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Painting the Dragon: China's image in Polish media  
during the Covid-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020  
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*Dmytro Zahorodniuk, 25 August 2023*



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## **Abstract**

The study aims to analyze China's image in Polish media during the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020. To explore the topic, I examine China-related articles from the five most popular Polish online media outlets – GazetaPrawna.pl, Onet.pl, Rp.pl, Wp.pl and Wyborcza.pl. I analyze three main themes crafting the image: the coronavirus pandemic, China's internal affairs, and foreign policy. The study argues that the image of China is ambiguous, but the media portrays the country relatively negatively. The number of words with negative emotional connotations in China-related articles prevails over positive ones. Polish media criticize China's response to the pandemic, different aspects of domestic policy, state of human rights, and assertive foreign policy. At the same time, the Chinese people's resilience during the pandemic and the post-pandemic economic recovery are described positively. The research summarizes that the pandemic worsened the depiction of China in Polish media.

**Keywords:** China, China's image, COVID-19 pandemic, Polish media

## **Abstrakt**

Celem badania jest analiza obrazu Chin w polskich mediach w okresie pandemii COVID-19 w pierwszej połowie 2020 roku. Aby zgłębić temat, przeglądam artykuły o Chinach z pięciu najpopularniejszych polskich mediów internetowych – GazetaPrawna.pl, Onet.pl, Rp.pl, Wp.pl i Wyborcza.pl. Analizuję trzy główne tematy tworzące ten obraz: pandemię wirusa, sprawy wewnętrzne Chin i politykę zagraniczną. Z badania wynika, że wizerunek Chin jest niejednoznaczny, choć media przedstawiają ten kraj raczej negatywnie. W artykułach dotyczących Chin przeważa liczba słów o negatywnych konotacjach emocjonalnych nad pozytywnymi. Polskie media krytykują reakcję Chin na pandemię, różne aspekty polityki wewnętrznej, stan praw człowieka i asertywną politykę zagraniczną. Jednocześnie pozytywnie opisano odporność Chińczyków na pandemię i ożywienie gospodarcze po pandemii. Z badania wynika, że pandemia pogorszyła wizerunek Chin w polskich mediach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Chiny, obraz Chin, pandemia COVID-19, Polskie media

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was the central event of 2020 that affected the whole world and significantly changed the images of many countries. The spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus tested the ability of governments to react rapidly in fast-changing conditions to save people's lives, economies, and political reputations. Lack of knowledge about the virus, its unknown nature, high contagiousness, and the relatively high death rate caused panic among people and put additional pressure on decision-makers. Moreover, technological progress made it the first pandemic tracked by billions of people in real time. Thus, any actions or inactions of a particular country immediately appeared in the spotlight of the world's media and ultimately influenced the country's image.

This study attempts to identify changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the image of China in Poland by examining Polish media outlets. The following paragraphs aim to answer why the image of China was selected as the object of the study, why Poland was chosen as the country for the analysis of China's image, and why the media were selected as a primary source of information.

This thesis is focused on the image of China because the country was in a unique situation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced sharp changes in attitudes toward it. China was the first country hit by the pandemic and the first to take control of it in 2020. For a few months, China was a pioneer in deterring the global epidemic, the main source of information about the virus, and the example of successful management of the spreading of the disease. The world's attention was concentrated on China, which guaranteed high media coverage of each action of the Chinese government. However, with recognition of the successes, China and Chinese people faced sharp criticism and even xenophobia when the pandemic spread to other countries. For instance, US President Donald Trump accused China of spreading the virus and failing to deter the epidemic.<sup>1</sup> China became an easy target for manipulation and conspiracy theories in an atmosphere of fear, panic, and uncertainty. The media widely spread fake news, myths, and stereotypes about China, the Chinese nation's behavioral habits, and the Chinese government's effectiveness. Thus, because of the turmoil of the pandemic, the image of China has undergone kaleidoscopic changes: the country was described as a victim of the pandemic and as a country that was responsible for it; the actions of the Chinese government were called successful, and not effective enough at the same time.

Furthermore, the recent competition between China and the US makes studying China's image essential to understanding the influence of China on a particular country. China's 'rise' over the last few decades (especially economic) led to the country's perception as a challenger of the US-dominated world.<sup>2</sup> Since 2017, this view has been reinforced due to the intensified rivalry between the US and China. However, many European countries tried to keep a balance between the two powers. Under such circumstances, the pandemic became an opportunity for the US and China to strengthen their positions, particularly among East European members of the European Union.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Zhang & Buzan, 2010, P. 447, P. 450

<sup>3</sup> Brattberg, 2021 and Fried et al., 2020

The analysis of the image of China in Poland is crucial because while China was portrayed as a challenger of the West, the region of Central and East Europe (CEE) was often perceived as a Chinese “Trojan horse” within the EU.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Poland is the biggest country in the CEE, the most populated, and the largest economy. It possesses a dominant position in the region by being a hub of manufacturing operations, distribution, logistics, and business activities and coordinating those processes in the entire area.<sup>5</sup> Poland has significant influence and political ambitions within CEE by leading regional initiatives, such as the Visegrad group, Eastern Partnership, and the Three Seas Initiative. Moreover, Poland is one of the countries with a lasting policy of having good relations with the US and the EU on the one hand and China on the other.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the country was called a “stalwart ally in Central Europe and one of the United States’ strongest partners” and China’s “strategic partner” simultaneously.<sup>7</sup> Altogether, it makes Poland a key country for both the US and China to secure their influence in CEE, and the image of China in Poland is one of the best indicators of the level of such power.

This thesis studies the country’s image through the prism of the media because they are one of the primary sources of trustworthy information and play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, forming perceptions, convincing people, and justifying the necessity of specific actions.<sup>8</sup> Their ability to create an image of a country, nation, social group, or event and form an attitude to it by consistently publishing content with a specific view is undeniable. Furthermore, unlike social media, online media outlets look like official and authoritative sources of information.<sup>9</sup> They have a strong affiliation with the state (from which they originated) even if they are independent and not controlled by governments.<sup>10</sup> This affiliation makes them a reliable instrument of communication between politicians (decision-makers) and the public, such as raising public awareness and concerns, “warming up,” and preparing society for future political decisions or vectors of development.<sup>11</sup> However, the media are also a powerful instrument for manipulation, persuasion, distortion, deception, or general change of opinions “regardless of whether it is a positive or negative change, acceptable or rejected, beneficial or harmful, beloved or hated.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, their influence increases in crisis and instability when people seek official information. That is why they are critical during political campaigns, wars, and global events like pandemics.<sup>13</sup> As a result, examining national media is simply the most precise and practical approach to studying the image of other countries.

While there are many papers about the image of China in the media during the pandemic, most of them examine English (Chung & Jo 2021, Chen et al. 2021, Zhang 2022, An et al. 2022), Italian (Pofi & Wing-Fai 2021, Chen 2021), and Spanish (Kaiyang 2021) press.<sup>14</sup> At the same

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<sup>4</sup> Butler, 2018

<sup>5</sup> American Chamber of Commerce in Poland, 2020

<sup>6</sup> Kuo, 2019

<sup>7</sup> United States Department of State, 2021 and Szczudlik-Tatar, 2015

<sup>8</sup> Abbas, 2020

<sup>9</sup> Meraz, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Cabrera et al., 2022 and Abbas, 2020

<sup>11</sup> Abbas, 2020, P. 883

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, P. 884

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, P. 884

<sup>14</sup> Chung & Jo, 2021, Chen et al., 2021, Zhang, 2022, An et al., 2022, Pofi & Wing-Fai, 2021, Chen, 2021, Kaiyang, 2021

time, Poland and the region of Central and East Europe have yet to be popular among scholars. The research aims to fill this gap in the literature and provide a comprehensive analysis of China's image in Polish media. To conduct the study, I observed the most popular Polish online media outlets during the first six months of 2020, namely GazetaPrawna.pl, Onet.pl, Rp.pl, Wyborcza.pl, and Wp.pl. According to the Institute of Media Monitoring, these media had the highest traffic and were the most cited.<sup>15</sup>

The research questions for this study are the following:

1. How has China been portrayed in Polish media during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. To what degree did the pandemic contribute to changing China's image in the Polish media?

To achieve them, I employ QDA Miner and the Worldstat software. I use the software to analyze the articles quantitative and qualitatively, code the data, sort it by topics, and identify emotional keywords.

Overall, the thesis is structured into four chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of existing literature about the concept of country image and the complexity of measuring the image of China. The methodology of the research is discussed in the second chapter. It includes the research design, questions, methods, data selection, time frame, and limitations. The quantitative and qualitative findings of the research are presented in the third and fourth chapters accordingly. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings about China's image in Polish media.

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<sup>15</sup> Imm, 2021

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review is divided into four parts to comprehensively analyze the previous study, discuss theoretical and empirical aspects of the research, and highlight the literature gap. The first part explores the theoretical background of the study. It explains the concept of “country image,” which is the study’s theoretical basis. The second part reviews how China was portrayed in the West throughout history and what implications it has nowadays. The third part shows the main narratives faced by China during the pandemic and how they affected the image of China globally. The final part provides an overview of existing research about China’s image in Polish media and points out the academic gap.

### 2.1 Country Image

*Country image* is a widely discussed, multi-dimensional concept used across various academic fields, notably in marketing, tourism, public relations, and international affairs.<sup>16</sup> Generally, the idea indicates the public perception of a particular country by collecting a mix of attitudes toward the country’s politics, economy, geography, and culture.<sup>17</sup> However, this explanation is too broad and represents neither the complexity of the term nor the particular definition necessary for the research.

The central issue with using the concept is that it belongs to a few categories, which overlap, influence each other, and often contradict.<sup>18</sup> Particularly, Hakala points out three categories: product-related (country of origin), nation-related (the nation as a whole), and culture-related (the culture and people of a nation).<sup>19</sup> Since the 1990s, there has been a continuous discussion towards distinguishing them for more precise and proper usage of the terms, but researchers still need to have a consensus.<sup>20</sup> As a result, *country image*, *nation image*, and even *region image* have been used interchangeably in the literature, although there is a slight difference between all terms.<sup>21</sup> This research incorporates all three categories of the term, focusing on all topics related to China (political, economic, cultural) and uses the term *country image*. However, to avoid confusion with the previous study, I provide an overview of prior usage of the concept and its definition.

Initially, the *country image* was the sole marketing term aroused from the *country of origin effect*. Indeed, scholars noted that the country of origin of products affects business and consumption.<sup>22</sup> Schooler states that prejudices and biases towards a country or people are an element of preconceptions about the products of that country.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Reirson argues that “consumer attitudes are national stereotypes rather than opinions about specific products.”<sup>24</sup> However, the pure marketing definition is too limited to production and consumption. Thus,

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<sup>16</sup> Jura & Kaluzynska, 2013, P. 122

<sup>17</sup> Chen et al., 2021, P. 81

<sup>18</sup> Jenes & Malota, 2009, P. 3

<sup>19</sup> Hakala et al., 2013, P. 540

<sup>20</sup> Fan, 2006, P. 2

<sup>21</sup> Lee, 2009, P. 11

<sup>22</sup> He, Xianhong & Xing, 2012, P. 677

<sup>23</sup> Lee, 2009, P. 17

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, P. 17



Nagashima evaluated product-related conception but defined it broader. He states that the image is “the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to products of a specific country,” created by “representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, history, and traditions.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Aholt stresses that the advance of globalization turned the world into one market, increased competition among countries, and made them “sensitive towards the way they are portrayed” in general.<sup>26</sup> However, it is debatable whether a strong country image influences other areas, for instance, national brands and products, or vice versa.<sup>27</sup> To eliminate this paradox, researchers have expanded the boundaries of the definition further. As a result, the marketing definition incorporated the “economic and political maturity, historical events and relationships, culture, and traditions, and the degree of technological virtuosity and industrialization.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it focuses mainly on production, which is not the aim of the research.

The definition of a *country's image* in diplomacy and public relations is slightly different, yet it fits the research better. According to Wang, “perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs held by international publics ultimately influence and drive nation-state behaviors in the global arena.”<sup>29</sup> Nye notes that image-building is one of the “forms of soft power” that affects “the country’s ability to build coalitions to achieve its international political objectives.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly to the *country of origin effect*, there is not always a direct link between public opinion and state policy, yet public perception creates an atmosphere that limits political actions.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Kunczik defines *country image* as “the cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country and what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people.”<sup>32</sup> He stresses that the historical component and “benevolence or malevolence imputed to other nations” are the key points that form the image.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Kunczik acknowledges the media’s reporting of foreign affairs that shapes the depiction of a country.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the work of the press in image-building is close to propaganda because “mass media intended to influence the attitudes of the domestic audience toward other countries in either positive or negative light.”<sup>35</sup> However, in his definition, Kunczik misses that media can contain cognitive (refers to the knowledge of a country) and affective (captures emotions and feelings about a particular country) dimensions of the image, which makes media an even more potent source of image-creation.<sup>36</sup> Malek and Wiegand, who studied the impact of media coverage on public opinion about a country’s foreign policy and the media’s role in foreign policy decision-making, noted this phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> They observed that there are two levels of relations between foreign policy and media; one is between media and the public, and the second is between media and decision-makers.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the relations are more likely to

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<sup>25</sup> Nagashima, 1970, P. 68

<sup>26</sup> Hakala et al., 2013, P. 538

<sup>27</sup> Fan, 2006, P. 8

<sup>28</sup> He, Xianhong & Xing, 2012, P. 677

<sup>29</sup> Wang, 2008, P. 9

<sup>30</sup> Nye 1990, 2004

<sup>31</sup> Wang, 2008, P. 13

<sup>32</sup> Kunczik, 1997

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> He, Xianhong & Xing, 2012, P. 678

<sup>36</sup> Wang, 2008, P. 9

<sup>37</sup> Zhang, 2011, P.17

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, P.17

be in a “media - public opinion - policymakers” triangle.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Cohen notes that governments are willing to use the media to push their agenda and influence the image.<sup>40</sup> This shows how complex the construct is and how many factors contribute to generating a *country’s image*. However, it also proves that analysis of media is one of the best ways to catch a clear and relevant picture.

In addition to the definition, 3 essential aspects of the concept are discussed to ensure its proper usage in the research. The first one is the primary way of shaping the image. For instance, Martin and Eroglu argue that a *country image* is “the total of all descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs one has about a particular country.”<sup>41</sup> They include all three ways of forming beliefs: descriptive (established through experience), informational (shaped by information from external sources, for instance, media), and inferential (perception of the relationship between some past event and a stimulus in the present).<sup>42</sup> However, Jenes points out that despite experience and opinions contributing to the country or nation’s image, it is formed “primarily on information received through the various channels, such as politics (internal affairs and foreign policy), telecommunication, entertainment (movies), rumor.”<sup>43</sup> The media is one of the most potent tools for transmitting such information. Thus, only the informational way of forming beliefs is used in this research.

The second point is the existence of internal and external country images and their influence on the objectivity of the picture. Jenes empathizes with a significant dissimilarity between outer and inner images. She stresses that the way “citizens think about their own country” and “what others/foreigners think about our country” are different.<sup>44</sup> This gap and nations’ aforementioned “sensitivity” towards how they are portrayed externally resulted in growing efforts to build a more positive and attractive outer image.<sup>45</sup> Hence, these efforts lead to another complex challenge of exploring the idea - whether it is accurate or influenced by a particular state interested in creating a distorted picture. Indeed, Kenneth Boulding, one of the pioneers of imagology, states that “the national image is basically a lie or at least a perspective distortion of the truth.”<sup>46</sup> Hakala, Lemmetyinen, and Kantola confirm that despite the image being based on reality, it is still “what is projected to the other.”<sup>47</sup> This refers to the relativistic nature of the *country image* argued by Gallarza, Saura, and García.<sup>48</sup> They observed that the image is always subjective (changes from person to person) and comparative (involves perceptions among various objects).<sup>49</sup> Thus, by examining China’s image in Polish media, this research is focused on a subjective perception of the external image of China.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, P.17

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, P.18

<sup>41</sup> Martin & Eroglu, 1993, P. 193

<sup>42</sup> Jenes & Malota, 2009, P. 4-5

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, P. 5

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, P. 5

<sup>45</sup> Anholt, 2007

<sup>46</sup> Boulding, 1959, P. 122 and Jura & Kaluzynska, 2013, P. 122

<sup>47</sup> Hakala et al., 2013, P. 538

<sup>48</sup> Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002, P. 71

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, P. 71

The final point about a *country's image* is its ability to be affected, as its value is highly vulnerable to global events like wars, crises, pandemics, and sports tournaments.<sup>50</sup> As a result, any actions, contributions, inactivity, achievements, or failures could influence the change of the image in a positive or, in contrast, negative way. That is why the research is limited to a strict time frame to analyze the image only during a particular period.

Considering all the information below, the enhanced Kunczik's definition of a *country image* best fits the research aims. Particularly, I define the concept as a "cognitive and affective representation that a nation holds of a given country and what it believes to be true about a country and its people in a particular period."<sup>51</sup>

## 2.2 Image of China in the West Through History

Although the country's image can be influenced and changed, it also contains stereotypes and biases that have not changed for centuries. The portrait of China in the West was historically biased due to geographical distance, geopolitical roles, and differences in political systems and cultures. The largest country with 1.4 billion people, country-civilization, the Great Wall, hieroglyphs, exotic culture, pandas, kung fu, and the brand "Made in China" are images China is often associated with.<sup>52</sup> However, the image also consists of racist and Sinophobic views and the perception of China as a challenger or enemy of the West. This section examines the historical roots of these conflicting images and their impact on today's depiction of China.

