

From soft power to sharp power: China's media image in Hong Kong's health crises from 2003 to 2020

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Abstract

This article examines China's media image in Hong Kong's health crises of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2003 and the coronavirus disease-19 in 2020. Both diseases were allegedly transmitted from mainland China to Hong Kong, which triggered extensive media coverage and intensive debates over China's role in epidemic control, reaction, and its trust in Hong Kong and the world. In 2003, China established a relatively positive and constructive media image in Hong Kong during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome crisis, particularly when Chinese state leaders made themselves visible to the people. However, in the wake of coronavirus disease-19, media and public discourses have speculated about China's failure to contain the pandemic, questioning China's informational credibility. Theoretically, we argue that the comparison of China's media image in Hong Kong during the health crises of severe acute respiratory syndrome and coronavirus disease-19 indicates that China's international image has shifted from a soft power to a sharp power. While Hong Kong is under Chinese sovereignty as a Special Administrative Region of China and a global financial and business hub, its media discourses continue to indicate how overseas opinion perceives the rise of China and its performance as a global citizen. Our findings show that the scholarly dialogues on soft power and sharp power were manifested in the news frames of severe acute respiratory syndrome and coronavirus disease-19 in Hong Kong. We will conceptualize the shifting media image by revisiting the concepts of soft power, sharp power, and the international debate on the rise of China in recent decades.

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Keywords

China, coronavirus disease-19, Hong Kong, media image, severe acute respiratory syndrome, sharp power, soft power

Introduction

In the pandemic-stricken year of 2020, there has been global speculation about China's role and responsibility in the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID)-19. Despite inconclusive scientific grounds about the origins of the deadly pandemic, China's global image has been negatively affected by opinions about COVID-19 expressed in Western media. Hong Kong, a former British colony and international financial and business hub, has been a Special Administrative Region under Chinese sovereignty since 1997. It now reflects the "row" over China's image in relation to the spread of COVID-19. As a southern global city in China, Hong Kong paid highly anxious attention to this "mysterious" virus when it was exposed in the news in early 2020. Social anxiety about the spread of the virus from mainland China was further aggravated by the collective memory of another deadly virus in 2003: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The SARS story in Hong Kong was characterized by social fear about the transborder epidemic crisis in mainland China. Indeed, the first SARS patient in Hong Kong was from its neighboring province, Guangdong (Siu & Chan, 2007).

China's image during the pandemic crisis of COVID-19 reflects the contested scholarly and political discourses about soft power and sharp power in the rise of China in recent decades. In brief, dialogues on soft power stem from Joseph Nye's (1990) explication of public diplomacy. Previous studies of soft power have focused on the national charm offensive originating in foreign policy, the political system, and culture rather than economic and military coercion (Lee, 2016; Nye, 2004). The Chinese leadership has strengthened China's international image since the beginning of the millennium, and it eventually referred to the idea of "soft power" in 2007 (Lee, 2016). However, China's endeavor to enhance its international standing and soft power has been met by an increasingly global backlash in recent years, which is indicated by the emerging concern about the "sharp power" of non-democratic regimes (Walker, 2018). The notion of sharp power echoes the criticism of China's soft power, which is driven by state manipulation (Walker, 2018), economic influence (Lee, 2016), and exploitation of the open systems of democracies by authoritarian powers (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017). International attention to and deliberation about China's role in the health crisis of COVID-19 has unleashed scholarly and political discourses surrounding China's overseas influence and its image in the eyes of the world.

Drawing upon empirical studies on Hong Kong media, this article will compare how China's image has been received by Hong Kong society amid the epidemic health crisis of COVID-19 in 2020 and SARS in 2003. Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of China's image in Hong Kong's media representation of the COVID-19 health crisis from January to April 2020, and of SARS from February to May 2003, we present the shifting media frames of China by attributing them to the discourses of soft power and sharp power. The SARS epidemic took place in 2003 when China began to cultivate its international influence in the new millennium (Lee, 2016). The COVID-19 crisis broke out in early 2020 when controversies over China's sharp power became a prominent concern (DeLisle, 2020; Walker, 2018). The comparison of China's image in Hong Kong media frames of SARS and COVID-19 therefore enriches intellectual dialogues concerning China's soft power and sharp power.

