	.44 n=9	182
Hankyoreh	1 n=3	.08 n=64	0 n=1	.4 n=10	175
U.S. Press	.19 N=21	.1 N=10	.05 N=109	.06 N=106	716
Breitbart	.11 n=9	n/a n=0	.04 n=24	.07 n=29	277
CNN	.25 n=12	.1 n=10	.05 n=85	.05 n=77	439
All	.51 N=138	.23 N=125	.13 N=134	.41 N=223	1,352

*Severity of COVID-19: 0=severe; 1= severe as a public health threat; n/a =not available.

Based on Table 2, while all countries outlets report on the number of deaths due to COVID-19 and the number of infections, China, when reporting on China had a mean of .55 indicating a moderate coverage of this public health threat within the severity frame, with the general trend being to report the severity with the specific public health qualifier as being more present in other countries (S.K. with .60, U.S. with .65, and all other countries reported on with .79).

The United States suffered the most from the pandemic, with 1,764,671 cases and a death toll of 103,605. Countries with over 200,000 cases also included

> Brazil, Russia, Britain, Spain, and Italy, according to the CSSE data." "Global confirmed COVID-19 cases topped 6 million on Saturday, reaching 6,003,762 as of 4:32 p.m." and "a total of 367,356 people worldwide have died of the disease (Global Covid-19, 2020, para.2 & 3).

Similarly, SCMP (Coronavirus latest, 3/31/2020, para.2) reported that, in Spain, "the total number of deaths rose by 849 in the past 24 hours... The number of new cases increased by 9, 222 on Tuesday".

For S.K., when reporting on the severity of the virus in China the mean was .84 indicating that the severity framing with the public health qualifier was moderately high, while the use of this was moderately low when reporting elsewhere, with the lowest being in S.K. The severity framing in S.K. press emphasizes the numbers of deaths and infection without a tendency to frame it with the specific public health threat qualifier. For example, Chosunilbo (2020a) began with a specific death count: "three death cases on February 28th in Daegu" (para. 1) as well as emphasis on the number of infected: "more than 2300 people have been infected by coronavirus" (para. 1), with particular emphasis on the rapid increase and the strain on current response systems: "the number of new cases is rapidly increasing which will paralyze the medical system in Daegu soon" (para. 1).

For the U.S., the severity framing rarely had the addition of the specific "extreme severity" with the public health threat, but like S.K., the articles which reported on China had the highest mean (.19 for China, .10 for S.K., .05 for U.S. and .06 for all else). Most of CNN denial/severity framing open with a take on the current numbers and infection rates "At least 575 coronavirus deaths were reported in the United States on Monday... This is the most reported deaths in the US in a single day…" (Sutton,2020). It also reported the impact of the virus such as "Refrigeration units intended as makeshift morgues are seen parked behind Belleview Hospital Center in New York City" (Sutton, 2020). For Breitbart, however, severity framing was often used in conjunction with an attribution of responsibility or a blaming of opposite political leadership, extending to not only China, but also other countries (e.g., "Mexico Nears 18K Coronavirus Cases Despite Admitted Undercount") (Ortiz & Darby, 2020).

Medical/Science Frame

All three countries mentioned quarantine measures and science about the virus along with specific prevention measures. The Chinese press (0.75) was more likely to highlight the importance of science-based response to COVID-19, compared to the S.K. (0.19) and U.S. (0.43) presses.

Table 3. Mean Medical/Science Frame*

	China	S.K.	U.S.	Others	N
Chinese Press	.75 N=101	1 N=3	.62 N=13	.62 N=76	279
Xinhua News	.85 n=47	1 n=2	.75 n=4	.64 n=53	152
SCMP	.67 n=54	1 n=1	.56 n=9	.57 n=23	127
S.K. Press	.12 N=8	.19 N=107	.29 N=7	.07 N=16	357
Chosun	.33 n=3	.32 n=44	.4 n=5	.13 n=8	182
Hankyoreh	0 n=5	.1 n=63	0 n=2	0 n=8	175

U.S. Press	.36 N=25	.13 N=8	.43 N=100	.36 N=81	716
Breitbart	.17 n=6	n/a n=0	.44 n=34	.18 n=17	277
CNN	.42 n=19	.13 n=8	.42 n=66	.41 n=64	439
All	.64 N=134	.21 N=118	.44 N=120	.45 N=173	1,352

* 0= quarantine measures; 1= science about virus and prevention; n/a = not available.