The Middle Ages period formed the baseline of the Western perception of China, full of myths and legends. Geographically isolated, Europe and China developed independently for centuries.<sup>53</sup> Since the 13th century, the intensification of trade facilitated connections between Europe and China. However, harsh conditions for such travel and a limited number of adventurers resulted in describing China as an "imaginary other landscape."<sup>54</sup> Marco Polo's "Book of the Marvels of the World" and Sir John Mandeville's fictitious book "Travels" described China as a state of civilization, wealth, wisdom, power, moral order, and miracles.<sup>55</sup> These books, written in the 13th century, shaped the perception of China in Europe for more than four centuries. In the 17th and 18th centuries, European philosophers like Leibniz, Quesnay, and Voltaire still believed that China was "a model of a perfectly regulated state" and that Chinese society had "moral superiority."<sup>56</sup> Rare reports of travelers, envoys, and missionaries about China and the Chinese policy of isolationism kept a predominantly biased image of the country until the middle of the 19th century. The depiction of the Middle Kingdom became closer to reality only when European countries established diplomatic missions in China. However, the stereotypical image of China as a country of mystery still exists and contributed to depicting the COVID-19 virus as mysterious and enigmatic.

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<sup>50</sup> Chen et al., 2021, P. 81

<sup>51</sup> Reworded from Kunczik, 1997

<sup>52</sup> Fan, 2006, P. 8

<sup>53</sup> Chaojun, 2019, P. 46

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, P. 46

<sup>55</sup> Prado-Fonts, 2022 and Chaojun, 2019, P. 75

<sup>56</sup> Jones, 2001, P. 26

The period of the 19th - the first half of the 20th century formed a basis for the negative stereotypes about China. First, the country was perceived as a loot due to the colonial expansion of the Western countries. According to Edward Said, “admiration” and romanticization of China and Chinese culture did not disappear but became essential to “orientalism.”<sup>57</sup> This romantic “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice towards East” was used to justify Western imperialism and conquests.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, ambassadors and travel writers described Qing China as backward, brutal, and decadent, suffering from internal instability.<sup>59</sup> Jones stresses that the coexistence of a stagnating economy and rich culture was an unsolvable puzzle for Western observers and caused an ambiguous image of China.<sup>60</sup> In Russia, China was perceived as a weak country but a unique civilization, a potential ally and danger, a despotic state, and a country that could end despotism and stagnation.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Isaacs studied the image of the Chinese in American society and also noted the American perception as “jostling pairs.”<sup>62</sup> He mentioned that “the Chinese are seen as a superior people and an inferior people, devilishly exasperating heathens and wonderfully attractive humanists.”<sup>63</sup> A similar contradictory image combining opposite views on China also appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic. The country was often presented as despotic and authoritarian but technological and effective.

The development of racial theories was another factor that worsened China’s image. Social scientists such as Marx, Engels, Darwin, Gobineau, and Spencer used “implicitly or explicitly racist” narratives to criticize the Chinese political and economic model.<sup>64</sup> Their books contributed to portraying China negatively when the West was obtaining moral, political, economic, and technological superiority.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, racial thinking coincided with the first waves of Chinese emigration contributed to the spread of Sinophobia. Especially it was demonstrated in the US, which resulted in a series of laws limiting Chinese immigration to the country.<sup>66</sup> Fear accompanied by discrimination against the Chinese turned into the idea of “yellow peril” or “Chinese peril,” which “was evident among European settlers from California to Australia.”<sup>67</sup> Numerous scholars acknowledged the return of racial and xenophobic ideas during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in large-scale discrimination against the Chinese in Western countries.<sup>68</sup>

The Chinese image dramatically changed in the second half of the 20th century. It was utterly shaped by the reality of the Cold War, in which China was a political and ideological enemy of the West. Establishing communism in China, numerous crises and wars at the country’s borders, destructive social experiments, and the aggressive rhetoric of Mao Zedong resulted in forming the Chinese image as even more aggressive than the USSR. Astarita examined the American press between 1949 and 1972 and concluded that the picture of China was entirely

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<sup>57</sup> Said, 1978

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Milestones: 1866–1898 and Jones, 2001, P. 10

<sup>60</sup> Jones, 2001, P. 99

<sup>61</sup> Lukin 2007, Pp. 161-162, Ewertowski, 2021, P. 10

<sup>62</sup> Isaacs, 1980, P. 70

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, P. 70

<sup>64</sup> Jones, 2001, P. 77

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, P. 39

<sup>66</sup> Milestones: 1866–1898

<sup>67</sup> Jones, 2001, P. 81

<sup>68</sup> Yiu, 2022, Siu & Chun, 2020, Li & Nicholson, 2021

linked to a communist nightmare.<sup>69</sup> “Communists,” “Red conquerors,” and “Red danger” were typical associations with China.<sup>70</sup> Turner, in his comprehensive analysis of the image of China in the US from 1949-2012, argued that such a negative image started to “recede” from the mid-60s due to the rapprochement between countries.<sup>71</sup> However, the events on Tiananmen Square eliminated the progress and contributed to depicting China as an undemocratic and repressive country. The leverage of the Cold War still impacts China’s image due to relatively little progress in adopting Western rules and values and constant opposition to the US-led world.

Nevertheless, several processes have determined the improvement of China’s image since the 1990s. The dissolution of the USSR symbolized the victory of the West over communism. At the same time, the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping and the “opening of China” led to the assumption in the West that China would transform into a liberal democracy.<sup>72</sup> Fukuyama made the quintessence of this idea in his famous “The End of History.”<sup>73</sup> Brzezinski, Mearsheimer, and Kim had a similar view on the future of China as a regional power with limited global potential that hopefully “become more prosperous and democratic.”<sup>74</sup> Such expectations have blurred the previous negative image of China in the West. Jian Meng, Zhu Hailong, and Moore also acknowledged the role of globalization in making the image more positive. The economic growth and openness were turning China from an isolated and autarky state to a prospective market, a big recipient of foreign investments, and one of the drivers of the world’s economy.<sup>75</sup> Thus, economic activity became a baseline of a new image of China in the 1990s and remained the most important driver of further improvement over the following decades.

The structural change in portraying China also happened because the Chinese government recognized the importance of the country’s image abroad and tried to improve it systematically.<sup>76</sup> It is not hard to notice that historically, the perception of China in the West was predominantly a result of Western actions, while China was a passive object of observation. Wang argues that since the 1990s, China has intensified image-building activities and become an active player that shapes its image globally by “promoting favorable characterizations and ameliorating unfavorable stereotypes.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese government started to hire media experts to polish China’s image, organize cultural events in other countries, issue white papers on human rights, the situation in Tibet, and China’s national defense, and design rules for presenting China’s positions on these sensitive questions.<sup>78</sup> These activities were coordinated by two institutions established in 1990-1991: the Overseas Propaganda Department under the Party Central Committee and the Information Office under the State Council.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Astarita, 2009, P. 31

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, P. 25

<sup>71</sup> Turner, 2014, Pp. 12-13

<sup>72</sup> Fukuyama, 1989, P. 3, P. 12

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, Pp. 11-12

<sup>74</sup> Brzezinski, 1997, P. 157, Kim, 1992, P. 247, Mearsheimer, 2001, P. 47

<sup>75</sup> Moore, 1999, P. 66, Meng, 2022, P. 35, Hailong, 2019, P. 37

<sup>76</sup> Wang, 2003, P. 48

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, P. 47

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, P. 48-49

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, P. 47

However, the effectiveness of the state-regulated approach to improving the country's image remained unclear. Kumar stresses that China has invested billions of dollars since 2009 "to strengthen its global media presence," while Lim and Bergin call this activity "China's global propaganda campaign."<sup>80</sup> Zhang argues that in the "postmodern age, news media has become the most important provider of information on China and shaped its perception abroad."<sup>81</sup> He stresses that "shaping China's image is the governmental foreign policy" and an essential part of the "soft power" concept.<sup>82</sup> In turn, soft power has been the backbone of the Chinese "peaceful rise" strategy in the 2000s-2010s.<sup>83</sup> Overall, this campaign and investment projects likely improved China's image in some countries, particularly in CEE.<sup>84</sup> However, most Western countries recognized it as propaganda and an attempt to hide reality. Consequently, it increased mistrust to the extent that any official statements of the Chinese government were perceived as disinformation, especially during the pandemic.

Chinese economic growth and lack of political changes constantly revived the perception of China as a threat to the West. The replacement of the "peaceful rise" concept with the "Chinese dream" and "Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" contributed to strengthening this discourse. Since 2017, the tensions between the US and China have grown, and the image of China has been steadily degrading. Western media constantly portrayed China as an authoritarian and aggressive country threatening the democratic world. Moreover, Hartig points out that China is aware of such perception, "sees itself misunderstood on the global stage and perceives the international environment as potentially hostile due to mainly negative reporting about the country by Western media."<sup>85</sup> On such a background, the pandemic became a factor that increased hostility between China and the West.

China has had different images throughout history, but they all influence the current one. The image was positive until the end of the 18th century, as China was perceived as a perfectly regulated and morally superior country. The leverage of this perception contributes to seeing China as an exotic culture and mystery civilization. The perception changed to the opposite in the 19th century, consisting of racist and Sinophobic views with the rise of the West and the decline of China. The hostility reached a maximum after establishing communism in China, as the country was seen as an open enemy of the West. Such a perspective significantly contributes to the close attention to Chinese growth and the perception of China as a Western rival and challenger. The recent economic and technological development without political democratization and liberalization strengthen this perspective. Thus, China's image remains contradictory, consisting of acknowledgments of the rich culture and economic growth, criticism of the political system, fear of the possible strength of the country, and potential conflict with the West.

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<sup>80</sup> Kumar, 2021 and Lim, & Bergin, 2018

<sup>81</sup> Zhang, 2011, P. 16

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, P. 15

<sup>83</sup> Herr, 2019, P. 15

<sup>84</sup> Bratberg et al., 2021

<sup>85</sup> Hartig, 2019, P. 69

## 2.3 China's Image in the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp decrease in positive attitudes toward China. Scott points out that diseases are “always politicized and always have political consequences,” and the coronavirus pandemic is no exception.<sup>86</sup> He illustrates that the nicknames given to the diseases are often based on nationality or race, such as “Spanish Flu,” “Asian Flu,” “Hong Kong Flu,” “Flanders Grippe,” “German Plague,” SARS, or MERS.<sup>87</sup> The World Health Organization advised media institutions to refer to the virus as “COVID-19” or “coronavirus” to avoid attaching to locations or ethnicity.<sup>88</sup> However, in March 2020, American officials and conservative media outlets used stigmatizing language and associated the virus with China.<sup>89</sup> The virus was first identified in the Chinese city of Wuchan and was shortly labeled as a “Wuchan virus” or “Chinese virus.”<sup>90</sup> Yu pointed out that China received severe political attacks after this, while Sinophobia and xenophobia dramatically escalated and “undermined China’s image” across the globe.<sup>91</sup> As a result, mistrust and unfavorable views of China reached a historical maximum in many countries.<sup>92</sup>

With the spread of COVID-19, China faced two main accusations. First, China was blamed for leaking the virus from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which launched the epidemic.<sup>93</sup> Second, China was accused of hiding the information about the leak and not making enough efforts to stop the spread of the virus before it went global.<sup>94</sup> Such narratives were widely spread in the Western media. Chen examined the coverage of China in the US and UK media by analyzing their tweets and found out that since the beginning of the pandemic, “non-negative reporting shrinks in number, leading to an increase in the proportion of negative coverage.”<sup>95</sup>

In response, China published a series of articles called “The Truth on...” to refute all the accusations and debunk outright conspiracy theories. This series of articles mirrored accusations of the US spreading the virus, yet most of these articles circulated mainly across official Chinese websites and rarely appeared in Western media.<sup>96</sup> Wendler argues that China intentionally crafted a campaign to clear its name in media and social media entirely by using the power of propaganda.<sup>97</sup> He underlines that China downplayed the severity and scope of the outbreak and released incomplete information on the spread of the disease to “exploit uncertainties in the origin of COVID-19”, promote China’s “successful crisis management,” and portray the Chinese government as a “superior in combating the virus.”<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Verma, Le Corre, and Brattberg argue that even Chinese aid, called “mask diplomacy,” has a geopolitical nature and

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<sup>86</sup> Calloway, 2014

<sup>87</sup> Cotter, 2020

<sup>88</sup> Darling-Hammond et al., 2020, P. 870

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, P. 870

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, P. 870

<sup>91</sup> Yu, Tay, & Yue, 2023

<sup>92</sup> Silver, Devlin & Huang, 2020

<sup>93</sup> United States Department of State, 2021

<sup>94</sup> Neuman, 2020

<sup>95</sup> Chen et al., 2021, P. 89

<sup>96</sup> The Truth on the Origin of the Novel Coronavirus, 2020

<sup>97</sup> Wendler, 2021

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

aims to change the COVID-19 narrative to a more positive one.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the Chinese efforts to improve views on China were perceived as a part of Chinese propaganda, further harming the country's image.<sup>100</sup>

Simultaneously, the pandemic reinforced ethnic and racial discrimination, hate speech, and aggression against the Chinese.<sup>101</sup> The Chinese people were accused of spreading the virus, infecting others, and being called "diseased."<sup>102</sup> Such narratives were shared by the media, too. They often included myths about Chinese wildlife consumption and the personal hygiene habits of Chinese people.<sup>103</sup> A prominent example of it was the speech of US Senator John Cornyn, who blamed China for the SARS, MERS, Swine flu, and coronavirus epidemics. He stressed that they happened because of a "culture where people eat bats, snakes, dogs and things like that," and the media widely quoted him.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Gover, Harper, and Langton reported "a surge in racially motivated hate crimes involving physical violence and harassment."<sup>105</sup> At the same time, Vachuska summarized that the pandemic caused an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment worldwide.<sup>106</sup>

To sum up, the COVID-19 pandemic was shortly politicized and used to blame China and the Chinese people for spreading the coronavirus. The English language media, dominant in agenda-setting, played a crucial role in this process. Thus, China was portrayed in a mostly negative light, which sharply worsened China's image in many countries.

## 2.4 The Image of China in Polish Media

The scope of literature related to the image of China in Polish media is limited, as the topic has not been popular among the academic community until recently.<sup>107</sup> The growing intensification of relations between Poland and China during the last decade has inspired interest in how China is depicted. However, there are still only a few fundamental papers about it. The topic has a solid background in methodology but lacks analysis of the latest changes in the image caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the research aims to fill this gap in the literature.

"The Image of a Migrant in the Polish Press" (Obraz imigranta na łamach prasy polskiej), written by Mrozowski in 1997, was one of the first articles about China's image. It analyzed different ethnic groups in the Polish press, including the Chinese.<sup>108</sup> Józwiak, Konieczna-Sałamatin, and Tudorowski focused on similar issues of how foreigners were portrayed in Polish media after joining the EU.<sup>109</sup> Their analysis showed that 66% of articles

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<sup>99</sup> Chen, 2021, and Le Corre & Brattberg, 2020

<sup>100</sup> Molter, & Di Resta, 2020

<sup>101</sup> Abbas, 2022, P. 885

<sup>102</sup> Gover, Harper & Langton, 2020

<sup>103</sup> Chen at al., 2021, P. 83

<sup>104</sup> Wu, 2020

<sup>105</sup> Gover, Harper & Langton, 2020, P. 647

<sup>106</sup> Vachuska, 2020, P. 9

<sup>107</sup> Jura & Kaluzynska, 2013, P. 121

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, P. 121

<sup>109</sup> Józwiak, Konieczna-Sałamatin, & Tudorowski, 2009, P. 4



have a neutral tone to foreigners, as they are seen as an “opportunity rather than a threat.”<sup>110</sup> However, both papers lack a specific analysis of the image of the Chinese, as they target all foreigners as one group.

“Media in China, China in Media” was the first book that systematically analyzes Chinese media and depicts China in Polish media. Bukowski, the author of one essay for the book, compared the data of polls about the perception of other nations called “Poles About Themselves and Other Nations” (OBOP) with Chinese images in Polish media in 2009-2010. He found out that, according to surveys, the Chinese were in the top five most disliked nations in the 1960-1970s.<sup>111</sup> The trend started to change to a more positive perception of Chinese in Poland in the 1980s and steadily grew till the end of the 2000s.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, according to polls, in 2010, the overall attitude was quite positive, as the number of respondents who perceived China positively was higher than those who perceived it negatively (29% and 27%, respectively).<sup>113</sup> Since that time, numbers remained stable for a decade, as according to CBOS, 31% of Poles had a positive attitude towards China and 28% negative in 2019.<sup>114</sup> The analysis of media approved the results of public polls, and Bukowski pointed out 3 important implications from it: Polish negative historical experiences didn’t lead to criticism of China or the Communist Party; the image is neutral when it comes to a description of Chinese government or society, and positive when topics are related to economy; the image in media is significantly simplified, yet reflects public opinion.<sup>115</sup>

Jura and Kałużyńska stressed that the relatively positive image of China significantly differs from the stereotypical belief that China is still “being depicted in the Polish media mainly as a Communist, totalitarian, and undeveloped country.”<sup>116</sup> Their research was based on a comprehensive list of media outlets, focused solely on the image of China in Polish media and provided detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the image.<sup>117</sup> They argued that even though China is not so popular in the media compared to European neighbors of Poland or the US, the overall depiction is not negative.<sup>118</sup> According to the study, the Polish media portrayed China “as a global power, modernized and expanding its influence all over the world.”<sup>119</sup> The study’s main limitation is its date, as the media analysis was conducted in the second half of 2013. Since then, Sino-Polish relations have rapidly developed, been influenced by several crises, and witnessed the growing geopolitical role of both China and Poland.

