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“Platform Amphibiousness” in Covid-19: The Construction and Communication of National Image in the Global South in the Polymedia Use of Chinese Overseas Students

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Abstract: In the post-epidemic era, international students are standing in the communication intersection of the Global South. Through interviews with 15 international students from developing countries, this paper finds that with the deepening of polymedia use during epidemic, the image of China in the media use of international students has changed and contains new energy for international communication. Firstly, in terms of media use, “from straying to breaking the wall”. There is no significant change in the platform of international students’ use of polymedia, but the demand for life information and comparison among media have increased significantly. Secondly, in terms of national image acceptance, “from information to action”. Even facing the stigmatization of China, international students’ reliance on Chinese local media still has been increasing during this period especially after the comparison between Western social media reports and their local experiences, while professional media image and concrete government actions are key factors. Thirdly, the role of individuals in the communication of the Global South goes “from nodes to windows”. International students using polymedia gradually convey China’s national image to the outside world through a cross-platform approach dismantling the incorrect frames after frames’ competition, generating the radiation effect of international communication from individuals, and driving the communication and correction of the international image within a limited scope.

Keywords: Covid-19, Global South, overseas students, international communication, polymedia, social media

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1 Research Background and Questions

Since Covid-19 has swept the world, this major public health event not only brought the media into the lives of individuals in a profound way, but also accelerated the mediatization of society as a whole, and never before in human history has digital media been used on such a large scale for the governance and life of society. The global social landscape has been profoundly disturbed since then, and the impact has not dissipated until now in the post-epidemic era.

At the same time, developing countries have emerged as a new force in the pandemic context. On the one hand, the information on the pandemic's outbreak has pushed the level of governance to an even higher level, on the other hand, communication technologies have been able to update and penetrate more deeply into these countries. The issue of communication in the "Global South" came to the fore again and again. The difference between the Global South and the Global North is not only a geographical distinction, but also a difference in the level of economic, social, and cultural development based on imbalances over geopolitical and international power distribution. However, when communication takes the Global South as its vision, it is not only about a kind of geographical closeness, but also about the unbalanced system existing in international communication. In a kind of cross-regional and cross-country communication, it is necessary to discuss the possibility of the fair development of communication technology for different countries and regions (Slater, 2014), so that a disciplinary paradigm against Westernism could be taken seriously.

Certainly, the development forces within the Global South are not equal in this process. It's clear that there are many differences between countries due to different levels of development and national conditions. It is also for this reason that the South–South cooperation and the South–South engagement of developing countries has become an important issue in the new global development and governance. However, it must be noted that although China and other countries in the South are both developing countries, there is always the problem that they cannot really resonate with each other in international communication due to the control of different network fields, and that it is difficult to truly coalesce the power of the South to break the existing world pattern.

In this era, the pattern of international communication has shown great changes, and we should not only analyze the opportunities of developing countries and the international communication environment from a macro perspective, but also analyze more micro nodes in the Global South from a micro perspective. In the interaction between countries, international students in China are a typical intersection of physical and virtual – they have a dual national

experience, and fulfill their daily needs by switching between the two media systems and carry out an amphibious media survival in the post-epidemic era, they are still living through the pandemic and are experiencing some psychological and cultural integration in the face of the conflict of national images under heterogeneous platforms. Therefore, this study focuses on this micro-group in international interactions, especially in South–South interactions, and takes international students as research subjects to discuss their media use in the post-epidemic era and communication power behind this use in more South–South interactions. Specifically, the research questions in this study can focus on the following three aspects.

1.1 Polymedia Use in Globalized Interactions

Media use reflects individuals’ daily use and contact with media, including media use types, media contact time and frequency, media use preferences, etc (Wilczek, 2018). As for the group of international students, a clear feature of polymedia use is more evident in their media use. The concept of “polymedia” was born in the social background of the global migration wave and the flow of human capital. It aims to discuss that users can overcome the defects of any other media by choosing one media in order to realize their communication intention and achieve control in their interpersonal relationships (Madianou & Miller, 2011). Before arriving in China, they were familiar with globally localized social media represented by Facebook and WhatsApp, but after arriving in China they needed to adapt to Chinese local social media represented by WeChat. This kind of dual use of media makes international students a representative group of “media amphibians” in the globalized media era. We introduce here the concept of “media amphibian”, which indicates an individual or a group living in the state of using two different media platform systems, adapting to diverse media narrative logics. And the term “platform amphibiousness” is also derived to describe their media practicing state. These terms might better clarify the characterization of the people who have polymedia use and should be distinguished from those people who have multi-media use for their use is based on different media forms such as using both podcast and Internet for news at the same time.