For China, wording within this frame emphasizes the connection between science about the virus and prevention efforts. For example, the Xinhua News (3/31/2020) reported that "the first batch of volunteers for a coronavirus epidemiological survey began to work on Tuesday in Shanghai after completing professional training". However, scientists also warned that "The antibodies may not remain for a long time, so there is still a risk that these recovered patients will be infected again. They should continue to keep themselves protected [by avoiding mass gatherings]" (Factbox, 2020, para.7), as well as medical inquiries into the virus affects the body long term: "The medical community has yet to establish how the virus can affect the bodies of recovered patients" (Zhou & Ng, 2020).

> For S.K., the coverage tended to focus on the quarantine aspect. When discussing information on the virus, the focus was on the fast spread of the virus due to its contagious nature, and asymptomatic cases: "According to Oh Myeong-done, a professor of infectious diseases at Seoul University of Medicine, an increasing case of asymptomatic [coronavirus] infection indicates the explosive nature of [coronavirus] transmission" (Kim, 2020a, para. 6).

For the U.S., measures regarding possible vaccines as "reason to hope" (Kraychik, 2020) and studies which discuss the mortality and survival rates of patients as well as symptoms were discussed: "it [the study] provides helpful insights into the symptoms of Covid-19 patients admitted to hospital" (Kraychik, 2020). Like China and S.K., most medical/science framing relies heavily on medical experts directly quoted in the body of the news articles.

Responsibility Frame

For the attribution of responsibility framing, China and S.K. were more critical of the U.S. (1.36 and 1.16) whereas the U.S. was most critical of China (1.36) while highly praising S.K. (3.0). Responsibility of WHO was relatively seen as neutral by the press in the three countries.

The Chinese press used the responsibility frame mostly to construct COVID-19 as a world health crisis and not a sole attribution of China's responsibility. It typically focused on other countries blaming China for the virus, such as "Moscow regrets the attempts of several Western countries to put the blame on China for the coronavirus pandemic" (Russia upset by Western, 2020, para.1), and "the whole world should stop kicking China and Chinese community when they are down" (Letters, 2020, para. title). It also called for WHO efforts worldwide and China's specific contribution to information as an end to "fragmented information" (Wu & Wong,2020) on the virus.

For S.K., the press reporting on China remained neutral, however with respects to S.K., the U.S, and others, this focus was moderately critical.

> 'Developed countries' prioritizing industrial interests lost valuable time [to prevent coronavirus outbreak] … The public health care systems in Italy and Spain that had suffered from chronic budget deficits exposed their

> weaknesses… the U.S.'s health care system revolving around profit-making, private hospitals is totally unsuitable for coping with a pandemic. In Japan, 'a developed country', total cases that have been reported so far are merely the tip of the iceberg due to Japan's restrained approach to [coronavirus] testing (Park, 2020, para. 3).

For the U.S. press coverage was mostly critical. When discussing positive attribution of responsibility for China in the U.S., CNN placed emphasis on the construction of more hospitals: "China is building two dedicated hospitals in Wuhan to help treat the thousands of people affected by the deadly coronavirus" (In photos,2020). By contrast, the majority of Breitbart articles with attribution of responsibility is extremely critical towards China: "outrage of Chinese citizens over the Party lying about how contagious they knew the virus to be" (Martel, 2020), often with mention of communism in conjunction with respects to blame: "weeks before the Chinese Communist Party revealed the existence of the virus to the world" (Martel, 2020). Breitbart articles with responsibility framing construct the problem as a Chinese problem, and language mirrors this with blame and othering rhetoric. The coverage of S.K. was largely positive, praising its highly advanced technology as innovated responses to COVID-19.

Human Interest Frame

For this framing, China tended to report neutral human-interest stories about China, and negative human-interest stories about S.K., the U.S. and others. The focus of these stories is the suffering and pain experienced by people affected by the virus, with quotes from residents which express anguish.

> Nobody knows how many times I've cried at night" – Tam Sau-Lan, 81, also live alone in a public rental housing flat in Lam Tin. Her husband died more than 20 years ago, while her two sons and two daughters live and work in Guangzhou (Sun, 2020).

Similarly, S.K. press tended to report negative human-interest framing which focuses on specific and personal anguish individuals have faced due to the virus.

> Mr. Shin (33) who brings up a son who is six years old is having a hard time to find a place to take care of his child, as preschool is closed and the opening day of school is postponed a week due to the spread of Wuhan coronavirus (Yu & Choi, 2020, para 1).

For the U.S. press coverage of China tended to also emphasize personal suffering. "For now, there is little people like Shi can do…when Shi asked what kind of patient would be admitted, she says the staff member responded: 'We will admit (them) if they're dying'" (Hollingsworth, Yang, & Thomas, 2020).