Launching the One Belt One Road Initiative and 16+1 project in CEE inspired authors to pay attention to how it influenced the image of China in Poland. Kobusińska analyzed the image in the context of the initiative in Polish weekly magazines *Polityka* and *Wprost* between 2011

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, P. 11, P. 35

<sup>111</sup> Bukowski, 2014, P. 140

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, P. 141

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, P. 141

<sup>114</sup> CBOS, 2019, P. 2

<sup>115</sup> Bukowski, 2014, P. 149

<sup>116</sup> Jura & Kaluzynska, 2013, P. 121

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, P. 121

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, P. 139

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, P. 139

and 2017.<sup>120</sup> She acknowledged the existence of numerous stereotypes towards China in the media but argued that since 2011, relations between China and Poland have been built on a new model, and this is reflected in the media.<sup>121</sup> However, Grzywacz came to different results by examining scientific journals.<sup>122</sup> She argued that among the Polish academic community, China is perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity, especially after 2013.<sup>123</sup>

The MapInfluenCE project, which studied Chinese influence in Central Europe and published several comprehensive analyses on the topic, is worth mentioning. For instance, Ostrowska argued that the Polish media discourse on China was “exceptionally positive” in 2010-2018, even compared to other Visegrad countries.<sup>124</sup> This changed in 2019 after the “Huawei spy scandal” in Poland, and Karásková, Bachulska, Matura, and Šimalčík admitted growing critical views in Polish media.<sup>125</sup> However, the project’s authors did not focus much on the Chinese image in Polish media during the COVID-19 pandemic. They conducted only one public poll about Polish attitudes toward China in 2020.<sup>126</sup> The poll showed a dramatic worsening of the attitude but lacked a detailed analysis.

I found only one paper about the image of China in the Polish press during the pandemic. Zhang Lei analyzed articles published in the authoritative Polish weekly newspaper “Polityka” during 2020-2021 and found out that China’s image is mixed: while the Chinese government and Communist Party are presented in a negative light, economic development and resilience of Chinese people were assessed positively.<sup>127</sup> However, the research cannot represent the variety of views in Polish media as only one media outlet with a liberal political character was analyzed.

Except for analysis published by scholars, there is data from the polls conducted in Poland during the pandemic. The survey made by CEIAS in 2020 shows a significant increase in negative views on China in Poland (41.5% negative, 31.7% positive, rest is neutral).<sup>128</sup> The survey showed that up to 50% of the Polish population had changed their views of China in the last three years; 34% of opinions have changed to be negative; only 9.4% of Poles trust China.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, conspiracy theories about the origin of COVID-19 influence perceptions of China among the Polish public. According to the poll, 26.3% think the virus spread because Chinese people eating bats and other wild animals, and 48% believe it was intentionally spread by China.<sup>130</sup>

Methodologically, most of the researches are based on a similar framework and uses QDA Miner and Worldstat software for quantitative and qualitative analysis. I took some inspiration from the research of Jura and Kałużyńska, and my study is primarily built on their

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<sup>120</sup> Kobusińska, 2018

<sup>121</sup> Ibid

<sup>122</sup> Grzywacz, 2020, P. 177

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, P. 190

<sup>124</sup> Ostrowska, 2019, P. 3

<sup>125</sup> Karásková, et al., 2021, P. 27

<sup>126</sup> Turcsányi et al., 2020, P. 23

<sup>127</sup> Zhang, 2022

<sup>128</sup> Turcsányi et al., 2020, P.2

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, P. 2

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, P. 5

paper. Mainly, I use the same methodology and set of keywords. However, there are 3 critical differences between our works. First, my research is focused on the Chinese image in a completely different context. While Jura and Kałużyńska studied a period of stability, I chose a period when China was in the turmoil of the pandemic and the spotlight of the world's attention. Second, I divided the qualitative analysis into specific topics for a more detailed analysis of each to avoid a generalized image. Finally, I used fewer sources (5 contrary to 17) and excluded numerous media and tabloids due to their decreasing popularity. The thesis of Zhan Lei is the second one that inspired my study. Similarly, I divided the qualitative section into topics but used another system, so only a few overlapped.

### 3. Methodological Framework

This section contains an overview of the methodology and the data collection process. It includes the justification of the chosen research design, the methods used, and the selected time frame. The section also presents the limitations of the study and how they affected the research.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The research is a quantitative and qualitative case study that uses a QDA Data Miner and QDA Wordstat software. The primary data collection, coding, and analysis are done using the software.

The case study configuration is chosen due to the ability to comprehensively analyze the concept using only one example. Yin defines *case study design* as an “empirical inquiry which investigates a phenomenon in its real-life context.”<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, Creswell points out that the “case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained time.”<sup>132</sup> Finally, since in-depth research is conducted, it allows the use of several data analysis methods.<sup>133</sup> This is an exact strategy of the research, as a phenomenon of the image of China in Polish media is studied in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic by conducting quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

The case study format is the most common approach to using the concept of country image and, particularly, examining the image of China in media. The aforementioned unique characteristics of Polish-China relations make this design essential. Thus, Jura and Kaluzynska, Bukowski, Kobusinska, and Zhang used the format in their analysis of the image of China in Polish media. At the same time, the case study format is also the main one for analysis of the image in media of other countries (the US, Italy, Spain, and Russia).

The other formats of study of the country image also exist in the literature, yet do not fit the research. For instance, Turcsanyi, Karaskova, Matura, and Simalcik used comparative design to examine the image of China in Czech, Slovakian, and Hungarian media.<sup>134</sup> However, it is indicative that they excluded Poland from the analysis of China’s image in Visegrad countries. Furthermore, as the primary source of information is local country media, conducting such research requires knowledge of several languages or having a team of researchers. Melnyk and Wakesa also used a comparative format to study the image of China in the media of several African countries (Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda).<sup>135</sup> However, this was possible due to the similar approach of China toward these countries.<sup>136</sup> The different nature of

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<sup>131</sup> Yin, 2009

<sup>132</sup> Creswell, 2014

<sup>133</sup> Priya, 2020

<sup>134</sup> Turcsányi et al., 2019

<sup>135</sup> Melnyk, 2021 and Wakesa, 2013

<sup>136</sup> An & Feng, 2022

Polish-China relations compared to other CEE countries and the unique regional role of Poland make such an approach less comprehensive compared to the case study.

There is a consensus among scholars that the pandemic significantly influenced the image of China across the world. However, the image changed dissimilarly in different countries. Furthermore, there is no universal scale to measure the scope of the change. Hence, the changes in the image should be analyzed separately in each country.

The research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the image of China in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic through analysis of Polish Media.

Thus, the research questions are:

1) *How has China been portrayed in Polish media during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

To answer the question, a wide range of topics that contributed to the image of China are analyzed in the research. Remarkably, the image is studied via 3 groups of topics:

- The issue of the pandemic itself (the beginning of the pandemic in China, the origin of the virus, the Chinese government's actions to manage the pandemic inside China, and providing aid to other countries)
- China's internal policy (state of economy and human rights, issues of Hong Kong and Taiwan integration)
- The foreign policy of China (relations with neighboring countries, the US and Poland)

2) *To what degree did the pandemic contribute to changing China's image in Polish media?*

The question aims to measure the significance of the image's change due to the pandemic. A comparison to the previous study, such as public polls and academic literature, is done to achieve this.

The thesis is an empirical data-driven research, which limits the ability to make any hypothesis. The first question is a broad descriptive "How-question," making it challenging to create a clear assumption. However, the second question conjectures a change in the image, so taking into account the secondary sources, the hypothesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly contributed to the worsening of the image of China in Polish media.

### **3.2 Data Selection**

The research is based on a corpus of data from the Polish online media outlets - GazetaPrawna.pl, Onet.pl, Rp.pl, Wyborcza.pl, and Wp.pl. The media were chosen because they were the most cited and influential in 2020, according to the Institute of Media Monitoring (Instytut Monitorowania Mediów).<sup>137</sup> Onet.pl and Wp.pl comprised 60% of overall citations among the top 10 Polish online news portals. Similarly, Wyborcza.pl, GazetaPrawna.pl, and

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<sup>137</sup> Imm, 2020

Rp.pl comprised more than 56% of overall citations among the top 10 online versions of newspapers. The average citation of them was about 34,000 times per year. According to the SE Ranking platform, these media also had the highest traffic, with about 3.8 million unique visitors on average in the first half of 2020, making them Poland's most visited online media.<sup>138</sup> The full data about the type of sources used in the research, number of citations, and traffic is presented in Table 1.

All sources are centrist from the point of ideological characteristics. Nevertheless, they represent a slightly broader range, as conservative and liberal media outlets are included.

Title	Unique visitors January 2020	Unique visitors June 2020	Citation 2020	Political characteristics*
GazetaPrawna.pl	758.000	660.000	18799	Centrist, conservative
Rp.pl	953.000	1.938.000	35085	Centrist, conservative
Wyborcza.pl	2.703.000	2.623.000	26517	Centrist-left, liberal
Onet.pl	7.569.000	8.057.000	58403	Centrist
Wp.pl	6.924.000	6.671.000	30847	Centrist

**Table 1. Selected media outlets used in the research**

\* The political (ideological) characteristics are taken from Jura & Kaluzynska due to a lack of professional research on this topic.<sup>139</sup>

Due to low popularity, many Polish media outlets are not included in the research. For instance, online portals Polityka.pl, DoRzeczy.pl, Wprost.pl, and GazetaPolska.pl, are excluded because they had more than 5 times lower traffic and 6 times lower citations. Other news aggregators, for example, Gazeta.pl, Interia.pl, Forsal.pl are also excluded due to the high citation level of daily newspapers used in the analysis, brief notes without attitudes, low traffic, and meager citation rate.<sup>140</sup> Fakt.pl and SuperExpress.pl are not selected due to their tabloid nature, which requires separate analysis.<sup>141</sup> Also, they had notably fewer articles about China, especially in the case of SuperExpress.pl.

The initial data selection is made by creating a database of all articles with the tag “Chiny” (the Polish word for “China”) published in the selected media portals. It includes all types of articles, such as news, analysis, and opinions. The sources of Polish origin and translations of foreign ones, for instance, Chinese, American, British, and Ukrainian, are included. The research consists of 2093 articles in total. Although the selected articles have a tag China, many do not provide information relevant to the research or mention China briefly. Thus, the QDA Miner and Wordstat software is used to code, filter, and eliminate inapplicable articles. Similarly to the approach of Jura and Kaluzynska, a dictionary of the most frequent words is created in the first stage.<sup>142</sup> It includes the words that appeared in the initial database more than

<sup>138</sup> <https://seranking.com> Last update is 26.04.2023, within the time the data might change for a 1-2%

<sup>139</sup> Jura & Kaluzynska, 2013, P. 123

<sup>140</sup> Imm, 2021

<sup>141</sup> Jura & Kaluzynska, 2013, P. 130

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, P. 124

50 times.<sup>143</sup> After this, they are filtered and assigned as keywords or removed due to irrelevancy. Since the fundamental idea of the thesis is to examine the image of China during the pandemic, the words are classified as keywords to fit specific categories (for instance, pandemic, economy, foreign policy, etc.) or to have emotional connotations (could be considered as positive or negative). Thus, after filtering the database and coding, 140 articles were selected for the detailed qualitative analysis.

### 3.3 Time Frame

The research includes articles published for the first 6 months of 2020, between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2020. The period was chosen because, during this time, China was at the epicenter of events caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and in the spotlight of world media. The first official news about “unexplained pneumonia” and a “cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan” appeared on the 31st of December 2019 on a ProMED platform and in the official statement of the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission.<sup>144</sup> They were picked up by WHO’s departments on the same day.<sup>145</sup> Nevertheless, it took some time for the information to be spread across the globe and appear in the media worldwide. Most media published articles about it only at the beginning of 2020. The first article about the disease in Polish media was published on the 3rd of January on Wp.pl entitled “China. Return of the deadly SARS virus? The number of cases of an unknown form of pneumonia is increasing”.<sup>146</sup> The other portals published about a new virus appearing in China a week later, on the 8th-11th of January. Initially, the disease was not called “COVID” or “Coronavirus.” Instead, such words as “mystery” and “deadly” virus were used.

The emergence of the virus dramatically boosted the number of articles about China. Usually, most media publish a few (from 7 to 12) China-related articles per week. However, in February-March 2020, there were often 5 to 10 articles per day in each media outlet.<sup>147</sup>

The end date of the time frame was chosen for two reasons. First, it was the initial date of gathering the material for the research. Second, after a few months of lockdown, China managed to decrease the number of COVID-19 cases in March 2020 and take control of the pandemic. As a result, the media’s focus switched to other countries, while the number of China-related articles dropped. The media almost stopped mentioning China in the context of the pandemic in the summer and did not provide new information relevant to the topic.

### 3.4 Research Methods

The primary methods used in the research are content and discourse analysis. Both methods are used with the help of QDA Miner. Such an approach is common among scholars, and for instance, Jura and Kaluzynska, Zhang, Turcsányi, et al. used it to analyze the image of China in media.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, P. 124

<sup>144</sup> ProMed report, 2020 and CHP closely monitors cluster of pneumonia cases on Mainland, 2019

<sup>145</sup> Listings of WHO's response to COVID-19, 2020

<sup>146</sup> Baran, 2020

<sup>147</sup> Data from the results of the research

Content analysis is used for a quantitative part of the study. Downe-Wambolt defines content analysis as “a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data to describe and quantify specific phenomena.”<sup>148</sup> The definition points out the two reasons why this method is selected for this study:

- the ability to transform unstructured qualitative data into organized quantitative data;
- the inferential nature that allows making conclusions from specific samples.<sup>149</sup>

The method allows to analyze of more than 2000 articles about China from the initial database. It turns the data into a quantitative format by identifying, counting, and coding the most frequent words. Furthermore, it interprets data and makes valid conjunctions.

Discourse analysis is used for qualitative data analysis. The method is chosen because it allows not only to analyze text but to “look beyond texts and take into account institutional and socio-cultural contexts.”<sup>150</sup> Ramanathan and Hoon admit that the method “plays a vital role in unraveling the hidden ideologies and scrutinizing the presence of power in media discourse studies.”<sup>151</sup> Accordingly, Van Dijk defines this “power” as “setting or selecting time and place, participants, audiences, possible speech acts (such as commands or requests), agendas, topics, choice of language, style, strategies of politeness or deference, and many other properties of text and talk.”<sup>152</sup> Thus, this method plays a crucial role in conducting a deep analysis of the discourse of Polish Media toward China.

### 3.5 Limitations

Several constraints influence the research and its results. The main limitation is that the analysis of China’s image is based only on 5 online media outlets. Although the selected media are Poland’s most popular and authoritative online portals, they do not represent the full diversity of views and opinions regarding China. Secondary sources and comparisons to existing research are used to navigate and reduce the potential negative impact of this limitation.

Another point is the relatively short time frame, which does not cover the whole period of the Coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic lasted more than three years, but only the first 6 months of it were selected. Thus, the research is limited to an analysis of the initial stage of it and does not examine the following stages.

The primary sampling scope of the research is extensive, including about two thousand articles. Coding is the best way to organize such data, as it labels, categorizes, and decreases the amount of information. However, coding in qualitative research is a process that can only partially be entirely objective, as it relies on a coder.<sup>153</sup> To mitigate the factor of subjectivity, the

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<sup>148</sup> Downe-Wambolt, 1992, P. 314

<sup>149</sup> Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017

<sup>150</sup> Carvalho, 2008, Pp. 161-162

<sup>151</sup> Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015, P. 58

<sup>152</sup> Van Dijk, 1995, P. 86

<sup>153</sup> Haggard, 2019, P. 49



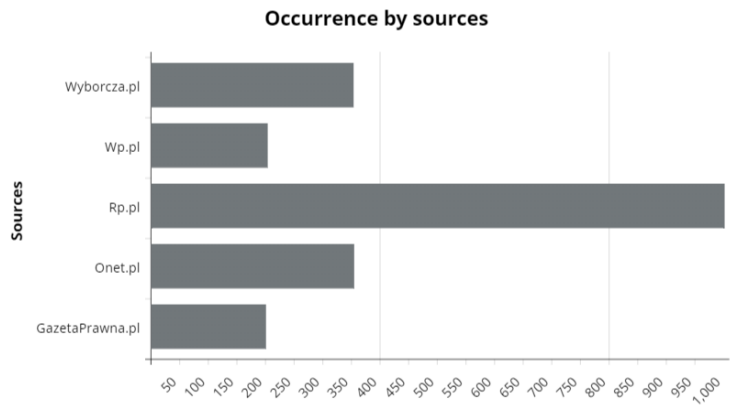
methodology of coding and the initial corpus of keywords are mainly based on the previous peer-reviewed study. The new keywords do not exceed 30%, enrich the data, and tailor it to the present time. Most are chosen to fill the keyword gap, which emerged because of the pandemic.

The significant advantage of the research is that original articles published in the Polish language are the primary source of the study. This allows for avoiding the potential biases that usually occur when using translated sources. At the same time, it is a significant limitation as I am not a native speaker of Polish, and my knowledge of the Polish language is upper-intermediate. It is enough for understanding complex texts but might also create space for misinterpretation during information analysis. The native level of Ukrainian and Russian languages, which are close to Polish, and a considerable time of living in Poland significantly increases my understanding of Polish texts, yet cannot eliminate biases.