Previous research on polymedia often focused on analyzing the use strategies from an individual’s feelings in use, such as the concept of platform swing proposed by Tandoc et al. (2019), or examining the media content characteristics and use effects of different platforms by comparison (Chib et al., 2014). The environment of the global media is what the platform amphibians are living in, and they are strategically switching between media platforms in this

technological environment. These overseas students are the most direct experiencers of different media platforms in China and internationally, and they are also the overall responders of the international platform “nature”.

However, few studies have talked about implications from this microscopic individual use to the more macroscopic international communication, other than the communication implications of interactions in the Global South. Clearly, standing in the intersection of global communication, international students’ polymedia use reflects their adaptation and integration into a new culture and can also reflect a microcosm of country-to-country interactions.

The emergence of Covid-19 exacerbates such a sociocultural psychological integration. Public health emergencies are often accompanied by large-scale illness, disability, or death in a short period of time. Faced with emergencies and great uncertainty, people need to obtain all kinds of information, reduce their information vulnerability, reduce their risk perception, and form subjective cognition and behavioral decisions about diseases (Li & Liu, 2020). In the post-epidemic context, international students in China are experiencing dramatic mediated social change, and for the international students from countries in the Global South selected for this paper, the development and rise of the Global South in terms of media technology and social governance is more intuitively felt. Therefore, in the context of epidemic-accelerated social change, the following question is posed for the group of international students.

RQ1: Is there a significant change in the polymedia use platform of international students from developing countries coming to China before and after the epidemic?

1.2 National Image Construction in the Post-epidemic Era

In the post-epidemic era, which is full of risks and uncertainties, the construction of national image is a particularly complicated process. The epidemic has added challenges to the communication of national image, but at the same time, there are also rich opportunities. It can be said that the epidemic is not only a test of the comprehensive strength of each country, but also an indicator of the level of information literacy and the ability to resist the “information epidemic” of each country’s government and people. In recent years, relevant studies in international academic communities have shown that China has evolved into a key variable to solve a series of global “wicked problems” such as pandemic, climate change, and the gap between the rich and the poor. Therefore, academic

communities advocate that China should be understood from political, economic, social and other dimensions (Rudolph, 2018). Although the epidemic is still raging, the fundamental context of globalization in today’s world has not changed. In the post-epidemic era, when the “West is absent” and the world is accelerating into a “post-Western” and “post-American” ideological crisis, China’s own actions are related to the construction of its position in the international landscape and discourse order, and also affect the trust of the Global South in China and the voice of the Global South in the global discourse system. As actual cross-cultural practitioners, the personal experiences of international students in China during the epidemic will have a direct impact on their perceptions of China’s national image.

In addition, the interactive perception of social media has become an important driving force in the transformation of the overall image of the China and society as outlined by the subjects of actors coming to China in the post-epidemic era. International students can directly sense a “nearby” Chinese society in their own life circle based on their arrival at the scene, but the larger “distant” China is still decoded and constructed more indirectly through social insights and media windows. In recent years, content about China is increasing year by year on international media platforms during social media evolution, and the production of relevant content by local Chinese “netizens” and foreign bloggers in China has created a more three-dimensional and comprehensive “online” picture of China than before. This has also enabled more international audiences to gain a deeper understanding of China. As media amphibians, foreign students in China are practicing embedding local Chinese social media alongside their original Western media. Through the epidemic, the local social media has also been instrumental in constructing and “connoting” the national image of China in the minds of international students.

Focusing on the international students from the Global South who experienced the collision of international communication during the epidemic, it can be said that their perceptions of China’s national image were confronted with a very complex source of information, but how their national images of China were constructed and changed in this process, reflecting the important influence of local globalization, the following questions are asked.

