Public Health Crisis and Political Accountability: Examining Government-media Communication at Chinese Press Conferences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Routine press conferences nowadays have already become a very common and popular platform for government-media communication in China. This study examines journalists' questions, which constitute an indispensable part in government-media communication, before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis at Chinese press conferences. The focus of the analysis is the variation of "adversarialness" contained in journalists' questions before and after the outbreak of the pandemic crisis. The coding of this study considered the characteristics of Chinese data and was based on a modified version of Clayman and Heritage's widely used coding systems (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Clayman, Elliott, Heritage & McDonald, 2006) for measuring adversarial questioning in U.S. press conferences. The results show that, there are variations on several indicators of adversarialness and the intensity of the indicators turns out to be different before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. Journalists indeed transform the press conference into a formidable instrument of political accountability under such special context.

Keywords: The COVID-19 Pandemic, Chinese Press Conference, Government-media Communication, Press-state Culture, Intercultural Communication, Journalistic Adversarialness and Deference, Political Accountability

1.   Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented public health crisis that was first reported in Wuhan, China and then swept across the world, has received worldwide attention and affected various social domains, including the media and journalism (Casero-Ripollés, 2020, p. 2). Unlike the scripted news coverage that contains thorough consideration and systematic editing, face-to-face interaction at news interviews and press conferences captures the spontaneous encounter between government officials and journalists, and serves as a direct window into government-media relations under such a very special circumstance as the pandemic. With the aim of facilitating mutual information exchange between China and the international community, holding a press conference in China is far from being the least preferred method of political communication compared with its western counterpart (Chen, 2003, p. 96). Instead, Chinese press conferences nowadays have already become a very common and popular platform of public communication. The frequency of routine news conferences has increased significantly not only at the beginning phase around 2000, a tremendous growth in the number of the conferences could also be seen these years: only within a single year of 2019 there were 257 press conferences held by the State Council Information Office of China (SCIO).

Different from any other kinds of crises that have limited geographic span and remain mostly as a domestic issue, the COVID-19 pandemic is exceptional and deserves more attention. As is known, the outbreak is reported to have first been detected in Wuhan, a mid-southern city in mainland China. Following the original cases in Wuhan, the virus was being detected within all

of China and in other areas of the world. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic deeply influenced people's lives and also constituted a huge challenge to Chinese government. The very first appearance of the cases in Wuhan made China the center of the world's attention and also added more pressure for the Chinese government. Every movement of the government including the issue of its policy, the realization of specific measures and general organization were all under the media spotlight. Against this background, press conferences serve as an important public arena and an ideal platform to observe the government-media communication concerning this crisis. As the main participators of a press conference, journalists have the opportunity to interact with officials directly and reflect the public opinion to some extent, serving as an important interface between government officials and ordinary citizens. Journalists not only probe for information but also set their own agenda and hold the officials accountable through questioning during the conferences.

Numerous studies have been carried out on news reports (Hubner, 2021; Masullo, Jennings & Stroud, 2022; Mihelj, Kondor & Štětka, 2022; Perreault & Perreault, 2021) and social media content (Theocharis et al., 2021; Tsao et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Nevertheless, there aren't many studies that focus mainly on live government-media interaction during this time. This study thus aims to record the variation of journalists' questioning at the conference before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and compare the intensity of every changing indicator. Since crisis is different from normal times, especially this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the already discussed consequential attributes may not function as the main influence during that time, so this study also makes efforts to provide possible explanations for journalists' practices during the special time. Besides, this study also makes slight adjustments to the frame analysis based on some unique question design that occurred in Chinese data from this new corpus, expecting to reveal more detailed information about the government-media communication in China.

Conventionally, intercultural communication has been defined as interactions between individuals from different ethnic groups and nationalities. Scollon and Scollon (2001, p. 12) later developed the discourse approach and redefined intercultural communication as "interdiscourse communication", which refers to the entire range of communications across boundaries of groups or discourse systems. Along this discourse perspective, government-media communication that consists of journalists and government officials could be viewed as intercultural communication between different professions. Close observations toward the specific interaction from either participating party could provide insight into the unique press-state culture under the Chinese context, and also contribute to the world cultural landscape concerning this topic from the Chinese perspective.

2. Journalists' Questioning at News Conferences

News conference questioning, as a prominent mode of press behavior and a direct window into the press-state culture, has already attracted the attention of researchers from around the world. In contemporary journalism, two competing conceptions of "objectivity" exist (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 151). On one hand, journalists are expected to be neutral in their questioning of public figures; on the other hand, there is objectivity as "adversarialness". The latter one is often considered as a testification of journalists' vigorousness for challenging the public figures. The major concern of related research in this area is about measuring the tendency of

"adversarialness" vs. "deference" contained in journalists' specific question design and seeking for the explanation of certain variation.