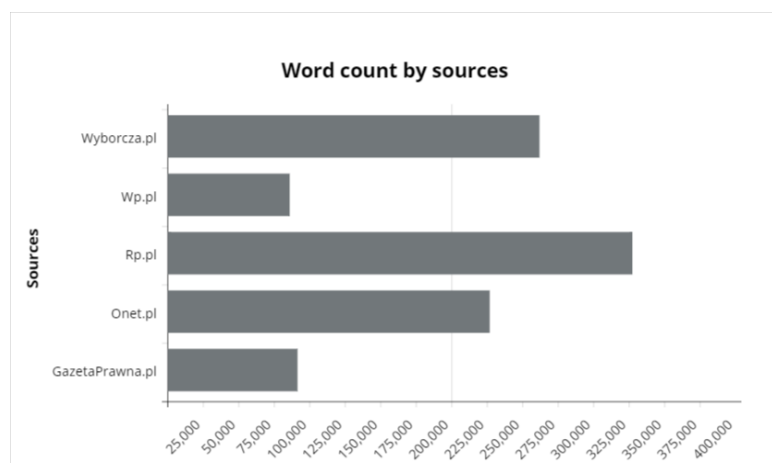
#### 4. Quantitative Analysis

This section provides an analysis of China’s image based on the most frequent words and categories appearing in the Polish media. The first part of it presents the results of the content analysis. The second part examines the proximity of words.

All 2093 articles with the tag “China” were initially selected for the content analysis. In total, they consisted of 987 089 words divided between 5 sources. The occurrence of China-related articles by sources is presented in Graph 1. The graph shows that GazetaPrawna.pl, Onet.pl, Wp. pl, and Wyborcza.pl do not have a significant difference in the number of articles, contrary to Rp.pl, consisting of almost 50% of all cases. Indeed, Rp.pl demonstrated a more dramatic increase in China-related reports in February-March compared to other sources. Moreover, Rp.pl was the only source that doubled the internet traffic of unique visitors in the first half of 2020, while other portals had less than a 10% change (see Table 1). However, such an increase and prevalence of articles from Rp.pl does not affect the findings as most of the articles published in the first months of the pandemic were short notes about the current state of the spread of the virus. The word count by sources in Graph 2 admits this fact and shows a more balanced data division between sources. Thus, the potential bias due to the dominance of Rp.pl in the number of articles is improbable.



**Graph 1: Number of articles with tag “China” by sources**  
Source: results of research



**Graph 2: Word count by sources**

Source: results of research

The articles' database was analyzed using Wordstat software. It automatically sorted words by frequency and eliminated those that appeared less than 50 times. Prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections were the most frequent words but were also eliminated due to their meaninglessness. After that, the remaining words were coded as keywords if they represented a particular topic or contained emotional connotations.

Another remark is that each code includes not only a nominative case of the word but also declension and, in some cases, synonyms. For instance, the "coronavirus" code includes these words (koronawirus, koronawirusa, koronawirusowi, koronawirusem, koronawirusie, koronawirusy, koronawirusów, koronawirusom, koronawirusami, koronawirusach). This is done to collect all mentions of the words and due to the features of the Polish language.

Initially, a dictionary of keywords was created from all relevant frequent words to identify the most common categories. The complete list of these words assigned to 61 codes is shown in Table 2. Articles without the appearance of the most frequent words comprised around 10% and were eliminated from the research after manually checking them. After that, codes were divided into 3 parts for further analysis: Coronavirus-related, Categories excluding Coronavirus, and Emotional connotations.

**Table 2. Words Frequency in China related articles**

Code	Count	% Codes	Articles	% Articles
Koronawirus/Covid (Coronavirus/Covid)	11007	22.9	1871	89.4
Pandemia/epidemia (Pandemic/epidemic)	5056	10.5	1417	67.7
Szpital (Hospital)	1622	3.4	677	32.3
Smierc (Death)	1521	3.2	794	37.9
Bezpieczeństwo/obrona (Security)	1402	2.9	657	31.4
Kwarantanna (Lockdown)	1108	2.3	536	25.6
Gospodarka (Economy)	1103	2.3	429	20.5
Pomoc/opieka (Help/care)	941	2.0	507	24.2

Prawo (Law)	891	1.9	478	22.8
Zagrozenie (Threat)	879	1.8	520	24.8
Kontrola (Control)	876	1.8	481	23.0
Zakaz/ograniczenie (Prohibition/restriction)	869	1.8	490	23.4
Dyplomacja/Stosunki międzynarodowe (Diplomacy/International relations)	736	1.5	409	19.5
Test (Test)	678	1.4	312	14.9
Kryzys (Crisis)	675	1.4	312	14.9
Protest/demonstracji (Protest/demonstrations)	651	1.4	352	16.8
Dobre (Good)	633	1.3	405	19.4
Trudno (Hard)	625	1.3	409	19.5
Handl (Trade)	621	1.3	319	15.2
Brak/deficyt (Lack/deficit)	604	1.3	382	18.3
Problem (Issue)	600	1.2	371	17.7
Walka (Struggle)	598	1.2	379	18.1
Maseczki (Masks)	597	1.2	258	12.3
Podejrzenie (Suspicion)	567	1.2	218	10.4
Ryzyk (Risk)	552	1.1	336	16.1
Wojna (War)	457	1.0	244	11.7
Konflikt/Atak (Conflict/Attack)	447	0.9	312	14.9
Współpraca (Cooperation)	408	0.8	216	10.3
Laboratorium (Laboratory)	396	0.8	245	11.7
Szczepionka (Vaccine)	382	0.8	229	10.9
Inwestycji (Investments)	379	0.8	182	8.7
Komunistyczna Partia (Communist Party)	372	0.8	171	8.2
Rozwój (Development)	370	0.8	102	4.9
Demokracja (Democracy)	354	0.7	130	6.2
Zapobieganie (Prevention)	333	0.7	223	10.7
Skuteczny/Efektywny (Effective)	333	0.7	156	7.5
Strach/panika (Fear/panic)	332	0.7	240	11.5
Wyrok/Kara/Areszt (Judgment/punishment/arrest)	328	0.7	233	11.1
Biznes (Business)	265	0.6	168	8.0
Wartość (Value)	253	0.5	175	8.4
Źródło (Source)	216	0.4	178	8.5
Wsparcie (Support)	180	0.4	132	6.3
Prawda (Truth)	162	0.3	129	6.2
Porozumienie (Agreement)	154	0.3	108	5.2
Propaganda (Propaganda)	153	0.3	89	4.3
Dezinformacja (Disinformation)	153	0.3	87	4.2
Nadzieja (Hope)	149	0.3	64	3.1
Jakość (Quality)	145	0.3	123	5.9

Sukces (Success)	141	0.3	83	4.0
Katastrofa (Catastrophe)	138	0.3	109	5.2
Przymus/niewola/represji (Coercion/captivity/repressions)	129	0.3	100	4.8
Rezim (Regime)	103	0.2	63	3.0
Autorytaryzm (Authoritarianism)	101	0.2	57	2.7
Zaufanie (Trust)	85	0.2	60	2.9
Sankcji (Sanctions)	81	0.2	53	2.5
Swoboda (Freedom)	78	0.2	61	2.9
Solidarność (Solidarity)	76	0.2	50	2.4
Liberalny (Liberal)	73	0.2	49	2.3
Masakra (Massacre)	69	0.1	34	1.6
Reforma (Reform)	61	0.1	42	2.0
Korzyść (Benefit)	58	0.1	44	2.1

Source: results of research

The data in Table 2 shows that during the first 6 months of 2020, China was mentioned predominantly in a context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as almost 90% of the articles contain the word “Coronavirus” or “Covid.” Furthermore, the solely “coronavirus-related” words comprise 46.9% of all coded words (see Table 3). These words empathize with different topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as measures imposed by the government (lockdown), instruments of deterring the pandemic (hospitals, tests, masks, vaccine), and the origin of the virus (source, laboratory). Further, such a division determined topics for the qualitative part of the research.

**Table 3. Coronavirus-related words**

Code	Count	% Codes
Coronavirus	11007	22.9
Pandemic	5056	10.5
Hospital	1622	3.4
Death	1521	3.2
Lockdown	1108	2.3
Test	678	1.4
Masks	597	1.2
Laboratory	396	0.8
Vaccine	382	0.8
Source	216	0.4
Total	22583	46.9

Source: results of research

Besides Coronavirus-related words, most frequent categories appearing in the articles are more typical compared to the previous study. Overall, 4 main sections shape the image of China: Security concerns, Economic development, Law, and International relations. Additionally, the Communist Party and local protests have also attracted the attention of Polish media. Related

words consist of 14% of codes and are the main focus of the media aside from the pandemic (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Most frequent categories excluding Coronavirus-related words**

Code	Count	% Codes
Security	1402	2.9
Economy	1103	2.3
Law	891	1.9
International relations	736	1.5
Protest	651	1.4
Trade	621	1.3
War	457	1.0
Investments	379	0.8
Communist Party	372	0.8
Business	265	0.6
Propaganda	153	0.3
Sanctions	81	0.2
Total	7111	14

Source: results of research

The other 39 codes represent the words that contain strong emotional associations and could be assessed as positive or negative. The codes and categorization key used in the research are shown in Table 5. Although the number of positive codes is similar to negative ones (20 cases and 19 accordingly), the negative keywords occurred 1.7 times more often. The high frequency of negative words is mainly a result of the pandemic (for example, Threat, Control, Prohibition, Struggle, Fear). However, the pandemic also contributed to many positive categories, such as Help, Prevention, and Effective. Furthermore, it is important to mention that there is an effect of the “contemporary media content, which is focused more on sensation, tragedy, or any other negative references over the positive ones”.<sup>154</sup>

**Table 5. Words with positive and negative emotional connotation**

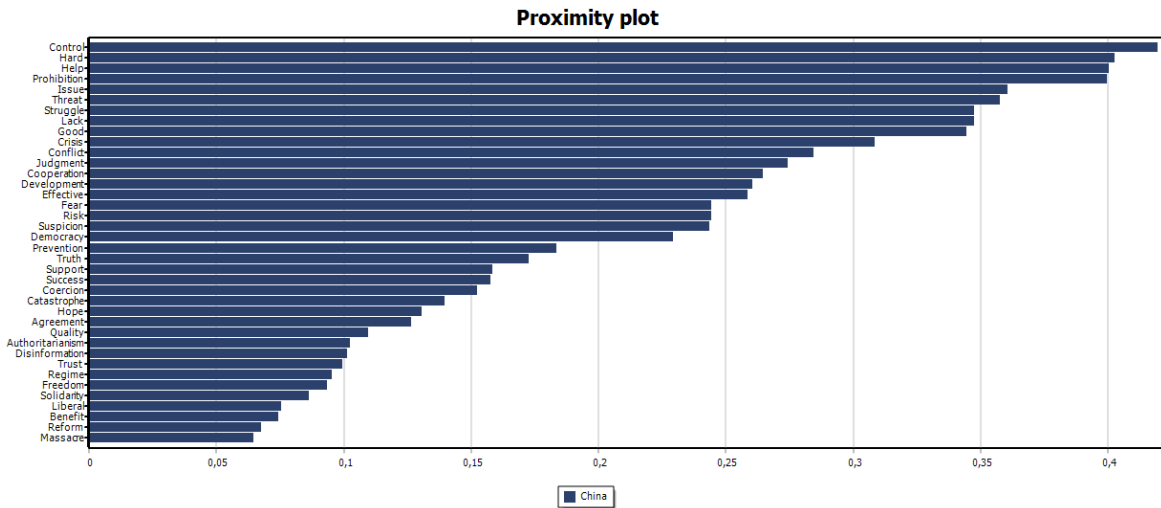
Code	Count	% Codes	Articles	% Articles	Categorization Key
Pomoc/opieka (Help/care)	941	2.0	507	24.2	Positive
Zagrozenie (Threat)	879	1.8	520	24.8	Negative
Kontrola (Control)	876	1.8	481	23.0	Negative
Zakaz/ograniczenie (Prohibition/restriction)	869	1.8	490	23.4	Negative
Kryzys (Crisis)	675	1.4	312	14.9	Negative
Dobre (Good)	633	1.3	405	19.4	Positive
Trudno (Hard)	625	1.3	409	19.5	Negative
Brak/deficyt (Lack/deficit)	604	1.3	382	18.3	Negative

<sup>154</sup> Jura & Kaluzynska, 2013, P. 126-127

Problem (Issue)	600	1.2	371	17.7	Negative
Walka (Struggle) 10	598	1.2	379	18.1	Negative
Podejrzenie (Suspicion)	567	1.2	218	10.4	Negative
Ryzyk (Risk)	552	1.1	336	16.1	Negative
Konflikt/Atak (Conflict/Attack)	447	0.9	312	14.9	Negative
Współpraca (Cooperation)	408	0.8	216	10.3	Positive
Rozwój (Development)15	370	0.8	102	4.9	Positive
Demokracja (Democracy)	354	0.7	130	6.2	Positive
Zapobieganie (Prevention)	333	0.7	223	10.7	Positive
Skuteczny/Efektywny (Effective)	333	0.7	156	7.5	Positive
Strach/panika (Fear/panic)	332	0.7	240	11.5	Negative
Wyrok/Kara/Areszt (Judgment/punishment/arrest) 20	328	0.7	233	11.1	Negative
Wartość (Value)	253	0.5	175	8.4	Positive
Wsparcie (Support)	180	0.4	132	6.3	Positive
Prawda (Truth)	162	0.3	129	6.2	Positive
Porozumienie (Agreement)	154	0.3	108	5.2	Positive
Dezinformacja (Disinformation)	153	0.3	87	4.2	Negative
Nadzieja (Hope)	149	0.3	64	3.1	Positive
Jakość (Quality)	145	0.3	123	5.9	Positive
Sukces (Success)	141	0.3	83	4.0	Positive
Katastrofa (Catastrophe)	138	0.3	109	5.2	Negative
Przymus/niewola/represji (Coercion/captivity/repressions)	129	0.3	100	4.8	Negative
Rezim (Regime)	103	0.2	63	3.0	Negative
Autorytaryzm (Authoritarianism)	101	0.2	57	2.7	Negative
Zaufanie (Trust)	85	0.2	60	2.9	Positive
Swoboda (Freedom)	78	0.2	61	2.9	Positive
Solidarność (Solidarity)	76	0.2	50	2.4	Positive
Liberalny (Liberal)	73	0.2	49	2.3	Positive
Masakra (Massacre)	69	0.1	34	1.6	Negative
Reforma (Reform)	61	0.1	42	2.0	Positive
Korzyść (Benefit)	58	0.1	44	2.1	Positive
Positive total	5090	10,6			
Negative total	8542	17,6			

Source: results of research

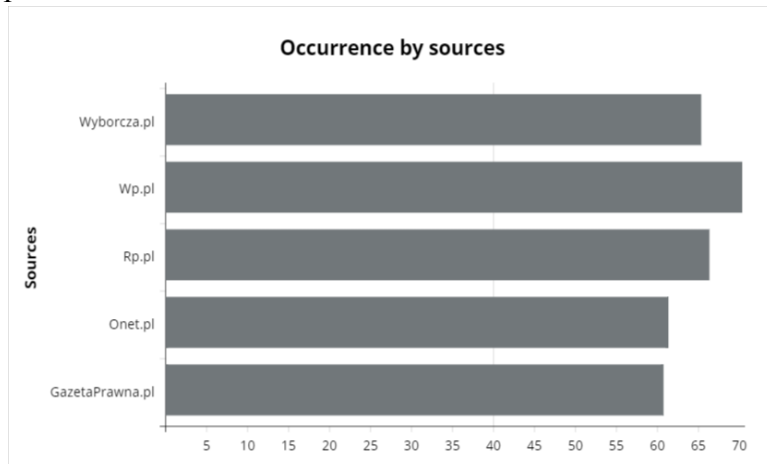
The significant limitation of the content analysis is that even though the keywords appear in China-related articles, there is no guarantee that they are all explicitly related to China, not to other countries mentioned in the article. To ensure the findings' relevance, the codes' proximity is analyzed. Jaccard's coefficient makes the clustering, and the occurrence is chosen within the paragraph.



**Graph 3. China and proximity of positive and negative emotional connotation**

Source: results of research

Graph 3 shows the keywords in a slightly other order, but most of the keywords remained within 2-3 positions, except Suspicion (7 places dropped) and Judgment (8 places raised). Across the first 20 most proximal words, only 7 are positive, while 13 have negative connotations. This data admits that China’s image in Polish media has more negative rather than positive associations.



**Graph 4: Percentage of keywords with negative connotations in China-related articles by source**

Source: results of research

Graph 4 shows no significant difference in the percentage of keywords with negative connotations among sources. Negative ones comprise 60-70% of keywords in all media outlets.

Overall, quantitative analysis shows that the topic of the pandemic dominated China-related articles. Aside from that, the media were focused on more traditional issues, such as Security, Economy, Law, and International relations. The number of words with negative connotations prevailed in the articles among all sources, contributing to a negative image of



China. On average, the percentage of negative words is 1.5-2 times higher than positive ones. Furthermore, proximity confirmed this, as only 7 words are positive across 20 of the most proximal ones. The country is strongly associated with terms such as Control, Hard, Prohibition, Issue, Threat, Struggle, Lack, and Crisis, while containing only Help and Good as positive words in the most proximal ones.

## **5. Qualitative Analysis**

This section provides a more detailed and specific analysis of China's image in Polish media than the quantitative part of the research. In total, 140 articles are used in this part. They either focus entirely on China as the main subject or reveal a specific topic and use China as their main illustration.

All articles were coded based on the main topics represented. Similarly to the approach of Jura and Kaluzynska, each article was assigned only one code that best suited its general focus.<sup>155</sup> Then, coded articles were systematized by similar topics and analyzed as a group. Each section of the qualitative part represents one group of articles.

### **5.1 The Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic is the main topic discussed in Polish media in the articles about China. It is shown by quantitative analysis and similarly confirmed by the number of articles used in the qualitative part. It should not come as a surprise, as the first cases of the COVID-19 virus were reported in China, and the attention of the world's media, including Polish, was entirely on the PRC.

All articles contributing to the image of China during the pandemic were systematized into 3 categories: the debate of the origin of the virus, the description of China's approach to dealing with the pandemic, and the attitude toward China's foreign aid. Thus, the following sections discuss these 3 topics.

