

The Analysis of CAA's COVID-19 Identity Construction in the Newspapers of San Francisco Bay with the Three-Level Structure Method

Yueni Yang¹, Junru Xiang²

¹Hunan Normal University, Foreign Studies College, Department of English, Changsha, Hunan 410081, China

²Xiangtan University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of English, Xiangtan, Hunan 411105, China

Abstract

Founded in 1969 in San Francisco, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) is a prominent Asian American advocacy organization, among the 34 groups opposing SFFA in the *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* case. An analysis of eight local newspapers from 2020 to 2023, using framing theory, found that coverage primarily highlighted CAA's "Stop APPI Hate" campaign and its support for affirmative action, portraying a positive image in combating discrimination. The reporting spanned media, political, and social spheres, noting CAA's use of media influence to advance legislation. While coverage was generally objective, it also praised CAA's achievements and its collaborations with Black and LGBTQ+ communities to promote racial equality. The pandemic significantly reinforced CAA's public identity as an "anti-hate advocate," underscoring its influence while presenting future challenges in balancing this focused image with its broader equity work. This study reveals the dynamic interplay between media, crisis, and civil rights organizations in shaping public narratives.

Keywords

Chinese for Affirmative Action, COVID-19, Framing Theory

1. Introduction

Founded in 1969 in San Francisco, California, CAA (Chinese for Affirmative Action) is one of the first immigrant groups to arrive in the United States during the nineteenth century [1]. As one of the most influential Asian American organizations in California, where Asian Americans occupy the largest population of all states, CAA has devoted itself to the civil rights of Asian Americans, having an impact on employment, education, public services, and Asian American images in mass media. For example, CAA was awarded "Outstanding Public Interest Contribution" by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1996 [2]. However, CAA has not been fully studied by 2023 in the academy.

Most of the papers involving CAA published in international journals have focused on its stance on affirmative action. In the case *SFFA v. Harvard* decision, CAA was one of the 34 Asian American education and youth-serving organizations and higher education faculty, and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund that opposed the SFFA [3]. Despite that studies on CAA have been narrowed to its relationship with the case and affirmative action, there are two important studies on the organization domestically, which focus on its activities and influences.

As early as 2005, Wang clarified that the organization-Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA)-is targeted at 5 industries: architecture, mass media, financing, and public functionaries in local, state, and federal government after interviews with Wang Lingzhi, the renowned professor from the University of California, Berkeley [4]. It finds that CAA activities can be divided into five parts, asking for equal opportunities of employment for Chinese Americans, looking for opportunities for equal education for Asian Americans, striving for equal distribution of public resources and services, safeguarding civil rights and suffrage of Chinese Americans, as well as protesting against racial violence, and distorted Asian American images in mass media [4]. Not until 2014 was there a comprehensive study on the background, development, activities, strategies, and influences of CAA. Not only does CAA maintain equality and justice for Asian Americans, along with improving Asian Americans' awareness of civil rights, but improves Chinese images in dominant discourse, as well as promoting inter-racial cooperation [2]. However, the shaping of CAA in the dissertation is from CAA's firsthand documents and annual reports, not from outside powers.

In summary, existing literature provides a foundation for understanding the CAA's self-positioning and historical activities, but lacks a systematic analysis of the public image it passively acquired during major public crises. Therefore, since the previous studies have been focusing on CAA's self-description, what kind of social images has it presented to the mass media since the pandemic? The paper tries to respond to the question of the identity construction of CAA after the breakout of COVID-19 in the mass media with the framing method. After analyzing coverage on CAA with the three-level structure, the paper assumes that newspapers in the San Francisco Bay depict CAA neutrally and praise its achievements during the pandemic. Also, this study introduces framing theory to explore how the San Francisco Bay Area media system, through its filtering and representation mechanisms, endowed the civil rights organization CAA

with social meaning during the COVID-19. This not only fills a gap in CAA research but also offers a case-based response to the broader theoretical question of how media frames minority rights organizations during crises.

2. Sampling

There are 63 local newspapers in San Francisco, 17 of which have ceased issuing by 2020, 4 of which we have no access to, and 4 of which are not available online (e-mail form and paper form). After searching for the keyword “Chinese for Affirmative Action” on the official website, excluding news reports before 2020, 38 news reports have been found. Table 1 records all the detailed information from 64 newspapers on “Chinese for Affirmative Action.”

