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## **MEDIA NARRATIVE COMPETITION BETWEEN THE U.S. AND CHINA DURING COVID-19**

ZHENZHU ZHANG

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MEDIA NARRATIVE COMPETITION BETWEEN THE U.S. AND CHINA DURING  
COVID-19

by

Zhenzhu Zhang

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Communication  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved by:

Dr. Steven Venette, Committee Chair  
Dr. John Meyer  
Dr. Eura Jung  
Dr. Jae-Hwa Shin  
Dr. Kyna Shelley

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the narratives that were presented in Chinese and American media by using Dr. Li Wenliang (one of the first people who tried to raise the alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19), and the COVID-19 origin controversy as case studies to understand how these news stories conflicted and which tellings became dominant. The way these two cases have been depicted in the media has changed over time. Understanding how that depiction changed is important because it helps demonstrate how narratives function to frame crises. The current study uses narrative, and framing theories to support thematic analysis of news articles. Observing how a narrative changes allows for a more nuanced perspective of how crises are communicated and understood by the community. Three major themes emerged from the media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang both in China and the United States: rumormonger, whistleblower and politicized icon, and martyr. Five major themes the U.S. and China were debating were uncovered related to the origin of COVID-19: natural cause, lab-leak conspiracy, U.S. army conspiracy, WHO's investigation role, and no clear source. The findings identify internal and external sources of pressure that can cause the media to change their storytelling. This analysis suggests that recognition of the competing media narratives between the U.S. and China during times of crises is necessary to facilitate a better understanding and effective strategic communication with each other.

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## DEDICATION

“To everything there is a season.”

“Each step counts.”

To my mother Chuanying Chen, my father Jianguo Zhang, my sister Mingzhu Zhang, and my brother Baozhu Zhang.

You are the most important people in my life, and I love all of you. I can't pursue my dream without your unconditional support and encouragement over the past four years when I am alone in the United States.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CDC</i>	U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<i>CGTN</i>	China Global Television Network
<i>COVID-19</i>	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
<i>GT</i>	Global Times
<i>IRB</i>	Institutional Review Board
<i>NYT</i>	The New York Times
<i>PD</i>	People's Daily
<i>PRC</i>	People's Republic of China
<i>WHO</i>	World Health Organization
<i>WSJ</i>	The Wall Street Journal
<i>XH</i>	Xinhua News Agency

## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

The U.S.-China relationship is “one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world” (Website of the Chinese Embassy in the US, 2012, para. 3). Generally, as each other’s stakeholder, the U.S.-China relations exist in both cooperation and competition. The two countries are still exploring how to get along well with each other. However, in recent years, tensions between the United States and China have been rising. Currently, the U.S.-China relations are at a historical low point due to how the Chinese government and the American government communicate about controversial issues amid the outbreak of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a key global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge our human beings have ever encountered since the World War Two (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Crisis can be defined as an unexpected event or series of events with manifested risk, high levels of uncertainty and threat (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Surprise, threat, short response time, and change could be considered as the four defining characteristics of crisis (Venette, 2003). Among the numerous definitions of crisis, one theme in common is that crisis is “a significant threat that can jeopardize an organization’s image, reputation, and financial stability, and may result in injuries and death” (George, 2012, p. 32).

COVID-19 pandemic can be considered as a global health crisis because it is an immediate threat to public health, social economies, and our communities. People’s normal way of living has been changed. Millions of people lost their lives globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health, food security and the work environment are also unprecedentedly challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has

caused devastating economic and social disruptions (World Health Organization, 2020, October 13). The COVID-19 crisis emergency and the enormity of the challenges that come with it, require government authorities to respond immediately to the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic was reported to have first hit Wuhan, China in December of 2019 (Lu, 2019, December 31). To date, the United States has the highest number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the world (World Health Organization COVID-19 Dashboard, 2022). Understandably, the tensions between the U.S. and China surrounding COVID-19 are inevitable.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers an ideal context in which to examine how media narratives function to frame crises, particularly how media narratives compete with one another in the face of an ambiguous and evolving health crisis. In other words, different constructions of narratives within or regarding a crisis gain or lose acceptance over time, and when certain tellings are incompatible, the audiences must make decisions about what to believe. New information is processed in relation to what is already held to be true, also known as the dominant or primary narrative (Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003). While people can encounter and process individual pieces of information, most often information is bundled into larger units, such as stories. Thus, narratives can be seen as “competitive” because they are vying for acceptance from the audience.

Information is crucial during a crisis, however, due to the main characteristics of a crisis, access to information is often restricted. There are so many uncertainties and controversies during times of crisis; therefore, people are desperately seeking information, especially regarding controversial issues, to satisfy their information needs. So, during times of crisis, understanding how government authorities effectively

communicate and narrate about controversial issues to the public through media outlets is vital.

Sellnow and Seeger (2013) state that “crisis communication could simply be understood as the ongoing process of creating shared meaning among and between groups, communities, individuals and agencies, within the ecological context of a crisis, for the purpose of preparing for and reducing, limiting and responding to threats and harm” (p. 13). Currently, scholars in crisis communication have summarized different types of crisis narratives and explored the role narratives play during crisis communication (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Crisis communication scholars also found an interesting phenomenon that narratives during crisis often compete (Heath, 2004; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). However, some questions still remain. These current studies do not provide an explanation how the narratives interact and change over time in the context of crisis. Furthermore, most of the existing studies on crisis communication were conducted in the west. Studies are scarce that have investigated the impact of narratives in crisis communication upon the strategic communication between China and the United States. Research conducted from the combined theoretical lens of agenda setting and framing is even rarer. This dissertation contributes to this academic conversation.

In this dissertation, I mainly explore the media narrative escalating competition during COVID-19 between the U.S. and China. Recognition of the competing media narratives between the United States and China is necessary to facilitate a better understanding and effective strategic communication between those two global superpowers.

The current study uses thematic narrative analysis of two cases as they unfolded, and also uses agenda-setting theory and framing theory as theoretical framework to help understand how, as the narratives change, people's understandings of the events also change. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the competing media narratives during COVID-19 between the United States and China. In particular, the focus is on how and why the Chinese state media or the American mainstream media narratives change over time and compete with one another. The purpose of this study is to understand how media construct stories, particularly when they are framing in opposition with one another.

#### U.S.-China relations overview

According to the Chinese Embassy in the US (2012), "following the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), China and the United States had a long period of estrangement" due to historical issues such as Taiwan, the Korean War, and Tibet. The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations led to the rapprochement between these two countries. In February 1972, the former American president Richard Nixon visited China for the first time in the history, "starting the process of normalization" of the Sino-U.S. relationship.

As the Chinese Embassy in the U.S. (2012) pointed out that "since China and the U.S. resumed contact, the two sides have seen frequent high-level visits and improving dialogue mechanisms. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, bilateral economic and trade relations have been growing rapidly, with broadening areas of cooperation, increasing substance, and greater interdependence". As "the biggest developing country and the biggest developed country", the U.S.-China economic and trade relations is a



critical pillar for the U.S.-China relationship. “Given the differences in their political systems, historical and cultural traditions, and levels of economic development, China and the U.S.” naturally “have different views on certain issues” (Chinese Embassy in the US, 2012).

Conflicts between the United States and China exist among a wide range of diplomatic, political, technological, and trade issues areas, with the U.S.-China trade war a primary example. According to statistics from the Office of the United States Trade Representative on its Website,

The U.S. is China’s largest export market and sixth largest source of import. China is the third largest export market and the largest source of import for the United States. China is currently U.S.’ largest goods trading partner with \$635.4 billion in total (two way) goods trade during 2017. Goods exports totaled \$129.9 billion; goods imports totaled \$505.5 billion. The U.S. goods trade deficit with China was \$375.6 billion in 2017, an 8.2% increase (\$28.6 billion) over 2016 (n. d., para. 4).

Swanson explained, “The United States trade deficit with China climbed to its highest level on record in 2017” (2018, February 6, para. 1). Therefore, countering the trade deficit became the Trump administration’s priority towards China, and a trade war was initiated, escalated, and intensified.

Another primary example is the Meng Wanzhou case. On December 1, 2018, Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei, a leading Chinese telecommunications conglomerate. The U.S. Department of Justice has requested Meng’s extradition, alleging that Huawei and Meng violated the economic sanctions toward Iran

and committed fraud (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019). Lijian Zhao, a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, called Meng's arrest a "serious political incident" (Xia, 2020, June 16, para. 1) and demanded, "immediately release Meng and ensure her safe return to China" (Xia, 2020, June 16, para. 6). Although officials of the U.S. Department of Justice claimed impartial law enforcement, the former U.S. President Trump admitted openly that Meng's arrest could be used as "a bargaining chip" (Klein & Westcott, 2018, December 12, para. 1) in ongoing U.S.-China trade talks.

Conflicts between the U.S. and China were far from over. August 5, 2019, the U.S. named China as "a Currency Manipulator" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2019, para. 1). On November 27, 2019, former U.S. President Trump signed the "Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019" (U.S. Congress, 2019) supporting the protesters in Hong Kong. On December 2, 2019, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson condemned the U.S. for "serious interference in China's internal affairs" (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2019, para. 1), sanctioned a few U.S.-based NGOs, and suspended a military exchange between the U.S. and Hong Kong.

In December 2019, COVID-19 first hit Wuhan, China, and then became a global pandemic. The narrative battle surrounding the origin of COVID-19 has increased tensions between the U.S. and China during the pandemic. On March 2, 2020, the U.S. Government labeled five Chinese state media entities as "foreign missions" (U.S. Department of State, 2020, para. 2) and limited Chinese journalists' number in the United States. On March 18, 2020, the Chinese Government announced its "countermeasures" (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2020, para. 6), such as reporters from The Wall Street

Journal, The New York Times, and The Washington Post had to leave China after their press cards expired in 2020.

U.S.-China tensions escalated and the mutual shutdown of the Consulates “mark[ed] the lowest point of bilateral relations in decades” (Wu, 2020, August 7, para. 1). On July 22, 2020, the United States demanded China close its consulate in Houston, alleging that “it was a hub of spying and intellectual property theft” (Wu, 2020, August 7, para. 2). Two days later, on July 24, China condemned the U.S. Government’s action and ordered the U.S. to close its consulate in Chengdu as a response (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2020, para. 1).

At this sensitive moment of the U.S.-China relationship, the former U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo admitted the failure of the U.S. foreign policy towards China in his important speech of “Communist China and the Free World’s Future” (Pompeo, 2020, July 23). Pompeo declared that “the era of engagement with the Chinese Communist Party is over, condemning its unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and aggressive moves in the East and South China Seas” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021, para. 44). Pompeo’s speech marks a significant change in the U.S. policy towards China.

#### Overview of the case of Dr. Li Wenliang

In December 2019, hospitals in Wuhan, China, started to receive patients with severe pneumonia symptoms that appeared to be a new form of disease (Lu, 2019, December 31). On December 30, 2019, as an ophthalmologist of Wuhan Central Hospital, Dr. Li Wenliang had seen a patient’s laboratory report with startling results, and he started to notice a possible outbreak of SARS-like coronavirus (Li, 2020, January 31).

Wuhan Central Hospital was one of the key health facilities when COVID-19 first hit Wuhan, China (Green, 2020).

According to Dr. Li Wenliang's (2020, January 31) own post on the social media platform Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter), he had seen a patient's laboratory report with surprising results, noting "positive indicators of high confidence of SARS-like coronavirus" (para. 1) on December 30, 2019. In an attempt to warn his medical school alumni, Dr. Li Wenliang sent messages through his WeChat social media account, warning them about a possible outbreak of SARS-like coronavirus and encouraging them to protect themselves from infection. He wrote,

7 cases of SARS have been confirmed at Huanan Seafood Market. According to a patient's laboratory report, the main mode of transmission of the virus is short-range droplet transmission. It can cause a type of special pneumonia that is infectious. The patients are isolated in the emergency department of our hospital's Houhu campus. The latest news is that it has been confirmed as a Coronavirus, and they are currently analyzing the virus type. Don't circulate this information outside the group, tell your family and loved ones to take precautions. (Li, 2020, January 31, para. 1)

Although Dr. Li Wenliang was not trying to spread information about the virus to the general public, this is the first time the possibility of this virus was publicly shared with any suggestion of documentation. As with WeChat, many people in the group could see this post. It was very easy for Dr. Li Wenliang's message to be read and leaked, allowing it to spread, much like the virus it was reporting.

On January 3, 2020, Dr. Li Wenliang was reprimanded by the local police for spreading rumors. After returning to work, days later, Dr. Li Wenliang unfortunately contracted COVID-19 while treating one of his patients (Li, 2020, January 31). On February 6, 2020, Dr. Li Wenliang died from the virus (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7).

#### Overview of the case of the origin of COVID-19

Former U. S. President Trump issued a travel ban to prevent all aliens who visited mainland China within two weeks of entering the United States due to COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China (Trump, 2020, January 31). The World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outbreak of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020, March 11). The diplomatic language between China and the U. S. became openly confrontational, with high-ranking officials in these two countries finger pointing at each other to blame the other side for the global pandemic.

According to spokesperson of Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian's (2020, March 12) own post on Twitter, he had cited a video clip of the U.S. "*House Oversight and Reform Committee Hearing on Coronavirus Response, Day 1*" (C-SPAN [Producer], 2020) on March 11. Robert Redfield, the director for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), admitted that some people had been diagnosed as dying of influenza in the U.S. when it could have been COVID-19 in fact (C-SPAN [Producer], 2020). Zhao Lijian wrote,

CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation! (Zhao, 2020, March 12)

More than 300 athletes from the U.S. military attended the 2019 Military World Games which was held in Wuhan, China in October 2019 (Wang, 2019, October 15). On March 12, 2020, Zhao Lijian also retweeted a link to an article from GlobalResearch which claimed that the COVID-19 may have escaped from U.S. Army Fort Detrick in Maryland as further evidence to support his argument that the COVID-19 originated in the U.S., and it may be the athletes from the U.S Army who brought the virus to Wuhan, China (Zhao, 2020, March 12). On March 16, former U.S. President Trump fought back immediately on Twitter by calling COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus” (Trump, 2020, March 16), invoking U.S. Senator Tom Cotton’s conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 was leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology’s lab (Stevenson, 2020, February 17).

#### Case studies

Dr. Li Wenliang’s tragic story and the origin of COVID-19 became spotlights of news media in both China and the United States, drawing intense attention amid the global pandemic. The way these two cases have been depicted in the media has changed over time and understanding how that depiction has changed is important. During crises, meaning is negotiated through the construction and exchange of narratives, and crises are understood and “lived” in terms of these frames (Venette, 2008, 2003). These two cases highlight how narratives unfold over time, and how media narratives frame people’s reactions during a crisis. While analysis of crisis narratives has been one focus of study for crisis communication (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016), additional understanding is needed about how competing narratives interact – especially when they are intercultural.

## Preview of chapters

Five separate chapters comprise this dissertation. In chapter two I review the relevant theoretical framework of narrative theory, agenda setting theory and framing theory based on which this research is designed. COVID-19 public health crisis provides the ideal context for communication scholars to explore how to apply the narrative, and framing theories into crisis communication. The association and prominence of each theoretical framework regarding to this research is outlined. I explain the detailed research methodology applied in this study in chapter three. In chapter four I present the key results. I explain the major research findings in the light of theoretical and practical implications in chapter five. I also provide the limitations and future research directions. In the end I summarize an overarching conclusion of this study.

## CHAPTER II – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The COVID-19 public health crisis represents an important research topic. Many different lenses have been used to explore this topic. In this study, media framing, and to a lesser degree, agenda setting theories are used in the context of narrative theory to examine how narratives evolve and compete during crises. The researcher provides the explanations of each theory, and how each theory has been used in research, especially crisis research. The goal of this chapter is to bridge understandings of vital communication theories (narrative, and framing theories) in the context of the COVID-19 public health crisis. I summarize the literature review and conclude this chapter with three main research questions of this study.

### Narrative theory

Humans are storytellers, and people's perception of the world is based on narratives they tell and hear (Fisher, 1984). Braddock and Dillard (2016) defined a narrative as "a cohesive, causally linked sequence of events that takes place in a dynamic world subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful actions performed by characters" (p. 447). In 1983, Kamler explained the importance of narrative and narrative theory as follows:

Any communication is a sharing of stories. Most stories seem to cry out to be shared. And getting shared is perhaps the most profound function of stories. Stories are the stuff of communication. And the sharing of them is what transforms persons into communal beings. In trading our stories back and forth for inspection, agreement, disagreement, we are involved in the activity of making



ourselves members of a community. Public story trade is at the heart of the social miracle about persons. (p. 49)

Human beings construct their understanding of life experiences and actions through narratives. People understand the logic of events that happen in the world and figure out how to respond to these events through stories (Heath, 2004).

Fisher's (1984) narrative theory is vitally important to the study of narration during crisis communication (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Crises are social phenomena where people test ideas by interacting with others to determine if they are understanding the events correctly and are formulating individual and collective responses (Venette, 2008). As Heath (2004) notes, "crisis response entails the telling of a story—the enactment of a crisis narrative" (p. 175). Heath (2004) suggests that "telling a story is a culturally typical response to crisis" (p. 168). Heath considers narrative as one of the components of crisis communication. For Heath, the definition of crisis "is a narrative event that demands unique and strategically appropriate rhetorical enactments" (Heath, 2004, p. 175). Sellnow and Seeger (2013) also point out that "narrative theory views a crisis event as a developing story" (p. 181).

Clementson (2020) studied the impact of narratives in crisis communication using an experimental design under the theoretical framework of Fisher's (1984) narrative theory and Heath's (2004) theory of crisis response narratives. "The theory of crisis response narratives (Heath, 2004) holds that ethical narratives are effective because they enhance trustworthiness, attitudes toward the spokesperson, and identification with the spokesperson" (p. 1). Through an online experiment with 365 participating undergraduate students at a United States public university about a TV interview with a spokesperson

answering questions from reporter during company crisis situation, he found that “ethical narratives are more effective than unethical narratives” (p. 1). While ethical communication is certainly preferred, an audience does not always know if messages are open, honest, and trustworthy.

Seeger and Sellnow (2016) focus on the role narratives play during crisis communication, arguing that “much of the meaning, power, and ultimate impact of a crisis are functions of the ensuing network of narratives” (p. 9). They define blame, renewal, victim, hero, and memorial as five different types of crisis narratives. Blame narratives mainly focus on the attribution of responsibilities during crisis. Renewal narratives emphasize a community’s recovery from crisis. Victim narratives demonstrate damage and ruin resulting from crisis. Hero narratives focus on the positive role which leaders, first responders, or ordinary citizens play in the crisis. Last, memorial narratives emphasize how the community remembers the crisis and what lessons the community should learn from the crisis over the long term.