2.1   News Conference Questioning Variation

Researchers have already established a mature analysis framework and conducted empirical studies about the adversarial question variation patterns along the historical period, providing general trends of the questioning behavior under different contexts. Despite the difficulty in measuring adversarialness in interaction, Clayman and Heritage (2002) developed a system which contains 4 dimensions and 8 variables to quantify the level of aggressiveness encoded in journalists' questions. They applied that system in a comparative study of the news conferences during Dwight Eisenhower's and Ronald Reagan's presidency in the US and found that journalists show significant adversarialness in all four dimensions. In their later study, Clayman, Elliott, Heritage and McDonald (2006) made some adjustments to the question analysis system, combining certain variables together to form a single composite measure of aggressiveness that has 5 dimensions. This time they focused on a larger time span and examined the half-century trend from the presidency of Eisenhower to Bill Clinton. The trend on separate dimensions in a bigger historical picture is found to be divergent during different periods. Scholars from other countries reported similar findings in press conferences and political news interviews; the changing trend for these dimensions is complicated and subtle rather than linear, but in general, the trend is evolving toward being more aggressive despite curvilinear ups and downs in most of the countries (Alfahad, 2015; Ekstrom, Djerf-Pierre, Johansson, & Hakansson, 2016; Eriksson & Ostman, 2013; Zhang, 2012a, 2012b; Zhang & Shoemaker, 2014).

Studies about the general trend have also noticed particular historical events including crises, and discussed their possible influences on the variation of adversarialness, so a rough sketch is done but more detailed observation about the times of crisis remains unknown. Zhang (2012b, p. 684) mentioned that the 2003 SARS pandemic crisis in China should be the reason for significant adversarialness in that year. In China, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is even more different from any previous crisis like the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake or even the very similar 2003 SARS pandemic public health crisis. Although the 2003 SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) pandemic that was first reported in Shunde, China, lasted for a few months and spread to dozens of countries, it didn't escalate into an international pandemic. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic was at first a domestic crisis and then an international one that influenced almost all the major countries in the world. The ramifications and severity of the 2003 SARS pandemic could never compare with the COVID-19: the ultimate number of patients contracting the disease was 8439 and the number of deaths was 800, the most severe areas being mainland China and Hongkong. Since the 2003 SARS crisis, the Chinese government has attempted to build a modern system of public relations, and national leaders have been more cooperative in releasing news and friendlier in politician-journalist relations (Wu & Zhang, 2018). Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic is so special and shows differences with previous crises in many aspects, questioning variation in the new crisis period also deserves more observation. Besides, research conducted on certain topics rarely focuses on crisis events, apart from a few that concern crisis including Jiang's (2006) comparative study of Chinese and American conferences on the North Korea nuclear crisis. Jiang (2006) found that the questions raised in American conferences turned out to be more aggressive than those in Chinese conferences in general;

nevertheless, it was not clear what was the more detailed dissimilarity about crisis questioning within each group, and the specific instances of language use were also not available.

2.2   Possible Explanations for the Questioning Variation

After the identification of general trends of questioning, scholars go further to explore economic and sociopolitical explanatory conditions encompassing administration life cycle, presidential popularity, state of the economy, foreign affairs (Clayman et al., 2012) and media relation strategies (Zhang, 2012b), examining their linkage with questioning variation. Findings show that the unemployment rate and the prime interest rate are positively associated with adversarialness, and questions about foreign affairs are significantly less adversarial than questions about domestic affairs, while loose media relation strategies bring about less adversarial questions from foreign reporters. Apart from broad sociopolitical context, studies are also conducted on the demographic and professional attributes of the domestic journalists, including organizational status, interpersonal familiarity (Clayman et al., 2012), and gender (Clayman, Heritage, & Hill, 2020; Meeks, 2017). Frequent participants were in some respects more adversarial than infrequent participants. Female journalists were in some respects more aggressive than their male counterparts. For press conferences that have global participators, press freedom (Du & Rendle-Short, 2016), power distance and the stage of development of journalists' home countries (Wu & Zhang, 2018) are explored. Journalists from countries with lower power distances tend to be more direct in their question designs than those with higher power distances; journalists with higher levels of press freedom tend to show more initiative, directness, assertiveness, and adversarialness than those with lower levels; journalists from developed countries are more direct, assertive, adversarial, and accountable than their counterparts. Ekström et al. (2013) found that not only the organizational or demographic attributes but situational aspects like politicians' way of answering can also influence the degree of aggressiveness in the interviewing.

In regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be considered that the outbreak and development, as well as the control and management of this public health crisis were exceptionally abrupt and innovative. Wuhan, the mid-southern city in China underwent the largest city lockdown in human history: people were required to separate from others and keep social distance, and public transportation was rearranged to control the geographic transmission of the virus. As a very special moment for the whole society, the COVID-19 pandemic may trigger various questioning behaviors of the journalists and requires the consideration of explanations different from normal times.

Based on the aforementioned review of questioning trends and explanatory factors for the variation, this study aims to explore the variation before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, as well as the possible explanations, through the following research questions:

(1) Do journalists' questioning behaviors show any differences before and after the outbreak of COVID-19?

(2) Are there any differences in the intensity among indicators that show adversarialness before and after the outbreak of COVID-19?

(3) What are the possible explanations for the variation of journalists' questioning before and after the outbreak of COVID-19?

3.   Data Collection

In the official white paper "Fighting COVID-19: China in Action" released by the Chinese government, the outbreak and final control of the COVID-19 pandemic in China could be divided into 5 stages starting from December 27, 2019 to April 29, 2020. Considering that there is a slight lagging behind in the time of related news conferences, this study set the time frame of the crisis from January, 2020 to May, 2020, covering the entire 5 stages as the official white paper summarized. For the comparative period of normal times, the data was drawn from August, 2019 to December, 2019. One press conference was randomly selected from every four weeks in a month, so altogether there are 4 conferences every month, 20 conferences for each year, including 353 live questions from global journalists. The SCIO (State Council Information Office of China) conference is a frequently-held and topic-oriented routine conference, enabling journalists to focus on certain topics and raise deeper questions. The role of the host of the conference is taken by the spokesperson of the SCIO, and the respondent of the SCIO conference is more than one person, encompassing government officials from different departments and at different levels, executives from state-owned enterprises and specialists from various kinds of areas. Six to twelve questions are asked per conference, and the average length of the conference is about an hour. This study collected both the scripted data and live video data provided on the official website, and the analysis is mainly based on the scripted questions with recorded video as a complement to ensure the accuracy of the raw data.

4.   Coding the Data

Clayman's systems (Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, & McDonald, 2006; Clayman & Heritage, 2002) have been widely used in empirical studies and serve as reliable frameworks to analyze journalists' question design. The first version of this system has 4 basic dimensions: Initiative, Assertiveness, Directness and Hostility. Under these 4 dimensions there are 10 variables indicating the adversarialness of question design. The updated version makes slight adjustments to the indicators, omitting a few ambiguous indicators and combining the separate indicators together to measure the adversarialness on the larger dimension. Considering the very special period of the COVID-19 pandemic and some unique expressions that are exclusive for Chinese data, this study selects indicators from the updated version but doesn't combine indicators together to see the change on a larger dimension, expecting to fully capture the change of the questions in a more detailed way. Besides, it also makes slight adjustments of the system due to the idiosyncratic features of Chinese data by omitting, adding and modifying some indicators. At an SCIO conference, the "one-turn-per-journalist" rule is mandatory, so "follow-up question" could not be seen in the conference and is thus removed from the coding system. A routine SCIO conference always has several guests as interviewees to answer the questions. Under such circumstances, some journalists would target certain respondents instead of others to answer their question. This study thereby adds such "target question" as an indicator under the dimension of directness. Previous studies on Chinese conferences all noticed the difference between English data and Chinese data in the design of self-referencing and other-referencing frame, so this study also made a modification on the specific categorical options under these two indicators. Modifications are also made on the indicator of "negative questions", for this question design is common in daily conversation but very rare in formal occasions like a press conference,

and journalists have other formulations to tilt the question. As Table 1 suggests, this study coded a total of 10 variables of every journalist's question.

Table 1. The revised analysis framework for the adversarialness of questioning

Dimension	Indicators	Subcategories	coding
Initiative	Prefaced questions	No preface	0
		Prefaced question	1
	Multiple questions	Single questions	0
		Multiple questions	1
Directness	Absence of Other-referencing frames	Could you please	0
		"Please (qing)"with intention	1
		No frame	2
	Absence of Other-referencing frames	Please ask	0
		I want to ask	1
		I wonder	2
		No frame	3
	Target questions	Target at expert	0
		Target at official	1
Assertiveness	Preface tilt	No preface	0
		No tilt	1
		Innocuous tilt	2
		Hostile tilt	3
	Question tilt	No tilt	0
		Tilt	1
Adversarialness	Preface adversarialness	No preface adversarialness	0
		Adversarial preface focuses of Question	1
		Adversarial preface presupposed	2
	Global adversarialness	Not adversarial overall	0
		Adversarial overall	1
	Accountability	Other Q	0
		Why did you	1
		Wh Q + on earth	2

Technically, this study first utilizes Chi-square test to observe the general variation before and after the outbreak. For those variables that are statistically significant (p value < 0.05), regression model will be adopted to record the specific change of variation (through the OR value), so the intensity of adversarialness on every indicator could be seen. To be specific, binary regression model is applied to variables that only have 2 categorical options; ordinal regression model is applied to variables that have more than 2 options. As for the Intercoder reliability, Scott's Pi

was calculated for all variables and the values all exceed 0.85, which suggests rather high uniformity between the 2 coders and reliability of the coding scheme.