Table 1. Comprehensive List and Content Availability of San Francisco Bay Area Local Newspapers Regarding CAA

1. The Advocate (Contra Costa College)	No result	2. Alameda Journal (East Bay Times now)	10 news reports	3. Alameda Times-Star	No online form	4. The Argus (Fremont)	East Bay Times now
5. Bay Area News Group	East Bay Times now	6. Bay Area Reporter	7 news reports	7. The Bay Citizen	Merged in 2013	8. Bay City News	No access
9. Berkeley Barb	1969-1971, ceased issuing	10. Berkeley Daily Planet	No result	11. Berkeley Tribe	1969-1971, ceased issuing	12. Berkeleyside	No result
13. The Black Panther (newspaper)	1967-1980, ceased issuing	14. The Californian (1840s newspaper)	Ceased issuing	15. The Californian (1860s newspaper)	Ceased issuing	16. The Daily News (Palo Alto)	No access
17. East Bay Express	No result	18. East Bay Today	No official website	19. Fish Rap Live!	No access	20. The Fountain Hopper	e-mail based
21. The Gaelic American	No result	22. Gilroy Dispatch	No result	23. The Golden Era	1852-1881, ceased issuing	24. Good Times (newspaper)	No result
25. Half Moon Bay Review	No result	26. Healdsburg Enterprise	No result	27. Kstati	No result	28. The Last Times	Ceased issuing in 1964
29. Metro Newspapers	No result	30. Napa Sentinel	No online form	31. North Bay Bohemian	No result	32. Oakland Post (California)	No result
33. Oakland Tribune	No online form	34. Open City (newspaper)	1967-1969, ceased issuing	35. The Organ (newspaper)	1970-1971, ceased issuing	36. Pacific Sun (newspaper)	No result
37. Palo Alto Weekly	2 news reports	38. Peninsula Observer	1967-1969, ceased issuing	39. Pleasanton Weekly	1 news report	40. Point Reyes Light (newspaper)	No result
41. Richmond Globe	No result	42. Richmond Post	1964-2007, ceased issuing	43. San Francisco Bay Guardian	No result	44. San Francisco Bay Times	5 news reports
45. San Francisco Bay View	1976-2008, ceased issuing	46. The San Francisco Call	1856-1965, ceased issuing	47. San Francisco Foghorn	No result	48. San Francisco Oracle	1966-1968, ceased issuing
49. San Francisco Sentinel	No online form	50. The Santa Clara	No result	51. Sausalito News	No result	52. SF Public Press	7 news reports
53. SF Weekly	4 news reports	54. Sonoma Valley Sun	No result	55. Spectator Magazine	1978-2005, ceased issuing	56. St. Helena Star	No access
57. Street Sheet	No result	58. El Tecolote (newspaper)	1 news report	59. The Tenderloin Times	1977-1994, ceased issuing	60. The Elevator (newspaper)	1865-1874, ceased issuing
61. Tri-City Voice	No result	62. Tri-Valley Herald	No result	63. West Marin Citizen	No result		

Table 2 shows the sampling utilized in the paper. 8 local newspapers are selected to analyze the images of CAA from January 1st, 2020, to January 8th, 2023.

Table 2. Selected Newspapers and Sampled News Reports on CAA

1. East Bay Times	10 news reports	2020.3.21-2022.8.21	2. Bay Area Times	7 news reports	2020.7.15-2022.11.7
2. Palo Alto Weekly	3 news reports	2020.4.7-2021.5.7	4. Pleasanton Weekly	1 news report	2021.5.14
5. El Tecolote	1 news report	2021.2.25	6. San Francisco Bay Times	5 news reports	2020.4.23-2022.3.24
7. SF Public Press	7 news reports	2020.3.20-2022.10.13	8. SF Weekly	4 news reports	2020.4.15-2021.6.16

3. Method-Framing

“The frame theory” was first introduced by American sociologist Goffman in his book “Frame Analysis” published in 1974. The “framing” was defined as “the mental principles and subjective processes by which individuals perceive and interpret social events”. As a cognitive structure, it helps users discover, understand, and define specific, complex, and diverse facts in the process [5].

Research on framing theory has focused on three major areas: qualitative research to construct media frames from the perspective of news production; content analysis of news texts to examine media frames; and analysis of audience frames from the perspective of communication effect research [6]. The meaning of “frame” is categorized by William A. Gamson as two types: as a noun, a metaphor for “boundary,” as a verb, “to structure,” meaning that the frame helps people construct meaning to understand why and how social events occur [7].