China's soft power and sharp power

Soft power focuses on a country's cultural and political charm rather than coercion and threats (Hunter, 2009; Nye, 1990, 2004). As a rising power in the world since the beginning of this millennium, China has provoked scholarly discussions about its international exercise of soft power. Cho and Jeong (2008) observed that China adopted the notion of soft power as a supplementary strategy to promote its position in regional politics. In practical terms, cultural industries and scholarly interactions are the main vehicles used by China to extend the soft side of its influence. Referring to the audiovisual entertainment of Hollywood as the powerhouse of American soft power, previous studies showed that the flourishing film industry and market were also conducive to extending China's cultural influence in the world (Vlassis, 2016). In addition, the booming development of museums in mainland China serves to enhance the country's cultural nationalism (Varutti, 2014; Zhang & Courty, 2020). Another well-known arm of China's soft power is the establishment of state-sponsored Confucius Institutes around the world, which are venues for academic exchanges and the knowledge transfer of Chinese values (Zhou & Luk, 2016).

China's endeavor to develop its soft power has been met by mixed international responses. China's image in Southeast Asian countries was formerly enhanced by its rising economic and cultural effects (Kurlantzick, 2007). China has attempted to garner a more robust international support for its territorial conflicts with other nations (Nelson & Carlson, 2012) and to take a more active role in establishing international protocols (Breslin, 2009). However, China's interpretation and implementation of soft power is characterized by the involvement of state power and economic coercion, which contradicts the core conceptualization of soft power as a charm offensive to gain voluntary attraction in interactions among transnational civil societies (Lee, 2016; Nye, 2011, 25 March). Zhou and Luk (2016) argued that the establishment of Confucius Institutes has been an unsuccessful initiative in promoting China's soft power because they are perceived as a propaganda tool and a threat to the host countries. Huang and Ding (2006) described soft power as the Chinese Dragon's "underbelly." They argued that China's soft power in overseas societies has been constrained by ethnic-based Chinese nationalism, which inevitably has threatened other states. Cho and Jeong (2008, p. 427) highlighted that the authoritarian political system exercised by the Chinese Communist Party's dictatorship has exacerbated the theoretical threat of China to the world.

In recent years, Western democracies have become increasingly cautious about the international influence of nondemocratic regimes, especially those of China and Russia. The National Endowment for Democracy (2017) coined the term sharp power to conceptualize the influence of authoritarian powers on other states, which "pierces, penetrates or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries" (p. 6). The thesis of sharp power is differentiated from Nye's (1990, 2004) original proposition. Walker (2018) highlighted that sharp power could limit free expression and distort political environments by taking advantage of the asymmetric levels of freedom between democratic and authoritarian systems (p. 12). Chang and Yang (2020) elaborated that authoritarian regimes delegitimize democratic institutions and values by setting up their own state-sponsored media outlets in democratic societies but censor unfavorable foreign information in their own homelands. Such unequal informational flows could also occur in political and economic influence when authoritarian regimes expand their investments and political lobbying overseas while strictly controlling the activities and operation of foreign companies, parties, and organizations in their domestic territories (Walker, 2018; DeLisle, 2020). Some scholars have conceptualized sharp power in

explications of China's responses to the social movements in Hong Kong since 2019 (Hui, 2020) and of its attempts to control Taiwan (Chang and Yang, 2020).

Scholarly dialogues about soft power and sharp power have illuminated intellectual contestation regarding the rise of China and its effects on the international order. While China was generally perceived as an ascending stakeholder in the global village in the first decade of the 2000s, it has been embattled by foreign resistance that has criticized its authoritarian governance and international influence in subsequent decades. Such intellectual contestation has been manifested in post-handover Hong Kong. In 2003, the central government of China was positively perceived by the Hong Kong public when Beijing announced socioeconomic initiatives to boost investment and tourism in the epidemic-stricken region, which had suffered death, casualties, and social loss due to SARS (Chan, 2018). However, the positive interaction between China and Hong Kong began to decline in the second decade after the handover, which was characterized by growing cultural distrust between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong locals and the social fear of "mainlandization" in Hong Kong by rising China's influence (Chan, 2018; Jones, 2014). As the following sections of this article discuss, the investigation of the media representations of China's image during the SARS (2003) and COVID-19 (2020) epidemics could provide evidence about intellectual debate, particularly the representation of China's image in Hong Kong.