#### **5.1.1 Origin of the Virus**

The controversy over the origin of the coronavirus has had one of the most substantial impacts on the negative portrayal of China in Polish media during the first 6 months of the pandemic. The unknown nature of the virus, its fast and unclear way of transmission, and limited official information from the Chinese government created a perfect ground for speculations and fake news, significantly damaging China's image. Journalists and politicians were not limited in their analysis by reliable information, and the media widely quoted their thoughts and opinions. This resulted in blaming China and the Chinese people for spreading the virus. Further, it caused the re-emerge of racist historical and cultural stereotypes about China and inspired the development of conspiracy theories. As a result, this significantly worsened attitudes towards China and the Chinese, ultimately making China's image hostile.

Initially, the Polish media described the COVID-19 virus as similar to the SARS or MERS viruses. The first coronavirus article published on Wp.pl on the 3rd of January 2020 cautions about the "return" of the SARS virus:

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, P. 130

“A new, hitherto unknown type of pneumonia has been reported in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in central China. It is still not known what causes the disease, which raises the fear of another attack of the deadly SARS virus.”<sup>156</sup>

Both SARS and MERS viruses were likely transmitted to humans from animals, particularly Chinese civets, and camels. Accordingly, the article points out the potential source of the virus as a wild-animal market in Wuhan as well:

“Researchers have so far been able to determine that all infected people worked or recently shopped at a seafood market in Wuhan,” while “some Chinese Internet users suspect seafood to be the source of infection.”<sup>157</sup> The fact that the market was closed on the 1st of January made this assumption even more trustworthy.<sup>158</sup>

The assumption that originally, the virus was transmitted to humans from animals because of wild-life consumption became extremely popular in the media from the first days of the pandemic. This perfectly matched the popular stereotypical image of China in Polish media that eating different exotic animals is dangerous but very common in the country. Nevertheless, in the beginning, the articles contained a modest analysis of the virus’s origin. For instance, Rp.pl, Wp.pl, and Wyborcza.pl cited an analysis published in the “Journal of Medical Virology.” The analysis compares the genetic code of the COVID-19 coronavirus with other coronaviruses.<sup>159</sup> It assumes that the source of the virus was snakes sold at the Wuchan market, particularly the banded krait and the common cobra.<sup>160</sup> Later, Rp.pl published an article arguing that the coronavirus pandemic started from contact with horseshoe bats, “which are often found in the city of Wuhan and the entire Chinese province of Hubei.”<sup>161</sup> Then, this theory was expanded by adding pangolins as a mediator in transmitting the virus from bats to humans, as pangolin’s meat “is considered a delicacy” and used in traditional medicine in China.<sup>162</sup> To explain this, Rp.pl referred to the research conducted by researchers from the South China Agricultural University, stating that “the virus strain found in pangolin organisms is 99 percent genetically identical with a virus that attacks humans.”<sup>163</sup> Hence, at this point, Polish media objectively analyzed the available information. The main idea of the articles was to explain the source of the virus rather than judge cultural habits.

However, with the development of the pandemic, the media changed words to more emotional and described China and Chinese habits negatively as terrific, strange, and often cruel. For instance, the analysis of the virus’s origin written by Wp.pl describes the Wuhan seafood market as a horrific place underlying that it is “common” in Asia:

“More than 70 species of animals were sold at the market. Many buyers believe that meat from such a market is better because it is fresher. Many animals are killed in front of customers. In

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<sup>156</sup> Wp.pl., 03.01.2020

<sup>157</sup> Ibid

<sup>158</sup> Wp.pl., 23.01.2020

<sup>159</sup> Ibid

<sup>160</sup> Ibid

<sup>161</sup> Rp.pl., 29.01.2020

<sup>162</sup> Rp.pl., 07.02.2020

<sup>163</sup> Ibid

cages, nets, and containers with water waiting for death, among others, fish, beavers, otters, frogs, hedgehogs, dogs, and snakes. The rhythm of the market was determined by the blows of cleavers, mingling with horns and other sounds of the metropolis. There were also dull thuds of fish, which were then gutted on wooden stumps. Blood and water everywhere. Hence, the name is Wet Market. There are thousands of such fairs in Asia. Some of them sell bats - mammals, which were quickly blamed for the coronavirus pandemic.”<sup>164</sup>

Even though the article cites Dr. Janik-Superson, who stated that “you can’t get infected by eating a bat, because the virus, a construct of nucleic acid and protein, is inactivated at higher temperatures” it also mentions that the Ebola virus was directly transmitted to humans from a bat.<sup>165</sup> This approach allows the reader to decide what to believe in, yet most arguments were already emotionally charged to present Chinese habits as “terrible.”

Additionally, the article contains an interview with Joanna, a Polish teacher who lived in Wuhan in 2016-2017 and stated that China is “just a different world” as:

“Hygiene standards in Chinese cities are different than in the West. For example, people spit on the street, which is not a rare phenomenon in Poland but is treated as a sign of bad manners. In China, some justify it with tradition, others with smog.”<sup>166</sup>

Such hygiene habits have nothing in common with the pandemic, yet they were used in the article to portray China negatively and underline the difference from the West.

Another example of such an aggressive discourse is the article published by *GazetaPrawna.pl* entitled “Where did the coronavirus come from? It all started with eating venison”.<sup>167</sup> It also assumes that although “it is not known which animal sold in the Wuhan market is responsible for the pandemic... in the case of SARS-CoV-2, pangolins, and bats are the most suspected.”<sup>168</sup> It points out that nature protection standards were never strictly observed in China, which is “the largest legal and illegal wildlife market.”<sup>169</sup> Further, it argues that recently “the black market in wild fauna and flora has developed there on an unprecedented scale... including consumption of endangered species of turtles, pangolins and sharks.”<sup>170</sup> Moreover, it says that the world’s population of pangolins decreased by 90% “due to their high popularity on Chinese tables.”<sup>171</sup>

The interview with Dr. Paweł Grzesiowski, the president of the Institute of Infection Prevention Foundation, published by *Wyborcza.pl* contains critical connotations on China as well. It explains that eating wild animals is one of the reasons why such viruses could emerge in China in general:

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<sup>164</sup> Wp.pl., 17.04.2020

<sup>165</sup> Ibid

<sup>166</sup> Wp.pl., 17.04.2020

<sup>167</sup> *Gazetaprawna.pl.*, 24.03.2020

<sup>168</sup> Ibid

<sup>169</sup> Ibid

<sup>170</sup> Ibid

<sup>171</sup> Ibid

“China is, unfortunately, a good training ground for viruses. Because of a few reasons. First, people live there very close to animals, wild animals. Second, many of them are caught and variously prepared and eaten. Third, we have a huge population density there. This creates the ideal circumstances for viruses to transmit.”<sup>172</sup>

The later research refutes the argument of the Wuchan market as a source of COVID-19 because it was found out that some people were infected much earlier. This was presented by Rp.pl, which cites several articles of the South China Morning Post admitting first infections in November 2019.<sup>173</sup> However, these findings increased the uncertainty regarding the origin of the virus. Later, this resulted in the assumption that the virus “escaped” from the Wuchan laboratory. Firstly, this appeared in the American media; however, China mirrored the idea and accused the US and its laboratory in Fort Detrick of letting the virus go. These theories caused a second wave of speculations and criticism of China in Western media and were actively discussed in Polish media. Most articles stressed that there is no evidence that the COVID-19 virus escaped the Wuchan laboratory, while the Chinese attempt to blame the US was perceived as fake and propaganda.<sup>174</sup> However, the overall discourse was neutral due to the lack of data rather than a strong denial of the theory. Furthermore, the development of the topic contributed to China’s image as a secretive and closed country that controls and often hides real information while spreading untrustworthy information instead.

Wyborcza.pl notes that while the US is a “fertile soil” for the conspiracy theories as they “allow to blame China” but also stresses that:

“Suspicious are fueled by Beijing’s lack of openness, which uses propaganda to try to intercept the narrative to claim that the epidemic did not start in China. Recently, all articles by local researchers regarding the pandemic’s origin have been subject to a multi-stage review and government authorization before publication. And when Chinese diplomats argue that the coronavirus could have been brought to China by American soldiers, the phrase “the thief has a burning hat” comes to mind”.<sup>175</sup>

Wp.pl also published an article that does not deny laboratory origin of the Covid-19 because while “scientist excluded the possibility of a human mutation of the new coronavirus” it does not “exclude the possibility of the virus getting out of the laboratory” due to accident.<sup>176</sup> However, another article on Wp.pl cites the head of the Institute of Virology in Wuhan Yuan Zhiming who stated that “the coronavirus can’t come from us”.<sup>177</sup>

Unlike Wyborcza.pl and Wp.pl, Rp.pl openly refutes the theory by publishing an enlarged version of Yuan Zhiming’s interview and providing a more detailed explanation of why the laboratory cannot be a source of the virus. It stresses that scientists “know exactly what research is being done at the institute and how the institute manages viruses and samples.”<sup>178</sup> By claiming

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<sup>172</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 06.02.2020

<sup>173</sup> Rp.pl., 24.02.2020 and Rp.pl., 13.03.2020

<sup>174</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 18.03.2020

<sup>175</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 16.04.2020

<sup>176</sup> Wp.pl., 18.04.2020

<sup>177</sup> Wp.pl., 19.04.2020

<sup>178</sup> Rp.pl., 19.04.2020

the artificial origin of the coronavirus, “some media outlets are deliberately trying to mislead people.”<sup>179</sup> Hence, Rp.pl avoids any doubtful phrases that could present China in a negative light.

Compared to other media outlets, the articles published at Onet.pl and GazetaPrawna.pl do not contribute much to the negative image of China. In contrast, they present the speculations around the Wuchan laboratory due to the political campaign of US President Donald Trump, who used the theory “to divert public attention from own mistakes in handling the epidemic.”<sup>180</sup> Both Onet.pl and GazetaPrawna.pl cite Reuters and “Der Spiegel” that it is “Trump’s new electoral strategy” to attack China and blame it for the pandemic outbreak.<sup>181</sup> Furthermore, Onet.pl quotes the head of the American National Institutes of Health, Anthony Fauci, who said in his interview with Newsweek that neither virus was created in a laboratory nor he believes that “the virus was detected in nature, but then transferred to a laboratory and accidentally “released.”<sup>182</sup> Onet also quotes Fauci’s statement that “everything strongly indicates that ... the virus developed in nature and jumped from species to species” and added that “most experts believe that the virus originated from wild animals traded in one of the markets in Wuhan.”<sup>183</sup> Finally, Onet.pl mentions the New York Times report stating that “the Trump administration was putting pressure on the intelligence community to substantiate the theory that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory” while “China strongly rejects these claims.”<sup>184</sup>

Overall, the discussion about the origin of the virus in Polish media sustained China’s image as a place where people consume various wild animals. Consequently, it causes such epidemics as COVID-19. The emergence of the theory that the virus originated from the Wuchan laboratory influenced the image of China relatively less, as most articles tagged it as a conspiracy. However, it also showed a division between media regarding how China is portrayed. While Wyborcza.pl, Wp.pl, and GazetaPrawna.pl described Chinese habits as terrible and suspected China’s government in spreading disinformation, Rp.pl and Onet.pl were more neutral and emotionless. They also pointed out that some accusations against China are political and do not have solid evidence to be considered true. Nevertheless, the general discourse presented in the media regarding the origin of the coronavirus significantly contributed to making the image of China in Poland more negative.

### 5.1.2 Dealing with Pandemic

China’s actions to deter the pandemic is another coronavirus-related topic that appeared in the spotlight of Polish media and impacted China’s image. Generally, the media presented it via two main discourses. The first was positive - China’s internal measures to manage the pandemic were called “draconian” but effective and exemplary for other countries. However, the second was predominantly negative, as later China was criticized for hiding information and failing to stop the spread of the virus at its early stages.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid

<sup>180</sup> Onet.pl., 08.05.2020

<sup>181</sup> Onet.pl., 08.05.2020 and Gazetaprawna.pl., 07.05.2020

<sup>182</sup> Onet.pl., 05.05.2020

<sup>183</sup> Ibid

<sup>184</sup> Ibid

China was the first country hit by the pandemic, so all measures imposed by the Chinese government to stop it were in the media's spotlight. Many articles described the imposing of lockdowns, prohibition of leaving home, mandatory wearing masks, suspension of public transport, and closing of airports, markets, and other public places. While such actions could be shocking at first sight, in the context of the pandemic, they were perceived as very effective and contributed to a positive image of China.

For instance, Rp.pl published a large interview with the Chinese ambassador in Poland, Liu Guangyuan, describing China's actions exclusively positively. The ambassador recognized that measures were "comprehensive and very restrictive [...] largely exceed the requirements of international health regulations [...] described by the director general of the WHO, as effective [...] and thereby setting new standards for epidemic control for other countries."<sup>185</sup> He also stated 6 principles of the measures presenting China as a country that developed an effective plan to deal with the disease: control and containment of the outbreak, focus on treating patients, prevention of the spread, open information about the course of the epidemic, increase in research efforts, and active international cooperation.<sup>186</sup>

Wyborcza.pl also acknowledged China's desperate efforts to manage the pandemic positively. One of the articles notes that "authorities have drastically tightened traffic restrictions, ordered all citizens to stay at home - except for the emergencies," and decided "to disinfect banknotes" to stop the virus.<sup>187</sup> The article quotes Tedros Ghebreyesus, WHO's head, who appreciates China's fight against the epidemic: "China has given the world time, although we don't know how much time."<sup>188</sup> Also, it cites Mi Feng, spokesman for the National Health Commission, who presented a decrease in new cases of infections and said that "the measures taken by China are starting to take effect."<sup>189</sup>

Onet.pl published interviews with Kornelia, a Polish woman living in Wuchan, and Li, a resident of Wuchan, both assessing the actions of the Chinese government as necessary and effective in preventing the spread of the disease.<sup>190</sup> Kornelia pointed out that "the Chinese believe in their government's ability to control the epidemic and admit the drastic measures already taken will certainly help."<sup>191</sup> Another Polish woman, Partycia, acknowledged that the Chinese government was prepared well for such a situation and stressed in the interview to Wyborcza that she would rather get sick in China than in Europe.<sup>192</sup>

However, after the facts of the earlier start of the pandemic became public, China faced a wave of criticism and accusations of ineffective and untimely measures to prevent the pandemic. In Polish media, China was presented as a country that deliberately hides information by punishing independent voices and endangering the world through such actions.

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<sup>185</sup> Rp.pl., 07.02.2020

<sup>186</sup> Ibid

<sup>187</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 16.02.2020

<sup>188</sup> Ibid

<sup>189</sup> Ibid

<sup>190</sup> Onet.pl., 30.01.2020

<sup>191</sup> Onet.pl., 31.01.2020

<sup>192</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 23.03.2020

Wp.pl was the first source that put attention on the Chinese government's slow reaction and warned about its negative consequences on the 20th of January 2020:

“Chinese authorities have long maintained that the 2019-nCoV coronavirus is unlikely to spread from person to person. Unfortunately, it turned out not to be true. On Monday, at least two cases of infection by medical staff who cared for the sick were reported... Meanwhiler, millions of Chinese people are preparing to travel in connection with the Lunar New Year. They will visit their loved ones in the farthest corners of the country. This may accelerate the development of the epidemic.”<sup>193</sup>

Wyborcza.pl was at the forefront of criticism of the Chinese government. One article published on the 23rd of January states that “[...]for a long time, the authorities ignored the virus. In early January, they even announced that there were no new cases and the epidemic was under control.”<sup>194</sup> Second article compares the situation with the SARS outbreak:

[...] “the Chinese authorities are afraid of a panic outbreak, especially as people do not trust official messages. They are hiding the real data about the infection (this was the case with SARS - some cases were reported in November 2002, but the authorities initially covered it up, and the WHO was notified only in February 2003).”<sup>195</sup>

Similarly, Rp.pl reported on the 28th of January that:

“Only a few days ago, the Chinese authorities realized the seriousness of the situation. The local administration has already admitted mistakes in disregarding the initial information about the appearance of the virus. The first patient was hospitalized on December 16, but the World Health Organization was not notified until December 31. The market, where the meat of rats, foxes, snakes and bats was traded, was closed only on January 1.”<sup>196</sup>

The slow reaction of the authorities was mostly viewed as a result of the incompetence of officials, who did not learn from the SARS epidemic and tried to “save seats” by hiding the scale of the disease.<sup>197</sup> However, some articles quote the US officials who “accused China of deliberately not raising the alarm about the virus to stockpile protective clothing and medical equipment” as import of epidemiological protection products “increased by several hundred or even several thousand percent” in January-February 2020.<sup>198</sup> While Gazeta Prawna notes that the approach of the data selection is manipulative, the trust to any official statements of the Chinese government was significantly undermined.<sup>199</sup>

Moreover, the topic of China's repressive system that punished those who reported the virus at an early stage was not missed by media outlets as well. Rp.pl quoted a senior specialist in the Chinese Osw who says that “[...] at the beginning, the problem was hidden and

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<sup>193</sup> Wp.pl., 20.01.2020

<sup>194</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 23.01.2020

<sup>195</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 08.01.2020

<sup>196</sup> Rp.pl., 28.01.2020

<sup>197</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 06.02.2020

<sup>198</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 05.05.2020

<sup>199</sup> Ibid



downplayed, and people who spoke about it were even punished. It is only when the scale of the problem could not be hidden that the Party says: “all hands on board.”<sup>200</sup> Onet.pl mentioned that some people were arrested because the first reports of a strange new disease in Wuhan in early December were perceived by the government as “fake news”.<sup>201</sup> Finally, Wyborcza.pl reported the situation with Li Wenliang, a 34-year-old doctor from Wuhan. In December he was alarmed about a patient with SARS-like symptoms on social networks, but “was interrogated and forced to sign a self-criticism sheet.”<sup>202</sup> His death from the coronavirus caused a resonance in the society and “critical posts flooded the Chinese internet.”<sup>203</sup>

The important remark was that while the media widely criticized the actions of Chinese authorities, they acknowledged the actions of Chinese medical workers and common people who heroically fought the pandemic. The contrast of “people” and “officials” created a mixed image of China.