RQ2: How did the perception of China’s national image change among international students from developing countries during the epidemic? And what are the factors that influence the perception of national image?

1.3 Micro Forces of International Communication in the Perspective of the Global South

The extensive cross-platform media practices of international students not only enrich their personal lives and experience the culture of other countries, but also act as a key node in the overall international communication. In the network of Global South interactions, studies often base the actors on countries and governments, but tend to overlook the important role of individuals in this communication process. As the actor network described by Latour (2005), in addition to seeing the role of macro-subjects, overseas students can play the role of structure holes among them (Burt, 2004).

In the era of new media, the global media information dissemination order is undergoing rapid transformation, which is highlighted by the rise of the mechanism of close information flow within major cultural groups, which indicates that the media transformation and the process of multi-polarization in the world are developing. The interactions of developing countries have gradually flourished, and the active mechanism of regional cultural circles has a diminishing effect on Western media hegemony (Friedman, 1994). In the post-epidemic era, they are microscopically responsible for bridging the dialog among countries from Global South, communicating heterogeneous cultures and promoting consensus in the ideological game of great powers. In a sense, international students who are intercultural are an important force for South countries to oppose global media hegemony in the coming post-Western era. Specifically, international students are also engaged in a discursive effort of cross-platform export in the use of polymedia to break down the stereotypes of China that have been orientalized under Western narratives.

Following on the hypothesis from above, international students are bound to communicate in this polymedia use after they have undergone their personal media use transformation and national image construction. In the absence of a true resonance of South–South communication, the characteristics and effects of such cross-cultural communication are of interest to this study, and the following question is asked.

RQ3: How do international students from developing countries in China spread China's national image in their cross-platform media use during the pandemic?

2 Methods

An in-depth interview method is widely used in the related research of the groups moving in different countries. Because it can examine deeper understanding and feelings in cross-cultural communication from the individual interviewees’ perspective. This study, reconducted in Wuhan City, China, did 30–90 min of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 international students from countries in the Global South (see Table 1 for details), covering three continents with the highest concentration in South countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The interviewees were six undergraduate students, six master students, and three PhD candidates. Their majors ranged from liberal arts to science and engineering and their time spent in China varied from two to six years, 10 of whom stayed over the

Table 1: Basic information of respondents.

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Country	Major	Education	Interview method	Length of interview
S01	Fran	Male	Chile	Chinese Language Education	Master	Phone	90 min
S02	Mugabai	Male	Uganda	Automation	Undergraduate	Interview	60 min
S03	Zhou	Male	Thailand	Architecture	Undergraduate	Interview	40 min
S04	Chengkai Paulina	Female	Mexico	Materials Science	PhD	Interview	30 min
S05	Ayesha	Female	Pakistan	Economics	Undergraduate	Phone	30 min
S06	Maharjan	Male	Nepal	Architecture	Undergraduate	Interview	40 min
S07	Roger	Male	Rwanda	Industrial Economics	PhD	Phone	30 min
S08	Ramiro	Male	Nicaragua	Architecture	Master	Interview	40 min
S09	Cintha	Female	Nicaragua	Architecture	Master	Interview	40 min
S10	Denis	Male	Nicaragua	Art and Design	Master	Phone	30 min
S11	Nur	Male	Ethiopia	International Economics and Trade	Master	Phone	30 min
S12	Leyli	Female	Turkmenistan	economics	Undergraduate	Interview	40 min
S13	Malak	Male	Pakistan	Industrial Economics	PhD	Phone	40 min
S14	Elodia	Female	Madagascar	Economics	Master	Interview	40 min
S15	Samuel	Male	Nicaragua	Civil Engineering	Undergraduate	Phone	30 min

period before and after the epidemic outbreak on the Chinese mainland. The interviews were conducted offline and online due to the reason of the epidemic. The interview questions were divided into three main sections. The first section is about the respondents' basic personal information, including their nationality, major, motivation and duration of study abroad, etc. The second one is about the respondents' polymedia use and media perceptions, including the media use and perceptions of local and international media platforms. The third is about the construction and dissemination of China's national image, including the perception of the media image, the change of the national image, and the personal dissemination and sharing of this national image in other countries of the Global South.