By applying experimental design, Brooke et al. (2020) studied the role crisis narratives play to impact the response of the public during a fictitious contagious public health crisis, using Seeger and Sellnow’s (2016) five types of crisis narratives as the theoretical frame. Through a survey with 1,050 participating American adults about an imaginary highly contagious virus outbreak in 2018, they found that “crisis narratives positively affect public protective behaviors, emotional responses, assessments of information credibility, and attributions of crisis responsibility during a public health crisis” (Brooke et al., 2020, p. 344). While the focus was very similar to the COVID-19

outbreak, the study did not include competing narratives, nor was the study aimed at understanding how narratives change over time.

Crisis communication scholars found an interesting phenomenon that narratives during crisis often compete with each other. Heath (2004) argued that “the narrative of one group can be a counterstatement and perhaps a corrective to the narrative of another group” (p. 173). Seeger and Sellnow (2016) also contended that multiple crisis narratives from different parties result in competition, especially “those experiencing a crisis from a different ideological, cultural, or even physical standpoint may offer very different narratives” (p. 143). Narratives during crisis help organizations to communicate their own stories to the public and fill the communication void (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). However, if organizations fail to construct a primary narrative which is favorable to them, then the public may form their own storyline which is unfavorable to organizations (Zhao et al., 2018).

Venette, Sellnow and Lang (2003) analyzed the threat NHTSA faced during extensive media coverage of Firestone tire failures on Ford vehicles. They chronicled NHTSA’s effort to create a secondary narrative to compete with the existing unfavorable narrative which “portrayed NHTSA as having continually failed to respond to the pattern of accidents that cost hundreds of lives” (p. 227). NHTSA’s secondary or competing narrative actively reestablished “the narrative associated with its failure by creating an exigency for enhancing, rather than punishing, the organization” (p. 219). In general, Venette, Sellnow and Lang illustrated the role of metanarration during the reconstruction of crisis perceptions, finding that “organizations can resolve a crisis through secondary narration” (p. 224).

Yang, Kang and Johnson (2010) examined “which forms of crisis narratives can enhance audience engagement in crisis communication such as reduction of negative emotions” (p. 473) by conducting an experimental study. They proposed that “effective delivery of narratives can lead to audience emotional engagement” and such engagement “can create and enhance emotional support and mitigate negative emotions” (p. 473). The findings of their study show that “participants’ negative emotions against the company in crisis were significantly reduced” (p. 486) through narratives meant for enhancement of public engagement.

#### Framing theory and news media

The role of media is vitally important to the information seekers during crisis communication (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Agenda setting, and framing theories “dedicated to analyzing media communication” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 139) are used widely during crisis communication. According to Sellnow and Seeger (2013), framing theory “describes the impact of how a story is depicted by the media” (p. 139). In this section, the researcher provides a “detailed discussion about the role” of framing theory, “to improve our understanding of how crises are mediated and more generally the role of the media” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 139) during time of crises.

DeSanto (2004) asserted that framing theory “is one of the most visible extensions of agenda-setting theory” (p. 23). Agenda setting, as a theoretical explanation, was first proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 based on Lippmann’s research. Their paper summarizes a study of the impact of media coverage on voters during the 1968 U.S. presidential election. The work argues that there is a high correlation between the focus of media coverage and important topics in the minds of the

audience, and the topics and events that attracted more media coverage will arouse people's attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Referring to the development trajectory of agenda-setting theory, McCombs summarizes:

Through the ongoing interaction of theorizing and empirical research consistent with the scientific method, agenda setting theory has evolved from a tightly focused perspective to a broad theory. Initially, the focus was on the way media affect the public's view of which issues are important. Later the theory broadened to encompass distinct aspects of public life: basic and attribute agenda-setting effects, the psychology of these processes, and the consequences of these effects for opinions and behavior. The participation of scholars worldwide has been central to the continuing productivity of the theory. (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 149)

Lippmann formalized the idea that "media have the potential for structuring issues for the public" (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 148). Mass media often play opinion leader's role during information dissemination, and the voice of media often influences the topics discussed by the public. The issues reported by mass media as important events are also reflected in the public's consciousness as significant. The more media emphasize the issue, the more the public will attach importance to it. This high association shows that "mass media has the function of setting an agenda for the public. Media's news reports and information transmission activities give different degrees of salience to various issues and influence people's judgment of important events" (Lippmann, 1921, p. 41), since "the public responds not to actual events in the environment but to 'the pictures in our heads'" (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 148) to construct an interpretation of

reality. The media provide those images. Littlejohn, Foss and Oetzel (2021) pointed out that “The media step in and essentially set the agenda-offering simpler models by which people can make sense of the world” (p. 148).

The function of agenda-setting includes a process of three parts. “First, the priority of issues to be discussed in the media, or *media agenda* must be set. Second, the media agenda in some way affects or interacts with what the public thinks, creating the *public agenda*. Finally, the public agenda affects or interacts in some way with what policy makers consider important, called the *policy agenda*” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 149). In short, “the media agenda affects the public agenda, and the public agenda affects the policy agenda” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 149).

Agenda-setting theory “advances the theme that reporters serve as gatekeepers to filter news events and by their reporting set an agenda” (DeSanto, 2004, p. 22). Agenda setting is an important way for the mass media to impact society. Agenda-setting theory argues that mass media often “cannot determine people’s specific view of an event or opinion” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 148). However, it can “effectively control which facts and opinions people pay attention to and the order in which they talk about issues by providing information and selecting related topics” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 149). Mass media may not necessarily tell people “what to think,” but it can suggest to them “what is important to think about and why” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021, p. 149).

Agenda-setting theory holds that the news media do not present the public with the world as it is, but with the news media’s agenda – selective coverage of what is happening in the world (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2016). The proponents of agenda-setting

theory try to describe and explain how the message was selected, edited, and presented. The processes of gatekeeping, generating the agenda, and that agenda's impact on the public combine to form people's perceptions of the importance of issues covered by the news media. Studies on agenda setting show that those issues or topics that have received more media attention, among a particular series of questions or topics, will become more familiar to the public over a certain period. These topics' importance will also be increasingly recognized by people, while issues or topics that received less media attention will not (McQuail & Windahl, 1995). Framing theory "holds that entities can create a media frame to convey a central idea in a chosen context; in other words, they can stage the idea and plan the format in advance. Robert Entman advanced the framing idea to include highlighting certain elements within the frame-in essence, including the most salient ideas to the targeted audience while excluding others" (DeSanto, 2004, p. 23).

One of the most cited definitions of media framing states:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Ott and Aoki (2002) explained that framing "looks to see how a situation or event is named/defined, and how that naming shapes public opinion" (p. 485). They highlighted selectivity, partiality, and structure as three inherent biases in all storytelling. Selectivity is defined as what is included and excluded in the story, partiality is what is emphasized and

downplayed in the story, and structure refers to how the story formally plays out (Ott & Aoki, 2002).

According to Carter (2013), “people rely on media for information and access to local, national, and world events. This reliance on the media is important to address as news stories are essentially narratives and interpretations” (p. 1). Carter (2013) argues that “by focusing on one aspect of an event and presenting it to an audience, media outlets construct reality. This construction operates by making certain aspects of stories more salient than others. This salience then ‘frames’ an event and provides a reference point for viewers in which all subsequent information is judged” (p. 1).

“Frames help organize facts, and facts take on meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame (Gamson et al., 1992). Frames provide references for the public about what is important, and the media has great power because of this” (Carter, 2013, p. 3). Holz and Wright (1979) asserted that “the perceived salience of a public issue will be directly related to the amount of coverage given to that issue by the mass media (p. 195)”. Comparing narratives helps highlight differences in the way a crisis is framed. Such comparison helps show how different facts are used to construct a coherent story that resonates with an audience.

“The abstract principles of framing are used by news media; doing so shifts the objective occurrence into a subjective event” (Carter, 2013, p. 4). In 2001, Reese summarized the essence of framing:

[A] frame is a moment in a chain of signification. As sources promote “occurrences” into “events,” as journalists define and seek out information that fits their organizing ideas, frames can help designate any number of moments when we



can say that a certain organizing principle was operating to shape reality. These moments being fluid makes it risky for us to fix at one point in time that happens to be most visible, such as in a news story. (p. 15)

According to Kuypers (2009), “the bulk of news framing analysis research is derived from a social scientific orientation, and it is grounded in quantitative assumptions” (p. 287). However, according to Carter (2013), “an additional aspect of framing regards rhetoric, both in everyday interactions and in more structured organizational domains. Rhetoric regards the manner in which one speaks as a means of communication or persuasion. When one considers the art of persuasion as a combination of context and language, one can see that the art of rhetoric relies heavily on framing. What elements are included in rhetoric—and just as importantly what elements are excluded—serve to frame arguments in specific ways and make some meanings more salient than others. Rhetoric thus plays a key element in how frames are defined in social environments” (p. 6).

In the context of crisis communication, framing theory “focuses on the rhetorical portrayal of life’s events” and “the way a situation is explained or framed has a direct impact on how audiences perceive it” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 140). Hook and Pu (2006) suggest, “Reporters and editors routinely choose among various approaches to the presentation of news stories” (p. 169). Holladay (2010) claims that “the way information is framed in news reports can affect public perceptions” (p. 161). Tian and Stewart (2015) argue that “the fact that different frames define an event or issue causes this same event or issue to be understood in different ways” (p. 296). “Applications of framing theory to crisis communication” mainly focus on “the media’s portrayal of news events” and “the way

organizations are portrayed by the news media following a crisis” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 140).

During times of crises, organizations usually try to frame their responses favorably. According to Sellnow and Seeger (2013), “the news media, in turn, either accept or reframe the organization’s response. Thus, from the organization’s perspective, framing is a form of publicity” (p. 140). Hook and Pu (2006) analyzed the news framing of the 2001 spy plane crisis in both China and the U.S. by conducting a qualitative content analysis. The findings of their study showed that “news coverage in both countries consistently framed the crisis around themes that reflected their government’s perspective” (p. 179). In another words, “coverage in the two countries contrasted sharply as the media in each country framed the story in a manner that reflected favorably on their governments” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 141).

Tian and Stewart (2015) compared how the SARS crisis was framed by CNN and the BBC by conducting a computer-aided text analysis. Their conclusions indicate “how different aspects or attributes of the same issue are presented through different frames” (p. 299). The findings of their study also show that “although we purport to live in a global information age with media systems that transcend national borders, there are still differences in coverage of both national and international news stories” (p. 299).

Based on the literature review, this study extends the examination of how narratives function during events where the “truth” is contested. The media frame crisis by reporting events. At times the narratives being communicated in the U.S. and China are consistent, but at other times, they diverge from one another. When the stories diverge, the media asks the audience to accept a particular point of view of the story. Thus, it is important to

understand how narratives change over time and how they compete with each other. Therefore, the following research questions are offered:

RQ1: How did COVID-19 crisis narratives in Chinese and American media compete?

The focus of this research question is on how stories interact with one another in their representations of the “truth.” Different media narratives are vying for dominance, meaning that they want to be seen as the “real” version of events, and that other tellings are false. Narratives also make reference to one another during this competition in an attempt to explain why one version of the narrative should be preferred over other explanations. This research question seeks to understand how this process occurred in the two crisis cases.

RQ2: How were COVID-19 narratives framed in American and Chinese media?

Previous research indicates that people’s understanding of events is dependent upon the way the story is framed. Crises are also framed, sometimes strategically, to shape public perceptions. Understanding how these events are framed provides insight into how the communication efforts are reflected in the media. The dominant media depiction is generally what the public understands and believes to be true about the controversial issue.

RQ3: How did the crisis narratives change over time?

Crisis is not static but is a dynamic process. Crisis events unfold over time. Correspondingly, a crisis narrative should also be dynamic, reflecting this development over time. With the case studies, controversial issues are used to understand not only how the story changes over time, but also how competing narratives affect the way that the

narrative changed. The dynamic interaction of narratives is underdeveloped in the extant literature, and thus an answer to this question expands our knowledge about crisis communication.

## CHAPTER III - METHODS

### Case study using thematic narrative analysis

This study used qualitative case studies to analyze media narratives about contested issues between the United States and China. The case study approach is a qualitative research method which “explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information ... and reports a case description and case themes” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96-97). Case studies allow for a detailed description of events as they unfold to draw conclusions based on theory.

Yin (2018) argued that “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. Case studies allow a scholar to focus in-depth on a case and to retain a holistic and real-world perspective—such as in studying individual life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, school performance, international relations, and the maturation of industries” (p. 5). Currently, case studies provide the foundation for understanding the phenomenon of competing narratives framed by media outlets in China and the United States. The more that questions seek to explain some contemporary circumstance (e.g., how or why some social phenomenon works), the more that case study research will be relevant. Case studies also are relevant when “questions require an extensive and in-depth description of some social phenomenon” (Yin, 2018, p. 4).

Yin (2018) also pointed out that “the ability to trace changes over time is a major strength of case studies” (p. 182). In these two cases, the narratives advanced by media

outlets change over time. In-depth case studies allow for analysis of how the framing of events developed chronologically.

Yin (2018) explained that when a scholar has sufficient resources, “multiple-case designs may be preferred over single-case designs” because “the analytic benefits from having two (or more) cases may be substantial” (p. 61). Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that researchers should carefully consider how many case studies are reasonable to highlight the key concepts. For this study, two case studies should be sufficient to provide meaningful comparison and analysis. These two chosen cases are issues that received wide media coverage both in the U.S. and China amid the COVID-19 global health crisis.

This study used thematic narrative analysis to conduct the case study. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), if a researcher wants to explore “the life of an individual” and “tell stories of individual experiences” (p. 67), narrative research is the best choice. This study sought to reconstruct the major narratives surrounding these two cases by conducting thematic analysis of media narratives. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes which emerged from the media accounts (as suggested by Daly, Kellehear, & Glikzman, 1997). Themes were identified through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). An iterative process was employed where initial themes were identified as they emerged from the data. Articles were read, and themes identified, on a thought-idea basis, with the latent or wider message of an article also considered as part of this analysis. In other words, articles were broken down by each separate idea, whether a sentence, paragraph, or long section. This thematic analysis was conducted across all selected news reports.

Polkinghorne (1995) explained that researchers should identify themes that appear in multiple data sources. By doing so, scholars can be confident that these ideas were formative in establishing the overall narrative readers were constructing. In other words, the dominant macro-narrative readers have about an event is a reflection of these repeated, converged ideas (Anthony, 2013; Anthony, Sellnow, & Millner, 2013; Anthony & Venette, 2017). Initially, a basic key word search was performed using Lexis-Nexis database of American media. Although many articles were identified, a lot of duplication existed. The list of articles was used to identify the sources that had a great deal of coverage of each topic. Those sources, identified below, were then used for data collection.

The researcher chose to use the online version of the news sources, because of the online data is easy to access. Also, the electronic version is likely more up to date than the print version (because it can be easily updated), and has less duplication than news databases (such as Lexis-Nexis). The reason why the researcher chose these particular media outlets for China and the U.S. to pull articles for these two case studies from is because of the international popularity of these certain news media outlets. The reason why different media outlets were selected for each case is that not all the American news outlets cover each case in detail. The researcher selected major news outlets that significantly reported each story, and the researcher also selected news sources that provide text-based reports to eliminate the need to transcribe.

After selecting the news outlets, the researcher performed a key words search from each news outlet's official website to generate the news articles. Then the researcher read through all the news headlines and do the first-round screening. After a second

round of reading and screening all these news articles, the researcher selected these news reports which most closely related to the narratives of these two cases, composing the general data pool for this study.

### Data analysis

The unit of data analysis for these two case studies is news articles published in major news outlets both in the U.S. and China. News articles are published publicly with access to the general public and no direct interaction with human subjects was involved in this study, therefore, this research was exempt from approval of the University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The researcher functionally created a separate timeline of these two cases by using the media reports in chronological order and looked for the common themes generated from the data. This approach allowed for the researcher to see the development of the stories over time. The researcher read each news article, took notes, and formed "initial codes." The researcher then described the case, classified "codes into themes," and used "categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 199). The researcher wrote analytical memos to identify the overarching ideas and labeled by primary-cycle codes going through the news articles sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph. According to Tracy (2013), the main job for the researcher in "secondary-cycle coding" is to critically examine "the codes already identified in primary cycles and [begin] to organize, synthesize, and categorize them into interpretive concepts" (p. 194). This process of secondary-cycle coding led to likely themes that answer the research questions in the following results section.



In general, the researcher first applied a “within-case analysis” to “identify issues within each case” and provided “a detailed description of each case and themes within the case” and then used a “cross-case analysis” which is “a thematic analysis across the cases” to “look for common themes that transcend the cases (Yin, 2009)” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 100). Finally, the researcher reported “the interpreted meaning of the case and lessons learned by using case assertions” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 101). Bruner (1990) said that we appeal to memory by drawing upon the facts of the case as they were reported, and we appeal to notions of time by situating the analysis within a time period.

#### *The case of Dr. Li Wenliang*

The researcher examined news reports that appeared in four American mainstream news media and four Chinese state media over a period from January 2, 2020, to April 2, 2020. Dr. Li Wenliang is among one of eight people initially identified in the Chinese press as rumormongers. He came into the spotlight due to the exposure of his identity on January 2, 2020, and he was recharacterized as a “martyr” (para. 1) by Xinhua News Agency on April 2, 2020.

For the purpose of equivalent examination of media depictions from both China and the U.S., four Chinese state media outlets, People’s Daily Online (PD), China Daily (CD), Global Times (GT), and Xinhua News Agency (XH), and four American mainstream news sources, The New York Times (NYT), CNN, TIME, and FORTUNE were examined. These media were selected because they are widely consumed news sources with international readership, and they covered Dr. Li Wenliang’s story. Once the news outlets were chosen, the researcher performed a search by using the key word “Li Wenliang” from the official websites of each news outlet to generate these news articles.

Forty-five news articles in total were identified. After proofreading and screening these news articles, the researcher selected fourteen news reports which most thoroughly related to the narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story. Among these fourteen news articles, there are six news articles from the Chinese media and eight news articles from the American media. Dr. Li Wenliang was only an ordinary doctor who tried to raise the alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19, and he only became the spotlight drawing media attention because he eventually died from the coronavirus. The date range selected for this case was only three months. Therefore, the limited sample size is unavoidable.