Research methods

To examine the media representation of China's image during the health crises of SARS and COVID-19, in 2003 and 2020, respectively, we searched for news articles the *Wiseneews* archive, an online electronic news database containing news and media publications in Hong Kong from 1998. As our study period, we selected the first 4 months after the outbreak of both health crises: February to May 2003 for SARS and January to April 2020 for COVID-19. We searched the news database using the following combinations of Chinese keywords:

- Wuhan pneumonia (武漢肺炎) (which was initially used in Hong Kong and internationally) OR new corona pneumonia (新冠肺炎) OR new pneumonia (新型肺炎): these were the most frequently used terms to describe COVID-19 in the news coverage of Hong Kong. The command "OR" instructed the *Wiseneews* archive to search for news articles containing any of these three terms.
- SARS (沙士) (which is a local Hong Kong usage) OR SARS (directly input the English words) OR atypical pneumonia (非典型肺炎): these were the most common terms used to describe SARS in news coverage in Hong Kong.

In addition to searching for news articles on the topics of COVID-19 or SARS in the respective study periods, we identified news articles that related the health crises to mainland China or the Chinese central government, which facilitated our examination of China's image in media representations of Hong Kong. We therefore used the following combinations of keywords:

- China (中國) OR hinterland (內地) OR mainland (大陸) OR the central government (中央): these were the most frequently used terms to describe China or Chinese society in the news coverage of Hong Kong. We input this combination of keywords with those that indicated COVID-19 or SARS by typing the command "AND" between them so that the *Wiseneews*

archive would select news coverage about these two health crises consisting of content about China or Chinese society.

In addition to examining the news coverage of both health crises in relation to China's image, we identified keywords that were highly illustrative of the public sentiment of Hong Kong regarding health crises originating in China. Specifically, in reports on the SARS epidemic in 2003, mainland China was culturally framed as a social imaginary in Hong Kong, which featured unknown health threats. The first SARS patient in Hong Kong was from Guangdong province (Siu & Chan, 2007). Because of the casualties and social loss in Hong Kong due to SARS in 2003, the epidemic became a primary cultural template for Hong Kong society's perception of health crisis as originating in the outside world (Chan, 2016). Hence, we constructed the following combinations of Chinese keywords to search for related news articles in the *Wiseneews* database:

- (Wuhan pneumonia (武漢肺炎) OR new corona pneumonia (新冠肺炎) OR new pneumonia (新型肺炎)) AND (SARS (沙士) OR SARS (directly input the English words) OR atypical pneumonia (非典型肺炎)): this combination of keywords was specifically constructed for the study period in 2020, as we wanted to examine the extent to which the news coverage of COVID-19 also mentioned SARS.

The above combinations of keywords allowed us to scrutinize the cultural impact of SARS on the media representation of COVID-19 in Hong Kong. Apart from quantitative analysis, we also conduct qualitative analysis on the key news frames based on the data collected from the *Wiseneews* database. We adopt the conceptual framework of discourse analysis constructed by Gamson and Lasch (1983). Their framework was used to examine news discourses based on key ideological elements: frame (i.e. the overall cultural meanings and social reasoning of the news frame); metaphor or catchphrase (i.e. theme statement, tagline title, or slogan intended to summarize the social issue); exemplars (i.e. past or present events commonly cited); depiction or visual image (i.e. icons or images suggesting the most significant meaning of the news frame); root (i.e. causality of the event implied by the news frame); consequences (i.e. social impact); and principle (i.e. moral appeal and justification). The conceptual model used in the qualitative framing analysis was useful in considering the major news frames suggested by the media representation of China's image in the health crises of SARS and COVID-19. The in-depth qualitative analysis of the news frames revealed the ideologies and discourses embedded in the media representation. In the following section, we will interpret the media data drawn from the *Wiseneews* database by discussing the findings of the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Regarding the qualitative analysis of the news frames, we will discuss in detail representative and illustrative news reports, editorials, and commentaries.