Economic Frame

Somewhat surprisingly, economic frame was the least covered frame of all (Table 1), which could be due to our analysis focusing on the beginning phase of the virus. For China, the economic framing focused on short-term governmental interventions and long-term economic impact: "The U.S. Federal Reserve… warned that the COVID-19 pandemic poses 'considerable risks' to the U.S. economy" (Spotlight, 2020, para.1).

> Recovery is set to continue in the coming months…while Beijing has not engaged in the huge volumes of stimulus seen in the U.S. and Europe in a bid to spend its way out of the pandemic- caused economic problems, it has in recent weeks loosed the purse strings (Bermingham, 2020).

For S.K., economic framing was also tied to the use of leadership framing: "The government and ruling party officials who had expressed optimism… economy will bounce back soon, have slightly changed their voice due to 'Wuhan pneumonia'" (Kim, 2020b, para 1). For the U.S., the economic frame discussed the long-term impact of the virus on the U.S economy and how this is connected to the world market. "The Federal Reserve is opening up another avenue for stressed-out foreign central banks to get access to US dollars during the coronavirus crisis" (Egan, 2020).

Moral Panic/Othering

Table 6 presents results regarding the tone of the press coverage. The overall tone is between neutral and somewhat negative (3.22). More specifically, Chinese media coverage is the most negative (3.35), followed by the U.S. media (3.27) and then the S.K. (3.0). Notably, the liberal SCMP was more negative (mostly towards China) than the state press, Xinhua News (more towards S.K. and the U.S.). The tone of conservative leaning Chosun was slightly positive, while the liberal leaning Hankyoreh was negative. The liberal leaning CNN was overall neutral (with negative tone primarily geared towards the U.S. [3.27]), contrary with the conservative Breitbart being nearly extremely negative on China (4.2).

Table 4. Press Coverage's Tone on Each Country*

	China	S.K.	U.S.	Others	All
Chinese Press	3.08 N=152	3.49 N=6	3.38 N=16	3.68 N=102	3.35 N=279
Xinhua News	2.35 n=67	5 n=2	3.37 n=8	3.64 n=74	3.07 n=152
SCMP	3.65 n=85	2.74 n=4	3.38 n=8	3.79 n=28	3.69 n=127
S.K. Press	3.25 N=12	3.00 N=387	3.00 N=22	3 N=36	3.00 N=357
Chosun	3.17 n=6	3.07 n=141	2.81 n=16	3 n=19	3.07 n=182
Hankyoreh	3.33 n=6	2.96 n=246	3.5 n=6	3 n=17	2.93 n=175
U.S. Press	3.53 N=58	2.67 N=15	3.27 N=407	3.22 N=237	3.27 N=716
Breitbart	4.20 n=25	2 n=2	3.28 n=183	3.5 n=68	3.42 n=277
CNN	3.03 n=33	2.77 n=13	3.27 n=224	3.11 n=169	3.17 n=439
All	3.21 N=222	3.00 N=408	3.26 N=445	3.32 N=375	3.22 N=1,352

*1=extremely positive; 2=somewhat positive; 3=neutral; 4=somewhat negative; 5=extremely negative

Approximately one third of the news reports contributed to "moral panic", with the Chinese press (68%) leading the charge, followed by S.K. (32%) and then the U.S. (13%) press. In comparison, about 15% of the reports contains the language of "the othering", with the lowest share from the Chinese press (7%), as compared to the S.K. and the U.S.'s 18% and 17% shares respectively. Perhaps the most striking is the divergence in "the othering" within presses in each country. For the Chinese press, Xinhua News contained no language of the othering, the reports (20 reports) came from South China Morning Post. For S.K., the majority of reports with othering language came from Chosun (29 reports compared to 6 from

Hankyoreh). Lastly, the U.S. press had the majority of the othering reports from Breitbart (34 reports compared to 6 from CNN).

The moral panic framing tended to stress the lack of information about the virus, the rapid spread, and the lack of facilities to adequately respond to the virus as well as negative impacts on the economy. Phrasing in this frame also had elements of combative language, being at "war" with the virus or language which inspire panic. The othering framing included phrasing which attributed the virus to one particular country or segments of people, phrasing such as "Wuhan virus", "China virus" or mentions of Communist party, discrimination of immigrant workers/ethnic minorities or rights infringed. Present in all three countries' news coverage were comparisons of COVID-19 reporting to other epidemics such as MERS, Ebola, and swine flu, but with particularly heavy comparison to SARS.

For China, these framings emphasized the panic and fear of stigmatization.

> Chinatowns across North America are reeling as panic and ignorance spread faster than the actual coronavirus…Chinese in North America are targets of mounting xenophobia and discrimination, including some being told to "go home". Though fear is a natural response to danger, the crisis has fanned entrenched stereotypes (Magnier, 2020).