5.   Data Analysis and Results

5.1   Initiative

Initiative refers to the questioning behavior that is enterprising rather than passive, setting more constraints on the respondent instead of offering them freedom. Stronger tendency toward initiative suggests lower level of deference and higher demand for agenda. This dimension is measured by the following two indicators: prefaced questions and multiple questions.

5.1.1 Prefaced Questions

Prefaced questions contain one or more statements prior to the question proper, and their manifest function is often to "contextualize" and provide relevance for the questions that follow, indicating a higher level of initiative compared with simple questions that have "no preface" (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Journalists at top-leader conferences all tend to pose prefaced questions to government officials (Du & Rendle-Short, 2016), for the top-leader conferences cover various topics and journalists have to use this design to provide enough context as a guide for the ensuing question. However, at the topic-oriented routine conferences, clear differences could be seen in the usage of this design either in normal time or crisis time.

Table 2. Prefaced questions variation across year

		Prefaced questions		χ^2	p	OR
		no preface	prefaced			
Year	2019	44(28.6%)	110(71.4%)	5.341	0.021	1.853
	2020	30(17.8%)	139(82.2%)			

As presented in Table 2, questions raised in 2020 tend to have more preface statements than those in 2019, and the result has already become statistically significant. In general, the number of preface statements in 2020 is 1.853 times more than in the previous year, and of all the questions asked, 82.2% of them are prefaced questions. Detailed observations about the prefaced questions are presented in the following examples:

Example 1. (2020-02, Journalist from China Media Group)
众所周知，2003 年的 SARS 疫情最终变成了一场影响全球很多国家的公共卫生危机，这次中国会有哪些措施防止疫情进一步扩散？
[English translation: As we all know, the 2003 SARS pandemic finally becomes a public health crisis that influences many countries in the world, this time what measures will be taken to prevent the further spread of the pandemic?]
Romanized transliteration: *Zhong suo zhoucaizhi, 2003 nian de SARS yiqing zuizhong bian cheng le yichang yingxiang quanqiu henduo guojia de gonggong weisheng weiji, zhe ci Zhongguo hui you naxie cuoshi fangzhi yiqing jinyibu kuosan?*

Example 2. (2020-02, Journalist from Nippon TV)

刚才高福先生说这个病毒现在还处于不断认知的过程中，请介绍一下现在对这个病毒的了解情况。比如病毒的来源是什么、潜伏期有多长时间、危险系数有多大，特别是对儿童和年轻人的危险系数有多大？谢谢。

[English translation: Mr. Gao has mentioned that the virus is still in the process of further recognition, please introduce the current knowledge about this virus, for instance what is the source of the virus, how long is the latency, and how large is the risk, especially for children and young adults？ Thank you.]

Romanized transliteration: *Gangcai Gaofu xiansheng shuo zhege bingdu xianzai hai chuyu buduan renzhi de guocheng Zhong, qing jieshao yixia xianzai dui zhege bingdu de liaojie qingkuang, biru bingdu de laiyuan shi shenme, qianfuqi you duochang shijian, weixian xishu you duoda, tebie shi dui ertong he qingjianren de weixian xishu you duo da? Xiexie.*

In Example 1, initiative is exercised by introducing a new topic about the 2003 SARS pandemic which the official didn't mention before and might not be willing to bring up. The usage of "as we all know" also lends force from the common sense and anonymous public, suggesting the similarity between the past crisis and the current one, enforcing the respondent to face the possible serious effect in the future and exerting more pressure on the respondent. Besides, journalists would also quote what the respondent has said in previous answers (Example 2) to set their agenda by stressing their attention on a certain topic and pushing the official to make further explanation on the same topic.

5.1.2 Multiple Questions

Multiple questions are considered more aggressive than single questions, for they place greater demand on the respondent. Previous study about routine press conferences (Zhang, 2012a) indicates that multiple questions might not serve as an effective indicator of initiative under the Chinese context, for journalists' usage of multiple questions remains the same and didn't show any variation at all from 2001-2009. Although the one-turn-per-journalist rule prompts the journalists to produce more questions in one turn, it doesn't erase the possibilities of raising single questions and there still are differences at the routine SCIO conferences. In this new data corpus, "multiple question" turns out to be a good indicator and is statistically significant across the year.