3 Results

Anderson (1991) once pointed out when discussing the national consciousness that the printing capitalism created “synchronicity” with ships, railways, and other technologies, which made people who had never met before imagine the community. The media also constructs national identities in the process of forging “imagined communities” for individuals practicing across cultures. After interviewing the interviewees, this paper provides clearer responses and answers to the questions raised in the previous section. Firstly, in their personal use of media, international students go through the process of breaking the wall from straying. Secondly, in this process of breaking the wall, the construction of the national image of China is mainly accomplished through physical actions rather than through informing. Finally, after personal use and national identification, they themselves are playing the role of nodes to windows, gradually becoming a micro force in the Global South's communication.

3.1 From Straying to Breaking the Wall: The Epidemic Accelerated their Paradigm Shift in the Use of Polymedia

Firstly, in terms of the media platforms used, the international students who are amphibious on the platforms has a certain degree of mapping relationship. The study found that almost all interviewees mentioned that they use two social media at the same time, except for S13 who said that he only uses WeChat now and does not actively use Western media such as Facebook anymore. In this overlapping use of platforms, international students' use of both Chinese and Western social media shows a correspondence relationship due to their need

Table 2: Correspondence of international students’ social media use.

Use	Chinese media	Western media
Communication with others	WeChat (mainly with teachers and classmates)	WhatsApp/Facebook (mainly with family and friends)
Get news and information	WeChat official accounts	Facebook
Entertainment	Bilibili	YouTube
Tour guide	Xiaohongshu	Instagram

for communication, information, and path dependence on their original media use (see Table 2). In such a relationship, the inertia of using the original media may be the original motivation for them to find the corresponding local platform for media adaptation after they come to China. We can find that at this initial stage, international students’ use of local social media is still under the pull of their original platform usage patterns and in a relatively passive state.

Secondly, getting information becomes the main purpose of international students in using the existing platforms. In our study, we found that international students have a greater demand for information about Chinese society, culture, and economy, and it is obvious that the information about China in the existing media is not enough to satisfy them for reasons of information’s quality and quantity, so that there is an “information deficit” in the use of Western media. In order to reduce the cognitive inconvenience caused by this information imbalance, they also tried to cross over to Chinese media in order to fill this information gap. As S12 said:

Sometimes when I want to know something about China and if there was nothing I could get from Google or YouTube, I will go to Baidu or Bilibili to read some reports in Chinese or watch some documentaries.

In addition, among the local mass media such as Bilibili, international students are also more motivated to find knowledge-based information such as historical documentaries and reports on China’s economy that can construct China’s image on these platforms.

Thirdly, in terms of usage, the interviews revealed no significant changes in the usage habits of Western and local Chinese media before and after the new epidemic, but there was a quiet shift in the perceptions of each medium. The interviewees did change their media use to varying degrees, but these changes only involved a relative increase in overall time use and a longitudinal extension, and did not involve large fluctuations in the depth of media use at the synchronicity

level, which is also a response to the previous research question 1. Nevertheless, we found in the interviews that international students spent more time living in China because of the pandemic and other reasons, and the relative inconvenience of international travel made their travel choices more inclined to play and experience within the Chinese territory. Physical constraints also make them more active in using local media after the epidemic to empower their local life. For example:

When I want to go out to some local spots in Wuhan or travel to other places throughout China, I would first go for Xiaohongshu to do some online research. For example, where and how others who have been there visited would give me some ideas. (S3)

As we can see, the epidemic still accelerates the process of breaking the wall of the media, which was going on slowly, and although the process is still relatively less significant and rapid, we cannot ignore the positive energy contained in the quantitative change.

3.2 From Information to Action: Practical Actions and Factual Information Become Powerful Factors in Image Construction

Before they came to China, indirect information was the main factor in constructing international students' impressions of China. In the interviews, 10 international students explicitly stated that they had learned about China through media reports or friends and relatives who had visited China. Interestingly, in the subsequent questions about the change of impressions of China after coming to China, those international students who learned about China mainly through media reports almost all directly or indirectly talked about many changes from negative to positive impressions, while those who learned about China mainly through family and friends said that they did not have much "preconception" of China, so they did not have the former so-called image reconstruction after coming to China. Erving Goffman's definition of "frame" is "people's definition of situation, which is based on a series of organizational principles. These organizational principles dominate events, and our subjective knowledge permeates them. These basic elements become frames" (Goffman, 1974). The transformation of China's image through the direct and indirect experiences of international students reveals some traces of pre-existing frames of international media coverage of China, and some of these frames potentially contribute to the perception of China's national image despite the absence of relevant experiences of international students.