Findings

The findings shown in Figure 1 indicate the salience of the health crises in the media representation during the 4 months after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 and of SARS in 2003. It presents the daily news and online news about COVID-19 separately, as the amount of online news was overwhelmingly greater than that of the daily news. Regarding news about SARS, only daily news is presented, as online news was not yet well-developed in 2003. We include both news and commentaries in the quantitative figures, as they represent the media exposure of the epidemic (SARS or COVID-19) in Hong Kong. Figure 1 shows that media attention to COVID-19 increased

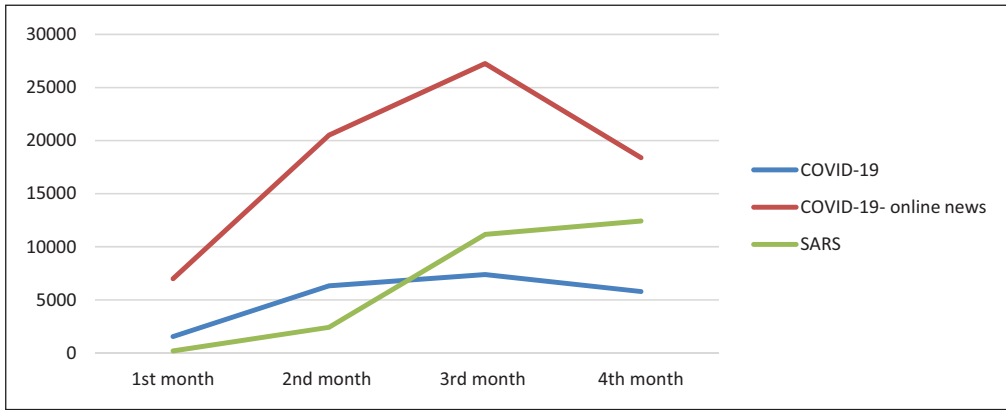


Figure 1. Media coverage of COVID-19 and SARS.

steadily from the first to the third months after the epidemic outbreak, while those for SARS increased sharply from the second to the third months and then continued to rise in the fourth month. Both health crises caused a great deal of persistent public concern after the outbreak of the epidemics.

Figure 2 illustrates the percentages of news about both health crises containing Chinese content, such as descriptions of mainland China, Chinese leaders, or Chinese society. The percentages of both the online and daily news of COVID-19 were generally higher than those of the daily news about SARS. All percentages were their highest at the outbreaks of the epidemics, which suggests that the Hong Kong public tended to think of mainland China when they became aware of the health crises. The findings shown in Figure 2 support those shown in Figure 3, which indicates that upon the epidemic outbreak, a high percentage of the news about COVID-19 mentioned SARS. These percentages gradually decreased in the subsequent months. The figures infer that the Hong Kong public immediately thought about mainland China for the outbreak of COVID-19, thanks to the collective memory of SARS.

To triangulate the quantitative findings, we employed the conceptual framework developed by Gamson and Lasch (1983) to identify the key news frames in the media representation of SARS and COVID-19. Table 1 shows the key news frames of the news coverage of SARS in early 2003. In general, although there were accusations of conspiracy regarding China's performance in combating the epidemic, media representations in Hong Kong generally conveyed China's attempts to foster global solidarity against the disease, transparency in epidemic policy, and support for Hong Kong. The pro-China newspaper *Wen Wei Po* quoted the Chinese president Hu Jintao's remark, "war of the people," which was a metaphor of China's mobilization of measures against the epidemic measures (*Wen Wei Po*, 2003a, 2 May, p. A08). In another news report, the same pro-China paper proclaimed that China was a responsible country that aimed to restore international trust (*Wen Wei Po*, 2003d, 25 May, p. A12). The positive image of building global solidarity against the SARS epidemic was found in the news coverage of other press organizations that held a centrist (e.g. *Ming Pao*) or critical stance on China (e.g. *Apple Daily*). Both *Ming Pao* and *Apple Daily* reported that American President George W. Bush expressed appreciation for China's measures against the epidemic (*Ming Pao*, 2003a, 28 April, p. A16; *Apple Daily*, 2003d, 28 April, p. A11). The international recognition of China's epidemic measures was