Table 3. Multiple Questions variation across year

| | | Question number | | χ^2 | p | OR |
		single question	multiple question			
Year	2019	70(45.5%)	84(54.5%)	5.139	0.023	1.579
	2020	56(33.1%)	113(66.9%)			

As can be seen in Example 2, multiple demand regarding the pandemic is common for the respondents. In general, journalists obviously tend to ask more questions in one turn in the year of 2020, and the number of multiple questions produced this year is 1.579 times more than in the

previous year. It is clear that journalists pay great heed to the public health crisis and become more aggressive in searching information after the outbreak of the pandemic.

5.2   Directness

Directness describes the degree to which questions are raised circuitously or straightforwardly in the press conference context. It takes the form of a phrase, clause, or sentence that frames the focal question (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). The indirect framing is demonstrated to be more polite, while the direct expression is considered to be adversarial. It can be grouped into two broad categories: referencing of the respondent and the questioners themselves.

5.2.1   Other-Referencing Questions

This indicator involves different degrees of reference to the respondent's ability or willingness to answer the question, and the design of the three subcategories shows the tendency toward stronger directness. As Table 4 shows, the least direct and most polite form begins with the phrase "could you please". In Chinese, "will you" loses the sense of willingness (Sun, 2010), so this subcategory is removed from the indicator. In another frame which doesn't have ability or willingness frame but contains the expression of politeness compared with the no frame type, the specific language expression is "please + personal pronoun + intention (e.g., comment, explain, tell)".

Table 4. Other-Referencing frames variation across year

		Other-Referencing questions			Z	P	OR
		could you please	"Please (qing)" with intention	no frame			
Year	2019	7(4.5%)	20(13%)	127(82.5%)	-2.531	0.011	2.38
	2020	2(1.2%)	12(7.1%)	155(91.7%)			

The tendency toward using a more direct and less polite frame is increasing in 2020 and reaches statistical significance. The frequency of the politest form of asking ("could you please") and the less polite frame ("please with intention") both drops, the impolite and direct form is more preferred by the journalists in 2020 and has increased from 82.5% to 91.7%.

5.2.2 Self-Referencing Questions

Self-referencing frames make reference to the journalists' own intentions, capabilities and motives to ask the question. Chinese language has a unique self-referencing phrase "qing wen (literally translated as 'please ask')" which shows politeness and doesn't have an equivalent in English. As Table 5 shows, compared with the previous year, 2020 only has slight variation on this indicator, the polite form declines and the impolite form increases, but in general the tendency toward directness doesn't reach significance.

Table 5. Self-Referencing frames variation across year

		Self-Referencing				Z/χ^2	P
		Ability frames beginning with qing	I want to ask	I wonder	no frame		
Year	2019	65(42.2%)	18(11.7%)	6(3.9%)	65(42.2%)	-1.108	0.268
	2020	67(39.6%)	12(7.1%)	4(2.4%)	86(50.9%)		

5.2.3 Target Questions

The frequency of target questions takes up almost 15% of the whole database, so it is considered as a specific question design instead of random expression. Since there is usually more than one respondent at the routine SCIO conference, the question allocation among the several respondents thus becomes a task for either the host or the journalists. Normally, it would be regarded as the task of the hosts to appoint the target respondent, for their job is to organize and make the conference proceed smoothly. However, question allocation is not as clear a task as journalist selection, which only involves the balance between domestic and foreign journalists; question allocation contains more complicated thinking, including the judgement of the content and final decision on the appropriate respondent. Considering this situation, journalists sometimes select the target respondent themselves and bring him/her up directly in the question design instead of leaving it a task for the host. The target frame is found to be combined with questions that are innocuous or at least neutral to the government.

Table 6. Target question variation across year

		Target Question		χ^2	p
		No target	target		
Year	2019	130(84.4%)	24(15.6%)	0.963	0.326
	2020	149(88.2%)	20(11.8%)		

Example 3. (2020-05, Journalist from China Media Group)
请问苗部长一个问题，4 月份以来，工业增加值增速实现了由负转正，请问工业经济回暖趋势能否持续？谢谢。
[English translation: May I ask (Please ask) a question for Minister Miao. Since April, the growth rate of industrial added value has changed from negative to positive, could the recovery trend of industrial economy last? Thank you.]
Romanized transliteration: *Qingwen Miao buzhang yige wenti, siyuefen yilai, gongye zengjiazhi zengsu shixianle you zheng zhuan fu, qingwen gongye jingji huinuan qushi nengfou chixu? Xiexie.*

Table 6 shows that, in general there is no significant variation on this indicator across the year, and only a slight decline of the target questions could be seen. In Example 3, the journalist clearly pointed out that Minister Miao is preferred to answer the question. This journalist mentioned the positive change in industry economy in April and asked the Minister to make a prediction about the stability of this status. This "targeting" is benign and enables the

government official to convey positive information which is beneficial both to the government and official's public image. Under the Chinese context, journalists seldom make a target person respond to a hostile question, so as to avoid holding a single person instead of the government as responsible.