The application of framing varies from the three-level framework, the interaction of reality level, media level, and cognitive level, to the interpretative package. For the three-level framework, scholars study the transformation of positive to negative images of university students in newspapers from 1997 to 2007 [8], the positive but biased images of senior citizens in the microblog of *People’s Daily* in 2018 [9], and the positive and objective inclination in Indian media *The Times of India* [10]. However, unlike the three-level framework, the interaction of reality level, media level, and cognitive level assumes the object, studying the reasons behind it. For example, one scholar has studied the slippery slope of the image of reality, the subversion of the media image, and the bias of the cognitive phenomenon of Chinese kindergarten teachers. Therefore, the second application does not suit our research. Furthermore, the third application includes metaphors, examples, slogans, descriptions, and visual images, which rarely exist in CAA’s reports. Besides, the previous studies focus on self-shaping and outer shaping. For example, one study is about how national images are shaped by an officially published documentary [11].

The paper does not have a general assumption about CAA in local newspapers and takes the materials from the outer parts, hence three-level framework is the most suitable one to conduct.

4. Findings

The three levels of structure are high-level structure, medium-level structure, and low-level structure. The high-level structure is equivalent to the topic of the news event and reflects the main meaning of the story [7]. The medium-level structure relates to the structure of the news, including main events, previous events, history, results, impact, attribution, and evaluation [7]. The low-level structure revolves around the discourse style of the news, including the structural features of statements and paragraphs, diction techniques, and language rhetoric [7].

4.1 High-Level Structure

In news reporting, the high-level structure of the frame is equivalent to the topic of the news event, referring to the event’s main idea or significance. In other words, what exactly is the news story trying to report? It is usually reflected by the headline of the article, the introduction, or a direct quotation, etc. In this way, the reader can quickly understand the story’s main meaning by analyzing the frame’s high-level structure [7].

CAA is involved in the news instead of being themed in the title, leading paragraph, or major contexts. All the samples show that CAA is not the main topic of the news but quoted information and one of Asian American affirmative action organizations that lead the activities that tracking attacks against Asian Americans related to the pandemic (i.e., Stop

AAPAPI Hate project), supporting the current Affirmative Action, supporting noncitizen voting, celebrating Women's History Month, and fighting against Trump's WeChat Ban. Table 3 shows the numbers of all the aforementioned themes in the samples except for one non-information news.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Primary Themes in News Reports Featuring CAA

Stop AAPAPI Hate	27/38	Support Affirmative Action	5/38
Support noncitizen voting	2/38	Celebrate Women's History Month	1/38
Fight against Trump's WeChat Ban	2/38	Non-information	1/38

Of all samples, the topic "Stop AAPAPI Hate" accounts for 71.1%, with 6 samples being in-depth reports on CAA's actions in the activity. All news is presented in a neutral position, highlighting CAA's role in the "Stop AAPAPI Hate" initiative and introducing key officials from CAA and their perspectives. At the beginning of the "Stop AAPAPI Hate" activity, the newspapers focused on the introduction of the project. For example, *East Bay Times* reported that CAA and its coalition created a website documenting incidents of hate, reached out to elected officials for new measures to combat COVID-19, and criticized the president for xenophobia related to the virus in response to anti-Asian hate [12]. With the activity going on, newspapers shift their concentration to the achievements of the project. For example, *San Francisco Bay Times* reported more than 1,600 incidents of racist abuse in the first three weeks after the website's release [13], *Palo Alto Weekly* recorded 3,794 incidents by February 2021 [14], and *Bay Area Report* recorded 11,467 incidents by March 31st, 2022 [15]. Of all incidents, 68.1% are verbal harassment, and shunning accounts for 20.5%, which are the largest proportions, followed by 11.1% of physical assault by February 28th, 2021 [16]. Another important achievement of the "Stop AAPAPI Hate" project is its impact on the LGBTQ community and the community's participation [15]. Samples show that "Stop AAPAPI Hate" and CAA are influential and functioning positively regionally, making a difference in xenophobia and racial discrimination. The pandemic and anti-Asian violence were the most pressing social issues at the time, making CAA's campaign highly newsworthy. Moreover, CAA proactively provided ready-made, easily reportable news to media outlets through actions like creating websites and releasing data, itself a successful media strategy. Finally, "Stop AAPAPI Hate" served as a powerful overarching framework with strong moral legitimacy and broad resonance. Adopting this framework posed minimal risk for media organizations and was most readily accepted by the public.