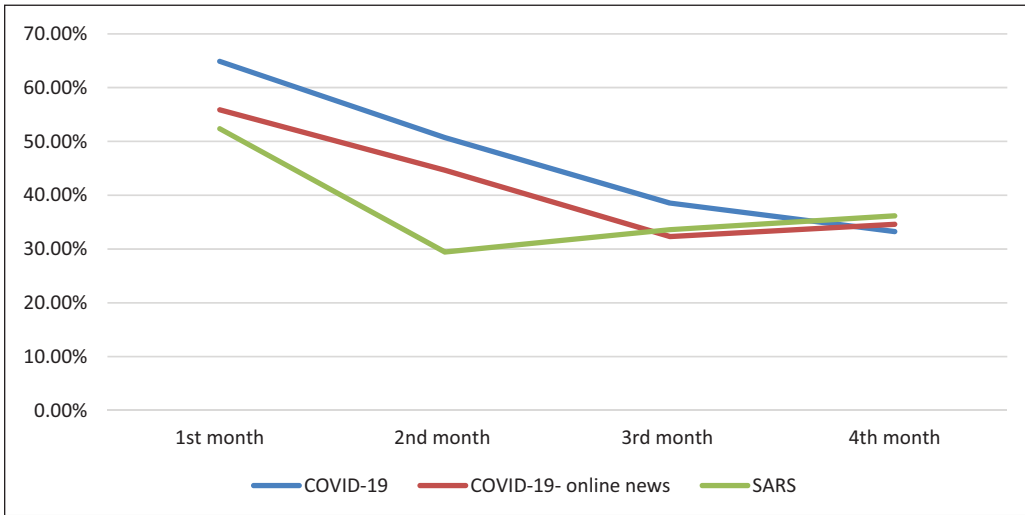


Figure 2. Percentage of Chinese content in media coverage.

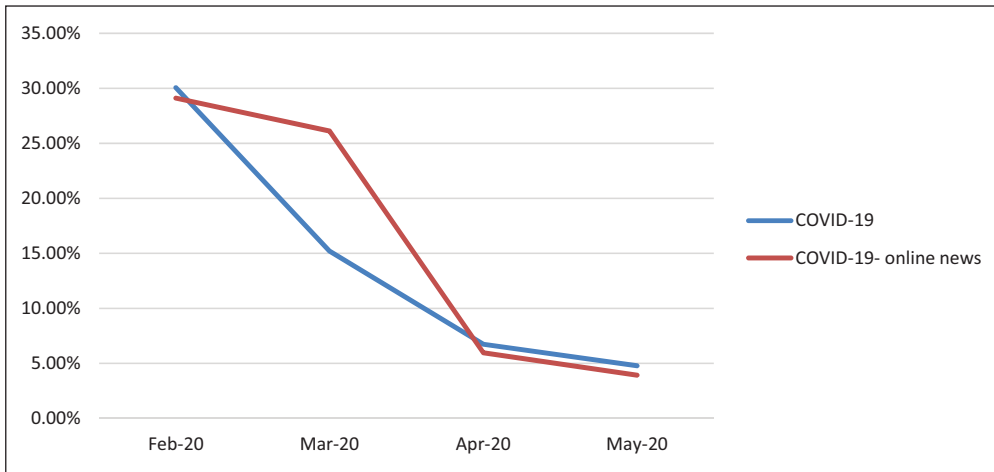


Figure 3. Percentage of COVID-19 media coverage mentioning SARS.

preconditioned by the central government’s stringent control of the transmission of the disease. The Chinese president personally ordered his government to prevent SARS from spreading to the outside world (*Oriental Daily*, 2003, 19 May, p. A10). He also ordered all local authorities not to cover up information about the epidemic (*Apple Daily*, 2003a, 18 April, p. A04). The media representation of positive interactions between China and international stakeholders in global solidarity against SARS was constructed in a news frame that highlighted China’s responsible reaction to the epidemic crisis and its winning of global trust. China was thus regarded as a significant international stakeholder because of its contribution to the measures against the

Table 1. News frames of China's role in SARS.