Table 1

*Description of Data Set Used for Analysis*

<b>Case Study</b>	<b>Number of News Articles</b>	<b>U.S. Mainstream Media</b>	<b>Chinese State Media</b>	<b>Date Range</b>
Dr. Li Wenliang	14	The New York Times; CNN; TIME; FORTUNE	People’s Daily Online; China Daily; Global Times; Xinhua News Agency	January 2, 2020 - April 2, 2020

*The case of the origin of COVID-19*

To restore the media narratives of the controversy between the U.S. and China over the origin of COVID-19, the researcher gathered news articles covering the period from December 31, 2019, to October 31, 2021. The outbreak of COVID-19 first hit Wuhan, China in the December 2019. The U.S. intelligence community released a declassified report on the origins of COVID-19 based on its three months investigation at the request of the Biden administration in October 2021. The researcher conducted

purposeful sampling of mainstream news media in both countries. More specifically, relevant articles were selected from The New York Times (NYT), The Wall Street Journal (WSJ), TIME, and CNN in the United States, and People's Daily (PD), Global Times (GT), Xinhua News Agency (XH), and China Global Television Network (CGTN) in China. In this case, the researcher replaced FORTUNE with The Wall Street Journal because The Wall Street Journal is one of the major American news outlets with international readership that covered the origin of the coronavirus with regularity. Similarly, China Daily was replaced by CGTN also because CGTN is one of the major Chinese news outlets with international readership and prominently covered the COVID-19's origin story.

Once the news outlets were chosen, the researcher performed a search by using three key words "coronavirus/COVID-19", "origin", and "Wuhan" from the official websites of each news outlet to generate these news articles. A sufficient 750 news articles in total from the eight U.S. and Chinese news media outlets were identified through the initial search. 230 news articles were generated after the researcher read through all the news headlines and do the first-round screening. After a second round of reading and screening all these news articles, the researcher selected 210 news reports which most thoroughly related to the narratives of the origin of COVID-19, composing a sufficient data set for this case study.

Table 2

*Description of Data Set Used for Analysis*

<b>Case Study</b>	<b>Number of News Articles</b>	<b>U.S. Mainstream Media</b>	<b>Chinese State Media</b>	<b>Date Range</b>
Origin of COVID-19	210	The Wall Street Journal; The New York Times; TIME; CNN	People’s Daily; Xinhua News Agency; CGTN; Global Times	December 31, 2019 - October 31, 2021

## CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

### The case of Dr. Li Wenliang

A thematic analysis of the media reports of Dr. Li Wenliang's story both in the Chinese state media and the American news media resulted in the following three major themes that emerged over time:

1. Rumormonger
2. Whistleblower and politicized icon
3. Martyr

These three themes describe the way that the different media narratives depicted Dr. Li Wenliang's story and highlights how the Chinese state media narrative changed over time. The first theme reflects that the Chinese state media initially framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger who tried to spread rumors that aroused panic and threatened the stability and safety of the society. Immediately following the primary narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang, the Chinese public refused to believe it, which was exacerbated by the depiction in the United States media. The U. S. media diverged from this initial story told by the Chinese state media by stressing that the doctor acted heroically to protect others. The second theme portrayed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized icon who tried to warn about the outbreak of COVID-19. Since the primary narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang's story had been rejected by the public, the Chinese state media had to adapt Dr. Li Wenliang's story. Over time, the third theme emerged which celebrated Dr. Li Wenliang as a martyr who sacrificed his own life in the interest of the public.

*Chinese media initial framing: rumormonger*

On December 31, 2019, Xinhua News Agency and other Chinese state media officially announced the outbreak of COVID-19. The initial narrative of the outbreak was carefully controlled. According to Xinhua News Agency (2019), health authorities identified 27 pneumonia cases found in Wuhan as “viral pneumonia” (para. 1) which is totally preventable and under control, claiming “there were no clear signs of human-to-human transmission” (para. 5) and “no medical staff has reported infections” (para. 6).

On January 2, 2020, according to Xiao (2020, January 2) from the People’s Daily Online (the original text in Chinese),

1日下午，武汉市公安局官方微博发布消息称，关于武汉市肺炎疫情的情况，8名散布谣言者，已被依法查处。

近日，武汉部分医疗机构发现接诊了多例肺炎病例，武汉市卫健委就此发布了情况通报。但一些网民在不经核实的情况下，在网络上发布、转发不实信息，造成不良社会影响。公安机关经调查核实，已传唤8名违法人员，并依法进行了处理。(第一、二段)

Author’s translation into English:

On January 1, 2020, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau published information through its official social media platform Weibo and claimed that eight people who spread rumors about the pneumonia epidemic in Wuhan have been investigated and dealt with legally.

Recently, some health facilities in Wuhan have diagnosed a number of pneumonia patients, Wuhan Municipal Health Commission published briefings regarding this. However, some internet users have posted and forwarded misinformation on the Internet without verification, causing adverse social impact. After investigation and verification, local police have reprimanded eight lawbreakers. The police will investigate and deal with all illegal acts that fabricate and spread rumors and disrupt social order. Acts like these will not be tolerated. (Xiao, 2020, January 2, para. 1-2)

The Chinese state media widely covered this news. The initial narrative generated from the Chinese state media reports portrayed Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger who spread misinformation that threatened the stability of the society. These eight rumormongers had attracted public attention. In fact, these eight people were not ordinary people; they were all doctors. Dr. Li Wenliang became important to the narrative due to the exposure of his identity.

On January 3, 2020, Dr. Li Wenliang was called to the local police station in Wuhan and was made to sign an official statement in which he was accused of an “illegal act” of “publishing fictitious discourse” that has “severely disrupted social order” (Li, 2020, January 31, para. 1). According to the statement Dr. Li Wenliang (2020, January 31) posted on the social media platform Weibo, he was reprimanded. He posted, “The Public Security Bureau hopes that you will cease illegal behavior. Can you do this? If you are stubborn, refuse to repent, and continue to conduct illegal behavior, you will be punished by the law! Do you understand?” Dr. Li Wenliang wrote down his answers of “Yes” and “Understood” and signed his name with his fingerprints on it.

The primary narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang framed by Chinese state media was as a rumormonger. However, as uncovered by future events, this primary narrative had been rejected by the public after Dr. Li Wenliang eventually decided to accept media interviews and spoke to the public about his own story.

*Rejection of initial narrative*

Dr. Li Wenliang returned to work as normal after signing the statement required by the police. Not long after, he contracted COVID-19, apparently from a patient who had unknowingly been infected with the coronavirus. On January 10, Dr. Li Wenliang developed a cough, and on January 11, he had a fever. On January 12, he was hospitalized; on February 1, he tested positive for COVID-19 and was officially diagnosed (Li, 2020, February 1).

On February 7, China Daily officially announced that Dr. Li Wenliang passed away from the virus (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7). However, the exact time of Dr. Li Wenliang's death is controversial. According to China Daily's report, on the evening of February 6, some Weibo posts said that Dr. Li Wenliang had died of COVID-19. These posts started to go viral on Chinese social media, "sparking immense sorrow and outrage of netizens" (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7, para. 10). However, at 12:38 am on February 7, Wuhan Central Hospital, Dr. Li Wenliang's workplace, denied his death through an official Weibo post by saying that Dr. Li Wenliang was still "under emergency treatment" (Zhou & Jiang, 2020, February 7, para. 12).

When Dr. Li Wenliang's death was officially announced, an online protest broke out on Chinese social media (Yuan, 2020, February 7). The Chinese public refused to believe the initial narrative framed by the Chinese state media which labelled Dr. Li



Wenliang as a rumormonger. Dr. Li Wenliang's death triggered an outpouring of mourning and rage on Chinese social media (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7). The New York Times reported that "the deluge of mourning and anger at the death of the doctor, Li Wenliang – from the same virus he was reprimanded for mentioning – at times overwhelmed China's sophisticated censorship and propaganda systems. Many on social media called the doctor a martyr and a hero" (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7, para. 3).

Since the late night of February 6, countless messages expressing grief at Dr. Li Wenliang's death and outrage over labeling him as a rumormonger were posted by Chinese netizens with different backgrounds, including Chinese state media leaders, well-known entrepreneurs as well as ordinary netizens (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7; Yuan, 2020, February 7). Hong Bing, the Shanghai bureau chief of People's Daily, posted on her WeChat:

We are angry that your warning was treated as a rumor, and we mourn that your death was not a rumor. . . . You have never been related to rumors, but you have been forced to commit repentance for spreading rumors. Refusing to listen to your whistling, your country has stopped ticking, and your heart has stopped beating. . . . How big a price do we have to pay to make you and your whistling sound louder, to reach every corner of the East? (Hong, 2020, February 7, para. 1)

Chinese social media have been filled with emojis of candles and whistles, Dr. Li Wenliang's words and images (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7). One Weibo user, Gong (2020, February 7) pointed out that the best mourning is reflection, and she expressed her anger by questioning, "Who had such great power to prevent doctors from

telling the truth? Our country is paying great price now! You owe Chinese people an explanation” (para. 4).

Tens of thousands of netizens flooded into Dr. Li Wenliang’s Weibo to speak of their grief and condolences and started to call him as a hero and a martyr who sacrificed his life for ordinary Chinese people (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7; Yuan, 2020, February 7). Gradually, Dr. Li Wenliang’s Weibo became a “wailing wall” in China, evoking “the Western Wall in Jerusalem where people leave written prayers in the cracks” (Yuan, 2020, April 13, para. 4). More than one year later, netizens still leave messages on Dr. Li Wenliang’s last post, although they know that there will be no response from him, telling him about their remembrances and daily lives. Some messages read, “I am still remembering when I got the news that you passed away last year, I cried all night” (Sunny, 2021, February 25) and “Dr. Li Wenliang, I received my first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine today. Spring is coming. I wish that you are doing well in heaven” (BlackPearl, 2021, February 25).

Dr. Li Wenliang’s death and emergence as a tragic figure during the pandemic became an important turning point for the Chinese government where events could have worsened if the Chinese government did not respond appropriately. The outcry of the Chinese public likely would continue if the narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story remained the same. Therefore, it was a strategic opportunity for the Chinese government to meet the needs of the public and to increase the effectiveness of its communication. This critical moment in time also aroused intense international media attention. The narrative told by the American media framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized

icon as well as a victim of the Chinese political system. His persona became a symbol for the lack of freedom of speech in China.

*Reframing: whistleblower and politicized icon*

The next recurring theme was that American media framed Dr. Li Wenliang, following his death, as a whistleblower who tried to sound the alarm about the outbreak of COVID-19 and was arrested or detained by local police. For example, the story of Li Wenliang by FORTUNE claimed that “Li was detained by local Chinese authorities and forced to recant his warning” (“World’s 25 Greatest Leaders: Heroes of the Pandemic”, 2020, para. 1). CNN journalists Xiong, Alam, and Gan (2020, February 6) also claimed that “Li was among a number of supposed ‘rumormongers’ detained in December for spreading news about the virus” (para. 4). The New York Times journalists Buckley and Mozur (2020, February 7) also mentioned Dr. Li Wenliang’s arrest by local police by citing his quotation: “‘I felt I was wronged, but I had to accept it,’ he said of his arrest. ‘Obviously I had been acting out of good will’” (para. 32). “World’s 25 Greatest Leaders: Heroes of the Pandemic” (2020) even celebrated Li Wenliang as one of the “heroes of the pandemic” in the headline and ranked him as number one of “World’s 25 Greatest Leaders” which included Angela Merkel, Lee Hsien Loong and Leo Yee-Sin, Anthony Fauci, Bill Gates, and Jack Ma.

Dr. Li Wenliang, following his death, was identified as a victim of the Chinese political system. New York Times columnist Li Yuan described Dr. Li Wenliang as a victim of the Chinese government, “an authoritarian government that allows for little dissent” (para. 3) which was “trying to control the message” (para. 8). Likewise, TIME journalist Leung (2020, February 7) framed Li Wenliang as the “whistleblower doctor”

who is “an eternal hero” in the headline, who insisted on fighting against the Chinese political system:

And yet Li was not dissuaded. He shared his ordeal online and carried out interviews with journalists through text message, conveying a picture of incompetence and mishandling of the virus at the crucial, initial stage of the outbreak. His insistence on speaking out defied a political system that does not tolerate dissent. (para. 4)

Calling for freedom of speech is considered one of Dr. Li Wenliang’s primary legacies according to American media. One portrait of Dr. Li Wenliang “turned the outlines of Dr. Li Wenliang’s surgical mask into barbed wire” (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7, para. 20), and this image became very popular on the social media platforms. CNN journalists Xiong, Alam, and Gan (2020, February 6) cited Dr. Li Wenliang’s well-known quotation, “I think a healthy society should not only have one kind of voice” (para. 15) in order to frame him as a symbol of freedom of speech in China. Similarly, Buckley and Myers (2020, February 1) framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a critic of information suppression by Chinese authorities, requesting more open and transparent information disclosure, by citing his quotes that “If the officials had disclosed information about the epidemic earlier, I think it would have been a lot better. There should be more openness and transparency” (para. 66). Besides this, American media also connected Dr. Li Wenliang’s death with the Chinese government. For instance, The New York Times journalists Buckley and Mozur (2020, February 7,) considered Dr. Li Wenliang’s death “a new test for China’s leader, Xi Jinping, who was already facing deep political problems — over a newly signed trade deal with Washington, Taiwan’s recent election

and Hong Kong's protest movement — before the virus spilled out of Wuhan” (para. 6). Similarly, CNN commentator Bociurkiw (2020, February 8) considered Li Wenliang as “China's hero doctor” (para. 1) and linked his image to the politicized icon of the Tiananmen Square tank man in 1989 against government protests. Bociurkiw (2020, February 8) explained that Dr. Li Wenliang's death “has unleashed an unprecedented tsunami of grief and anger that probably has not been seen since President Xi Jinping rose to power” (para. 7). So, during this time period, Dr. Li Wenliang was being portrayed by American media as a whistleblower. He began to emerge as a political figure representing the people who have worked behind the scenes to respond to the pandemic. Thus, Dr. Li Wenliang's story was used symbolically to represent a larger political idea.

Evidence was also growing that a significant portion of the Chinese people were rejecting the initial portrayal of Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger. The depiction of Dr. Li Wenliang as a political hero at this critical period of Sino-American relations increased pressure on the Chinese government, through state media, to alter its framing of the story of Dr. Li Wenliang. Lack of effective response risked increased public criticism, both domestically and internationally. Therefore, the Chinese state media had to take swift action to shift their narrative by retelling Dr. Li Wenliang's story. A successful retelling would have to recognize the popularity of Dr. Li Wenliang and his actions for Chinese people and attenuate the criticism coming from the American media.

Fortunately, the Chinese government was able to reconstruct the narrative to frame Dr. Li Wenliang as a hero, which was congruent with both the Chinese popular opinion and the Western media's perspective. Buckley and Mozur (2020) concluded,

“Unable to fully expunge the discussions, Beijing has turned to state media to transform Dr. Li Wenliang into a loyal soldier aligned with the government’s cause” (para. 10). The official framing of Dr. Li Wenliang clearly shifts from the initial construction.

*Retelling of the initial narrative: martyr*

After his death on February 7, the narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang gradually transformed from rumormonger into martyr from social media to official mainstream media in China. American media also noticed that Chinese state media turned to “transform Dr. Li Wenliang into a loyal soldier aligned with the government’s cause” (Buckley & Mozur, 2020, February 7, para. 11). For example, China’s state media Global Times released its own remembrance to Dr. Li Wenliang in its editorial on February 7. “Opinion: Salute Dr. Li Wenliang” (2020) praised that Dr. Li Wenliang, who tried to warn fellow doctors about COVID-19 when it first emerged in Wuhan, had shown his professionalism as a doctor. “Doctors are soldiers in the outbreak of infectious disease, hospitals are the battlefield, we feel heartbroken for his death in line of duty” (“Opinion: Salute Dr. Li Wenliang”, 2020, February 7, para. 3).

The initial narrative had been rejected by the public, and thus the official mainstream media in China started to change the narrative. The initial narrative shift did not ease the public’s outrage, and they continued to seek the truth of Dr. Li Wenliang’s death. The Chinese government reacted very swiftly to public’s concerns related to Dr. Li Wenliang’s case. Buckley and Mozur (2020) noted that “it is rare for the Communist Party to react so swiftly to public outrage. Several top officials and state media outlets had joined in the chorus mourning Dr. Li Wenliang’s death. In statements online, the National Health Commission and the Wuhan government said they had expressed their

condolences” (para. 19). On February 7, at noon, according to the State Supervisory Committee (2020, February 7), a one-line statement on its website explained that in order to investigate the circumstances surrounding Dr. Li Wenliang’s death, the State Supervisory Committee has “decided to send an investigation team to Wuhan, Hubei Province, to conduct a comprehensive investigation on related issues reported by the public about Dr. Li Wenliang” (para. 1).

On March 19, the State Supervisory Committee released the press briefing regarding the investigation of Dr. Li Wenliang’s death through Xinhua News Agency. Following the alternative narrative found in the American media, Dr. Li Wenliang was now framed as a martyr or eternal hero. However, unlike the American depiction of Dr. Li Wenliang as trying to challenge the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government, Zhao (2020, March 19) pointed out that this part of the story was not the truth. The public was reminded that Li Wenliang was a “member of the Communist Party of China,” not an “anti-government figure” (para. 27). The state media referred to the American framing, providing evidence of its relevance, but explained that Western countries’ efforts intending to make use of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story to attack the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government will not succeed (Zhao, 2020, March 19).

Countering the popular narrative of the American media, China Daily journalists Zhou and Jiang (2020, February 7) emphasized that although “Li and the seven others were summoned by Wuhan police for ‘spreading fake information on the internet,’ they were reprimanded but not fined or detained, the police said. Li continued his normal work at the Wuhan hospital until Jan 10 when he came down with a cough and fever, symptoms of the coronavirus” (para. 7-8). Wuhan police published a post on its official

Weibo social media platform and formally offered a “solemn apology” (para. 1) to his family and revoked the admonishment of him around 8 pm on March 19 (Wuhan Public Security Bureau, 2020, March 19). On April 2, Xinhua News Agency journalist Liu (2020, April 2) published that Li Wenliang and fourteen frontline health care providers who died from COVID-19 were identified as the first batch of “martyrs” (para. 1) by Hubei Province People’s Government. The Chinese state media was able to swiftly change the narrative after initial public refutation through the retelling of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story. The secondary Chinese press narrative successfully became the dominant narrative in China over time because it comported to the public’s interpretation of events.

Table 3 graphically highlights the key moments in the development of the narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang and the national sources and which country’s media initiated the change of the narratives.