For example, Rp.pl described nurses who shaved their heads before going to Wuhan to reduce the risk of contracting the coronavirus as an “example of the sacrifices medical staff makes as they fight the spread of the deadly coronavirus on the front lines.”<sup>204</sup> Another article quotes John, an English teacher in Wuhan who says that “delivery drivers who come to work are treated like heroes” and generally calls Chinese a “crisis-oriented society,” prepared to cope with many natural disasters effectively.<sup>205</sup>

However, in many cases, such heroism was perceived as a result of the faults of officials. Building from scratch a 1000-bed hospital in Wuchan in a week was an impressive example of heroism. Yet Wyborcza.pl described it critically:

“Construction of hospitals should add optimism to the Chinese and demonstrate to the world the superiority of the Chinese model, which can mobilize itself to fight the epidemic. However, by rapidly building hospitals, Beijing wants to improve its recently tarnished image. Chinese Internet users criticize the officials quite openly, blaming them for the initial concealment of the epidemic and the terrible condition of overcrowded hospitals with exhausted doctors.”<sup>206</sup>

The real conditions of medical personnel work were described by Wyborcza.pl as well. One article refers to the AFP agency and says, “doctors who wear overalls, put on diapers, limit the amount of water they drink and try to avoid going to the toilet.”<sup>207</sup> It explains that due to the small number of doctors, many of them continue working even being sick with coronavirus because “there’s just no one to replace.”<sup>208</sup> Another article quotes Bloomberg as reporting about “catastrophe of the Chinese health service, as doctors cannot keep up with saving people, and

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<sup>200</sup> Rp.pl., 29.01.2020

<sup>201</sup> Onet.pl., 31.01.2020

<sup>202</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 16.02.2020

<sup>203</sup> Ibid

<sup>204</sup> Rp.pl., 11.02.2020

<sup>205</sup> Rp.pl., 28.01.2020

<sup>206</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 03.02.2020

<sup>207</sup> Ibid

<sup>208</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 12.02.2020

only the most difficult cases qualify for treatment.”<sup>209</sup> It empathizes with the lack of tests, masks, hospital beds, and respirators.<sup>210</sup>

Such a terrific image contradicted the Chinese government’s statements, increased mistrust of officials, and inspired the media to doubt all other Chinese data. For instance, Rp.pl and Wyborcza.pl focused on queues of people near morgues and assumed that the number of infections and deaths in China was much higher.<sup>211</sup> The exact numbers were unclear, but according to articles, it could be even 20 times higher than reported.<sup>212</sup> Rp.pl quoted British and American experts who used mathematical models to discover more infections.<sup>213</sup> The article underlines that while WHO “officially thanked Beijing for its “unprecedented openness,” few people believe in the veracity of the data.”<sup>214</sup> The decision to correct data and recognize 50% more victims in Wuchan after the active phase of the pandemic only admitted the assumptions above.<sup>215</sup> It strengthened China’s image as a country that falsified data.<sup>216</sup> The work of about 170,000 accounts on Twitter, whose main motive was “to praise China for its response to the emergence of the coronavirus,” was also perceived by the media as approval of such an image.<sup>217</sup>

The media also acknowledge that there are small chances to do something with China’s behavior in the future. While more than 120 countries, including China, supported the investigation of the emergence and spread of COVID-19, the quintessence of the potential results of it was published by GazetaPrawna.pl. It noted that “even if China has committed a flagrant violation of international law that has resulted in the spread of the disease, it does not mean China will be easily held accountable. Beijing has been avoiding legal responsibility before the international community for decades.”<sup>218</sup>

To sum up, while China’s internal measures to manage the pandemic were effective, the assessment of governmental response was negative. The media pointed out the slow reaction of the authorities, repressions against people who raised concerns about the virus, and continuing hiding of information. Overall, China’s approach to managing the pandemic strengthened common stereotypes about China’s government as repressive and secretive.

### **5.1.3 China’s Foreign Aid**

China’s campaign to help other countries suffering from the pandemic did not improve the image of China in Polish media. Chinese actions, called “mask diplomacy,” were ultimately perceived via the prism of geopolitics, turning this topic from a potentially positive to a rather negative part of China’s image.

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<sup>209</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 31.01.2020

<sup>210</sup> Ibid

<sup>211</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 31.03.2020 and Rp.pl., 01.04.2020

<sup>212</sup> Rp.pl., 01.04.2020

<sup>213</sup> Rp.pl., 18.02.2020

<sup>214</sup> Ibid

<sup>215</sup> Onet.pl., 17.04.2020

<sup>216</sup> Ibid

<sup>217</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 12.06.2020

<sup>218</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 28.04.2020

The main discourse in the media was that the aid is appreciated, but no aid would be needed if China stopped the spread of the virus in time. China was accused of failing to cope with a local epidemic and prevent it from becoming a global pandemic. Thus, the aid was perceived as a propagandist attempt to whitewash China's reputation afterward. Furthermore, the media raised concerns that China will use aid to strengthen its influence in some countries and make them dependent.

The geopolitical dimension dominated Polish media regarding China's medical aid. Wyborcza.pl and Rp.pl stated that the Chinese "launched a global offensive to improve the country's image" and "bought the world's favor" by offering help.<sup>219</sup> One article emphasizes that China sent medical equipment to Italy after Germany and France refused to help Rome.<sup>220</sup> Italians welcomed the support and became a baseline of the Chinese narrative, portraying the country as a leader in dealing with the pandemic.<sup>221</sup> Later, China promised help to Central and East European countries using the 17+1 format. Wyborcza.pl stressed that China used the format for years to pursue its interests in CEE.<sup>222</sup> Rp.pl quoted orientalist Alexei Maslov, who predicts that providing financial aid is the next step, similar to the Chinese actions after the 2008 crisis, when "Beijing greatly increased the export of capital abroad, taking over many international financial assets, and many countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia came under its influence."<sup>223</sup>

Furthermore, Wyborcza.pl quoted think tank analysts who accused Beijing of using the aid to "undermine EU solidarity" and "challenge Europe's sense of community."<sup>224</sup> The best illustration of this is the words of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who did not receive any support from the EU and stated that "European solidarity does not exist."<sup>225</sup> According to Wyborcza.pl, China immediately took advantage of it to send medical equipment and then use Serbian posters with the image of Chinese President Xi Jinping and the caption: "Our brother" in propaganda.<sup>226</sup> Similarly, the media outlet quoted the American ambassador to Poland, Georgette Mosbacher, who said, "Andrzej Duda made the call under pressure from Beijing."<sup>227</sup> According to Mosbacher, "the call was used by Chinese propaganda," and "without it, Poland would not get help."<sup>228</sup> Rp.pl also cited former Minister of National Defense Antoni Macierewicz, who warned against trusting China in general:

"Imagine that this country, which started this terrible pandemic that we are experiencing today, advertises itself as a country safe from any threat [...] here comes the old well-known Roman saying based on the Trojan War: "timeo Danaos et dona ferentes - I'm afraid of the Greeks, even when they bring gifts."<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 13.03.2020

<sup>220</sup> Ibid

<sup>221</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 30.03.2020

<sup>222</sup> Ibid

<sup>223</sup> Rp.pl., 22.03.2020

<sup>224</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 03.04.2020

<sup>225</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 07.05.2020

<sup>226</sup> Ibid

<sup>227</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 15.05.2020

<sup>228</sup> Ibid

<sup>229</sup> Rp.pl., 20.03.2020

Similar geopolitical discourse presenting China in a negative light appeared regarding the potential invention of the vaccine. Rp.pl quoted Alexey Kurpiyanov, a Russian scientist, who notes that the invention of the coronavirus vaccine is the only thing Beijing is missing to complete geopolitical victory.<sup>230</sup> He stressed that “getting a vaccine will confirm the system’s superiority” and have geopolitical implications.<sup>231</sup> By inventing the vaccine, China will give it away, like medical equipment, “appearing as a sponsor to save the world.”<sup>232</sup>

GazetaPrawna.pl put attention not only on political, but also economic aspects of Chinese aid. It reported that Chinese “selfless help” is “ordinary commercial transactions,” which, however, is used to improve China’s image and strengthen political positions globally.<sup>233</sup> One article states that Poland “buys equipment from China on the money of Polish taxpayers.”<sup>234</sup> In contrast, Polish masks were transferred to China for free at the pandemic’s beginning.<sup>235</sup> Another illustrates that Italy received 300,000 masks after buying 1,000 ventilators, while Spain bought medical equipment from China to get 500,000 masks from the Jack Ma Foundation.<sup>236</sup> Furthermore, Czechia purchased medical equipment from China, and Beijing presented this as charity.<sup>237</sup> Thus, “the Chinese government portrays itself as a hero who saves the world [...] to increase its credibility and strengthen soft power towards Europe.”<sup>238</sup> On the background, “America does not invest adequate resources to help allies and friends.”<sup>239</sup> As a result, the article concludes that China and Russia are “hunters” who use the pandemic to change the global balance of power, while the countries of Europe are their “victims.”<sup>240</sup>

The quality of China’s aid also attracted the attention of Polish media outlets. The media followed every jet with medical supplies (tests, masks, equipment) arriving in Poland from China under the “Cargo for Poland” campaign.<sup>241</sup> While the aid was appreciated, Wyborcza.pl investigated that the arrived masks had fake certificates and doubted whether they provided high protection.<sup>242</sup> Except for Poland, cases of poor-quality tests and masks were noticed in Czechia, Spain, and the Netherlands.<sup>243</sup> The Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese ambassador in Poland explained that it could happen due to the high supply volume and that products donated to China also had quality defects.<sup>244</sup> The ambassador stressed that, unlike Western countries, China did not use it to discredit the aid.<sup>245</sup> In a large interview with Onet.pl, he underlined that China “stands shoulder to shoulder with all countries, and thus provides assistance in the fight

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<sup>230</sup> Rp.pl., 22.03.2020

<sup>231</sup> Ibid

<sup>232</sup> Ibid

<sup>233</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 28.03.2020

<sup>234</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 30.03.2020

<sup>235</sup> Ibid

<sup>236</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 28.03.2020

<sup>237</sup> Ibid

<sup>238</sup> Ibid

<sup>239</sup> Ibid

<sup>240</sup> Ibid

<sup>241</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 05.04.2020

<sup>242</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 23.04.2020

<sup>243</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 03.04.2020 and Wyborcza.pl., 23.03.2020

<sup>244</sup> Onet.pl., 06.04.2020

<sup>245</sup> Ibid

against the pandemic to 120 countries and international organizations, including Poland.” He was shocked, however, that “some politicians and media, guided by Cold War logic and political motives, discredit China using nonsense” and calling China’s goodwill as a “mask diplomacy” and a “geopolitical weapon.”<sup>246</sup> He pointed out that the Chinese “will never forget the help that many countries gave us in difficult times, and we will repay them from the heart.”<sup>247</sup>

While Chinese ambassadors in different countries actively supported the Chinese narrative, their efforts did not affect the discourse in Polish media much. Only a few articles describing Chinese help did not contain negative connotations. For instance, Wp.pl presented it logically:

“The whole world came to help [China]. Now China is trying to help others. They’re already shipping medical equipment to Italy. They also want to help Poland”.<sup>248</sup>

To sum up, if the main idea of Chinese aid was to improve its image, it did not succeed significantly. The Polish media perceived such actions as a propagandist campaign, criticized the aid quality, and posted many articles warning about political and economic implications. As a result, this portrayed China as a pragmatic country that took advantage of temporarily weak Europe to strengthen its influence.

## **5.2 China’s Internal Policy**

Besides direct analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s internal policy was in the spotlight of Polish media. This section focuses on analyzing the key topics that appeared in the media and shaped China’s image: the state of the economy during the pandemic, the situation with human rights, and the issue of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

### **5.2.1 Economy**

Economic development is one of the biggest strengths of China and traditionally contributes to the most positive part of the country's image in Polish media. The pandemic significantly impacted China’s economy and caused skeptical prognoses in the media, yet the fast recovery was assessed positively.

The fear of an unknown virus at the beginning of the pandemic forced many companies to close factories and evacuate foreign employees. Such actions created an image that the Chinese economy faces one of the biggest challenges in history, and Polish media published many worrying articles describing it. An article on Rp.pl explains the closure of Amazon, Google, Microsoft offices, and automotive factories of General Motors and Toyota, while Peugeot, Citroen, Honda, and Nissan asked personnel to evacuate.<sup>249</sup> It states that Wuhan is a large automotive and manufacturing hub in China, and the production disruption affects the

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid

<sup>247</sup> Ibid

<sup>248</sup> Wp.pl., 17.03.2020

<sup>249</sup> Rp.pl., 30.01.2020

global supply chain.<sup>250</sup> Another article illustrates it by showing examples of Hyundai and Nissan, which ran out of parts supplied from China and closed factories in South Korea and Japan.<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, Rp.pl notes that the PMI index (measuring the economic situation in the industry) “fell from 50 points in January to a record low of 35.7 points in February.”<sup>252</sup> The article empathizes that during the global crisis in 2008, this index fell to 38.8 points.<sup>253</sup>

Tourism and food industries were considered by Rp.pl as the most affected and stated that “there is no doubt that the Chinese economy is losing a lot from the epidemic.”<sup>254</sup> The article mentions that the Chinese are the largest tourist group in the world and the second largest market after the US for many companies, such as Starbucks or McDonald’s.<sup>255</sup> At the same time, it was noted that the key Chinese industries, such as e-commerce and technology, are more resilient and relatively safe, so no decrease in orders was recorded on the Alibaba sales platform.<sup>256</sup> Additionally, the article underlines that “the coronavirus cannot survive outside the body for more than a dozen hours, so shipments from China to other countries are safe.”<sup>257</sup>

The strict measures of the Chinese government to counter the pandemic influenced pessimistic discourse in the media regarding the Chinese economy and caused a fear of recession. Wyborcza.pl referred to the New York Times and Reuters, pointing out that in China, “industrial production fell by 13.5%, consumption by 20.5% and investments by 24.5%”.<sup>258</sup> The article emphasizes that it is “the initial cost of fighting the coronavirus with draconian methods [...] including quarantines that have affected hundreds of millions of people, shutting down cities and provinces, and halting transportation in much of China.”<sup>259</sup> It quotes the New York Times concluding that “to stop the epidemic, China stopped the economy”.<sup>260</sup> However, unlike Wyborcza expecting “months to get back to normal,” Rp.pl quoted South China Morning Post stating that by the end of February, “a third of small businesses in China have resumed operations” and “it will take about a month for China to return to normal.”<sup>261</sup>

The situation in the banking industry was described as stressful as well. Rp.pl quoted S&P agency stating that “bad debts in Chinese banks could increase by as much as 7.7 trillion yuan (\$1.1 trillion) to 10.1 trillion yuan” in total.<sup>262</sup> However, the agency is not pessimistic regarding further development and points out that “People’s Bank of China already lowered its annual loan rate” to stimulate economic growth, and “will persuade banks to increase their lending” to help small and medium-sized companies.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Rp.pl., 30.01.2020 and Rp.pl., 10.02.2020

<sup>251</sup> Rp.pl., 10.02.2020

<sup>252</sup> Rp.pl., 01.03.2020

<sup>253</sup> Ibid

<sup>254</sup> Rp.pl., 29.01.2020

<sup>255</sup> Ibid

<sup>256</sup> Ibid

<sup>257</sup> Ibid

<sup>258</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 16.03.2020

<sup>259</sup> Ibid

<sup>260</sup> Ibid

<sup>261</sup> Rp.pl., 25.02.2020 and Wyborcza.pl., 16.03.2020

<sup>262</sup> Rp.pl., 21.02.2020

<sup>263</sup> Ibid

Forecasting companies were assessing the ability of the Chinese economy to recover from the pandemic optimistically. While they lowered their expectations regarding China's GDP growth in 2020, the fall was insignificant. Rp.pl quoted S&P, Goldman Sachs, Barclays, and UBS analysts, who cut estimates from 6% to 5%.<sup>264</sup> Mark Haefele, global director of investments at UBS, believes that "the virus may be largely contained by the end of March, so the negative impact on the Chinese economy will be mainly limited to the first quarter while from the second, there will be a demand-driven rebound."<sup>265</sup> Another article says that Chinese indexes started to grow in March. It states that the Shanghai Composite index has gained 9% over the past month, while the Dow Jones Industrial has lost almost 6%, and Germany's DAX has fallen by almost 11%.<sup>266</sup> Rp.pl cites Michael Metcalfe, the head of macro strategy at State Street Global Market, saying that "it is fascinating that Chinese equities outperform global markets [...] concerns have shifted to Europe and potentially to the US, so markets are leaning towards other safe havens."<sup>267</sup> Such recovery also happened due to the innovative solutions of the Chinese companies to resume and maintain safety in light of the pandemic. Ensuring distance between employees, frequent testing, and dividing space into squares were called exemplary in Polish media.<sup>268</sup>

Later, analysis published in the media in April and June showed that the Chinese economy was hit less than initially expected. For instance, Gazeta Prawna quoted Reuters stating that although "China's economy shrank by 6.8 percent in the first quarter", the industrial production in March "fell less than experts had expected."<sup>269</sup> This shows "that efforts to restart the economy since February are bearing fruits."<sup>270</sup> The article stresses that "financial markets did not react significantly to the expected decline" and that Beijing put efforts "to reduce the negative economic impact of the epidemic, including prevention of large-scale redundancies."<sup>271</sup> Another article notes that in May, foreign investments increased by 7.5% compared to May 2019 and almost covered the overall losses of the beginning of 2020.<sup>272</sup> Foreign companies still want to be present in China, as Toyota, Volkswagen, and BMW signed new contracts and made rich investments.<sup>273</sup> The article stresses that global brands such as PepsiCo, Adidas, and JP Morgan Bank show "unwavering trust" in China by making new purchases and investing in the expansion of manufactures.<sup>274</sup> The article summarizes that COVID-19 did not change the business approach with China.<sup>275</sup> Speculations that "large companies will withdraw from the Far East" disappeared by the summer of 2020.<sup>276</sup>

Except for the impact of the pandemic on the Chinese economy, the issues of poverty and demographic situation are traditional topics in Polish media, which create a mixed image of the country. Both Wyborcza.pl and Rp.pl acknowledged the outstanding success of China in fighting

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid

<sup>265</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 19.02.2020

<sup>266</sup> Rp.pl., 05.03.2020

<sup>267</sup> Ibid

<sup>268</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 19.02.2020

<sup>269</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 17.04.2020

<sup>270</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 13.03.2020

<sup>271</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 17.04.2020

<sup>272</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 24.06.2020

<sup>273</sup> Ibid

<sup>274</sup> Ibid

<sup>275</sup> Ibid

<sup>276</sup> Ibid

poverty, as only 30-40 million Chinese suffer from it compared to 850 million in 1990.<sup>277</sup> The effective system of points “for ensuring growth, maintaining stability, and success in fighting poverty” worked well and some provinces, such as Jiangsu, reported that only 0,00002% of the population do not have enough costs to survive.<sup>278</sup> At the same time, Wyborcza.pl pointed out the growing inequality as, together with the fast rise of billionaires and a strong middle class, “workers from villages are second-class citizens with no right to free education or free health care.”<sup>279</sup> Similarly, both media outlets noted that China faces a demographic crisis. Rp.pl stressed that even though China canceled its “one-child policy” in 2016, “allowing couples to have two children, it did not have the desired effect,” the country’s “birth rate fell last year to its lowest level since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.”<sup>280</sup> Wyborcza.pl assumed that such development might cause economic problems because of an aging population and increased pressure on inefficient health care and underfunded pension systems.<sup>281</sup>

To sum up, the image of China via the prism of the economy is mostly positive. While there were a lot of worries about the damage the pandemic could cause to the economy, China showed good recovery statistics. An important point is that Polish media perceive the Chinese economy as an integral part of the global economy. Thus, any optimistic signals from China are perceived as positive to the whole world.