After arriving in China, practical action became a major force in dissolving the established frames and touching the real China. The real experiences on the ground in discovering about the Chinese epidemic were more intuitive and vivid for international students to perceive Chinese society, Chinese development, and Chinese culture. As S15 said, “I never thought that China will have so many incredible buildings here”. S8 even mentioned in the interview that he had focused his first drone video on his university library and wrote under his WeChat’s Moments: “今天起我可以给尼加拉瓜人看武汉，和中国这个漂亮的国家!” (From now on, I can show Nicaraguans Wuhan and this beautiful country, China!)

However, things have changed greatly during the pandemic. We could find a lot of stigmatizations towards China in news reports of the Western social media. The stigma is “a characteristic that is inconsistent with social expectations and whose possessor often experiences a loss of identity, credibility, or value in social interactions, and produces feelings of shame, stigma, and guilt (Goffman, 1986).” To be more specific in international communication, it usually manifests itself as the purposeful and conscious imposition of derogatory and insulting allegations on the identity, characteristics or behavior of the stigmatized country by the country stigmatizing others, and the successful realization of discrimination or derogation against the stigmatized object. And there are some kinds of tendency that “framing” and “stigma” integrating with each other in the process of communication. For example, according to the identical measures of lockdown against the pandemic, the New York Times (2020) accused China of “greatly damaging people’s lives and freedoms”, in their reports but praised Italy for “risking its own economy to stop the spread of Europe’s worst epidemic”, a double standard here is obvious. More explanations to the stigmatization and its framing could be found in the reports of the Wall Street Journal (2020) and the Jyllands-Posten (BBC, 2020), where the latter published a cartoon that featured the five-star red flag as an outline, but replaced the five stars on the red flag with the symbols of five viruses and the former, published a discriminatory article *China is the real sick man of Asia*.

After experiencing the epidemic, the international students who experienced in China directly and received correct factual information about the epidemic also unlocked more aspects of China. In our interviews, we found that the entire international student community almost invariably sought to verify the reports of the epidemic in their use of polymedia. When presented with inaccurate information about China that they could not confirm, almost all international students chose to look for discrepancies in heterogeneous sources. During the epidemic, the influx of inaccurate information on social media caused an “information epidemic”. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), information

epidemic is a phenomenon in which a large amount of information, including rumors and gossip, spreads rapidly through cell phones, social media, the Internet, and other communication technologies in the context of an infectious disease epidemic, making it difficult to find trustworthy sources of information and guidance to rely on, and hindering effective measures to prevent and control the epidemic (WHO, 2018). As far as international students are concerned, this round of “belief and epidemic” will affect international students’ risk perception and national recognition of China. In order to counteract the negative effects of the “epidemic”, international students have taken the initiative to find out the truth by combining their local experiences and seeking multiple verifications of the epidemic reports. In this process, the emergence of the “epidemic” has accelerated the improvement of international students’ media literacy and their access to real sources of reports in the comparison, which has accelerated the process of breaking the wall of national image construction. Specifically comparing the news about the epidemic from China and abroad, some international students mentioned that:

The news reported from abroad is very negative and depressing, which is quite uncomfortable, and relatively speaking, the news about pandemic from China is more constructive, because it mainly tells people not to be panic and will also give people measures could be taken to protect themselves (S5).

Based on this, they generally preferred to receive news from China during the epidemic, and the credibility of international news about China was undermined because it conflicted with what international students saw from local. In the case of reports about the epidemic in China, international students chose to trust their direct local experiences after comparing inside and outside. As S3 mentioned: “it was pretty uncomfortable to hear what Facebook and Twitter said what was going on in China. It’s negative and not productive, so I just tried to ignore them.” And S8 said “it seemed that the press manipulated the reports and some of it were obviously lies. There were not people dying in the streets.”