5.3   Assertiveness

Assertiveness assesses the extent to which journalists' questions suggest or push for a particular answer, and it contains 2 indicators: preface tilt and question tilt.

5.3.1 Preface Tilt

When the parameters are set rather narrowly, as in "yes/no" questions, it provides the basis for interviewers to follow up and exert pressure for response on evasive interviewees (S. E. Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Prefaces that occur before "yes/no" questions have the potential to narrow and tilt a question, so for this indicator only this type of prefaces is coded.

Table 7. Preface tilt variation across year

		no preface	no tilt	innocuous tilt	hostile preface	Z/χ^2	P
Year	2019	8(16.3%)	12(24.5%)	14(28.6%)	15(30.6%)	-0.706	0.48
	2020	15(19.7%)	18(23.7%)	7(9.2%)	36(47.4%)		

Since only 125 out of 323 questions in this study are 'yes/no' questions, the sample size turns out to be rather small compared with other indicators. Although rank-sum test doesn't present statistical significance, there are very obvious changes on innocuous tilt and hostile preface; the former undergoes a sharp fall from 28.6% to 9.2%, and the latter increases from 30.6% to 47.4%. The results indicate the tendency toward adversarialness to some extent.

5.3.2 Question Tilt

In regard to "question tilt", journalists would show assertiveness not only in the preface but also in the question part. However, journalists at Chinese press conferences have their own way of tilting toward "yes" answer instead of using negative questions as appeared in English data. While negative questions that are common in ordinary Chinese conversation are found to be rare in routine Chinese conference data, a previous linguistic researcher (Sun, 2010) points out there is a certain question design in Chinese which could be seen as searching for a confirmative answer, which contains the Chinese structure of "do-not-do" (roughly translatable into English as "will-V-or-won't-V").

Example 4. (2020-03, journalist from Consumer News and Business Channel, CNBC)
当疫情在全球蔓延的时候，各国都更关注今年的进博会，请问第三届中国国际进口博览会的筹备情况怎么样？会不会受到疫情的影响？您预测今年的进博会和往年相比有何不同？谢谢。

[English translation: As the pandemic is spreading across the world, countries all pay more attention to this year's "China International Import Expo". Please ask how is the preparation work going? Will or will it not be affected by the pandemic? According to your prediction, what is the difference of this year's expo compared with past years? Thank you.]

Romanized transliteration: *Dang yiqing zai quanqiu manyan de shihou, geguo dou geng guanzhu jinnia de jinbohui, qingwen disanjie zhongguo guoji jinkou bolanhui de choubei qingkuang zenmeyang? Huibuhui shoudao yiqing de yingxiang? Nin yuce jinnia de jinbohui he wangnian xaingbi youhe butong? Xiexie.*

Table 8. Question tilt variation across year

		Question Tilt		χ^2	p	OR
		no tilt	tilt			
Year	2019	33(67.3%)	16(32.7%)	7.605	0.006	2.815
	2020	32(42.1%)	44(57.9%)			

On the surface, this structure seems to provide alternatives for response, but under the Chinese context it is used to bring about a confirmative answer in many cases. As shown in Example 4, "do-not-do" structure is naturally taken as a confirmative answer, and the second question is completely based on the confirmation of the first question. As can be seen in Table 8, the variation of question tilt across the year is statistically significant, and 2020 is almost threefold higher than 2019 in the production of tilted questions.

5.4 Adversarialness

This dimension is concerned more with thematic content rather than structural design compared with the other dimensions. Adversarialness refers to the contents which are critical of the government, including its policy and administration.

5.4.1 Preface Adversarialness

Within the indicator of "Preface Adversarialness", the subcategory of "adversarial preface presupposed" represents the most aggressive type for taking the preface as a prerequisite and asking a hostile question on this basis. The less aggressive category "adversarial preface focus of question" only expresses adversarialness in the preface statement, and then seeks for the comment of the respondent. Preface adversarialness here is measured and coded on a conservative level, with only those critical voices that clearly indicate government's responsibility involved, including bringing up the inadequacy of certain policy, deficiency of the government's work, suspicion about government's announcement and disagreements with the administration. Some general undesirable situation like the mention of the severity of the pandemic and economic downturn is considered as objective description of the status as long as the preface doesn't indicate its relation with the government.