The second largest theme is affirmative action, including equal college entrance by race and gender, and equal job opportunities for Asians. The samples are also in the neutral position, without judgments or emotional comments on CAA. On the one hand, in referring to Asian Americans who are against affirmative action, the *East Bay Times* reported that CAA was one of those for affirmative action. On the other hand, CAA joined the plaintiffs who requested that no SAT and ACT scores as a university admission requirement. Besides, equal job opportunities for Asians are what CAA has been fighting for. According to the *Bay Area Report*, CAA has an economic justice program that helps limited English-speaking Asians look for jobs and improve their skills [17]. Also, *SF Weekly* revealed that CAA filed for unemployment, aggravated by language barriers [18].

The third important issues are noncitizen voting and Trump's WeChat Ban. However, CAA is not a major subject in the news, but a participant in the activities. At first, CAA led the coalition that campaigned for San Francisco's law validating noncitizen voting in Santa Ana, New York, Boston, and Chicago [19]. Then, in denouncing Trump's WeChat Ban, *SF Weekly* reported that CAA and the San Francisco Unified School District needed WeChat to disseminate information to online communities, expand Chinese language engagement for limited English-speaking residents, and help with economic justice [20].

The last theme is on celebrating Women's History Month. Unlike the aforementioned news reports, the *San Francisco Bay Times* not only involved "Stop AAPAPI Hate" but also reported CAA positively. In the news, the Co-Executive Director of CAA was even chosen for 2022's Woman of the Year for Assembly District 19 [21].

From the perspective of numbers, news reports focus on combating anti-Asian hate and fighting for affirmative action, all in-depth reports in the "Stop AAPAPI Hate" project. Given the news attitude, all samples are neutral in the position, except for the one that celebrates Women's History Month and CAA's Co-Executive's effort in combating anti-Asian hate and discrimination.

4.2 Medium-Level Structure

The medium-level structure refers to the structure of the news reports, including major events, antecedent events, history, results, influences, and evaluations [7]. In the samples, the medium-level structure is most represented in the correlated industries and related subjects.

First, Table 4 shows that mass media, political, law, education, social, economic, cultural, and medical areas are

involved in the reports. Note that two areas can co-exist in one report.

Table 4. Sectors Involved in News Coverage of CAA

Mass media	16	Political	8
Social	5	Economic	5
Law	4	Education	2
Cultural	1		

Among all the samples, the mass media occupy 42.1% of all samples. For example, CAA worked with the Asian American Planning and Policy Council and the San Francisco State University to create a website that documented incidents of racist harassment on March 21st, 2020 [12]. The Internet has been a significant database for CAA and its coalition to fight against AAPI Hate. Besides the online website, the offline press conference is also used by CAA. For example, *El Tecolote* reported that CAA and other Asian American organizations across the Bay Area held a virtual press conference demanding action against racist attacks [22].

21.1% of news reports are political. For example, *Bay Area Times* reported that the CAA co-executive director discussed sustaining the quest for racial justice on behalf of the Black community [23]. Besides, CAA, together with the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council, denounced xenophobia from the political rhetoric that incites racist hatred and violence [24]. Then, as part of the activity for affirmative action, CAA joined the Equal Justice Society, NAACP, and other organizations to help restore affirmative action in California [25]. Lastly, political reports about “Stop AAPI Hate” are abundant, covering more than half of politically related reports. For example, the co-executive director of CAA called on Gov. Gavin Newsom to create a racial equity task force [26].

Both social and economic areas occupy 13.1% of the samples. In social areas, CAA not only helped against AAPI Hate but also fought against Trump’s WeChat Ban, according to *SF Press*. Another important step taken by CAA is in the economic area. For example, CAA sponsored the “Stop AAPI Hate” project to help recipients like restaurants against anti-Asian hate [27]. CAA also helped limited English-speaking Asians with jobs and skill development.

Events about law and education, respectively, occupy 10.5% and 5.2% of the samples. On “Stop AAPI Hate,” LGBTQ Asians were helping pass bills to stem hate crimes [27]. Except for the project, CAA also helped claim files for unemployment [18]. As for education, CAA supported affirmative action in college entrance and requested abolishing SAT and ACT scores for admission after a settlement was reached [28]. However, events in culture only account for 2.6% of the proportion. According to *SF Weekly*, Asian American Magazine fought erasure, where the executive director of CAA believed that they were making progress in the API community [29].

Besides, the related subjects range from politicians, mass media, racial communities, agencies, and organizations. First of all, as the founder of the “Stop AAPI Hate” website, the Asian American Planning and Policy Council and San Francisco State University Asian American Studies Department are the most repeated organizations. Then, Gov. Gavin Newsom is mentioned twice in the theme “anti-Asian hate,” not only for his denouncing racist attacks but for calling on him to pass bills in this regard. On the contrary, President Trump has also been denounced twice for spreading anti-Asian xenophobia. Besides, ABC7 releases a live show combating anti-Asian hate crimes by CAA and other panel advisors. Under the theme, the black community, female community, and LGBTQ community are also mentioned for combating anti-Asian hate. The 10 largest transit agencies in CA are another aspect of the theme, only different in that they are part of the law that needs to recognize street harassment. Furthermore, in the theme “supporting affirmative action,” the plaintiffs, which include six organizations, are also mentioned.