The study found that the common frameworks that international students perceived in the Western media coverage of the epidemic were fabricated, for instance, the origin of the virus framework (China created the virus), the catastrophizing framework (corpses and infected people are everywhere in streets of China), the repressive control framework (the government is pushing epidemic prevention measures in an anti-human rights way), and the racist framework (China treats Chinese people and foreigners differently in China); in the interview, S5 mentioned:

After the outbreak of epidemic in Wuhan, a foreign media approached me and wanted to have an interview. When I was trying to tell them the truth that everything was positive outside, they always tried to interrupt me and asked me to say something bad, which was quite annoying.

With the deepening of local media and related media interventions, international students were able to perceive the information corresponding to the reality, which is different from the Western media reports, which not only deconstructed the negative frame of foreign media reports, but also constructed a more realistic and objective image of China. After being exposed to Chinese mainstream media reports and combined with local practice, they have positive feedback on the narrative of China’s fight against the epidemic and partly contribute to the perception of the overall national image. As S12 mentioned:

I think the Chinese government’s regulations toward Covid-19 are quite effective instead of someone called ‘anti-human rights’, on the contrary, it is protecting peoples. That’s why China is the safest country now.

It is important to note that while international news frameworks have been rapidly dismantled in the development of international students’ practices and perceptions from local, they still influence international students indirectly in several ways. For example, S12 mentioned:

My family would often contact me and tell me to take care of myself, and I would always go out of my way to explain to them that China has already got back to normal now. This always makes me feel quite helpless.

How do international students, who are relatively well-informed about China, respond to such information asymmetry?

3.3 From Node to Window: Individual and Group Power in Global South Communication

Before the epidemic, international students mostly played the role of dissemination nodes in a scattered manner. During this period, international students shared their local lives across platforms in the use of polymedia. This sharing was mainly rooted in campus and city life, and the mode of sharing varied depending on individual media usage preferences.

The outbreak of the epidemic and the experience of fighting the epidemic in China became a source of group consensus for international students, and pulled them to make more external corrections. Before the epidemic, the world’s attention

on China was more focused on China's economic development and political evolution, while the outbreak of the epidemic made the world focus on the agenda of the Chinese epidemic as well. By setting up a series of related agendas, the Western media has been able to create a one-way gaze on China and lead its people to shift the focus from the country's epidemic and accept various frameworks for reporting on China. It is important to emphasize that while this behavior has brought about various disadvantages to China's national image, foreign audiences have not been subjected to a single dominant-hegemonic decoding entirely at the will of the media. As mentioned earlier, when users clearly perceive that Western reports are inaccurate and engage in negotiated or oppositional decoding, they actively seek out heterogenous sources to find out the truth, which indirectly raises foreign audiences' concerns about China, and is a potential opportunity to motivate them to seriously understand China. For example, the interviews found that the friends and relatives of international students in their home countries tended to learn more and more frequently about China from them, and the international students would give them discourse feedback based on their actual experiences, and the sides involved in this set of discourse also had a tendency to spill over from reporting the Chinese epidemic to narrating the real experiences of Chinese society and Chinese culture, which gradually spread the real image of the Chinese nation to their entire social network under the nodal communication. For example, S4 mentioned:

When the pandemic was raging in Wuhan, my family was very concerned about my safety here, but I told them not to worry about me and everything went well during the lockdown. We had school delivering food and water to us and then all lives go back to normal now...I also told my family that Chinese food is great and there are many interesting spots and buildings, and I tried to persuade my sister to apply for a Chinese university.

It is because of the common experience of the whole group of international students in fighting against the epidemic in China that they have reached a consensus in the social media field, and the combined power of individual discourse has become a powerful force to dispel inaccurate information on social media.

We might notice that the two kinds of platform possess two kinds of different frames, and very interestingly, those frames might occur to compete with each other for wanting to be the leading force to affect audiences' opinion. As Aarøe (2017) points out for us, framing effects in dynamic competitive information flows depend on timing and the processing mode in the audience, and social media. And considering the effect of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and political blogs, the framing effect might function not as the same as before because

these social media constitute new communication platforms through which politicians and other elite actors can disseminate their preferred frames to the public without the traditional news media as a mediator (Otterbacher et al., 2013). The overseas students might disseminate the factually incorrect frames based on the local life experience and information and touch the real aspect of China.