Table 3

*A Timeline of Key Moments in the Evolving Dr. Li Wenliang Media Narratives*

*Competition between China and the U.S.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Chinese Media</b>	<b>U.S. Media</b>
Jan 2, 2020	“Eight rumormongers [including Dr. Li Wenliang] have been reprimanded” (PD).	
Feb 1, 2020		Dr. Li Wenliang is a “critic of information suppression by Chinese authorities” (NYT).
Feb 6, 2020		Dr. Li Wenliang is a “symbol of freedom of speech” (CNN).



Table 3 Continued

Date	Chinese Media	U.S. Media
Feb 7, 2020	Remembrance and praise for Dr. Li Wenliang (GT).  Dr. Li Wenliang’s death sparks “sorrow and outrage” of Chinese netizens (CD).	Chinese online protest due to Dr. Li Wenliang’s death (NYT).  Dr. Li Wenliang is a “hero” (FORTUNE)  Dr. Li Wenliang is a “whistleblower” (TIME)
Feb 8, 2020		Dr. Li Wenliang is “China’s hero doctor” and “politicized icon” (CNN).
Feb 13, 2020		Dr. Li Wenliang’s death is a “major challenge” for the Chinese government (CNN).
Mar 19, 2020	Investigation of Dr. Li Wenliang’s death is released, and he is an “eternal hero” and “Chinese Communist Party member” (XH).	
Apr 2, 2020	Dr. Li Wenliang is one of “the first batch of martyrs” (XH).	

The case of the origin of COVID-19

Five major themes the U.S. and China were debating were uncovered through thematic analysis of news articles related to the origin of COVID-19, both in the American mainstream news media and the Chinese state media.

1. Natural cause
2. Lab-leak conspiracy
3. U.S. army conspiracy
4. WHO’s investigation role
5. No clear source

These five themes describe the way that the different media narratives depicted the origin of the COVID-19 and highlight how these narratives changed over time. The first theme reflects that the media initially framed the origin of COVID-19 as having a natural cause closely related with a seafood market in Wuhan. Following the primary narrative of the origin of the COVID-19, the American media began suggesting that this origin story was inadequate. The U. S. media diverged from this initial story told by the Chinese state media by stressing that coronavirus did not originate in a seafood market. Instead, the second theme suggested that coronavirus originated in a biochemical laboratory leakage in Wuhan. Since the primary narrative of the origin of the COVID-19 had been rejected by the American media and the lab-leak conspiracy theory was proposed, the Chinese state media were compelled to respond. Over time, the third theme emerged by saying that it was U.S. army who brought the coronavirus to Wuhan while attending the 2019 Military World Games. After investigations by both WHO and the American intelligence agencies, results show that there was no definitive conclusion in terms of the origin of COVID-19, which emerged as the fifth theme.

*Chinese media initial framing: natural cause*

The theme of *Natural Cause* that emerged throughout the data from both the American media and the Chinese media regarded the COVID-19's origin and thus received a theme of its own. This theme resulted in 25 news articles of the 210 news articles (approximately 12% of the total news articles analyzed). The table below illustrates a breakdown of the percentage of the news articles from the American media and Chinese media respectively under this theme.

Table 4

*Relative Importance of the Natural Cause Theme by Percentage of Prevalence in Reports*

<b><i>Natural Cause: Percentages</i></b>	
American Media	7 % of total analyzed news articles
Chinese Media	5 % of total analyzed news articles

In the earliest coverage of the Chinese state media, coronavirus was explicitly framed as having originated in Wuhan, and the uncertainty simply focused on what unknown wild animal sold in a seafood market was its source. According to Xinhua News Agency (2019, December 31), health authorities claimed that all the first 27 pneumonia cases were “found to be related to a seafood market” (para. 5), and they were “investigating the market’s hygiene conditions” (para. 5). On January 22, 2020, CGTN briefly depicted that the coronavirus “originated from wild animals illegally sold at a Wuhan seafood market” (para. 1) by citing Gao Fu, head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention as a credible expert source.

Only two days later, on January 24, 2020, TIME East Asia journalist Campbell (2020, January 24) interviewed an English teacher who lived very close to the Wuhan Huanan seafood market. The teacher said, “It was well-known for selling lots of weird, live animals, so nobody was surprised at all when it emerged that the virus might have come from an unusual animal” (para. 2). Campbell (2020, January 24) also pointed out that “eating wild animals” is “just part of Chinese culture” and

Chinese people “love to eat anything alive” (para. 7) and are “obsessive about freshness” (para. 6). However, attribution of the origin of coronavirus to the consumption of wild animals’ meat is “often flawed” (para. 9) and “the truth is more complex” (para. 1).

On January 27, 2020, according to Pan (2020, January 27) from CGTN, the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported on Sunday that 33 out of the 585 samples collected from the seafood market tested positive for the new strain of coronavirus which caused the pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan.

The virus was confirmed to have come from the wildlife sold at the market. The early confirmed cases of the new coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan are closely related to the food market. It is believed that the virus was carried originally by bats and transferred to humans via some uncertain intermediate host.

Virology experts said tracing down the virus source, controlling it and identifying the intermediate host of the virus are keys to control the continuous virus transmission from animals to people. (para. 1-3)

The initial narrative generated from the Chinese state media portrayed the origin of COVID-19 as related to a seafood market in Wuhan, and the coronavirus was represented as being traced back to bats.

Bats, as hosts of many different viruses, once again came to the public’s attention. During the outbreak of SARS in 2003 for instance, Pan (2020, January 27) pointed out that “bats spread the SARS virus to civet cats. People ate the infected civet cats, then got

the virus which led to over 800 deaths worldwide. Some viruses do not necessarily cause disease or death in the host animal, but human consumption of wild animals or encroachment on wildlife habitats increases the chance of exposure and transmission, making outbreaks possible” (para. 10-11). Eating wild animals had been established in the publics’ minds as a potential source of zoonotic diseases.

Bats also emerged as a topic in the American media. On January 28, 2020, the New York Times reported that bats are “considered the probable source of the coronavirus outbreak spreading from China” (para. 1). The New York Times science writer Gorman (2020, January 28) cited infectious disease expert Dr. Peter Daszak saying, “We don’t know the source yet, but there’s pretty strong evidence that this is a bat origin coronavirus” (para. 3).

Besides bats, pangolins were also considered as a possible intermediate host of coronavirus. According to Xinhua News Agency (2020, May 9), coronavirus “might have originated from the recombination of a pangolin virus and a bat virus” based on “results from a comparative genomic analysis” (para. 1). The New York Times science writer Gorman (2020, February 10) also updated that “in the search for the animal source or sources of the coronavirus epidemic in China, the latest candidate is the pangolin” (para. 2), and further clarified that “it is also far from clear whether the pangolin is the animal that passed the new virus to humans. Bats are still thought to be the original host of the virus. If pangolins are involved in disease transmission, they would act as an intermediate host” (para. 4).

A noteworthy phenomenon became evident at this point; American media outlets’ narratives also competed with each other during COVID-19 crisis. For example, when the

West generally blamed the coronavirus on Chinese people's consumption of wild animals, TIME journalist Campbell (2020, March 10) suggested a more empathetic perspective by pointing out that "the next pandemic could even emerge in the U.S. While China is well known as the world's top consumer of trafficked wildlife, less reported is the fact the U.S. is number two" (para. 15). Many Americans consume wild animals harvested through hunting.

The primary narrative of the origin of COVID-19 framed by Chinese state media was as natural cause and this initial narrative was recognized by American media at the beginning. However, gradually, this primary narrative had been rejected by some American media while the outbreak of COVID-19 eventually became a global pandemic.

*A focus of competing media narratives: lab-leak conspiracy*

After reviewing of the news media coverage, the theme *lab-leak conspiracy* resulted in the largest overall commonality found among the data set, resulting in 103 news articles of the 210 news articles which were analyzed and placed into a theme. The predominance of this theme which generated from the data could show that the lab-leak conspiracy has been a focus of the controversial media narratives between the U.S. and China.

The table below illustrates a breakdown of the percentage of the news articles from the American media and Chinese media respectively under the theme.

Table 5

*Relative Importance of the Lab-leak Conspiracy Theme by Percentage of Prevalence in Reports*

<b><i>Lab-leak Conspiracy: Percentages</i></b>	
American Media	33 % of total analyzed news articles
Chinese Media	16 % of total analyzed news articles

This theme included common codes found throughout the data such as: Wuhan Institute of Virology, Wuhan lab, biochemical lab, laboratory, lab leakage, Chinese bioweapon, researchers at Wuhan lab, Tom Cotton, Shi Zhengli, and intelligence agency. News articles under this theme highlighted the controversy surrounding the laboratory leak conspiracy theory, pointing to people who supported or rejected lab-leak conspiracy arguments. *Lab-leak conspiracy* was a strong emerging point used by the media to frame COVID-19’s origin. From this research, this theme emerged both lab-leak conspiracy support and lab-leak conspiracy reject as sub-themes.

The recurring theme was that a large segment of American media presented arguments for and against the lab origin narrative. The repetition of this idea placed the controversy on the media, and thus public agenda. Regardless of valence, these articles served to frame the origin of coronavirus as uncertain. Many sources overtly advocated that COVID-19 resulted from a leak from a laboratory of the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Some articles pointed to U.S. Republican Senator Tom Cotton from Arkansas.

He believed that coronavirus did not originate in Wuhan seafood market, but rather that coronavirus was “a Chinese bioweapon” (Stevenson, 2020, February 17, para. 5) that could have escaped from Wuhan Institute of Virology by accident. During an interview on Fox News, Cotton pointed out:

Epidemiologists who are widely respected from China who have published a study in the international journal Lancet have demonstrated that several of the original cases did not have any contact with that food market. The virus went into that food market before it came out that food market. So, we don't know where it is originated, but we do know we have to get to the bottom of that. We also know just a few miles away from that food market, it is China's only biosafety level 4 super laboratory that researches human infectious diseases.

We don't have evidence that this disease originated there, but because of China's duplicity and dishonesty from the beginning, we need to at least ask the question to see what the evidence says, and China right now is not giving evidence on that question at all. (Stevenson, 2020, February 17, para. 3-4)

Some reports even explained that coronavirus could be developed as a bioweapon. This narrative of “the coronavirus as an escaped weapon” (Stevenson, 2020, February 17, para. 7) had dominated not only the American media agenda but also international media agenda. According to The New York Times, the British tabloid The Daily Mail, citing a U.S. biosafety expert, warned a virus could have escaped from the Wuhan lab due to China's lack of freedom of speech and information transparency (Stevenson, 2020, February 17, para. 7).



Only one day later, on February 19, 2020, CGTN journalist Gong (2020) refuted Tom Cotton's bioweapon conspiracy theory of COVID-19's origin as "bogus" by citing an official statement in *Lancet*, a professional medical journal, proposed by 27 experts who "strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin" and they "supported their claim with research findings that overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife" (Gong, 2020, February 19, para. 5-8).

The Wuhan lab leak conspiracy became the dominate narrative regarding the origin of COVID-19 after being formally suggested by U.S. Senator Tom Cotton. The Chinese bioweapon conspiracy theory won wide support among the Trump administration. For example, an article from *The New York Times* on February 19, 2020, reported that "Allies of the administration in Congress, and even some officials speaking privately, have repeated the fringe theory — dismissed by scientists — that Chinese laboratories, not a wholesale food market in Wuhan, might have been the true source of the epidemic and that it started earlier than Beijing has said" (Myers & Wong, 2020, February 19, para.17).

President Donald Trump and other top Republicans such as U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo highlighted the COVID-19's "foreign origin" and stigmatized China by calling COVID-19 the "China virus" or "Wuhan virus" (Marlow, 2020, March 11, para. 2). Immediately, the Chinese state media *Global Times* countered on March 20, 2020, saying "US President Donald Trump has referred to the novel coronavirus as 'Chinese virus' at least eight times in tweets and media briefings within just two days, fueling widespread xenophobia and racist sentiment and even physical and verbal attacks

against Asian Americans and undermining global efforts to contain the deadly virus” (Global Times, 2020, March 20).

An article from CNN on March 24, 2020, read “President Donald Trump said Tuesday that he has decided to pull back from associating the novel coronavirus with China, which he had previously done by calling it the ‘China virus’ or the ‘Chinese virus’” (Vazquez, 2020, March 24); however, the U.S. government still affirmed the lab-leak conspiracy theory. According to another CNN news article on April 15, 2020, “US intelligence and national security officials say the United States government is looking into the possibility that the novel coronavirus spread from a Chinese laboratory rather than a market” (Campbell, Atwood, & Perez, 2020, April 15).

In respond to this claim, the Chinese media CGTN defended, citing Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian’s pushing back that “the origin of this new virus is for the scientists and medical experts to find out, and the claim itself is groundless” (CGTN, 2020, April 16, para. 4-5). Zhao further pointed out, “Officials of the World Health Organization have repeatedly said there’s no evidence the virus was made in a lab, and many experts have also said the claim lacks scientific ground” (CGTN, 2020, April 16, para. 4-5).

The Wall Street Journal is another mainstream American news outlet advocating lab-leak conspiracy theory. On April 21, 2020, Tom Cotton published a commentary article in the opinion section of The Wall Street Journal focusing on the association between the coronavirus and the biochemical labs in Wuhan (Cotton, 2020, April 21). Cotton argued that “Beijing has claimed that the virus originated in a Wuhan ‘wet market,’ where wild animals were sold. But evidence to counter this theory emerged in

January. Chinese researchers reported in the Lancet Jan. 24 that the first known cases had no contact with the market, and Chinese state media acknowledged the finding. There's no evidence the market sold bats or pangolins, the animals from which the virus is thought to have jumped to humans. And the bat species that carries it isn't found within 100 miles of Wuhan" (Cotton, 2020, April 21, para. 2).

Therefore, the Wuhan Institute of Virology became a focus of this controversy and received intense news media attention. With the increasing questions about the COVID-19's origin, virologist Shi Zhengli who studying bats virus from the Wuhan Institute of Virology refuted firmly, saying "she could 'guarantee on my life' that the virus hadn't originated in her labs" (Aredy, 2020, April 21, para. 12).

Disregarding Shi Zhengli's refutation, toward the end of April, the Trump administration seemed to have launched another campaign in tracing the COVID-19's origin. For example, The New York Times journalists Mazzetti et.al. (2020, April 30) disclosed that senior officials of the Trump administration had tried to persuade intelligence agencies in the U.S. to find more evidence to support that the coronavirus was leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. At the same time, President Trump claimed that "he has seen evidence that gives him a 'high degree of confidence' the novel coronavirus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan" (Cohen et.al., 2020, April 30, para. 1).

In response, on May 1, 2020, CGTN cited Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's statement that "he has no evidence to suggest the coronavirus originated in" a Wuhan lab (para. 1). On the same day, CGTN also cited a statement from U.S. intelligence agencies which "debunked a conspiracy theory about the origin of the novel

coronavirus, concluding that it was not manmade or genetically modified” (CGTN, 2020, May 1, para. 1).

Despite uncertainty from other western politicians and U.S. intelligence professionals, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo kept pushing the U.S. intelligence agency for further investigation of the COVID-19’s origin (Sanger, 2020, May 3). Only three days later, both CNN and Chinese state-run media People’s Daily countered Trump and Pompeo’s conspiracy theory by citing world-famous U.S. infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci’s interview with National Geographic saying, “A number of very qualified evolutionary biologists have said that everything about the stepwise evolution over time strongly indicates that it evolved in nature and then jumped species” (People’s Daily, 2020, May 6, para. 1). On the same day, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, “the US does not have certainty about the origin of the coronavirus pandemic” (Hansler, Gaouette & Conte, 2020, May 6, para. 1). Although Pompeo had to admit that he did not have enough evidence, he continued to advocate the lab-leak conspiracy theory.

From May 2020 until December 2020, the Chinese state media cited varied sources to reject the lab-leak conspiracy theory. For example, an article from CGTN on May 16, 2020, argued that “scientists and virologists across the globe have reached consensus that COVID-19 evolved in nature” (Xing, 2020, May 6, para. 1). Another article from Xinhua News Agency on May 26, 2020, opposed “politicizing, stigmatizing coronavirus origin” by citing Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s press briefing “the origin of the coronavirus is a serious scientific problem that must be studied by scientists and medical experts on the basis of facts and science” (para. 2-3). Another

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin refuted the “U.S. claim of coronavirus originating in Wuhan lab” saying, “The laboratory has high-standard bio-safety facilities and a strict management system. All the researchers must undergo systematic theoretical and operation training, and obtain the qualification and approval before entering the laboratory” (People’s Daily, 2020, July 23, para. 4). The Chinese media continued to maintain that the origin of the disease was natural.

On July 30, 2020, Xinhua News Agency refuted the American media’s advocating of lab leak conspiracy theory by citing world prominent scientists’ latest studies on COVID-19. One study conducted by U.S. FDA suggested that COVID-19 “may have been well adapted in human[s] before the outbreak in Wuhan” and this finding “may cast doubt on a theory that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory” (para. 9-10). According to another study published in Nature Medicine, researchers’ findings show that COVID-19 “is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus” and the researchers “do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible” (para.11, 13).

Scientists from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which was “the focus of intense speculation and conspiracy theories” once again refuted the Wuhan lab leakage conspiracy theory in an interview by NBC News on August 12, 2020. Yuan Zhiming, vice director of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, said that “regular health checks are conducted for the facility’s personnel. So far, the institute has not encountered positive tests for the virus or its antibodies, which would suggest that a person had the virus at some point” (People’s Daily, 2020, August 12, para. 1). Wang Yanyi, director of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, said “it is unfortunate that she and her colleagues had been

targeted as a scapegoat for the origin of the virus” (People’s Daily, 2020, August 12, para. 5-6). Also, important to note is that the Chinese media was citing an American news agency’s interview. This strategy was likely used to demonstrate that the American media did not have consensus on the origin story.

On December 17, 2020, Xinhua News Agency cited Russian President Vladimir Putin’s speech at his annual press conference to refute accusations against China. Putin said, “As for the origin [of the coronavirus], there are a lot of rumors. I would not like to talk about them all while addressing the country and the whole world, particularly because we haven’t come across any evidence that confirms these accusations against anyone” (para. 2). Again, the Chinese media pointed to international support for their position.

From January 2021 until May 2021, the lab-leak origin story disappeared from the American media’s agenda. However, on May 23, 2021, an exclusive report from The Wall Street Journal provided new supporting evidence that the coronavirus had escaped from a lab of Wuhan Institute of Virology, based on an intelligence report which claimed that three researchers from the lab got sick at the same week with COVID-19 symptoms in November 2019, just weeks before the confirmed outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan (Gordon, Strobel & Hinshaw, 2021, May 23).