## 5.2.2 Human Rights

The topic of human rights is traditionally the most harmful to the image of China. Most articles published in Polish media on this topic focus on violating rights and suppressing freedom of speech. All media outlets mentioned China in the context of censorship; however, the situation with Uyghurs appeared only in Wyborcza.pl.

The key topic that makes China’s image negative is censorship and suppression of independent voices that warned about the pandemic’s beginning. Onet.pl quoted Fu King-wa, a Hong Kong University professor who says that in China, “public debate on many key issues is limited, the media is under state control, and dissidents and independent journalists are constantly being silenced.”<sup>282</sup> He stresses there was evidence that “social media posts containing warnings were censored, especially in the early stages of the pandemic.”<sup>283</sup> At the same time, independent journalists Chen Qiushi and Fang Bin, who reported on the situation in Wuhan, disappeared, and it is still unknown what happened to them.<sup>284</sup> Similar cases happened to popular blogger Ren Zhiqiang and activist Xu Zhiyong; both disappeared after criticizing the government for its slow response to the pandemic and stressing that “limiting freedom of speech contributed to the spread of the virus.”<sup>285</sup> Rp.pl and Wp.pl pointed out that people in China could be imprisoned for 7 years “for posting information on the epidemic that does not come from official

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<sup>277</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 11.01.2020

<sup>278</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 11.01.2020 and Rp.pl., 10.01.2020

<sup>279</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 11.01.2020

<sup>280</sup> Rp.pl., 17.01.2020

<sup>281</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 18.01.2020

<sup>282</sup> Onet.pl., 08.06.2020

<sup>283</sup> Ibid

<sup>284</sup> Ibid

<sup>285</sup> Onet.pl., 15.03.2020 and Onet.pl., 17.02.2020



sources.”<sup>286</sup> Furthermore, they quoted a Human Rights Watch report mentioning that “dozens of people have been detained in recent weeks for making posts related to the coronavirus on social media.”<sup>287</sup>

Another prominent example of such repressive actions was the case of Li Wenliang, who was one of the first to raise an alarm about the coronavirus in 2019. Onet.pl mentioned that “he was ordered to sign a document accusing him of “making false remarks” and “seriously disturbing the social order.”<sup>288</sup> After his death from COVID-19, Wuhan’s public security department “withdrew the caution and apologized to the doctor’s relatives.”<sup>289</sup> However, Wyborcza.pl reported that millions of posts appeared after his death were removed due to censorship.<sup>290</sup>

One of the most critical views on the state of human rights in China was published by Wyborcza.pl. The article quotes Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, who stressed that China faced the most pervasive and brutal campaign of oppression in decades:

“Dissidents are silenced. Civic groups are closed down. Independent journalism no longer exists. Internet discussions are limited. Hong Kong’s limited freedoms are under attack. And for the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims of the Xinjiang [autonomous region], Beijing has created the most intrusive surveillance system, coupled with the detention of over a million people for forced indoctrination. [...] Beijing has long censored what the Chinese say and now tries to censor criticism worldwide. Thus, it increasingly threatens the entire international human rights protection system.”<sup>291</sup>

The situation with Uyghurs was presented only in Wyborcza.pl and became a major point of criticism of China. While one article admits that the campaign of re-education of Uyghurs was launched after terrorist attacks in 2014, it quotes a leaked document admitting that the reason for repressions is not terrorism but “their identity, based on language and religion.”<sup>292</sup> The second article refers to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute report stating that Uyghur labor is used to produce products of 83 well-known Western brands.<sup>293</sup> It emphasizes that the workplace “with guard towers and cameras everywhere looks more like a prison.”<sup>294</sup> The third article points out that the US Congress passed a bill to protect the minority even though it could “exacerbate the US-Beijing relations.”<sup>295</sup>

Wyborcza.pl also published the most positive view. An article describes the “hukou” system restricting the mobility of the Chinese and discriminating against them depending on

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<sup>286</sup> Wp.pl., 04.02.2020

<sup>287</sup> Ibid

<sup>288</sup> Onet.pl., 19.03.2020

<sup>289</sup> Ibid

<sup>290</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 13.02.2020

<sup>291</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 15.01.2020

<sup>292</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 19.02.2020

<sup>293</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 03.03.2020

<sup>294</sup> Ibid

<sup>295</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 28.05.2020

their place of birth.<sup>296</sup> The system creates barriers and “hinders the advancement of a country that wants to have world-class universities, attract professionals, and bet on innovation.”<sup>297</sup> The article acknowledges Xi Jinping’s efforts to abolish the system and stresses that in case of success, the Chinese leader “will go down in history as a great modernizer”.<sup>298</sup>

Overall, the topic presents China predominantly in a negative light. The Polish media portrays China as a country with active social media censorship during the pandemic, numerous arrests of bloggers and activists, and internationally recognized human rights violations.

### 5.2.3 Hong Kong and Taiwan

Both territories, Hong Kong and Taiwan, appear in Polish media in the context of repressive or aggressive actions taken by the Chinese government against them, ultimately contributing to a negative image of China. Most articles about Hong Kong describe the Chinese government’s attempts to limit the region’s autonomy and local protests against it. Taiwan is traditionally presented in a context of military tensions with the PRC and as an example of successfully countering the pandemic.

Polish media empathized that since the middle of 2019, Hong Kong has been shaken by mass protests against a draft law allowing suspects to be extradited to mainland China.<sup>299</sup> Wyborcza.pl provided a neutral analysis of the protests, mentioning that the protest escalated over time as “the police became more and more brutal, and radical groups emerged among the demonstrators that turned the capital of global finance into a battlefield.”<sup>300</sup> The article says that while “record number of protests did not help to achieve goals” but also “Beijing did not use force to turn Hong Kong into a second Tiananmen.”<sup>301</sup>

However, the law was assessed by Polish media deeply negatively. Wyborcza.pl called it a “draconian law that threatened Hong Kong freedom,” while GazetaPrawna.pl stressed that adopting it “signaled the beginning of a new era of authoritarianism in this previously liberal region of China.”<sup>302</sup> Onet.pl points out that Hong Kong was an “oasis of freedom” with considerable autonomy and wide liberties for its citizens, enjoying a “one country, two systems” policy.<sup>303</sup> However, the article doubts that this policy still exists. It says the new law could be used “to silence dissidents and political opponents,” similar to mainland China.<sup>304</sup> The adoption of the legislation on the 31st anniversary of the events on Tiananmen Square is also a symbolic sign showing that Beijing “will pursue an assertive and decisive policy towards its territories in different status.”<sup>305</sup> As a result, Rp.pl assumed that a demonstration on the 4th June would be

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<sup>296</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 25.01.2020

<sup>297</sup> Ibid

<sup>298</sup> Ibid

<sup>299</sup> Onet.pl., 07.06.2020

<sup>300</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 28.02.2020

<sup>301</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 28.02.2020

<sup>302</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 30.06.2020 and Wyborcza.pl., 01.06.2020

<sup>303</sup> Onet.pl., 07.06.2020

<sup>304</sup> Ibid

<sup>305</sup> Ibid

likely the last celebration of the anniversary of the democratic uprising that took place in 1989.<sup>306</sup> The article quotes Lee Cheuk-yan, a Hong Kong citizen who said that “the hope to live in a democratic society has been dashed.”<sup>307</sup>

The media published many articles about international reaction condemning China’s actions. Rp.pl, Wyborcza.pl, GazetaPrawna.pl and Onet.pl quoted the White House security adviser Robert O’Brien, who said that “national security law actually means the annexation of Hong Kong,” and the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who wrote that the US “no longer recognizes Hong Kong as autonomous from China.”<sup>308</sup> The joint statement of the G7 published by the media also stressed that:

“The law threatens the system that has allowed Hong Kong to flourish and that has been key to its success for so many years. We are also very concerned about the possibility that it will restrict the fundamental rights and freedoms of the entire population there.”<sup>309</sup>

However, such warnings did not impact China’s decision to impose the law and strengthened the image of the PRC as a repressive country suppressing opposition and freedom.

Regarding Taiwan, Polish media were focused either on a local approach to counter the pandemic or on Chinese military activity around the island.

Wyborcza.pl noted that the initial reaction of the Taiwan government to the spread of COVID-19 was “nervous,” and the island ran out of masks due to panic in February.<sup>310</sup> However, in the next months, the media published 3 articles describing Taiwan as the most successful example of fighting the pandemic and comparing its approach and political system with mainland China. One article says Taiwan achieved this through effective coordination, big data analysis, fast reaction, considerable restrictions, and transparent information policy.<sup>311</sup> The second article states that the government in Taipei launched a “diplomatic offensive” by donating 10 million surgical masks to America and European countries.<sup>312</sup> It emphasizes that the number is higher than donations announced by the PRC.<sup>313</sup> Furthermore, according to Wyborcza, it demonstrates the advance of Taiwan’s political system compared to the PRC:

“Do not trust China, whose negligence led to the pandemic,” Taiwan seems to be saying. “You can remain a liberal democracy and successfully fight the coronavirus. Take advantage of our experience.”<sup>314</sup>

The final article uses Taiwan’s success to criticize the PRC even more aggressively. It stresses that:

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<sup>306</sup> Rp.pl., 04.06.2020

<sup>307</sup> Ibid

<sup>308</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 24.05.2020 and Gazetaprawna.pl., 27.05.2020

<sup>309</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 17.06.2020

<sup>310</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 06.02.2020

<sup>311</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 12.03.2020

<sup>312</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 02.04.2020

<sup>313</sup> Ibid

<sup>314</sup> Ibid

“Democracy is more efficient than dictatorship, and the possibilities of the Chinese people are limitless when they are not blocked by oppression, violence, and lies. This is the lesson that Taiwan has taught the world by defeating the coronavirus epidemic. [...] This success is very uncomfortable for the regime in Beijing and the lifelong dictator Xi Jinping, who is accused of incompetency and lowering the number of victims. The incompetence and cynicism of the regime in Beijing, as in any dictatorship, works not only to the advantage of democracy as a more efficient system. It also works to the great advantage of people who do not listen to the lies of the regime that the democratic system is supposedly not good for every nation, dares to lead to peaceful restoration of democracy in the Republic of China on Taiwan, and has not succumbed to the easy temptation of not relinquishing power at all costs.”<sup>315</sup>

The military exercises often organized around Taiwan by the PRC also attracted the attention of Polish media, yet were described in a rather neutral tone. Rp.pl published several articles stating that the Chinese army practices landing in front of the island. It says Chinese fighter jets flew into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone 8 times in two weeks in June.<sup>316</sup> It also quoted Taiwanese Prime Minister Su Tseng-chang:

“China has never abandoned the possibility of using force against Taiwan. Even facing a serious epidemic, China keeps sending planes and ships near Taiwan, disturbing Taiwan. [...] We currently see a second wave in Beijing. China is a big country and should use its strength to take care of its people, reducing the impact of the epidemic and protecting peace in the region. That would be better.”<sup>317</sup>

To sum up, both Hong Kong and Taiwan were mainly used by Polish media to contrast the PRC system and provide examples of alternative development models in a good light. This creates a significantly negative image of the PRC, presenting the country as an aggressive authoritarian regime that suppresses democratic movements and endangers regional peace.

### **5.3 China’s Foreign Policy**

This section analyzes how China’s foreign policy influenced the country’s image in Polish media. China’s relations with its neighbors, the US and Poland, are 3 topics that prevailed in the media. The pandemic did not change the media’s focus, and similar topics also appeared in the previous studies. In the context of foreign policy, most articles describe China negatively as a pragmatic country that aggressively protects its interests in the region excessively aggressively. The US-China relations present China as a competitor and challenger of the US. However, the part of Polish-China relations contributes to a mixed image of China, presenting the country as a specific, potentially dangerous but important and strategic partner of Poland.

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<sup>315</sup> Wyboreza.pl., 23.04.2020

<sup>316</sup> Rp.pl., 22.06.2020 and Rp.pl., 05.06.2020

<sup>317</sup> Rp.pl., 23.06.2020

### 5.3.1 Relations with Neighboring Countries

The pandemic's beginning contributed to growing suspicion and distance between China and its neighbors. While Polish media stressed that China tried to improve the situation after containing the first wave of the virus, overall, they presented China as having problematic relations with many countries around the border.

The media points out that the pandemic worsened China-Russia relations even though both countries “have similar undemocratic systems” and are interested in weakening the US.<sup>318</sup> Rp.pl states that introducing a travel ban on Chinese citizens was perceived in China as an unfriendly action and was criticized by diplomats.<sup>319</sup> Furthermore, the instruction issued to public transport drivers “to inform the police if they notice “people of Chinese nationality” caused a sharp reaction from the Chinese embassy in Russia.<sup>320</sup> After more than 80 Chinese citizens were obtained and isolated in Moscow, the embassy stressed that:

"There is no such thing as special monitoring of PRC citizens in any country, not even in the US and Western countries. The Chinese embassy directly states that this situation may “damage the positive atmosphere for the development of Sino-Russian relations.”<sup>321</sup>

Later, according to Rp.pl, China also closed the border with Russia, calling the country “an example of an inability to control sick people arriving from abroad [...] which heavily affected the country.”<sup>322</sup>

Investigation of a spy scandal in Saint Petersburg also did not contribute to improving Russia-China relations. Onet.pl explains that China recruited a Russian scientist who lectured at a Chinese university to collect and send information on methods of detecting Russian submarines.<sup>323</sup> The article underlines that the problem is global and “casts a shadow on academic cooperation with Chinese universities.”<sup>324</sup> On such a background, Wyborcza.pl assumed that due to a crisis in China, the country might find a solution in annexing the Russian Far East by force.<sup>325</sup>

The escalation at the India-China border also contributed to a negative image of China in Polish media. Wyborcza.pl reports that both sides “moved several infantry battalions with heavy weapons” to the border in the disputed Aksai Chin-Ladakh area.<sup>326</sup> Moreover, it says that 20 Indian soldiers were killed in the biggest clash in the last 40 years.<sup>327</sup> It was emphasized that both countries accuse each other of provocations and build military infrastructure to increase capacity in a potential conflict. However, the article quotes Alice Wells, head of the South and Central

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<sup>318</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 14.02.2020

<sup>319</sup> Rp.pl., 20.02.2020

<sup>320</sup> Rp.pl., 27.02.2020

<sup>321</sup> Ibid

<sup>322</sup> Rp.pl., 14.04.2020

<sup>323</sup> Onet.pl. 17.06.2020

<sup>324</sup> Ibid

<sup>325</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 14.02.2020

<sup>326</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 28.05.2020

<sup>327</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 16.06.2020

Asia division at the State Department, who said that “the armed incidents at the border are a reminder that Chinese aggression is not just rhetorical.”<sup>328</sup> Such context puts responsibility for the escalation on China. Similarly, *GazetaPrawna.pl* stresses that “India sees the situation as a continuation of the aggression of the 1960s and a demonstration of strength in an attempt to cover up the embarrassment of allowing the COVID-19 epidemic to spread to the rest of the world.”<sup>329</sup> Furthermore, *Onet.pl* put attention on “anti-Chinese sentiment intensification” in India resulting in burning Chinese flags during demonstrations.<sup>330</sup> Even though Beijing announced that “an agreement had been reached to calm down the situation on the border,” India responded to the provocation by blocking 59 Chinese smartphone apps, including TikTok, to hit China’s business in the country.<sup>331</sup> At the same time, it was noted that China tries to protect its interest in the region. Particularly, China perceives the development of Indian infrastructure in areas Pakistan claims to threaten Sino-Pakistani cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>332</sup>