Regarding the frame effects, in the process of transformation from individual nodes, the communication of the country’s image under the use of polymedia has quietly broken the wall. It is especially important that this process of breaking the wall is not only reflected in the breaking of the wall in their own media use, but also in the breaking of the wall in the international media. The international students themselves play the role of “window” to some extent. They can convey the national image of China through the cross-platform way, so their real perceptions in the local media will also be the same. Therefore, the image they really perceive in the local media will spread further and produce the radiation effect of international communication.

However, it should be reminded that the interviews still observe that although there are already traces of discursive efforts at the individual level of international students, there are limitations in the broader scope of communication. On social media, due to the lack of direct local experience of most international audiences and the influence of the presses’ reporting framework, the actual situation of China’s fight against the epidemic is not very clear and objective in their mind, so that a strong climate of negative opinions unfriendly to China is formed on the platform. With this spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) that contradicts the local perceptions of international students, their discursive efforts also run the risk of making this ineffective. For example, nearly nine interviewees explicitly stated that they would selectively ignore false online news about China’s fight against epidemic if they saw it, rather than engaging in confrontational behaviors such as leaving comments to counteract it. Only one person, S5, said,

When I find something that is incorrectly reporting China, I will try to tell them what’s true. When I wanted to say something positive to China, I would receive some comments saying ‘she has been paid by China’, and it was both quite funny and confusing. Why did China have to pay me for I’m not a big shot?

4 Discussion

This study takes international communication in the post-epidemic era as a perspective and selects international students from the Global South as the

research subjects to explore the role of international communication and international image communication in this dramatically changing environment from a micro perspective.

After in-depth interviews with 15 international students from different developing countries, we found that their media use, national image construction and communication in China reflected new changes under the accelerating influence of the epidemic. In the polymedia use, the epidemic did not cause any significant change in their polymedia use platform, but it caused a significant increase in the comparison of their information content in both platforms, and the need for local life and health information became the main motivation for local media use. In the construction of the national image, their image of China is not merely informed and accepted, but is gradually acquired in a dynamic way based on specific actions of the government and the media. An active and competent government, reliable and helpful information led to a positive impression of China during the epidemic, but their perceptions of the country's image in the Global South in their eyes were still significantly influenced by the international news framework. In terms of individual roles, after media use conversion and national image perception, the international student community can also play the role of an important node of China's national image, breaking the wall and correcting the national image of China and the Global South it represents in two media ecologies. That is, the international student community can be seen as an important node in international communication and an important part of the cohesive force in South–South engagement. But this role is mostly confined to intimate relationships and is extremely vulnerable to a spiral of silence in a different climate of opinion.

We have to see that practical perception and effective action become the main factors of perceived national image, while international students, through their special identity, construct and spread China's national image in embodied perception and virtual interaction, completing the process of local globalization. However, there are still many constraints in this process, which is closely related to individual media literacy, and the radiation effect of individual nodes is very limited in the process of communication on international platforms, and the communication opportunity can be easily nullified by the collision of domestic and foreign ideas. Therefore, in the future international communication, we not only need to see this kind of international communicators with special status, but also need to do a good job of guiding construction in the domestic and foreign communication environment, and actively construct China's overseas communication environment, so that this kind of free and real personal experience can be better disseminated overseas and gather a stronger new force in the Global South.

However, the study also has a lot of disadvantages that needs following scholars focusing on. Firstly, this study neglects a perspective of concentrating on the student’s interpersonal communication and more specific information interaction within their home communities. The perception and construction of China’s national image include a wide range of these information and it might also help those people who outside China better understanding what’s really going on in this country. Secondly, we have discussed little on how the different frameworks of Chinese media and Western media function on students’ perception, and interestingly, these framing which comes from two different platforms to some extent might adverse to each other and compete with each other in order to affect the audience. So, how the audience act in this dynamic competitive information flow and what is the result of the gaming might be a valuable point worth digging deeper into. Thirdly, our interview materials do not support us to include the students’ subsequent communication practices. Maybe the following study could take a more concrete perspective on the interpersonal influence from the students’ communities and audience frames in communication of China’s national image.

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