Frame	Global solidarity against epidemic	China's helping hands	China's conspiracy
Metaphor/ catchphrase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China is a responsible country (中國是負責任國家) Restoring international trust (重建國際互信關係) War for the people (人民戰爭) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China will support Hong Kong forever (祖國永遠是香港的堅強后盾) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SARS as China's biochemical weapon SARS as China's Chernobyl?
Example	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese state leaders keep warning that no cover-ups of epidemic cases China punishes under-performed officials in the epidemic crisis Communication among the top leaders between China and other states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China delivers medical and supporting materials to Hong Kong Chinese state leaders care about the epidemic situation in Hong Kong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beijing's cover-ups of SARS patients China's new leadership is wrestling with internal power struggle amid SARS crisis
Depiction/visual image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese state leaders promise not to transmit SARS to overseas Appreciation from other state leaders to China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese state leaders personally supervise supporting materials for Hong Kong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The metaphor of Chernobyl, which recalls memory of covering up human-made disaster
Root	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's responsible reaction to epidemic crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's responsible reaction to epidemic crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal power struggle within China's leadership Habitual defects of China's officialdom
Consequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstration of China's new leadership to the world Enhancing China's role in international world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidating the China-Hong Kong relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese officials keen to claim credits and sway away from responsibility
Principle/moral appeal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Earning international trust for China amid epidemic crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Earning trust for China in Hong Kong amid epidemic crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China is not a trustworthy country

SARS: severe acute respiratory syndrome.

SARS epidemic (*Apple Daily*, 2003e, 29 May, p. A27), which the reformist leadership demonstrated during that health crisis (Brahm, 2003, 5 May).

In addition to the news frame of global solidarity against SARS, media coverage in Hong Kong also highlighted to China's support of Hong Kong. The pro-China paper *Wen Wei Po* published the highly illustrative saying, "China will support Hong Kong forever (*Wen Wei Po*, 2003c, May 9, p. A27). China delivered protective equipment and other medical resources to Hong Kong. The Chinese premier Wen Jiabao personally supervised the transaction, which demonstrated that Chinese state leaders supported Hong Kong (*Wen Wei Po*, 2003b, May 7, p. A01). The news frame of China's support of Hong Kong depicted China's responsible reaction to the epidemic crisis and Hong Kong's social trust in China. Strikingly, the *Apple Daily*, which is well known for its critical stance on China, reported that because of China's stringent measures against the epidemic, Hong Kong people trusted Beijing more than they trusted the local Hong Kong government (*Apple Daily*, 2003b, April 25, p. A08).

Nevertheless, critical voices in Hong Kong's media representation expressed negative attitudes toward China's performance during the SARS epidemic. Without concrete evidence though, it was suggested that SARS was a bioweapon created by China (*Ming Pao*, 2003b, May 2, p. A16). Political commentator Ivan Choy coined the metaphor "China's Chernobyl" to describe China's reaction to SARS (Choy, 2003, May 30). It was argued that China was experiencing internal power struggles between the new and former leaderships during the epidemic crisis (*Apple Daily*, 2003c, April 26, p. A13). Moreover, the Chinese bureaucracy was criticized for shying away from responsibility but being keen to claim credit (Chan, 2003, May 6). In this coverage, China was depicted as an untrustworthy country.

Table 2 shows the major news frames of the COVID-19 epidemic in early 2020. Resembling the news frames of SARS in 2003, the pro-China press has highlighted China's leadership during the COVID-19 epidemic. According to a commentary in the pro-China *Wen Wei Po*, China gained international applause by helping others to fight COVID-19 (Chu, 2020, March 20). Another online media platform HK01, which was founded by a Hong Kong businessman who has vast investment in China, also referred to the words by the Chinese president Xi Jinping, who requested the implementation of a central policy to combat the epidemic (HK01, 2020a, January 27). To substantiate China's leadership during the epidemic, there were news reports about China's punishment of incompetent officials in carrying out measures against the epidemic (HK01, 2020c, February 21). These reports highlighted the central government's command to closely monitor asymptomatic patients and maintain the transparency of information about the epidemic (*Wen Wei Po*, 2020b, March 31, p. A08). Such news reports stated that Chinese state leaders personally comforted residents and working personnel during the epidemic (HK01, 2020b, February 10). The benevolence of Chinese state leaders was further illustrated by the report about a donation of 4.73 billion Chinese yuan from members of the Chinese Communist Party (HK01, 2020d, March 4) and President Xi's offer of support to the international community (*Wen Wei Po*, 2020a, March 22, p. A03). The news framing of China's leadership during the epidemic emphasized Beijing's responsible action to the COVID-19 epidemic and its attempts to restore a positive image of Chinese leadership in both China and overseas. This news frame was reminiscent of soft power, which is aimed at fostering trust in Chinese partisan leadership.