The pandemic also aggravated Sino-Australian relations. The Australian call to investigate the origin of the coronavirus “was perceived by China as a confrontation and undermining the state’s authority.”<sup>333</sup> The Chinese ambassador to Australia, Cheng Jingye, used harsh words to describe Australian actions and de-facto called to boycott Australian products.<sup>334</sup> Later, China warned citizens to travel to Australia and blamed the country for racism against Chinese people.<sup>335</sup> Furthermore, on a background of tensions, Australia experienced a massive cyberattack in June, and experts pointed out that it was likely the work of Chinese hackers.<sup>336</sup>

Such actions, together with the aggressive rhetoric of many Chinese ambassadors, led *Wyborcza.pl* to the assumption that China changed its foreign policy principles, and diplomats are encouraged “to show courage and bravery in defending the interests” of China.<sup>337</sup> Two articles published by the media outlet admit the statement. The first one points out that in April, China expanded jurisdiction to “two disputed archipelagos in the South China Sea.”<sup>338</sup> The islands are claimed by Chinese neighbors, such as Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia; however, China organized a military build-up and turned coral islands into military bases.<sup>339</sup> *Wyborcza.pl* stresses that China pragmatically uses the time when other countries are busy with the pandemic to establish full control over strategic archipelagos.<sup>340</sup> The second article shows that China is building new dams on the Mekong River to produce more energy, even though it could cause ecological disasters in Southeast Asia and affect Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> *Wyborcza.pl*, 28.05.2020

<sup>329</sup> *Gazetaprawna.pl*, 03.06.2020

<sup>330</sup> *Onet.pl*, 19.06.2020

<sup>331</sup> *Wyborcza.pl*, 16.06.2020 and *Gazetaprawna.pl*, 30.06.2020

<sup>332</sup> *Gazetaprawna.pl*, 03.06.2020

<sup>333</sup> *Onet.pl*, 23.04.2020

<sup>334</sup> *Wyborcza.pl*, 28.04.2020

<sup>335</sup> *Rp.pl*, 08.06.2020

<sup>336</sup> *Wyborcza.pl*, 19.06.2020

<sup>337</sup> *Wyborcza.pl*, 28.04.2020

<sup>338</sup> *Wyborcza.pl*, 19.04.2020

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>341</sup> *Wyborcza.pl*, 13.01.2020

North Korea and Cambodia are the countries the media perceive as China's allies, which also does not positively influence the country's image. Rp.pl described the arrival of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to Wuchan as a visit of a Chinese "close ally" who, contrary to other countries, decided not to evacuate students from the pandemic's epicenter.<sup>342</sup> Meanwhile, Onet.pl published that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un congratulated Chinese President Xi Jinping on successfully fighting the pandemic.<sup>343</sup>

The Chinese relations with Japan and South Korea were not in the media's spotlight, but it was pointed out that China put efforts to improve the relations. An article at Wyborcza says that China banned foreigners from entering its territory but made an exclusion for Japanese and Korean entrepreneurs.<sup>344</sup> However, this shows a rather pragmatic national interest in stimulating the economy rather than symbolizing goodwill.

To summarize, the media mostly focus on conflictual situations in China's relations with neighbors. As a result, this creates an image of China as a country that provides pragmatic yet excessively aggressive foreign policy in the region. The important part is that such an assertive policy developed during the pandemic, as previously, China preferred to maintain more stable and predictive relations.

### 5.3.2 China-US Relations

The relations between the US and China appear in Polish media exclusively in the context of their rivalry. However, while it is recognized that the countries are competitors, most articles quote officials rather than make their analysis or assessment. As a result, the tone of the articles is mostly neutral, without significant support from one side. However, the number of articles quoting American officials outweighs the quotes from Chinese. Such an approach contributes to a negative depiction of China.

Analysis of the media shows that at the beginning of the pandemic, countries maintained rather cordial relations. The media perceived a decrease in tensions positively, as the competition caused more problems than benefits to the world. For instance, Rp.pl emphasizes that countries signed a partial trade deal in January after more than a year of trade conflict.<sup>345</sup> As a result, China reduced tariffs on imports of 1,717 goods from the US worth approximately \$75 billion.<sup>346</sup> It was stressed that such actions could help to fight the pandemic.<sup>347</sup> Wyborcza.pl notes that in response, Washington "lifted sanctions on the Chinese company Cosco, the largest ship owner in the world."<sup>348</sup> The articles present China as an integral part of the world's economy and do not contain any negativity.

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<sup>342</sup> Rp.pl., 04.02.2020

<sup>343</sup> Onet.pl., 08.05.2020

<sup>344</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 18.05.2020

<sup>345</sup> Rp.pl., 06.02.2020

<sup>346</sup> Ibid

<sup>347</sup> Ibid

<sup>348</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 18.02.2020

Regarding the initial response to the coronavirus epidemic, the US even contributed to a positive image of China. President Donald Trump “assured that Washington is working closely with Beijing and said that China “handles it professionally,” which also portrayed China positively.<sup>349</sup> The U.S. official acknowledged that “China has been more transparent about the coronavirus than it has been in previous crises.”<sup>350</sup> Respectively, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said, “China noted that the U.S. has expressed its willingness to assist China and hopes that appropriate assistance will be provided soon.”<sup>351</sup>

However, with the spread of the coronavirus, the rhetoric of the US and China towards each other became more hostile, and the image of China was significantly harmed. China and the US accused the other party of spreading the virus, and politicians and diplomats used offensive language to blame opponents. Some articles presented arguments of both countries, but the favor started to switch to the US, while China was depicted more and more negatively. Onet.pl put responsibility for worsening the relations on China. An article states that the conflict started in March “when Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian promoted a conspiracy theory on Twitter that the coronavirus was brought to Wuhan by American soldiers.”<sup>352</sup> The article presents Donald Trump’s accusation of Beijing’s lack of transparency and naming the virus as a “Chinese virus” as a response to China.<sup>353</sup> Furthermore, GazetaPrawna.pl noted that the first mentions of American agents who “brought the coronavirus to China” appeared in January.<sup>354</sup> The outlet points out that “such revelations are part of propaganda counter-offensive in response to accusations against Beijing of downplaying the first cases of the disease and hiding information about them.”<sup>355</sup> The media did not openly support the American narrative of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, saying that “there is ample evidence” that the coronavirus “came from a laboratory in Wuhan.”<sup>356</sup> However, they put significantly more effort into proving that the Chinese narrative is nonsense and propaganda.

The pandemic expanded the borders of China’s image as a competition of the US. While most articles referred to the economy - a traditional field of the contest with the US - Wyborcza.pl pointed out fighting the pandemic and developing the coronavirus vaccine. An article compares the invention of the vaccine with the race to the moon during the Cold War.<sup>357</sup> However, it stresses that “the stakes are higher, because whoever wins “will rule the world.”<sup>358</sup> Although the article underlines that “the ‘my country first’ approach is harmful, as scientists should collaborate, not compete,” it also portrays China negatively by quoting an American official who blamed Chinese hackers in attempts to steal data about the US vaccine program.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Rp.pl., 14.02.2020

<sup>350</sup> Rp.pl., 02.02.2020

<sup>351</sup> Rp.pl., 04.02.2020

<sup>352</sup> Onet.pl., 04.05.2020

<sup>353</sup> Ibid

<sup>354</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 18.03.2020

<sup>355</sup> Ibid

<sup>356</sup> Onet.pl., 04.05.2020

<sup>357</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 12.05.2020

<sup>358</sup> Ibid

<sup>359</sup> Ibid



Aside from the analysis above, the media published many articles quoting American officials, particularly Donald Trump, his advisors, and administration members, such as Steve Bannon, Mike Pompeo, Peter Navarro, and Georgette Mosbacher. These articles contain pure accusations of China in all aspects of the coronavirus. Examples of such statements are Trump's phrase that "no one but one country can be held responsible for what happened" or Steve Bannon's phrase, "The Chinese Communist Party is responsible for the plague."<sup>360</sup> The large number of these articles on a background of only a few ones quoting the Chinese ambassador to Poland, Liu Guangyuan, and Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, could lead to an assumption that Polish media preferred to publish American officials. However, the media stressed that the narrative of blaming China "for all the disasters related to the coronavirus" became the central part of Trump's election strategy.<sup>361</sup> Consequently, it caused a dramatic increase in populist statements from Trump's administration officials quoted by the media.

Overall, the topic of US-China relations describes China as a dangerous competitor of the US. Statements and interviews of American officials dominate the informational space, and most articles present the US narratives less critically. However, while the media portrays China mostly negatively in the context of the topic, the number of open accusations of the country is also limited.

### 5.3.3 Polish-China Relations

The image of China in Polish media regarding relations with Poland is mixed but mostly positive. The media present China as an important trade partner, larger than the US. However, it is also recognized that relations lack trust, often because of the Chinese excessively pragmatic foreign policy.

Economic relations between Poland and China is a large topic that presents China positively as a perspective but specific partner. Rp.pl stresses that China is "a priority country of the Polish agri-food sector."<sup>362</sup> However, the article states that the Chinese are "formalists, experts in ingredients, nutrition, and health, and very demanding in terms of quality and safety."<sup>363</sup> Ignoring this results in losses for Polish entrepreneurs and strengthens "the opinion that China is somehow strange, difficult or full of barriers and obstacles."<sup>364</sup> Another article quotes Jacek Strzelecki, an expert on the Chinese agri-food market. He describes the Chinese as "a pragmatic nation that can quickly adapt to new conditions by their national feature: there is a crisis, there is an opportunity."<sup>365</sup> He points out that after the pandemic outbreak, China prioritized online sales and presentations; thus, "Polish companies that will be able to keep up with the Chinese pace will have a chance not only to continue their current exports but also to gain new customers."<sup>366</sup> However, regarding the latter, he is pessimistic as, according to his

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<sup>360</sup> Onet.pl., 28.04.2020 and Gazetaprawna.pl., 29.05.2020

<sup>361</sup> Onet.pl., 04.05.2020 and Gazetaprawna.pl., 07.05.2020

<sup>362</sup> Rp.pl., 11.01.2020

<sup>363</sup> Ibid

<sup>364</sup> Ibid

<sup>365</sup> Rp.pl., 09.05.2020

<sup>366</sup> Ibid

analysis, “Polish offers on Asian commercial platforms not only differ from the current trends but are even archaic.”<sup>367</sup>

Another example of Polish-China economic relations is less positive. Wyborcza.pl explains the Chinese attempts to invest in constructing roads in Poland as unreliable. While the offered price of the Chinese project is two times lower compared to rivals, the article cautions from trusting Chinese investors. The article provides an example of the previous cooperation when the Chinese consortium “unexpectedly stopped construction of the motorway and demanded a hefty surcharge for resuming the work.”<sup>368</sup> Another article suggests double-checking Chinese investors, especially with abnormally low prices.<sup>369</sup>

The Chinese medical aid was perceived rather positively, although Wyborcza.pl and GazetaPrawna.pl were critical of it. The presentation of the aid was mostly used to describe that Polish-China relations are in a perfect stance. At the same time, China was depicted as a pragmatic country, and some media worried about the potential “political price” that Poland might pay for it.

The launching of an “air bridge” of medical supply was assigned to a personal achievement of Polish President Andrzej Duda. Wp.pl quotes Sławomir Majman, deputy director of the Institute for Security and International Development, who said “this is the result of arrangements between presidents Andrzej Duda and Xi Jinping.”<sup>370</sup> Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki admitted that “such an efficient action was possible thanks to the good relations” between the two presidents.<sup>371</sup> However, Wyborcza.pl perceived the conversation negatively and recalled previous issues in relations with China:

“When a Polish officer was arrested for spying for China, the Polish president continued promoting the idea of a new Silk Road. When the pandemic came, he immediately boasted of a phone conversation with Xi Jinping.”<sup>372</sup>

GazetaPrawna.pl published an extensive interview with political analyst Bartłomiej Radziejewski, presenting China as an expansionist and dangerous power.<sup>373</sup> The analyst stressed that China “is a despotic state, ruthless superpower that thinks primarily about its interests, if they give humanitarian aid, they want something in return.”<sup>374</sup>

At the same time, a few articles in different media showed cooperation between Polish and Chinese cities helping each other during the pandemic. Notably, the Chinese city of Yuyao thanked the authorities of Kielce “for the help in the purchase of 6.5 thousand thermometers.”<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Rp.pl., 27.06.2020

<sup>368</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 05.02.2020

<sup>369</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 27.02.2020

<sup>370</sup> Wp.pl., 25.03.2020

<sup>371</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 27.03.2020

<sup>372</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 23.05.2020

<sup>373</sup> Gazetaprawna.pl., 30.04.2020

<sup>374</sup> Ibid

<sup>375</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 03.03.2020 and Wyborcza.pl., 12.04.2020

In response, 12,000 masks arrived in Kielce from Taizhou, which the local government helped.<sup>376</sup> The City of Weifang sent protective equipment to Olsztyn, and the authorities of Liuzhou sent masks to Stalowa Wola “to repay the help of the local government during the outbreak in China.”<sup>377</sup>

Overall, regarding relations with Poland, China’s image is rather positive. The media focus on the economic benefits of cooperation between the countries and discuss how it can be improved. At the same time, the belief that China makes things only in its own interests increases mistrust, casts a shadow on the further development of the relations, and contributes to portraying the country as a hypothetical threat.

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<sup>376</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 03.03.2020 and Wyborcza.pl., 12.04.2020

<sup>377</sup> Wyborcza.pl., 22.03.2020 and Wyborcza.pl., 26.03.2020

## 6. Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the image of China in Polish media during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, 5 of the most popular Polish online media outlets were analyzed. The study showed that the interest of Polish media in China significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the country was at the epicenter of the events and in the spotlight of the world's media. The number of articles published by 5 online media outlets and tagged "China" exceeded 2000 during 6 months, while previous studies collected a few hundred for a considerable period. Most articles described China in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, as 90% contained the words "coronavirus" or "covid." However, aside from the pandemic, the most popular topics were traditional: economy, security, law, and international relations. Although the image of China had different associations, the negative depiction of the country outweighed the positive.

The quantitative analysis showed that the words with negative connotations comprised 60 to 70% across all selected media outlets. While the number of positive and negative keywords was similar, the frequency of the negative ones was 1,5-2 times higher. The data showed that most proximity words associated with China are "control," "hard," "help," "prohibition," and "issue." Indeed, only 7 words among 20 of the most proximal ones contained positive emotional connotations.

The qualitative analysis provided a more detailed exploration of China's image and confirmed quantitative findings. In the context of the pandemic, the image was the most negative. China was portrayed as a country with common wildlife consumption, which likely caused the pandemic. With the spread of the coronavirus, China was presented as a country that hides information and spreads disinformation about the origin of the virus and the scale of infections. While the media assessed further Chinese actions to contain the pandemic and support other countries positively, the discourse of failing to stop the virus at the initial stage prevailed. However, the media were focused on criticism of the Chinese authorities, but ordinary people were described as heroes courageously fighting the pandemic.

The Chinese campaign of providing medical aid was mostly viewed via a prism of geopolitics. The media praised the aid but also pointed out it as a propagandist attempt to improve China's image and strengthen its influence in countries suffering from the pandemic. As a result, China was depicted as a country that failed to stop the spread of the virus but adapted to take advantage of the pandemic. The idea that "no Chinese aid would be needed if China prevented the epidemic" was a quintessence of most articles.

The media's attempts to describe China's internal policy created a mixed image of the country. Chinese economy was one of the topics traditionally presenting China positively, and the pandemic did not change it. Initially, Polish media worried that the pandemic hit the Chinese economy hard and could cause a global crisis and recession. Thus, fast economic recovery and further growth after the successful containing of the spread of the coronavirus inside the country was perceived warmly. The Chinese actions to support businesses, secure investments, and restore production manufacturing and supply chains were described as beneficial to the world's economy. At the same time, the situation with human rights contributed to portraying China as

an authoritarian and undemocratic regime. Most of the media criticized widespread censorship and arrests of independent journalists and bloggers who reported about the spread of the virus. It was pointed out that suppression of independent voices alarming about the epidemic's beginning contributed to the inability to contain the coronavirus pandemic at the early stages. On the contrary, Taiwan's approach was presented as a more successful example of managing the pandemic. Overall, Taiwan and Hong Kong were used by Polish media to contrast the PRC. The military training around Taiwan and regular attempts to limit Hong Kong's autonomy were presented as an illustration of the threats Beijing poses to democratic governments.

Chinese foreign policy also contributed to a mixed image of the country. The aggressive policy towards neighbors in the region created a picture of a country surrounded by rivals. Moreover, the media stressed that the coronavirus pandemic escalated the US-China tensions and the relations between countries reminiscent of the Cold War. It was pointed out that the Chinese policy has become more assertive during the pandemic, harming the country's image. However, the analysis of Polish-China relations described China rather positively as an essential and valuable economic partner. The media empathized that relations with China are complicated, but the proper approach could make them mutually beneficial.

The image of China slightly differed in different media outlets. Wyborcza.pl, GazetaPrawna.pl, and Wp.pl portrayed the country predominantly negatively, while Rp.pl and Onet.pl often provided modest and rather neutral analyses.

Overall, the research showed that the image of China in Polish media during the COVID-19 pandemic is primarily negative. This confirms the hypothesis that the pandemic significantly worsened China's image in the media, as the previous study assessed the country's depiction as relatively positive.

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