The manifestation of which is reported to be expressed through violence: "other bullying, shunning, and assault cases have been reported across the continent, sparked by fears that those with Asian features are more likely to carry the virus" (Magnier, 2020). S. K. press, likewise, covered news events with focus on French Asians' response to an "anti-Asian backlash" on social media with the hashtag of "JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (I am not a virus)" (Cho, 2020, para. 3). U.S. framing of moral panic/ othering from CNN tended to call out egregious examples: "The Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has sparked controversy after migrant workers, returning home during a nationwide coronavirus lockdown, were doused in bleach disinfectant used to sanitize buses" (Gupta, Mitra, & Sud, 2020). Additionally, moral panic coverage also coincides with talk of people panic buying items like masks, which also features othering: "At first, when I started looking for masks, people were really understanding," she said. "But now, when I go up and ask, and I'm Asian, I can feel the look on their face" (Andrew & Yeung, 2020). The news outlet Breitbart in particular had a high percentage of articles featuring the virus referred to as the "Wuhan virus" or "China virus", often in discussion about responsibility.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the COVID-19 press coverage through perspectives of framing and moral panic. Among the seven commonly used frames covering pandemics, denial/severity, medical/science and economic consequence frames stood out, but for different reasons. While it was expected that the severity and medical/scientific frames were most frequently covered themes, what was striking was China's more intense focus on these issues, doubling the amount of that of the S.K. and U.S.; moreover, conservative-leaning medias in S.K. and the U.S. tended to have less coverage on these issues than their liberal counterparts (e.g., Breitbart had only about half of the CNN's coverage on severity whereas about two-thirds of the coverage on medical/science frame). Contrary to the vast coverage of severity and medical frames, the economic consequences frame received minimal media attention despite of the COVID's devastating impact on economic activities. The other noteworthy findings involved mutual blames between China and the U.S. on leadership and responsibility, and China's crusade on winning the war on coronavirus that seemed to have aroused disproportionate "moral panic", yet showed little interest in xenophobic "the othering" tactics aiming to label, stigmatize, or marginalize individuals and groups, when compared particularly with the U.S.

To be sure, this study had data and methodological limitations, including sampling technics (selection of specific days and two media outlets per country) and the time frame (covering only the first six months of 2020). As COVID-19 continued to evolve, the media's tone and coverage along these major frames could be changing as well. Nevertheless, our snapshot of the particular time, event, and media coverage is informative for the theory on press's freedom and responsibility, and within the larger political, economic and socio-cultural context.

Yin's theory on press's freedom and responsibility provided a stark contrast between Eastern Confucian patriarchy and Western liberal social contract conceptions of government and the individual. Media coverage of COVID-19, in our analysis, reveals, in part, that governments in Asia (more so as shown in the Chinese strategies) tended to take full ownership of eradicating the coronavirus by calling attention to the deadly virus (severity frame), and taking extreme measures to lock-down cities and mandate stay-home order and mask wearing (severity and medical frames) in an effort to gain full control of the virus to save lives, albeit jeopardizing some individuals' lives and needs in the process of doing so. In comparison, media coverage on governments in the U.S. tended to be more diverse and fragmented (partly due to sporadic governmental responses and shifting strategies), raising awareness of the deadly pandemic on the one hand, and challenging governmental authorities in mandatory shutdowns and mask wearing on the other.

While medias did seem to do their job in covering the governments' messages and serving as a watch dog (e.g., SCMP, the Hong Kong based Chinese newspaper was somewhat critical of the government), the extent to which they do their job depends on their role (e.g., Xinhua News is the CCP's news agency thus serves its agenda), and organizational agenda (e.g., CNN and Breitbart represent the opposite ideological spectrum, thus at times projecting completely opposite tones and perspectives on the pandemic). Moreover, our analysis of the media coverage of the pandemic also seems to untangle (e.g., CNN condemned xenophobic attitudes towards Asians when coronavirus broke), and yet further entangles (e.g., Breitbart blamed China's failure to stop the virus that resulted in huge financial losses and China shall pay), the tension between nationalism/globalization and cultural misunderstandings/clashes of the East and the West. While Xinhua News and Chosun reported on mandatory mask wearing as a matter of fact in China and S.K., mask wearing has been politicized and otherized in the U.S. media.

In a way, coronavirus, unlike previous, less contagious or deadly, outbreaks such as the SARS and the H1N1 flu, serves as a perfect human experiment in examining competing national models in handling a pandemic. It put the media outlets to the test as well, as truth and fairness of reporting will eventually emerge. Future research shall further explore the competing needs of a free and responsible press within the context of serving both the individuals and national interests during a pandemic.

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