This news report set off a new wave of Chinese lab-leak conspiracy theory advocacy in the American media. Then on May 24, 2021, according to CNN, Dr. Anthony Fauci, U.S. infectious disease expert changed his former position by saying that he was “not convinced” that the COVID-19’s origin had a natural cause, and he thought the U.S. should insist on investigating the origin of COVID-19 until finding the truth

(Cillizza, 2021, May 24, para. 2). Next, on May 26, 2021, CNN journalists Sullivan et al. (2021, May 26) disclosed that President Joe Biden has ordered intelligence agencies in the U.S. to “redouble its efforts in investigating the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and report back to him in 90 days” (para. 1).

In respond, the Chinese media CGTN defended on May 27, 2021, citing the head of the Wuhan Virology Institute, Yuan Zhiming’s pushing back; he stated, “I can tell you for sure that none of our students, retirees, or any of our staff has been infected” (para. 2). Yuan pointed out furtherly, “There’s no way this virus came from us – We have a strict regulatory regime, we have a code of conduct for research, so we are confident of that” (para. 4) and “they have no evidence, or knowledge, this is entirely based on speculation” (para. 6).

From the beginning of June until the end of August 2021, a media narrative battle between the U.S. and the Chinese media seemed to further escalate. A week later, on June 1, 2021, Xinhua News Agency responded with an editorial arguing that “for political purposes, the U.S. side continues to cross the moral bottom line, maliciously concocting conspiracy theories and spreading misinformation, which has fueled an anti-science trend, exacerbated racial discrimination, and undermined the global fight against the pandemic. The United States has indeed become the creator and disseminator of a political, information and moral virus” (para. 2). The metaphoric language clearly was used to shift the focus to American wrongdoing by attacking the accuser.

The American media had another intensive coverage of the Wuhan lab leakage conspiracy theory during almost the entire month of June 2021. For example, an article from The Wall Street Journal on June 8, 2021, provided new supporting evidence that

“the hypothesis claiming the virus leaked from a Chinese lab in Wuhan is plausible and deserves further investigation” based on a classified intelligence report by an American government national laboratory (Gordon & Strobel, 2021, June 8, para. 1).

On June 13, 2021, according to CNN, global leaders attending the G7 summit called for a new investigation into the origin of COVID-19, accusing Beijing of failing to cooperate (Liptak & Sullivan, 2021, June 13). On June 22, 2021, The New York Times once again questioned, “Did the coronavirus come from a lab?” (Bokat-Lindell, 2021, June 22, para. 1). David Relman, a Stanford microbiologist, who supported a “more thorough investigation” of the origin of COVID-19 said, “despite testing tens of thousands of animals, researchers in China have been unable to locate a natural source of SARS-CoV-2. The closest apparent relatives were collected from bats more than 1,000 miles from Wuhan” (Bokat-Lindell, 2021, June 22, para. 14).

In response, the Chinese media also had intensive coverage rejecting the Wuhan lab leakage narrative during the two months of July and August 2021. Rejection of politicizing the origin of COVID-19 dominated the Chinese media agenda during this period. For example, an article from CGTN on July 7, 2021, cited experts’ published articles and argued that “politicizing COVID-19 origin hinders efforts to find answers” (para. 1). On July 27, 2021, the CGTN journalist Zhe Gong (2021, July 27) also pointed out that “the coronavirus origin tracing work should not be politicized” (para. 1) by citing a conference speech from Dr. Gao Fu, the director of the Chinese CDC.

On August 17, 2021, People’s Daily cited Ikenna Emewu, editor-in-chief of Africa China Economy Magazine, “No doubt, the U.S. has introduced so much politics to the efforts to trace how the coronavirus came to ravage humanity, rather than rely on



facts and science” (para. 9). At the end of August, CGTN commentary writer Xi Sun (2021, August 29) called for the U.S. to stop “the political farce of tracing coronavirus origins” (para. 1) and the blame game against China. Sun (2021, August 29) also pointed out “global cooperation is needed to overcome the crisis as soon as possible” (para. 13).

Rejection of the story of Wuhan lab researchers getting sick from COVID-19 was another theme in the Chinese media during this time. For example, an article from CGTN on August 10, 2021, cited varied sources to answer the question, “Did three Wuhan lab researchers get infected?” (para. 1). Zeng Yixin, vice minister of China’s National Health Commission, said that “none of the staff or post-graduate students at the WIV have ever contracted SARS-CoV-2” (para. 4). Yuan Zhiming, the head of the Wuhan Virology Institute, emphasized the safety of the Wuhan lab maintaining “the lab is designed, constructed and operated in line with both international requirements and domestic standards. It has stable and reliable biosafety precautions in place, and has established a set of complete biosafety management systems and a professional team to bolster, manage and maintain its operation” (para. 6) and proposed that “it would be very simple to know the truth if the reporters disclose the names of the three” (para. 8). Danielle Anderson, a virologist from Australia who worked at the lab in 2019, also refuted the rumor by saying, “If people were sick, I assume that I would have been sick – and I wasn’t, there is a procedure for reporting symptoms that correspond with the pathogens handled in high-risk containment labs” (para. 13).

On August 13, 2021, in response to an article in The Independent headlined “Covid patient zero may have been a Wuhan lab worker, WHO chief says” (para. 2), Chinese state media Global Times cited an anonymous source, claiming that “it was

merely a translation error and was not what Ben Embarek said. That was a scenario he used as an example to illustrate how the different hypotheses of lab leak and infections from bat to human are linked and should not be looked at separately as each hypothesis includes many different scenarios” (para. 4-5). The origin narrative remained unresolved.

Obviously, the crisis narratives regarding the origin of COVID-19 in the American and Chinese media clashed with each other. The origin of COVID-19 was in and out of the news agenda for quite some time in the U. S. media outlets. More recently, on February 4, 2022, according to The New York Times, both Republican and Democratic senators supported the creation of an independent commission to launch a new probe into the origin of COVID-19 (Stolberg, 2022, February 4). We could predict that this kind of finger-pointing media narratives between the U.S. and China will certainly happen again in the near future.

In addition, the U.S. mainstream media are themselves split over the origin of COVID-19. This conflict continued in the American media. Not all the American media support the laboratory leakage explanation, and division exists among the American news media. For example, as soon as The New York Times featured Tom Cotton who proposed Wuhan lab leak conspiracy theory regarding the origin of COVID-19, CNN researcher Tara Subramaniam questioned his theory by checking facts immediately (Subramaniam, 2020, February 18). She pointed out that “experts have dismissed Cotton’s ‘engineered bioweapon hypothesis’ but noted it’s possible, yet unlikely, that the lab was connected to the start of the outbreak” (Subramaniam, 2020, February 18, para. 8). According to CNN, one expert argued that “the thing that weighs against the claim is that it’s a terrible bioweapon. If you were engineering a bioweapon this would have the

absolute opposite of the characteristics you would want” (Subramaniam, 2020, February 18, para. 9). An expert was cited as stating, “I have seen no one provide any solid information to support that theory” (Subramaniam, 2020, February 18, para. 12). Regarding to Cotton’s description of China’s COVID-19 response, it is believed that “Cotton exaggerated certain aspects of China’s response to the situation. While almost half of China’s population is in some way restricted from traveling in response to the outbreak, not all of these individuals are in quarantine” (Subramaniam, 2020, February 18, para. 15). CNN also denounced Trump’s naming coronavirus as “China virus,” saying “that name is both inaccurate and is considered stigmatizing after consulting with medical experts, and receiving guidance from the World Health Organization” (Klein, 2020, March 19, para. 13). CNN journalist Klein pointed out that the origin of the COVID-19 is politicized in the U.S. as a debate between the former President Trump and the then presidential candidate Biden. Trump sought to scapegoat and blame China for spreading the virus to attack Bide for “siding with the Chinese” (Klein, 2020, March 19, para. 3).

TIME on April 20, 2020, cited officials and scientist at the lab of the Wuhan Virology Institute refuting the Wuhan lab leakage conspiracy theory. Yuan Zhiming, the head of the Wuhan Virology Institute, said, “There is absolutely no way that the virus originated from our institute” (para. 2) and clarified that “none of its employees, retirees or student researchers were known to be infected” (para. 3). Bat virologist, Shi Zhengli, who worked for the lab, was also cited refuting the rumor by saying “she would ‘swear on my life’ that the virus had nothing to do with the lab” (para. 11).

TIME journalist Philip Elliott criticized former President Trump’s credibility (Elliott, 2021, May 26). He pointed out that “it follows months of incoherent responses

and irrational denialism from a man who claimed the pandemic would just go away and yet had to be airlifted to Walter Reed while infected himself. And we wonder why Americans dismissed Trump when he asserted that a lab accident in China may have been to blame. It's possible to be correct and untrustworthy at the same time" (Elliott, 2021, May 26, para. 14).

American news media that have been identified as leaning left politically generally framed the lab leak narrative as uncertain or not credible. These American news outlets and the Chinese media were mainly consistent in their framing of the issue. Additionally, this story was used as an indictment of President Trump's credibility; thus, this story could be used as yet another story undermining President Trump. Conversely, politically right-leaning American news media framed the leak story as possible, or even probable. Additionally, the Chinese government was framed, either directly or through implication, as a bad actor or malevolent entity. According to this point of view, if the virus emerged from a Chinese lab, then the Chinese government must be held responsible. Identifying responsibility, or determining guilt, is necessary if "justice" for this world-wide crisis is ever to be realized. It can be inferred that politically conservative Americans must place great value on justice because the right-leaning media continually appealed to this theme.

*Chinese media reframing: U.S. army conspiracy*

After reviewing of the news media coverage, although the theme of *U.S. Army conspiracy* emerged only from 13 news articles of the 210 total, it deserves to be considered a separate theme as it is another critical moment in the controversy surrounding COVID-19's origin. The U.S. Army conspiracy theme should be considered

as a major Chinese argument responding to the lab-leak theory identified in the American media. The table below illustrates a breakdown of the percentage of the news articles from the American media and Chinese media respectively regarding the U.S. Army conspiracy theme.

Table 6

*Relative Importance of the U.S. Army Conspiracy Theme by Percentage of Prevalence in Reports*

<b><i>U.S. Army Conspiracy: Percentages</i></b>	
American Media	3 % of total analyzed news articles
Chinese Media	3 % of total analyzed news articles

This theme included common terms found throughout the data such as: U.S. Army, U.S. military, U.S. soldiers, Maryland, military base, Fort Detrick, biolab, Wuhan Military World Games, Zhao Lijian, and US bioweapon. News articles under this theme reflect the controversy surrounding the U.S. Army conspiracy theory, and include articles that either advocate or reject this narrative.

The Chinese state media narrated various stories regarding the origin of the coronavirus over time. In the beginning, the Chinese state media unambiguously framed COVID-19 as having originated from Wuhan Huanan seafood market. However, this initial narrative was questioned by the American media. Instead, the American media framed COVID-19's origin as uncertain. The Chinese state media refuted this narrative

and defended itself by saying that it was American military athletes who brought the coronavirus to Wuhan while attending the 2019 Military World Games.

On March 4, 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian refuted the narrative that the coronavirus is a “Chinese virus” and tweeted: “Confirmed cases of #COVID19 were first found in China, but its origin is not necessarily in China” (Zhao, 2020, March 4). On March 8, 2020, Chinese Ambassador to South Africa, Lin Songtian also tweeted: “Although the epidemic first broke out in China, it did not necessarily mean that the virus is originated from China, let alone ‘made in China’” (Lin, 2020, March 8). It implicitly indicated that the Chinese state media was gradually reframing the crisis narratives regarding the increasing uncertainty about the origin of the coronavirus.

Only five days after Zhao Lijian’s tweet, the Xinhua News Agency published a commentary denouncing “Washington’s poisonous coronavirus politics” and criticizing that “instead of focusing on fighting the epidemic in their own country, some in the United States are trying to shift the blame and politicize humanity’s common challenge by stoking pernicious anti-Chinese sentiments” (Gao, 2020, March 9, para. 2). Writer Gao Wencheng pointed out, “the origin of the virus remains unclear, as scientists and researchers around the world are still trying to figure it out” (Gao, 2020, March 9, para. 6), and warning that some American politicians blame China as a “scapegoat” and their “dangerously irresponsible statements are highly counterproductive at this drastic hour that demands solidarity and cooperation, and could be much more menacing than the virus itself” (Gao, 2020, March 9, para. 2).

According to The New York Times (2020, March 13), Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian was trying to tell a new story of COVID-19's origin that "the United States was the source of the virus," and "it is an American disease that might have been introduced by members of the United States Army who visited Wuhan in October" (Myers, 2020, March 13, para. 1-2).

On March 12, 2020, Zhao Lijian retweeted, "It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan" (Westcott & Jiang, 2020, March 13, para. 5). On the same day, in order to further support his argument, Zhao Lijian also retweeted a study claiming that the coronavirus may have escaped from U.S. Army Fort Detrick in Maryland (Zhao, 2020, March 12). Zhao Lijian's a series of tweets appear to be a refutation to the unsubstantiated lab-leak theory regarding the origin of coronavirus which was proposed by the American media.

In response, on March 13, 2020, according to CNN, "Chinese ambassador Cui Tiankai was summoned to the State Department shortly after Zhao's comments were posted online" (Atwood & Cohen, 2020, March 13, para. 4). On March 16, 2020, former U.S. President Trump fought back immediately on Twitter by calling COVID-19 the "Chinese Virus" (Trump, 2020, March 16). The next day, on March 17, Trump argued the reason for using this term during a press conference: "I didn't appreciate the fact that China was saying that our military gave it to them" (Whitehouse, 2020, March 17). He also refuted the term of "Chinese Virus" creates a stigma: "I don't think so. I think saying that our military gave it to them creates a stigma" (Whitehouse, 2020, March 17). On March 18, 2020, Trump claimed again that the main reason he used the term of "Chinese Virus" is China blamed

coronavirus on U.S. army service members (Whitehouse, 2020, March 18). Only one day later, the Chinese state media CGTN published a news article with a title of “10 questions for the U.S.: Where did the novel coronavirus come from?” (Wang, 2020, March 19) which reiterated the view that athletes from the U.S. army had brought the coronavirus to Wuhan. The Chinese government, through the Chinese media, initiated and strongly defended the “natural source” origin story. Advocating that the U.S. is responsible, at this point, must be seen as a move to sway public opinion and to defend against the continued onslaught of attacks.

At the end of March, the narrative battle between China and the U.S. seems to de-escalate. On March 22, 2020, Cui Tiankai, China’s ambassador to the U.S., refuted Zhao Lijian’s argument, claiming it is “crazy” to blame the U.S. military for the origin of the coronavirus (Swan & Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020, March 22). Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, retweeted “#COVID19 epidemic once again proves that mankind is a community with a shared future [...] We should unite to deal with the epidemic and carry out international cooperation to save more lives” (Zhao, 2020, March 23). In response, Trump “seemed to back off from the term Chinese virus” claiming, “I don’t have to say it,” if Chinese people “feel so strongly about it” and he also had a “very good conversation” with Chinese President Xi Jinping by telephone (Suliman & Baculinao, 2020, March 27).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to expand in the U.S., and the American media kept questioning the WHO’s investigation of the COVID-19’s origin in China keep the narrative battle going. For example, on February 3, 2021,



CGTN published a news article with a title of “China hopes U.S. will invite WHO for COVID-19 study.” On August 26, 2021, People’s Daily also published a news article with a title of “U.S. should invite WHO to probe coronavirus origins at Fort Detrick, UNC.” The Chinese state media reiterated that the coronavirus originated in the American military laboratory. It is obvious that when both the U.S. and China stop blaming each other, the competing media narratives merge into one story, and the conflicts go away. However, finger-pointing blaming narratives can only keep the conflict going.

*WHO’s investigation role: pro-China bias*

World Health Organization (WHO) plays a major role in investigating the origin of the COVID-19. The theme of *WHO’s investigation role* ranked as the second largest theme found across the data. This theme resulted in 43 news articles of the 210 news articles and ranked around 21% of the total news articles analyzed and therefore received an independent theme.

The table below illustrates a breakdown of the percentage of the news articles from the American media and Chinese media respectively under this theme.

Table 7

*Relative Importance of the WHO's Investigation Role Theme by Percentage of Prevalence in Reports*

<b>WHO's Investigation Role: Percentages</b>	
American Media	16 % of total analyzed news articles
Chinese Media	5 % of total analyzed news articles

This theme included common codes found throughout the data, such as World Health Organization, WHO, WHO-China, WHO report, the origins of the pandemic, coronavirus origins, Wuhan Institute of Virology, President Trump, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and Wuhan lab. News articles under this theme concerned the controversy surrounding the WHO's investigative role, informing the international audience about people who support or reject the WHO's investigative role and their arguments and evidence. WHO's investigation role was a second strong emerging frame by the media of how it narrated the COVID-19's origin. From this research, this theme emerged both WHO's investigation role reject and WHO's investigation role support as sub-themes.

Results demonstrated how powerful the media are in framing the narratives and setting the agenda. Since narratives about COVID-19's origin framed by the Chinese media and American media were competing with one another, both the Chinese and the U.S. sides required a third party to conduct an independent investigation about the COVID-19's origin. Therefore, the WHO as "a specialized agency of the United Nations

responsible for international public health” was the ideal third party since its “primary role is to direct international health within the United Nations’ system and to lead partners in global health responses” (World Health Organization, 2022).

However, President Trump questioned the independence of the WHO and threatened to suspend financial support to it by criticizing its handling of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The response added to already strained relations between China and the United States and triggered another round of media narratives competition. According to CNN, a letter to the General Director of WHO written by Trump read, “It is clear the repeated missteps by you and your organization in responding to the pandemic have been extremely costly for the world. The only way forward for the World Health Organization is if it can actually demonstrate independence from China. I cannot allow American taxpayer dollars to continue to finance an organization that, in its present state, is so clearly not serving America’s interests” (LeBlanc, 2020, May 18, para. 4, 9).

As China is becoming more and more wealthy and powerful, the U.S. media have questioned if the WHO is sufficiently independent. According to The Wall Street Journal, Trump criticized WHO for an “alarming lack of independence from Beijing and failed to adequately respond as Chinese government officials sought to cover up the emerging health threat” (Lubold & Hinshaw, 2020, May 19, para. 2).

In response, on February 16, 2021, according to Xinhua News Agency, WHO said that “the international expert team on the COVID-19 origin-tracing mission in Wuhan was ‘independent’ and had no affiliation” (Xia, 2021, February 16, para. 1). Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the General Director of WHO, emphasized that “it is an independent study which is composed of independent individuals from ten institutions”

(Xia, 2021, February 16, para. 2). The initial findings of WHO report have ruled out that “the hypothesis that the virus escaped from a laboratory” (Xia, 2021, February 16, para. 9).