Table 9. Preface adversarialness variation across year

		Preface adversarialness				
		no preface adversarialness	adversarial preface focused of Question	adversarial preface presupposed	Z/χ²	p
Year	2019	95(81.2%)	4(3.4%)	18(15.4%)	-4.489	<0.001
	2020	79(55.6%)	4(2.8%)	59(41.5%)		

The reason for the scarcity of "adversarial preface focused of Question" lies in the fact that journalists seldom ask for comments alone; when they show a design like "what's your comment/say on ...", it often follows another question that presupposed the preface as fact. From 2019 to 2020, the tendency toward more adversarial preface is statistically significant. "No preface adversarialness" drops largely from 81.2% to 55.6%, while "adversarial preface presupposed" almost triples from 15.4% to 41.5%.

Example 5. (2020-02, Journalist from China News Service)
我的问题是，随着管控升级，一些措施落实起来还是有一些差距，比如菜、米、油等居民的基本生活物资如何加强保障？谢谢。
[English translation: My question is, with the upgrading of management and control, discrepancy still exists between the issued measure and its operationalization in reality, for example, how to facilitate and guarantee the providing of basic living goods and materials like vegetables, rice, oil, etc.]
Romanized transliteration: *Wo de wenti shi, suizhe guankong shengji, yixie cuoshi luoshi qilai haishi you yixie chaju, biru, cai, mi, you, deng, jumin de jiben shenghuo wuzi ruhe jiaqiang baozhang? Xiexie.*

Example 5 mentions the government's incapability in providing sufficient basic goods for the people during the pandemic – the basic needs for necessary living are not completely fulfilled. Here the journalist shows adversarialness by highlighting the contradictions between the government's policy and action, pointing out the thorny and unresolved problems which are crucial to the people and pushing the government to come up with better solutions. The problem is presupposed as mere fact in this example, conveying strong adversarialness toward the government – the current situation is not ideal and requires improvement.

5.4.2   Global Adversarialness

Global adversarialness is coded for a question that is hostile both in the preface and question, so the question that has a hostile preface but only asks for comment is not included. Hostile simple question that doesn't have a preface is also considered as adversarial overall.

Table 10. Global adversarialness across year

		Global adversarialness		χ^2	p	OR
		Not adversarial overall	Adversarial overall			
Year	2019	137(89%)	17(11%)	29.772	≤0.001	4.512
	2020	106(62.7%)	63(37.3%)			

Example 6. (2020-01-26, JOR from China Review)
请问为何武汉出现了 300 多例肺炎患者政府就开始"封城"，官方是否存在瞒报实际患病人数和疑似患者数据？请问目前武汉实际感染人数到底有多少？谢谢。
[English translation: May I ask why the government started to "lock the city" when Wuhan had only about 300 Pneumonia patients? Does that exist the official lie about the actual patients' number and suspicious patients' data? At present what on earth is the exact contracting number in Wuhan? Thanks.]
Romanized transliteration: *Qingwen weihe Wuhan chuxian le sanbai duo li feiyan huanzhe zhengfu jiu kaishi "Fengcheng", guanfang shifou cunzai manbao shiji huanbing renshu he yisi huanzhe shuju? Qingwen muqian Wuhan shiji ganran renshu daodi you duoshao? Xiexie.*

A remarkable increase of global adversarialness has been witnessed after the outbreak of the pandemic (Table 10), with questions that are adversarial overall in 2020 being 4.512 times more than in the previous year.

Example 6 consists of a trickle of simple questions that escalates the adversarialness within one turn. The first question conveys disagreements about the government's policy and asks for the government to defend the legitimacy of the policy. The journalist suggests that with only around 300 patients there seems no need to set such strict control. The second question casts suspicion about the government's announcement, suggesting that there may be more patients than the government reported. The third question is based on the presupposition that the government may not be honest with the number of patients who have contracted the virus, and it is not only asking information but enforcing the government to admit its fault and tell the public the real number.

5.4.3 Accountability Questions

In Clayman's analysis frame, accountability questions are grouped into two forms; the milder one is the "why did you" type, and the harsh one is the "how could you" type. In the latest Chinese data, the "how could you" type is never brought up by journalists, so this structural frame is removed from the indicator. Journalists at Chinese conferences have a unique design that urges for the government's duty, which is the combination of "wh" questions and the phrase "on earth". Question in this form is not merely asking for information, but also arguing for the right to know and pushing the government to take the responsibility in information sharing.