However, there were also negative news frames of China's leadership during the epidemic crisis. Compared with the news frames of the SARS epidemic in 2003, the news coverage about China's conspiracy included cynical and aggressive metaphors of the Chinese partisan leadership.

Table 2. News frames of China's role in COVID-19.

Frame	China's leadership in epidemic crisis	China's conspiracy	China's manipulation of international order
Metaphor/catchphrase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese president: throughout implementation of central policy to win the epidemic war (貫徹落實黨中央決策 打贏疫情防疫狙擊戰) China wins international applause by helping others to fight against epidemic (中國襄助他國抗疫贏得國際掌聲) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Emperor" Xi Jinping transfers public anger to local officialdom (習帝卸責群臣) American president Trump coined the term "Chinese virus" (中國病毒) and accused China of covering up the outbreak and later spreading the COVID-19 virus to the world FOX news said China gets "bloody hands" (滿手鮮血) and requests Chinese president to tell the truth about COVID-19 Suppression of "whistle blowers" for their early release of epidemic information China's online informational control and public doubts to official epidemic information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World Health Organization (WHO) "kneels" (跪低) before China The United States accused WHO taking "China as the center" (以中國為中心)
Example	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's replacement of incompetent officials and promotion of capable leaders amid COVID-19 crisis Stringent epidemic measures by China Communication between Chinese state leaders, other state leaders and international organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The United States accused China raging disinformation about COVID-19 Taiwan accused China's suppression of its participation in WHO Overseas countries attack the performance of WHO in prevention of COVID-19 Taiwan's laudable performance and cooperation with other states in epidemic prevention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The United States will "shut down the water tap" (閉水喉) for WHO The accusation that China pretends to be "savior" (救世主) in COVID-19 pandemic
Depiction/visual image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On-site visits by Chinese state leaders to hospitals and virus-stricken areas Chinese state leaders initiate donations for combating COVID-19 Appreciation of China by some state leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The death of Dr. Li Wen-liang, the first medical doctor who was arrested because of informing others about the epidemic in the early stage Charlie Hebdo (satiric French political magazine) depicted Chinese president sleeps with a wild animal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's manipulation of international order and overseas countries China's suppression of Taiwan's contribution to epidemic prevention
Root	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's responsible reaction to epidemic crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance weakness of Chinese partisan dictatorship Covering up China's fraudulent handling of epidemic crisis and internal problems such as fragile economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International call for investigating the outbreak of COVID-19 Rising anti-Chinese sentiment around the world China is the world's enemy
Consequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restoring positive image of Chinese leadership in China and the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Losing ruling legitimacy of Chinese partisan leadership Collapsing trust to China and Chinese state leadership 	
Principle/moral appeal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrusting Chinese partisan leadership 		

COVID: coronavirus disease; WHO: World Health Organization.

Chinese president Xi was depicted as “an emperor” who transferred public anger to local officialdom under the negative global sentiment against China’s failure to stop the transmission of COVID-19 from its borders to the world (*Apple Daily*, 2020f, March 3, p. A07). Attacks on China by foreign state leaders and international media included provocative catchphrases in news discourses in Hong Kong. American President Donald Trump pejoratively coined COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” (*Apple Daily*, 2020g, March 18, p. A09). The American conservative media outlet FOX news also accused China of having “bloody hands” and condemned the Chinese Communist government of covering up the seriousness of the epidemic in information disseminated to the world (*Apple Daily*, 2020h, March 20). Conspiracies regarding China’s cover up of the epidemic were further bolstered in news reports that reviewed China’s suppression of online epidemic information and public distrust of official messages (HK01, 2020e, March 5). The death of whistleblower Dr Li Wenliang, a mainland doctor who was detained by Chinese police because he released information about COVID-19, became an icon of the collapse of official credibility during the health crisis (*Apple Daily*, 2020d, February 21). The French satirical political magazine *Charles Hebdo* issued a cover image of the Chinese president sleeping with a wild animal (*Apple Daily*, 2020c, April 25). Ivan Choy, a well-known political commentator in Hong Kong, described China’s performance during COVID-19 as “China’s Chernobyl” (Choy, 2020, February 5). The news frame of China’s conspiracy emphasized the decreasing international trust in China and the fragile ruling legitimacy of Chinese state leadership due to the governance weakness in the partisan dictatorship and the bureaucratic cover-up of the crisis caused by the epidemic.