On March 30, 2021, WHO published its report of COVID-19’s origin based on a month-long on-site visit to Wuhan. According to WHO’s report, it is probable “the virus originated in a bat or pangolin before making the leap to people,” and it is “extremely unlikely” (World Health Organization, 2021, March 30) the COVID-19 escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan.

After WHO released the report of the COVID-19’s origin, the American media had cast doubt on the report’s authenticity. On the same day, The Wall Street Journal’s Drew Hinshaw, Betsy McKay and Jeremy Page argued: “The team had little power to conduct a thorough, independent investigation during their trip. China initially resisted international pressure for an inquiry, and later imposed strict limitations, secured China veto rights over participants and expanded its scope to encompass other countries” (Hinshaw, McKay, & Page, 2021, March 30, para. 5). The Biden administration also questioned the “integrity” of data which China provided to the WHO. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, defended China’s cooperation during the investigation saying, “Chinese authorities had provided data of particular concern to the WHO-led team item by item” (Hinshaw, McKay, & Page, 2021, March 30, para. 12).

According to The New York Times, press secretary of the White House, Jen Psaki, criticized China of impeding the WHO’s investigation into the origin of COVID-19 and demanded China be more “transparent” by providing “underlying” data saying, “The report lacks crucial data information and access — it represents a partial and

incomplete picture” (Thrush, 2021, March 30, para. 4). The WHO’s report questioned not only by the Biden administration, but also other nations. The U.S. and “13 other countries released a joint statement raising questions about the WHO report and calling for independent and fully transparent evaluations, and the European Union called for better access for researchers and further investigation” (Gaouette & Hansler, 2021, March 30, para. 3).

Chinese state media Global Times responded to this allegation with an article entitled, “Attacks on WHO report dismissed” (Zhao et al., 2021, March 31, para. 1). According to Global Times, the WHO’s report “dismissed the possibility of the virus being leaked from a lab” (Zhao et al., 2021, March 31, para. 2).

Although WHO published its COVID-19’s origin report, the American media demonstrated disbelief and kept calling for “more thorough investigation of Covid origins in China” (Cameron, 2021, April 11, para. 1). For example, on May 13, 2021, The New York Times published a news article titled “Another group of scientists calls for further inquiry into origins of the coronavirus” (Gorman & Zimmer, 2021, May 13). These scientists asked in a public letter for “a new investigation to explore where the virus came from” since “lack of evidence leaves theories of natural spillover and laboratory leak both viable” (Gorman & Zimmer, 2021, May 13, para. 1-3).

Under political pressure from the U.S. and other countries, on October 13, 2021, according to The New York Times, the WHO had to resend an advisory group which included scientists from 26 countries to investigate the origin of coronavirus. Political competition between the U.S. and China resulted in the previous

investigation in early 2021 becoming “bogged down” (Mueller, 2021, October 13, para. 4). Results indicated that WHO’s investigative role regarding COVID-19’s origin was supported by the Chinese media, and the media outlets in China did not want to keep the origin of COVID-19 on their agenda. However, WHO’s investigation of COVID-19’s origin was rejected by the American media, and media outlets in the U.S. still wanted to keep the origin of COVID-19 on their agenda, seemingly never giving up the story which they believed to be true.

*Retelling of the initial narrative: no clear source*

The theme of *no clear source* emerged throughout the data from both the American media and the Chinese media regarding COVID-19’s origin, and thus received a theme of its own. This theme was identified in 26 of the 210 news articles and represented approximately 12% of the total news articles analyzed. The table below illustrates a breakdown of the percentage of the news articles from the American media and Chinese media respectively under this theme. This theme was far more prevalent in American media.

Table 8

*Relative Importance of the No Clear Source Theme by Percentage of Prevalence in Reports*

<b>No Clear Source: Percentages</b>	
American Media	10 % of total analyzed news articles
Chinese Media	2 % of total analyzed news articles

The Biden administration questioned WHO’s COVID-19 origin report published on March 30, 2021, stating that the origin of the COVID-19 remains “unclear” (Hernández & Gorman, 2021, March 29, para. 1), but it is “extremely unlikely” (World Health Organization, 2021, March 30) that it was leaked from a Wuhan laboratory. According to The New York Times, President Biden “ordered the nation’s intelligence agencies in May to conduct a 90-day inquiry into the origins of the pandemic” (Barnes, 2021, August 27, para. 1). The “laboratory-leak theory” and the “natural exposure theory” are the two leading theories of the origin of COVID-19. According to The New York Times national security journalist Barnes (2021, August 27), intelligence agencies in the U.S. drew no confirmed conclusion on which theory is correct based on their three-month investigation at the request of the Biden administration. The author claimed that “American intelligence agencies are unlikely to be able to draw a firm conclusion about the origin of the novel coronavirus without more information from China on the earliest cases or new scientific discoveries about the nature of the virus” (Barnes, 2021, October

29, para. 1-2). On the same day, according to CNN, the declassified report released by the intelligence agencies in the U.S. confirmed that “it has not reached a conclusion on the origins of Covid-19” (Lillis, 2021, October 29, para. 1).

Since the breakout of the COVID-19, scientists around the world have been trying to figure out its origin. Journalist Amy Marcus from The Wall Street Journal argued that not only were the intelligence agencies in the U.S. unable to find the precise source of COVID-19, but also noted that “bat scientists warn that the world may never know COVID-19 origins” (Marcus, 2021, July 11, para. 1).

No clear source also emerged as a topic in the Chinese media. On October 30, 2021, CGTN also depicted that a clear source of COVID-19’s origin is not identified yet, based on a press release by WHO-China joint team. The Chinese media returned to the idea that tracing the origin of COVID-19 is a scientific issue, and that people should trust scientists’ conclusion, not politicize it.

The latest theme of the origin of COVID-19 framed by both the American media and the Chinese state media was *no clear source*. This updated narrative was recognized by both the American media and the Chinese media. Both the American and Chinese media seemed comfortable with the idea that the origin of the disease might never be resolved, and thus the need for continued reporting disappeared. The larger narrative about the origin of COVID-19 has appeared to resolve on this shared belief. This story was removed from the media’s agenda. Once again, the research results indicate that the conflicts will go away if the competing media narratives disappear.



Table 9 illustrates the evolving COVID-19 origin narratives between China and the U.S. Key moments are presented, along with the countries where the themes were initiated. The major themes can also be seen as they change over time.

Table 9

*A Timeline of Key Moments in the Evolving COVID-19 Origin Media Narratives  
Competition between China and the U.S.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Chinese Media</b>	<b>U.S. Media</b>
Dec 31, 2019	Health authorities: all the cases “related to a seafood market” in Wuhan (XH).	
Jan 28, 2020		Bats are “considered the probable source of the coronavirus outbreak spreading from China” (NYT).
Feb 17, 2020		Tom Cotton: coronavirus was “a Chinese bioweapon” escaped from Wuhan lab (NYT).
Feb 19, 2020	Tom Cotton’s bioweapon conspiracy theory of COVID-19 origin is “bogus claims” (CGTN).	
March 12, 2020	Zhao tweets that “It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan” (PD).	
March 13, 2020		“Chinese ambassador Cui Tiankai was summoned shortly after Zhao’s comments” (CNN).
Mar 30, 2021		Authenticity of WHO’s COVID-19 origin report is questioned (WSJ).
Mar 31, 2021	WHO’s COVID-19 origin report which “dismissed the possibility” of the lab leak is supported (GT).	
Oct 29, 2021		American intelligence agencies released declassified report which confirmed that “no firm conclusion” (CNN).
Oct 30, 2021	A clear source of COVID-19’s origin is not identified yet, it is a “scientific issue” (CGTN).	

## CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

This study examines the narratives that were presented in Chinese and American media using Dr. Li Wenliang and the COVID-19 origin as case studies to understand how these news stories conflicted and which tellings became dominant. The way these two cases have been depicted in the media has changed over time. Understanding how that depiction changed is important because it helps demonstrate how narratives function to frame crises. The current study uses agenda-setting, framing and narrative theories to support thematic analysis of news articles. Observing how a narrative changes allows for a more nuanced perspective of how crises are communicated and understood by the community.

Three major themes emerged from the media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang both in China and the United States: rumormonger, whistleblower and politicized icon, and martyr. Five major themes the U.S. and China were debating were uncovered related to the origin of COVID-19: natural cause, lab-leak conspiracy, U.S. Army conspiracy, WHO's investigation role, and no clear source. The findings identify internal and external sources of pressure that can cause the media to change their storytelling. Results of this study have significant implications for the crisis communication literature and the crisis communication practices of government entities. This analysis suggests that recognition of the competing media narratives between the U.S. and China during times of crises is necessary to promote sharing perspectives and effective strategic communication between the two global superpowers.

In this chapter, I will first talk about the major findings from the theoretical framework of narrative, agenda setting and framing theories. Then, I will discuss the

theoretical and practical implications of this study. Next, research limitations and future directions will be discussed. Last, I will end this chapter with an overall conclusion of this research.

### Explanation of major findings

Narratives that operate across a broad audience become even more complex during crisis (Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003). COVID-19 has been an unprecedented public health crisis subject to multiple interpretations. The purpose of the current study was to explore, using narrative, agenda setting and framing theories, the media narratives regarding Dr. Li Wenliang and the COVID-19 origin controversy. Additionally, the investigation examined the change in media narratives over time.

#### *RQ1*

Research question one asked, “How did COVID-19 crisis narratives in Chinese and American media compete?” The findings of this study also highlight how narratives can compete with one another. When crisis narratives conflict, people have to resolve these inconsistencies (Anthony, 2013; Anthony, Sellnow, & Millner, 2013; Anthony & Venette, 2017). Consistent with Seeger and Sellnow (2016), different parties may provide multiple crisis narratives in terms of different ideologies, cultures, or even physical viewpoints. For the case of Dr. Li Wenliang, through thematic analysis of media reports from four Chinese state media and four American media sources that covered Dr. Li Wenliang’s story, it is evident that the state media initially framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a troublemaker who tried to spread rumors against the collective good. The mainstream media in the United States portrayed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized icon who tried to warn about the outbreak of COVID-19. This clash of narratives, along

with the Chinese public's dissatisfaction with the initial depiction, created a decisive moment for the Chinese government. Without careful retelling of events, criticism would have remained or increased.

For the case of the COVID-19 origin controversy, through thematic narrative analysis of media reports from four Chinese state media and four American media outlets that covered the controversy of the COVID-19 origin, it is apparent that the Chinese state media initially framed the origin of COVID-19 as natural cause closely related with a seafood market in Wuhan. The mainstream media in the United States countered by suggesting that COVID-19 may have been leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan. However, the Chinese state media responded with the counter-claim that it was the U.S. Army that brought the coronavirus to Wuhan while attending the 2019 Military World Games. This clash of narratives, along with the American public's dissatisfaction with the initial depiction by the Chinese media, created another decisive moment for the Chinese government concerning how to strategically communicate this controversy to the global public. Without careful retelling of events, criticism would have remained or increased.

## *RQ2*

Research question two asked, "How were COVID-19 narratives framed in American and Chinese media?" The way people understand a crisis is largely based on the way those events are being narrated by the media. Joye (2010) points out, "News carries a unique signifying power, a power to represent events in particular ways" (p. 598). Results of this study suggested that the media narratives of Dr. Li Wenliang's story and the COVID-19 origin controversy in Chinese and American media diverged greatly. For the case of Dr. Li Wenliang, Chinese media initially framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a

rumormonger, while the American media framed Dr. Li Wenliang as a whistleblower and politicized icon. The primary Chinese narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang's story was quickly rejected by the Chinese public. Finally, the Chinese media generated an alternative telling of Dr. Li Wenliang's story which celebrated him as a martyr.

For the case of the COVID-19 origin controversy, the Chinese state media and American media initially converged on the story reflecting natural cause. When an American politician suggested that the disease came from a lab in Wuhan, a significant split developed in the story being told in the U.S. A third origin story emerged when the Chinese media argued that the U.S. introduced the disease. That narrative was quickly rejected in the U.S., but it appeared to gain some traction in China. The origin controversy continued as claims were met with counter-claims. Not until a conclusion was articulated that seemed reasonable to both Chinese and American audiences was the origin story removed from the agenda. The story is now framed through a lens of uncertainty. People seem to agree that the world may never know the true origins of COVID-19.

Differences in culture plus differences in media and social systems may cause very profound divergence in the media representations of the stories of Dr. Li Wenliang and the origin of COVID-19. The different media constructions of the facts into narrative explanations resulted in different attitudes in American and Chinese audiences. In the U.S., the media is largely profit-driven and thus tends to be heavy on sensationalism. While in China, most of the media are state-owned. The Chinese media are considered as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party. Advocating government's stances and disseminating information the government wants the public to know is the media's first

priority. These differences ultimately have an influence on the way the narratives were constructed and shared.

The different ideological stances and national interests of the U. S. and China also shaped how American and Chinese media covered both Dr. Li Wenliang and the origin of COVID-19. Animosity toward the Chinese Communist Party by American media added another uncertainty factor when setting agenda and framing these two cases. On the macro-level, differences in political and economic systems between the two countries influence the ways that media stories are communicated to the particular audiences.

According to agenda setting theory, the media tell the public what the important issues are. Framing theory helps explain how the media shapes how the public should be thinking about the issue. For example, should people think about the events as good or bad? Thus, the media suggests both what their audiences should be thinking about and offers a particular way to think about them.

In case of COVID-19's origin, in terms of the agenda-setting, the American media placed this topic on the agenda of public deliberation as an important topic (in essence saying, "this is an important topic; look at how much time we are spending on it"). As discussed in the results chapter above, the origin of COVID-19 was framed differently in the American and Chinese media, and even the American media narratives competing one another. In terms of framing, a large segment of the American media suggested that either China intentionally released the disease (a bad act), or it was a lab leak accident (a mistake). Either way, China was ultimately responsible. It was not until a construction of events was offered that removed blame as the dominant frame that the controversy was removed from the agenda. The idea that the origin may never be known might not have

been fully satisfying to all parties, but it was sufficient to help the narrative converge and the controversy to go away.

In the case of Dr. Li Wenliang, why did American media want to tell the story of Dr. Li Wenliang? Part of the reason why the American media wanted to put Dr. Li Wenliang's story on the agenda was because they were trying to show China was not doing the right thing. This case might have been used by the American media as evidence that the Chinese government is a bad actor, a theme not uncommon in American journalism. An alternative explanation is that the American media told the story because Americans value people who stand up for what is the right thing to do, and Americans also value underdogs who are fighting what appears to be injustice. Therefore, to some extent, Dr. Li Wenliang's story is consistent with Americans' common values. As mentioned above, the media in the United States are market-oriented and have to gain attention from their audiences. When the media can tell compelling stories, they will gain more sales. Therefore, American media put their audience's needs as their first priority and try to make their audience happy.

While on the contrary, Chinese state media are considered as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist party, therefore, their emphasis is different. The Chinese media have to be consistent with the Chinese government's position. To some extent, different media systems between the U.S. and China shape the different media agenda setting and framing. The two nations' media have different priorities when they are setting the agenda and framing stories. This difference could help explain why these two stories are framed differently in these two countries. In another words, this separation could also

help highlight the incentives to argue about the narratives. The American and Chinese media have different motivations that ultimately determine how narratives are framed.

### *RQ3*

Research question three asked, “How did the crisis narratives change over time?”

The results revealed that researchers can track dynamic crisis-related narratives over time. Because crises are dynamic, communication scholars should not view a narrative as a fixed series of static events. Communication scholars should not look at narratives as something that happens in a vacuum, because narratives are not only changing, but are also contextual. For example, the case of Dr. Li Wenliang, in an attempt to protect the public, the Chinese state media depicted Dr. Li Wenliang as a rumormonger. However, the public believed that Dr. Li Wenliang was trying to protect the public. Instead of rejecting Dr. Li Wenliang’s depiction as a hero, the state media coopted the alternative telling of events into its own narrative. Instead of being ingrained as a symbol of a government failure, Dr. Li Wenliang became a martyr and a model citizen who reflected collectivist values and efforts. The state media’s metanarration (see Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003) successfully re-explained events and sought to deflect blame away from the Chinese government.

For the case of the COVID-19 origin controversy, the Chinese state media initially framed the origin of COVID-19 as natural cause closely related with a seafood market in Wuhan. However, the American public did not believe what had been framed by the Chinese media to be true. Instead, the mainstream media in the United States portrayed that COVID-19 originated from a biological laboratory leakage in Wuhan. However, the Chinese state media self-defended by going on the attack, saying that it was



U.S. Army that brought the novel coronavirus to Wuhan while attending the 2019 Military World Games.

#### Recommendations based on findings

Results indicated that when the Chinese and American media failed to find a way to converge on a narrative that satisfies both sides, the stories never went away. Regarding communication strategies that organizations can use during a crisis, if a dominant media narrative about the crisis is being framed negatively, one possible strategy to get the story out of the agenda is to stop arguing about the way the story is being constructed. At times, the organizations should stop arguing if they want the story to go away. For example, when the Trump administration blamed China for COVID-19, the Chinese media argue by self-defending, the conflicts between the U.S. and China escalated, and the story did not go away. When the Biden administration stopped blaming China, the Chinese media did not argue, the conflicts disappeared, and the story did go away.

Avoiding arguing is sometimes the first step in avoiding conflict, or to let the conflicts go away. Blaming only escalates the controversy. In the two case studies, blaming China or the U.S. failed to make the story go away; in fact, the opposite was true. Controversy appears to be the fuel that keeps the stories alive. Therefore, in some instances, the parties in conflict must stop blaming each other. If the American media attacked China, the Chinese media refuted by attacking the U.S., and both sides kept the controversy going. If organizations want the competing narratives to merging into one story, they should stop saying that there are two stories. The more conflicts there are, the more likely the story will stay in the agenda; the stories only stays around as long as the

conflicts exist. Take the case of COVID-19 origin for example, the Chinese media initially framed the story as natural cause, while the American media rejected the initial narrative and framed as lab leak, which was China's fault; the Chinese media refuted the accusation by blaming the U.S. Army. Inevitably, the conflicts between these two countries not only remained, but they also thrived, becoming bigger and bigger. While on the contrary, the stories went away as soon as the narratives were allowed to converge.