Table 11. Accountability questions across year

		Accountability questions			Z	p
		Other Q	Why did you	Wh Q+on earth		
Year	2019	140(90.9%)	11(7.1%)	3(1.9%)	-0.205	0.837
	2020	155(91.7%)	8(4.7%)	6(3.6%)		

Example 7. (2020-01, journalist from Beijing Youth Daily)
我想问一下，刚才我们一直在强调新型冠状病毒的肺炎纳入乙类管理甲类控制，这句话到底意味着什么？
[English translation: I want to ask, recently we have been continuously stressed that pneumonia should be included into the type B management and type A control, what on earth does it mean?]
Romanized transliteration: *Wo xiang wen yixia, gangcai women yizhi zai qiangdiao xinxing guanzhuang bingdu de feiyan naru yilei guanli jialei konghzi, zhe ju hua daodi yiwei zhe shenme?*

As presented in Example 6, the journalist considers it government's responsibility to tell the authentic number. In Example 7, the question indicates the ambiguity of the policy and asks the government to explain. Unlike the "why did you type", the "wh Question+on earth" combination is tinted with strong condemning flavor: it should be the government's duty to make clear definition or explanation, but it doesn't. Therefore, the journalist is pushing hard to get the information. Table 11 suggests that there isn't a significant change on this indicator across the year.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

In general, there are 6 out of 10 indicators that show statistically significant variation after the outbreak of the pandemic. The statistical results are sufficiently enough to answer the first research question, which aims to explore if there are any differences in journalists' questioning behaviors after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists clearly pay more attention to this huge public health crisis and exhibit more aggressiveness in questioning at press conferences, given its great impact on the whole society. As for the second research question that goes further to observe the changes in the intensity of adversarial indicators after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be noticed that these statistical indicators are not changing unanimously and show differences in the degree of intensity. The 2 indicators from the dimension of adversarialness convey the largest change, with global adversarial questions increasing fourfold and preface adversarialness threefold compared with normal times. Polar questions are more likely to be tilted and the variation ranks the third among the 7 changing indicators. A rising trend toward directness that embodies impoliteness could be seen in the frame of referencing the respondent. All of the 3 indicators from the dimension of initiative show significant variation, but the intensity is not as strong as the aforementioned indicators. To sum up, in response to the second research question, the variation of adversarialness is more significant on indicators that concern content than those that only concern structure.

After general and subtle observations on statistical results, the third research question goes beyond the data and focuses on the possible explanations for the variation of journalists' questioning behaviors after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A time of crisis challenges the normal operation of a society in many aspects and creates an intense atmosphere for the people concerned. Influencing factors discussed in the past may not suffice to make explanations for the variation of journalist behavior during the special time, and different perspectives are needed to observe the politician-journalist interaction. The government-media relationship at this time is complicated and requires more attention. On the local level, crisis brings about more needs for basic living products and medical supplies, and all of these become a tough task for the government. Every movement of the government is under strict supervision and interrogation of the people and the media. Any negligence in the balance between production and needs, the distribution of goods among different groups of people, and implementation of concrete measures, could deteriorate the already intense situation and trigger more contradiction. On the international level, the government also needs to consider the possible influence on the international community and cope with sudden change of the situation. Unlike the normal crisis that often remains a domestic thing, the COVID-19 pandemic was at first a local-level event that rapidly developed into a domestic crisis, and finally became an international emergency.

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that journalists express their pursuit of information transparency and hold the government accountable in a bold and outward way during crisis time, even under the circumstance that they normally prefer harmonious communication (Chen, 2012). Intercultural scholars have found that there is a tendency for Asians to be concerned with showing deference or respect in interactions with non-intimates, in contrast to westerners, who tend to emphasize egalitarian interpersonal relationships (Scollon & Scollon, 2012, p. 24). It seems that the pandemic crisis has changed this normal status and journalists indeed transform the press conference into a formidable instrument of political accountability. The concept of political accountability covers a larger picture than the concept of democracy does, for accountability acts can also exist and flourish in nondemocratic states that don't have direct elections (Lindberg, 2013, p. 202).

After the outbreak of the pandemic crisis in Wuhan, this mid-southern city in mainland China has become the center of public attention after the official report, seizing the breath of the local citizens and those from other mainland cities, especially cities in Hubei and other adjacent provinces. After the outbreak was detected in Wuhan, the Chinese government conducted a lockdown on mainland cities and provinces, and these geographic locations could also explain the journalists' relatively more adversarial questioning behavior about this pandemic. As the pandemic continuously expanded its geographic trajectory and was being reported in countries all around the world, journalists in other countries gradually started to pay more attention and presented adversarialness at press conferences. On the basis of the abovementioned discussion, the response to the third research question regarding the possible explanations for the variation of journalists' questioning behaviors, could be summarized as geographic location, public policy and journalistic accountability.

The limitation of this study is that it stands on the journalistic side to capture the government-media communication and takes the journalist group as a whole. For the future research, the respondents' answers are also needed to be taken into consideration in order to have a more comprehensive view of the press-state interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Besides, considering that the journalists are from all around the world, whether the journalists are all unified in their journalistic practice still remains unknown and requires more subtle

exploration. Observation from other cultures and different phases of the pandemic could also make complementary contributions to this topic.

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