In addition to the news framing of China’s conspiracy, the country was also portrayed as manipulating the international order and unduly influencing the World Health Organization (WHO), which is the leading international healthcare policy body. Citing the accusation of the United States against China’s influence over the WHO, the *Apple Daily* used the word “kneels” to describe WHO’s compliance with China’s pressure in response to COVID-19 (*Apple Daily*, 2020e, January 29, p. A09). Sino–American tensions amid the global pandemic became news agendas in Hong Kong’s media representation. American President Donald Trump warned that China must bear the consequences if it concealed information about the epidemic (Ming Pao, 2020, April 20, p. A11). American secretary of state Mike Pompeo accused China of suppressing Taiwan’s contribution to measures against the global epidemic of COVID-19 (HK01, 2020f, March 31). The United States eventually removed its sponsorship of the WHO because the latter had adopted a “China-centered” approach to its epidemic policy (*Apple Daily*, 2020b, April 15). A column of the British *Times* also criticized China for “pretending” to be the “savior” in the COVID-19 pandemic and condemned China for concealing information about the epidemic from the world but then later sending out medical support (*Apple Daily*, 2020a, April 8). The news frame of international manipulator was echoed in the conceptualization of sharp power. It was derived from the international tension faced by China during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the Sino–American hostility. China was depicted as an aggressive manipulator that had distorted the operations of the WHO, such as by blocking the participation of Taiwan in the organization and jeopardizing transnational public health. China was also accused of concealing significant information about the epidemic so that the global community was caught off-guard by COVID-19. China’s manipulation of the international order, according to this news frame, resulted in increasing anti-Chinese sentiment around the world, which was manifested in international calls for investigating the outbreak of this deadly pandemic.

Conclusion and discussion: beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

The findings of our study demonstrated that the conceptualization of soft power and sharp power could inform us about China's image in Hong Kong's media representation during the global health crises in 2003 (SARS) and 2020 (COVID-19). In brief, soft power refers to the implementation of national charm in overseas societies based on cultural attraction. Sharp power could be described as the exercise of informational control and state capitalism over external free markets, potentially weakening the soft power and legitimacy of democracies (Nye, 1990, 2004; Walker, 2018). In the media discourses of SARS, China was largely pictured as a builder of international solidarity against a global epidemic who earned a positive appraisal from other world leaders. Conversely, in the media discourse of COVID-19, China is widely depicted as a manipulator of international order which unduly exerts influence on an international organization, WHO, and conceals its own moral responsibility, demonstrating that China could readily exercise its political and economic influence—a typical reflection of a rising sharp power, particularly, in the eyes of the west. News representation suggests the extent to which the discussion of soft power and sharp power is diffusing from scholarly and intellectual deliberation to public discourse, and helps us to access how the general public perceives the rising global influence of non-democracies, especially China and Russia. The notions of soft power and sharp power originate from the purpose of public diplomacy in international relations studies. News and media discourses therefore are significant field for examining the effect of such concepts and strategies.

Conceptual dialogues about soft power and sharp power stem from increasing scholarly and political concerns about the international influence of authoritarian and hybrid regimes. In the literature on soft power, it is assumed that nation-states that embrace it win popularity by exerting cultural charm in democratic systems (Nye, 1990, 2004). However, the concept of sharp power precisely challenges this assumption because the political ideologies and propaganda in non-democratic regimes are gaining footholds in international relations and politics (Walter, 2018). Hong Kong, which is an international financial center where global capital meets the rising China, is an interesting exemplar of the practice of soft power and sharp power, which the findings of the present study demonstrated. Because of its international standing in finance and business, Hong Kong could be a testing ground of China's capacity to extend its soft power and sharp power to the global community. Also surfacing were lingering Sino-American tensions and China's diplomatic relationship with neighboring states. Future studies on media representations of Hong Kong could also investigate global public opinions of China's international relations.

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