### Implications

Narrative, and framing theories provided an excellent lens for analysis of the competing stories in these two cases. Communication scholars have illustrated that narratives are how people make sense of the world around them (Fisher, 1987). Narratives are particularly important during a crisis because events are articulated as stories (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Competing narratives start to resolve when the story is consistent with the "facts" (i.e., what people understand to be true about the story) (Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003). This study contributes to the academic conversation by showing that, during times of crisis, the narratives that resonate with an audience not only dependent on the way facts are woven together, but the stories must appeal to the publics' values. The extent to which the narrative is consistent with the audiences' value system, the more likely they will be to accept that narrative.

The way the media frames a crisis shapes people's opinions and perceptions of that crisis. How does the media decide what frame to use? It is related to media system and the audiences' common values. For example, framing theory has been used to show how the construction of a story influences the audience's understanding of the events. However, Dr. Li Wenliang's case contributes to framing theory by demonstrating that

when a series of events are framed in a manner that is inconsistent with their strongly held beliefs, the public will likely reject that narrative. Thus, framing lacks persuasive power when the suggested narrative is contrary to people's experiences or beliefs.

According to Rothwell (2018), the "individualism-collectivism dimension is thought by some scholars to be the most important, deep-seated value that distinguishes one culture from another" (p. 16). In individualist cultures, the "autonomy of the individual is of paramount importance" and "competition, not cooperation, is encouraged" (Rothwell, 2018, p. 16). While "commitment to the group is paramount," in collectivist cultures and cooperation and "harmony is encouraged" (Rothwell, 2018, p. 16).

Take the case of COVID-19 origin for example, Americans wanted to know what happened exactly because they do not want it to happen again. In the U.S., people value individualism, and pursuing justice is one of their common values. When people or entities do something wrong, Americans want them to be held accountable and to be punished. While in China, people value collectivism and they believe that finger pointing does not work, conflicts make the problem even worse. People cooperating together and trying to find the solution is the right way to end this public health crisis. In the case of Dr. Li Wenliang, he was depicted by the Chinese state media at first as a rumormonger who tried to spread rumors that threatened the stability and safety of the community, which reflects Chinese values since conformity is more expected in China. Similarly, the U. S. values individualism, which certainly reflects the American media narrative framing him as a whistleblower trying to do the right thing. Americans value people who stand up for the general public's good, even when that comes at great personal sacrifice. It is

understandable that Dr. Li Wenliang's story is consistent with Americans' common values. The resolution of Dr. Li Wenliang's story was also consistent with Chinese values. Dr. Li Wenliang was a hero and a model citizen; he acted for the collective good. His sacrifice is worthy of remembrance and emulation. From the above analysis, it could be seen that how each national narrative may fit well with each nation's values and culture.

Dr. Li Wenliang's case also highlights that the Chinese government was wise when it reframed its initial telling of the story. The government successfully reduced criticism by reconstructing the narrative in a way that was consistent with public sentiments and was responsive to alternative framing, such as American media depictions. The government's response reinforces the idea that crises are dynamic, and thus communicators need to be able to retell the story while accounting for new information and perspectives.

To remove a story from the media's agenda, the conflict needs to be resolved. How does an organization reduce the conflict to de-escalate the competition between the tellings of events? Using harmonious frames instead of blaming frames is a good way. This study suggests five potential harmonious frames: (1) not blaming; (2) shared values; (3) common ground; (4) problem solving; and (5) public good. *Not blaming* means that organizations or individuals should avoid blaming each other. Conflicting narratives about blame keep the controversy alive. *Shared values* suggests that focus should be placed not on the differences in values between countries, but rather on the core values that are shared. Life and protection of the public are examples of shared values related to the COVID-19 crisis. *Common ground* is similar to shared values; however, the emphasis

in this frame is on areas of agreement about the narratives, especially particular facts. Stating how parties agree about some points, even if they disagree about others, helps to reduce tension. With *problem solving*, parties are reminded to stay focused “on putting out the fire” (solving the problem), rather than debating less pressing concerns. *Public good* provides an ethical imperative to recognize that people are often in jeopardy during a crisis. Involved organizations should put the welfare of the public at the first priority. From a communication perspective, people should be provided information that helps them protect themselves and their loved-ones.

The commentary published by the Xinhua News Agency advocating that “as the epidemic is spreading to more countries and regions, and infecting more people around the globe, it is time for countries to build a united front to win the war on the disease” and warning that “those U.S. rumormongers’ attempts only serve to encourage fear, division and hate” (Gao, 2020, March 9, para.11). This statement provides both positive and negative examples of harmonious frames. Showing that the disease is a danger to everyone establishes common ground. Building a united front and fighting a shared battle reflects common values and emphasizes problem solving and common good. Unfortunately, pointing to U.S. rumormongers undermines harmony due to blaming.

The thematic analysis of this study also identified how both internal and external (international) sources of pressure can cause the media to change their storytelling. For example, the findings of this study suggested that internal sources of pressure, such as online protests on Chinese social media, helped to communicate that the Chinese public did not accept the initial narrative of Dr. Li Wenliang’s story. External sources of pressure coming from media sources outside of China also indicated that the initial telling of Dr.

Li Wenliang's story was not entirely accepted as accurate. Few other studies have identified these sources of pressure that have caused media to change their storytelling, especially during crises.

#### Limitations and future research directions

The major limitation of this study is only four news sources from the United States and four news sources from China were used. Certainly, other news sources could have been analyzed. Also, only American news media were examined representing international pressure. Other external sources could provide meaningful insights. Hence, future study could use news media from other countries as well. Regardless, the sources included in this study were sufficient to articulate the major themes depicted in the media of both countries.

In the future, scholars should study the difference between the government funded media versus independent media in the way they frame crisis and construct narratives. As discussed previously, the motivations might vary based on who is funding the reporting, as well as other political and economic influences.

Future research should test to see whether the same or similar process of adapting narratives within the Chinese media holds true in other countries. Other crisis cases within China also deserve attention to see if similar findings will emerge. Other stories have been told differently outside of China, putting pressure on the Chinese news sources to change how they report about a particular crisis case. Media reports about protests that took place in Hong Kong may be a prime example.

Future research could also look at additional cases where more than two narratives are competing. In other words, the cases studied in this dissertation have two

main positions that competed with one another. Other cases exist where more than two narratives are presented as definitive explanations of a crisis. Possible examples could be the conflict of Ukraine (Western perspective versus Russia position versus Chinese view) and Prince Andrew's sexual misconduct case (his story versus royal family's story versus media's story).

### Conclusion

During times of crisis, a significant communication function served by conspiracy theories is to help unite the public against “an imagined secretive, powerful elite” (Fenster, 1999, p. 28). Šrol, Čavojová and Ballová Mikušková (2022) argued that “one of the appeals of conspiracy theories in times of crises is that they provide someone to blame for what has happened” (p. 1). By creating and circulating conspiracy theories regarding the origin of COVID-19, particularly those either framing China or the U.S as responsible for the global pandemic, this could also be considered as a global competition between the U.S. and China over the narrative of this public health crisis.

Objective reality or facts are less important in the truth finding role of media discourse, rather what is more important is the way that the media weaves them together into a story. The truthfulness of the story is socially constructed. The media tells us how to think about those facts. The way the media tells us how to think about those facts is the way how media frames the story. This analysis suggests how powerful the media is when establishing the agenda and shaping what people believe to be true.

Dr. Li Wenliang was an important figure during the emergence of COVID-19. The origin of COVID-19 is one of the main controversies between the U.S. and China during

the pandemic. By examining these two cases, a better understanding of how crisis narratives work can be gained. This analysis provides an understanding of how the news media construct narratives during a crisis. Hopefully, this thematic narrative analysis will assist government entities and news agencies in learning how to deal with an emergent public health crisis like COVID-19. In the future, people such as Dr. Li Wenliang should not have to suffer or be falsely accused in order for their information to be seen as valuable. My research also indicates that the finger pointing blaming communication regarding the controversial issues between the U.S. and China in nowadays is not an effective communication strategy, instead, it could escalate the controversy and make things even worse. Government entities and news agencies in both countries should avoid unnecessary media narratives competition and focus on solving the problem by putting the welfare of all the human beings at the first priority.



APPENDIX A - Sample Codebook

Table A1.

*Example of News Articles Coded for Theme: Lab-leak Conspiracy*

<b>Example of News Articles Coded for Theme: <i>Lab-leak Conspiracy</i></b>		
<b>Theme and Codes</b>	<b>News Outlet</b>	<b>Example Excerpts of News Articles</b>
<b>Lab-leak Conspiracy</b>		
<p>→ <b>Sub-theme:</b> <b>Lab-leak Conspiracy Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wuhan Institute of Virology</li> <li>- Wuhan Lab</li> <li>- Biochemical Lab</li> <li>- Laboratory</li> <li>- Lab Leakage</li> <li>- Chinese Bioweapon</li> <li>- Researchers at Wuhan Lab</li> <li>- Tom Cotton</li> <li>- Shi Zhengli</li> <li>- Intelligence Agency</li> </ul>	<p><b>American Media</b></p>	<p><b>NYT: Senator Tom Cotton Repeats Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins</b> The rumor appeared shortly after the new coronavirus struck China and spread almost as quickly: that the outbreak now afflicting people around the world had been manufactured by the Chinese government. The conspiracy theory lacks evidence and has been dismissed by scientists. But it has gained an audience with the help of well-connected critics of the Chinese government such as Stephen K. Bannon, President Trump’s former chief strategist. And on Sunday, it got its biggest public boost yet. Speaking on Fox News, Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, raised the possibility that the virus had originated in a high-security biochemical lab in Wuhan, the Chinese city at the center of the outbreak.</p> <p><b>NYT: Trump Officials Are Said to Press Spies to Link Virus and Wuhan Labs</b></p>

		<p>Senior Trump administration officials have pushed American spy agencies to hunt for evidence to support an unsubstantiated theory that a government laboratory in Wuhan, China, was the origin of the coronavirus outbreak, according to current and former American officials. The effort comes as President Trump escalates a public campaign to blame China for the pandemic.</p> <p>Some intelligence analysts are concerned that the pressure from administration officials will distort assessments about the virus and that they could be used as a political weapon in an intensifying battle with China over a disease that has infected more than three million people across the globe.</p> <p>Most intelligence agencies remain skeptical that conclusive evidence of a link to a lab can be found, and scientists who have studied the genetics of the coronavirus say that the overwhelming probability is that it leapt from animal to human in a nonlaboratory setting, as was the case with H.I.V., Ebola and SARS.</p> <hr/> <p><b>NYT: Did the Coronavirus Come From a Lab?</b></p> <p>From the outbreak's early days, most scientists assumed that the virus, SARS-CoV-2, had jumped from an animal to a person in late 2019, possibly at a meat market in Wuhan, China, the city of 11 million where the first known Covid cases were</p>
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	<p>identified. But in May, The Times reported that U.S. intelligence agencies were investigating another explanation that had been debated for months: that the virus had accidentally escaped from a lab. There are certainly some serious scientists who think it's a possible, even probable explanation. One is David Relman, a Stanford microbiologist, who has been calling for a more thorough investigation of the virus's origins since last year.</p> <p>Despite testing tens of thousands of animals, researchers in China have been unable to locate a natural source of SARS-CoV-2. The closest apparent relatives, Relman notes, were collected from bats more than 1,000 miles from Wuhan.</p>
	<p><b>WSJ:</b> Coronavirus and the Laboratories in Wuhan</p> <p>The U.S. government is investigating whether the Covid-19 virus came from a government laboratory in Wuhan, China. The Chinese Communist Party denies the possibility. "There is no way this virus came from us," claimed Yuan Zhiming over the weekend. Mr. Yuan is a top researcher at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which studies some of the world's deadliest pathogens. He is also secretary of the lab's Communist Party committee. He accuses me of "deliberately trying to mislead people" for suggesting his</p>

	<p>laboratory as a possible origin for the pandemic.</p> <p>Beijing has claimed that the virus originated in a Wuhan “wet market,” where wild animals were sold. But evidence to counter this theory emerged in January. Chinese researchers reported in the Lancet Jan. 24 that the first known cases had no contact with the market, and Chinese state media acknowledged the finding. There’s no evidence the market sold bats or pangolins, the animals from which the virus is thought to have jumped to humans. And the bat species that carries it isn’t found within 100 miles of Wuhan.</p> <p>Wuhan has two labs where we know bats and humans interacted. One is the Institute of Virology, eight miles from the wet market; the other is the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention, barely 300 yards from the market.</p>
	<p><b>WSJ:</b> Intelligence on Sick Staff at Wuhan Lab Fuels Debate on Covid-19 Origin</p> <p>Report says researchers went to hospital in November 2019, shortly before confirmed outbreak; adds to calls for probe of whether virus escaped lab.</p> <p>Three researchers from China’s Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick enough in November 2019 that they sought hospital care, according to a previously undisclosed U.S. intelligence report that could add</p>

		<p>weight to growing calls for a fuller probe of whether the Covid-19 virus may have escaped from the laboratory.</p> <p>The details of the reporting go beyond a State Department fact sheet, issued during the final days of the Trump administration, which said that several researchers at the lab, a center for the study of coronaviruses and other pathogens, became sick in autumn 2019 “with symptoms consistent with both Covid-19 and common seasonal illness.”</p> <p>The disclosure of the number of researchers, the timing of their illnesses and their hospital visits come on the eve of a meeting of the World Health Organization’s decision-making body, which is expected to discuss the next phase of an investigation into Covid-19’s origins.</p>
		<p><b>WSJ:</b> U.S. Report Found It Plausible Covid-19 Leaked From Wuhan Lab  A report on the origins of Covid-19 by a U.S. government national laboratory concluded that the hypothesis claiming the virus leaked from a Chinese lab in Wuhan is plausible and deserves further investigation, according to people familiar with the classified document. The study was prepared in May 2020 by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California and was drawn on by the State Department when it conducted an inquiry into the</p>

		<p>pandemic’s origins during the final months of the Trump administration. It is attracting fresh interest in Congress now that President Biden has ordered that U.S. intelligence agencies report to him within weeks on how the virus emerged. Mr. Biden said that U.S. intelligence has focused on two scenarios—whether the coronavirus came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident.</p>
		<p><b>TIME:</b> Trump’s Racially-Charged Retweet of ‘China Virus’ Message Fuels Tensions With Beijing  As the disease formally designated as COVID-19 expands across the U.S., Trump and other top Republicans have sought to highlight the outbreak’s foreign origin. On Tuesday, Trump retweeted supporter Charlie Kirk calling it the “China virus”.</p> <p>That’s a characterization that Beijing has been fighting since the virus was first discovered in humans in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in December. Chinese diplomats and state media have pushed back against terms like the “Wuhan flu” wherever they turn up, with Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian arguing last week that “no conclusion has been reached yet on the origin of the virus.”</p> <p>“By calling it ‘China virus’ and thus suggesting its origin without any supporting facts or evidence, some media clearly want China to take the</p>

		<p>blame and their ulterior motives are laid bare,” Zhao said.</p>
		<p><b>TIME:</b> How China’s Response to the COVID-19 Lab Leak Theory Means It Will Rumble On and On</p> <p>China’s insistence of flinging mud instead of facilitating a thorough investigation means that not only will the cloud of suspicion remain, but we may never know the true cause behind the pandemic. Despite Zhao’s protestations of “China’s openness and transparency,” the facts tell a different story.</p> <p>China arrested whistle-blower doctors during the first stages of the pandemic. It publicly denied human-to-human transmission despite overwhelming evidence. It sanctioned the virologist who courageously published the first SARS-Cov2 genome without permission. Its National Health Commission forbade the publishing of any information regarding the Wuhan outbreak and ordered labs to destroy or transfer all viral samples to designated testing institutions, according to a Jan. 3 order seen by Beijing-based finance magazine Caixin. Universities have been instructed not to publish any report that indicates the virus originated in China, according to directives seen by TIME. Even journalists who have attempted to access bat caves in southwestern China—including TIME—have been met with harassment and intimidation.</p>

	<p>On May 14, 18 prominent scientists—including Ralph Baric, a virologist who has worked with Wuhan Institute of Virology chief scientist Shi Zhengli—published a letter in the journal Science that called for a new investigation because “theories of accidental release from a lab and zoonotic spillover both remain viable.” Dr. Francis Collins, the director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, told senators May 26 that while it is most likely the virus arose naturally “we cannot exclude the possibility of some kind of a lab accident.” What undeniably feeds the conjecture is China’s unwillingness to conduct open investigations even into scenarios that could render the lab leak theory less compelling.</p>
	<p><b>TIME:</b> Top Official at Wuhan Disease Lab Denies Any Link to Coronavirus Outbreak</p> <p>A top Wuhan laboratory official has denied any role in spreading the new coronavirus, in the highest-level response from a facility at the center of months of speculation about how the previously unknown animal disease made the leap to humans.</p> <p>U.S. President Donald Trump again fanned speculation about the origins of the virus at a Saturday news conference, in which he said China should face consequences if it was “knowingly responsible” for the outbreak. The U.S. president has at times referred to the disease as a</p>



		<p>“Chinese virus,” a term he said he embraced after a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman tweeted an unsubstantiated theory about U.S. Army athletes introducing the pathogen to Wuhan.</p> <p>“What we know is that the ground zero for this virus was within a few miles of that lab,” Peter Navarro, a Trump trade adviser, said Sunday on Fox News. “If you simply do an Occam’s razor approach that the simplest explanation is probably the most likely, I think it’s incumbent on China to prove that it wasn’t that lab.”</p>
		<p><b>CNN:</b> US explores possibility that coronavirus spread started in Chinese lab, not a market</p> <p>US intelligence and national security officials say the United States government is looking into the possibility that the novel coronavirus spread from a Chinese laboratory rather than a market, according to multiple sources familiar with the matter who caution it is premature to draw any conclusions.</p> <p>The theory is one of multiple being pursued by investigators as they attempt to determine the origin of the coronavirus that has resulted in a pandemic and killed hundreds of thousands. The US does not believe the virus was associated with bioweapons research and the sources indicated there is currently no indication the virus was man-made. Officials noted that the intelligence</p>

		<p>community is also exploring a range of other theories regarding the origination of the virus, as would typically be the case for high-profile incidents, according to an intelligence source.</p> <p>The theory has been pushed by supporters of the President, including some congressional Republicans, who are eager to deflect criticisms of Trump's handling of the pandemic.</p>
		<p><b>CNN:</b> Trump contradicts US intel community by claiming he's seen evidence coronavirus originated in Chinese lab</p> <p>President Donald Trump contradicted a rare on-the-record statement from his own intelligence community by claiming Thursday that he has seen evidence that gives him a "high degree of confidence" the novel coronavirus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China, but declined to provide details to back up his assertion.</p> <p>The comments undercut a public statement from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued just hours earlier which stated no such assessment has been made and continues to "rigorously examine" whether the outbreak "began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan."</p> <p>Trump officials have been pushing the US intelligence community to determine the exact origins of the coronavirus outbreak in pursuit of an</p>

		<p>unproven theory that the pandemic started because of a laboratory accident in China, multiple sources told CNN.</p>
		<p><b>CNN:</b> Biden tasks intelligence community to report on Covid origins in 90 days</p> <p>President Joe Biden said Wednesday he has directed the US intelligence community to redouble their efforts in investigating the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic and report back to him in 90 days.</p> <p>The announcement comes after a US intelligence report found several researchers at China's Wuhan Institute of Virology fell ill in November 2019 and had to be hospitalized -- a new detail that fueled fresh public pressure on Biden to delve deeper into the origin of the virus.</p> <p>Biden said in the statement that in March he directed his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, to task the intelligence community with preparing a report on the most up-to-date analysis of the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, including whether the virus emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident.</p> <p>Biden said he received that report earlier this month and asked for additional follow-up.</p>

Example of News Articles Coded for Theme: <i>Lab-leak Conspiracy</i>		
Theme and Codes	News Outlet	Example Excerpts of News Articles
<b>Lab-leak Conspiracy</b>		
<p>→ <b>Sub-theme:</b> <b>Lab-leak Conspiracy Reject</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wuhan Institute of Virology</li> <li>- Wuhan Lab</li> <li>- Biochemical Lab</li> <li>- Laboratory</li> <li>- Lab Leakage</li> <li>- Bioweapon</li> <li>- Researchers at Wuhan Lab</li> <li>- Tom Cotton</li> <li>- Shi Zhengli</li> <li>- Politicizing coronavirus origin</li> </ul>	<b>Chinese Media</b>	<p><b>CGTN:</b> Coronavirus ‘bioweapon theory’ is bogus, say 27 experts in Lancet</p> <p>Not long after the novel coronavirus outbreak emerged in Wuhan, theories like “China manufactured the virus in a lab as a bioweapon” started to surface. Many online suspected the Wuhan Institute of Virology, home to Asia’s highest-level biosafety lab, is responsible for the global spread of the disease especially that the facility is not far away from the seafood market, which is suspected to be the ground zero of the outbreak.</p> <p>Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas in the United States, also reportedly said the virus was a “Chinese bioweapon run amok,” but later clarified on Twitter that media had “lied.” “I simply said we couldn’t rule out any possibility yet for the virus’ origin, including a laboratory accident,” he wrote in a tweet.</p> <p>Twenty-seven international public health experts, however, have condemned these false claims, jointly issuing a statement on the website of renowned medical journal The Lancet and saying: “We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin.”</p> <p>The scientists supported their claim with research findings that “overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife.”</p>
		<p><b>CGTN:</b> China dismisses claim new coronavirus originated at Wuhan lab</p>

		<p>China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian dismissed claims that the new coronavirus raging through the world originated at a laboratory in Wuhan in Central China’s Hubei Province, where COVID-19 was first reported.</p> <p>U.S. intelligence and national security officials Wednesday said that the U.S. is looking into the possibility that novel coronavirus originated in a Chinese lab. U.S. President Donald Trump later on Wednesday also said his government is trying to determine whether the coronavirus emanated from a lab in Wuhan.</p> <p>Addressing a daily media briefing on Thursday, Zhao responded that the origin of this new virus is for the scientists and medical experts to find out, and the claim itself is groundless. “Officials of the World Health Organization have repeatedly said there’s no evidence the virus was made in a lab, and many experts have also said the claim lacks scientific ground.”</p>
		<p><b>CGTN:</b> Coronavirus Pandemic: Wuhan Virology Institute denies manufacturing virus</p> <p>YUAN ZHIMING Researcher, Wuhan Institute of Virology, Director, Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory, Wuhan Branch Director, Chinese Academy of Sciences “I can tell you for sure that none of our students, retirees, or any of our staff has been infected. A group of staff members chose to stay in Wuhan during the lockdown, which guaranteed that our work was in full swing during the Chinese New Year break. I can hardly count how many teams there are right now. Because now the whole institute is carrying out research in</p>

		<p>different areas related to the coronavirus. We have major teams in drug development, vaccine research, pathogenesis, and of course some are trying to answer the basic questions, including the origin of the virus and the general characteristics of the virus, which is one of our strengths. Some work on the structure of the virus, and the immune responses to it. We've devoted ourselves to the research of it since the outbreak began.”</p> <p>“There's no way this virus came from us – We have a strict regulatory regime, we have a code of conduct for research, so we are confident of that.”</p> <p>“Why are there rumors? Because the Institute of Virology and P4 laboratory are in Wuhan – people can't help making associations, which I think is understandable. But it's bad when some are deliberately trying to mislead people. U.S. Senator Tom Cotton said earlier that the virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The Washington Post and several other outlets wrote about the virus coming from the Wuhan lab. They have no evidence, or knowledge, this is entirely based on speculation.”</p>
		<p><b>GT:</b> Trump's racist words spark hatred, fuel global xenophobia</p> <p>US President Donald Trump has referred to the novel coronavirus as “Chinese virus” at least eight times in tweets and media briefings within just two days, fueling widespread xenophobia and racist sentiment and even physical and verbal attacks against</p>

		<p>Asian Americans and undermining global efforts to contain the deadly virus.</p> <p>Trump’s comment, which is completely against science and facts, could also further promote already-growing populism and racism around the world amid the global pandemic that could plunge countries and regions that have been hit severely by the disease into further disarray and dark abyss, observers warned.</p> <p>After tweeting several times “Chinese virus” to shift the blame to China, Trump insisted on calling it a “Chinese virus” because “it comes from China,” in response to a question from an American journalist on Wednesday. Growing numbers of Asian Americans have been frustrated by the labels of “Chinese virus” or “kung flu,” which risk turning them into a target of hatred and retaliation as the pandemic unfolds quickly in the country.</p>
		<p><b>GT:</b> Source says Western reports of ‘Wuhan lab worker as patient zero’ a translation error</p> <p>It seemed that some Western media simply cannot drop their playbook of distorting the scientific community's views on the origins of SARS-CoV-2. On Friday, a source revealed to the Global Times that the widespread reports which claimed a Wuhan lab worker may be the COVID-19 patient zero was only a translation error.</p> <p>“Covid Patient Zero may have been a Wuhan lab worker, WHO chief says,” read the headline of The Independent,</p>

		<p>and the story quoted Peter Ben Embarek, who led an international team on joint WHO-China studies in Wuhan, as saying that the patient zero of COVID-19 could have been a Wuhan lab employee who came into contact with a bat.</p> <p>However, a source familiar with the matter told the Global Times on condition of anonymity that it was merely a translation error and was not what Ben Embarek said.</p> <p>That was a scenario he used as an example to illustrate how the different hypotheses of lab leak and infections from bat to human are linked and should not be looked at separately as each hypothesis includes many different scenarios, the source said.</p> <p>The WHO-China joint report released on March 31 listed four hypotheses for the source of transmission of the novel coronavirus to the human population, namely a direct zoonotic spillover, cold-chain food infection, an intermediary host species, and a laboratory-related incident.</p> <p>The joint study said that a laboratory incident is “extremely unlikely” to be the cause of COVID-19 pandemic.</p>
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		<p><b>PD:</b> Fauci dismisses theory coronavirus originated in Chinese lab</p> <p>Top U.S. infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci said that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated.</p> <p>Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), made the comments Monday in an interview with National Geographic.</p> <p>While answering a question regarding evidence that the virus was made in or accidentally released from a lab in China, Fauci said, “If you look at the evolution of the virus in bats, and what's out there now is very, very strongly leaning toward this (virus) could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated -- the way the mutations have naturally evolved.”</p> <p>“A number of very qualified evolutionary biologists have said that everything about the stepwise evolution over time strongly indicates that it evolved in nature and then jumped species,” he said.</p>
		<p><b>PD:</b> China refutes U.S. claim of coronavirus originating in Wuhan lab</p> <p>The Chinese Foreign Ministry on Wednesday refuted the claim by some U.S. politicians that the novel coronavirus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan.</p> <p>With respect to the management and research of the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), Yuan Zhiming, director of the National Biosafety</p>

		<p>Laboratory at the institute, had given a comprehensive introduction during an inclusive interview, Wang said.</p> <p>“The laboratory has high-standard bio-safety facilities and a strict management system. All the researchers must undergo systematic theoretical and operation training, and obtain the qualification and approval before entering the laboratory,” Wang quoted Yuan as saying.</p> <p>“Speaking of the truth, we do hope that the U.S. government will tell the truth about issues such as the Fort Detrick biolab and give an explanation to the American people and the international community,” he said.</p>
		<p><b>PD:</b> Wuhan lab scientists refute coronavirus origin conspiracy theories in NBC interviews</p> <p>Scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) once again strongly refuted conspiracy theories that the novel coronavirus originated from the lab in interviews with NBC News that took place inside the institute.</p> <p>On Friday, NBC News became the first foreign news organization to be granted access to the institute since the COVID-19 outbreak began, visiting the lab and meeting with scientists who had been working on the origin of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Yuan Zhiming, vice director of the institute, reiterated that scientists at the facility obtained their first samples of the coronavirus after the disease had begun to spread among the public.</p>

		<p>He said that regular health checks are conducted for the facility’s personnel. So far the institute has not encountered positive tests for the virus or its antibodies, which would suggest that a person had the virus at some point. Wang Yanyi, director of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, said it is unfortunate that she and her colleagues had been targeted as a scapegoat for the origin of the virus.</p>
		<p><b>XH:</b> China says firmly opposes politicizing, stigmatizing coronavirus origin</p> <p>China firmly opposes politicizing and stigmatizing the origin of the novel coronavirus, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said Tuesday, in response to Japanese leader's recent remarks.</p> <p>The origin of the coronavirus is a serious scientific problem that must be studied by scientists and medical experts on the basis of facts and science, Zhao told a press briefing.</p> <p>“China firmly opposes politicizing and stigmatizing the origin of the virus, which runs counter to the professional opinions of the World Health Organization, many research institutions and medical experts, as well as the efforts and expectations of the international community, including China and Japan, to jointly combat the COVID-19 pandemic,” he said.</p> <p>Political blindness should not override scientific judgment, and solidarity and cooperation are the most powerful</p>

		<p>weapon for mankind to defeat the pandemic, Zhao said.</p>
		<p><b>XH:</b> Scientists reject conspiracy theory of coronavirus origin  As COVID-19 is still ravaging the world, top scientists have rejected a conspiracy theory claiming that the novel coronavirus was made in a lab. A study conducted at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s vector-borne viral diseases laboratory in Maryland suggested that SARS-CoV-2 may have been well adapted in human before the outbreak in Wuhan, the South China Morning Post reported on Sunday. The new study “may cast doubt on a theory that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory,” said the report. In an article published recently in Nature Medicine, researchers concluded that their analysis clearly shows that the novel coronavirus “is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus.”  Noting the genetic data irrefutably show that SARS-CoV-2 is not derived from any previously used virus backbone, the researchers said in the article that “we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.”</p>
		<p><b>XH:</b> World Insights: U.S. disseminates political, information, moral virus with conspiracy theory on coronavirus origin  The U.S. government has recently joined forces with some unscrupulous media outlets to hype up the so-called “laboratory leak” conspiracy theory on the origin of COVID-19 during the virtual World Health Assembly, which</p>

		<p>has drawn concern and criticism from the international community.</p> <p>For political purposes, the U.S. side continues to cross the moral bottom line, maliciously concocting conspiracy theories and spreading misinformation, which has fueled an anti-science trend, exacerbated racial discrimination, and undermined the global fight against the pandemic.</p> <p>The United States has indeed become the creator and disseminator of a political, information and moral virus.</p>
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Table A2.

*Example of News Articles Coded for Theme: U.S. Army Conspiracy*

<b>Example of News Articles Coded for Theme: <i>U.S. Army Conspiracy</i></b>		
<b>Theme and Codes</b>	<b>News Outlet</b>	<b>Example Excerpts of News Articles</b>
<b>U.S. Army Conspiracy</b>		
<p>→ <b>Sub-theme:</b> <b>U.S. Army Conspiracy Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- U.S. Army</li> <li>- U.S. Military</li> <li>- U.S. Soldiers</li> <li>- Maryland</li> <li>- Military Base</li> <li>- Fort Detrick</li> <li>- Biolab</li> <li>- Wuhan Military</li> <li>- World Games</li> <li>- Zhao Lijian</li> <li>- US Bioweapon</li> </ul>	<b>Chinese Media</b>	<p><b>CGTN: 10 questions for the U.S.:</b> Where did the novel coronavirus come from? Given that some major U.S. media and politicians made groundless claims that the novel coronavirus originates in China, blamed and slandered China, even asked for an apology from China, then I have every reason to ask 10 questions for the United States about its origin too. Question 4 The U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, located on Fort Detrick, Maryland, was shut down in July 2019. Was it because there was a virus leakage incident? Just one month later, there was an influenza outbreak across the country. Were those two things related in any way? Were the misdiagnoses simply cooked up to cover up such secrets? Did that also become a motive for the U.S. to shift the blame to other countries by labeling them as the origin of the novel coronavirus?</p>

		<p>Was that an epic coincidence or a dirty secret in disguise? Why did the U.S. erase huge number of English news reports on the internet covering the shutdown in March 2020? Is there anything to hide, or is there anything to worry about?</p> <p>Question 5</p> <p>At the 7th Military World Games (October 18-27, 2019) held in Wuhan, why did the U.S. team (369 members) win ZERO gold medal? Did that even look like a reasonable record for the world's leading military power? Did your government do it on purpose?</p> <p>Was anyone among the 369 participants ever (mis)diagnosed with influenza? Was it possible they were carriers of the novel coronavirus?</p> <p>The best thing for the U.S. now is to stop burying its head in the sand and give the 369 people PCT tests to see if they are infected.</p>
		<p><b>GT:</b> US Fort Detrick biolab becomes hot topic on Chinese social media</p> <p>Following China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's recent speech at a regular press conference urging the US to open its Fort Detrick Laboratory to inspectors on Monday, this somewhat mysterious biological lab that handles sensitive disease resources in Maryland has become a hot topic on China's Twitter-like Sina Weibo.</p> <p>"If the US truly respects facts, then please open the biological lab at Fort Detrick, show more transparency to</p>

		<p>issues like its 200-plus overseas bio-labs, invite WHO experts to conduct origin-tracing in the United States....” Hua said at the conference. Her request was quickly supported by Chinese netizens online with people urging the US to respond.</p>
		<p><b>PD:</b> U.S. should invite WHO to probe coronavirus origins at Fort Detrick, UNC</p>
		<p>A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson on Wednesday urged the United States to stop political manipulation on the issue of coronavirus origins tracing, saying the United States should invite WHO experts to launch a probe into Fort Detrick and the University of North Carolina (UNC) to find the source of the virus if it is bent on insisting the lab-leak theory.</p> <p>Spokesperson Wang Wenbin made the remarks at a daily press briefing after the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland wrote to the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), and submitted two non-papers on Fort Detrick and UNC, as well as an open letter signed by netizens demanding an investigation into Fort Detrick.</p> <p>The Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) has received WHO experts twice. It is extremely unlikely that the novel coronavirus was leaked from the WIV -- this is the clear conclusion of the China-WHO joint study report,</p>



		the spokesperson said. Those who insist that the possibility of a lab-leak cannot be ruled out should investigate Fort Detrick and the UNC in the principle of fairness and justice.
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<b>Example of News Articles Coded for Theme: <i>U.S. Army Conspiracy</i></b>		
<b>Theme and Codes</b>	<b>News Outlet</b>	<b>Example Excerpts of News Articles</b>
<b>U.S. Army Conspiracy</b>		
<p>→ <b>Sub-theme:</b> <b>U.S. Army Conspiracy Reject</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- U.S. Army</li> <li>- U.S. Military</li> <li>- U.S. Soldiers</li> <li>- Maryland</li> <li>- Military Base</li> <li>- Fort Detrick</li> <li>- Biolab</li> </ul>	<p><b>American Media</b></p>	<p><b>NYT:</b> China Spins Tale That the U.S. Army Started the Coronavirus Epidemic</p> <p>After criticizing American officials for politicizing the pandemic, Chinese officials and news outlets have floated unfounded theories that the United States was the source of the virus.</p> <p>China is pushing a new theory about the origins of the coronavirus: It is an American disease that might have</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wuhan Military World Games</li> <li>- Zhao Lijian</li> <li>- US Bioweapon</li> </ul>		<p>been introduced by members of the United States Army who visited Wuhan in October.</p> <p>There is not a shred of evidence to support that, but the notion received an official endorsement from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose spokesman accused American officials of not coming clean about what they know about the disease.</p>
		<p><b>WSJ:</b> Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Claims It Began in the U.S.—and Beijing Is Buying It</p> <p>A Canadian writer has added fuel to a tiff between the U.S. and China over a fringe theory claiming the coronavirus originated in the U.S., an assertion that is widely denounced. Lawrence Delvin Romanoff, who is in his late 70s, produces essays that generally praise China and criticize the U.S. One essay, published in early March by a Montreal-based website that carries alternative views of events, was heartily endorsed in a tweet by Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for China’s Foreign Ministry who has nearly half a million Twitter followers.</p> <p>Mr. Zhao has used the essay as part of Beijing’s effort to reorient the discussion over the coronavirus, suggesting the U.S. military introduced it to China through an international sports competition held in Wuhan, China, last year in which American troops participated. The Pentagon has denounced the notion of U.S. military involvement</p>

	<p>as “false &amp; absurd conspiracy theories.” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticized it as “outlandish rumors” aimed at whitewashing China’s role in the pandemic. After Mr. Zhao and other Chinese officials endorsed the essay, the State Department on March 13 summoned China’s ambassador in the U.S., Cui Tiankai, to lodge a formal protest.</p>
	<p><b>CNN:</b> US summons Chinese ambassador over coronavirus conspiracy theory</p> <p>US Assistant Secretary of State David Stilwell summoned China’s ambassador in Washington to the State Department Friday morning, hours after a prominent Chinese official suggested that the US military may have been responsible for bringing the coronavirus to Wuhan, the epicenter of the global pandemic. That claim was publicly promoted by China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian on Thursday, who pointed to remarks made by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Robert Redfield as proof of a growing conspiracy theory that the coronavirus did not originate in central China, as previously thought, and may have been brought there by the US Army.</p> <p>Chinese ambassador Cui Tiankai was summoned to the State Department shortly after Zhao’s comments were posted online.</p>

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