4.3 Low-Level Structure

The analysis of the low-level frame focuses on the discourse style characteristics of the news report, including the structure of statements and paragraphs, the wording techniques, and the use of rhetoric [7]. The paper will analyze the low-level structure of CAA in the samples from emotional dispositions and keywords. Emotional dispositions are attitudes of the mass media towards CAA, while keywords represent the focus of the news reports.

97.3% of the samples show a neutral position in reporting CAA-related news, while only one sample shows a positive tone. Often, the neutral reporting introduces CAA as one of the founders when introducing the “Stop AAPI Hate” project. Furthermore, the positive reporting happens when *the San Francisco Bay Times* chooses the co-executive director of CAA as 2022’s Woman of the Year for Assembly District 19 by using “proud to name her” as a compliment for CAA’s efforts in “Stop AAPI Hate” [21]. The overwhelming proportion of neutral reporting identified in this study does not imply a lack of media stance. This strategic neutrality precisely reflects the caution exercised by professional media when covering racial issues. It may represent a reporting convention designed to avoid controversy and maintain an appearance of objectivity. However, this convention objectively produces a depoliticizing effect, simplifying and co-opting the CAA’s decades-long affirmative action movement-with its complex political demands-into a widely sympathetic anti-hate initiative during times of crisis. This diminishes the CAA’s radical character, transforming it into a

community service provider more readily accepted by mainstream society.

The paper utilized the application Antconc to analyze the keywords of the samples. Table 5 shows the 30 most frequently mentioned keywords after excluding pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, punctuation marks, etc.

Table 5. High-Frequency Keywords in CAA-Related News Reports

Keywords	Frequency	Keywords	Frequency
Asian	116	Hate	111
San	71	Incidents	62
American	60	Francisco	60
California	53	People	53
Chinese	50	State	50
Americans	49	Action	40
Bart	38	Affirmative	36
AAP	35	Harassment	32
Community	29	Board	28
Crimes	28	Pandemic	28
Public	27	Coalition	26
Attacks	25	Transit	25
Racism	23	Virus	23
President	22	Campaign	21
COVID	21	Students	21
Data	20	Trump	19

As can be seen from the table, “Stop AAP Hate” is the largest topic in samples, counting as the largest theme of CAA’s work after the breakout of the pandemic.

There are three circumstances where the word “Asian” appears. When combined with Americans and anti, the word is used as the subject and object of the project “Stop AAP Hate,” where the coalition and CAA are most repeated, collecting data from the website documenting racist incidents. For example, when commenting on the project, CAA will be related to mentioned as one of the founders who help Asian Americans against anti-Asian hate, racism, and discrimination. Then, LGBTQ and the word “community” are also related to Asians in referring to participants of the project. Lastly, identity is also related to Asians when people criticize the project for homogenizing the Asian American community and erasing different identities.

Hate is often related to AAP, Campaigns, harassment, crimes, incidents, speeches, and websites, showing that CAA and the project have been one of the hot spots in California.

The places San Francisco, San Jose, San Bernardino, and San Diego appear 64, 4, 1, 1, and 1 times because the newspapers are located in the San Francisco Bay, and all the aforementioned cities are located in California. Besides, “state” refers to California.

Chinese can be used in CAA, Chinese Americans, and the Chinese virus. When discussing anti-Asian hate, the term “Chinese virus” is cited to trace back to the origin of racist crimes. Furthermore, the words affirmative and action are also part of the name “CAA.”

When “people” are related to Asian, Black, and LGBTQ+, they are part of the project fighting against racial attacks. However, when it comes to Chinese “people,” Trump and others blame the pandemic virus on the Chinese.

Lastly, Bart Board is part of the public transit agencies that are required by the legislation to recognize street harassment,

gather data, and create non-carceral solutions.

5. Conclusion

After the analysis, it can be found that the local newspapers in San Francisco reported on CAA with multiple topics, mainly “Stopping APPI Hate” and “Supporting affirmative action”, focusing on positive images in fighting against racist discrimination and crimes. In addition, the coverage of CAA spans a wide range of areas, primarily mass media, political, social, and economic, with CAA actively promoting the national reach of “Stop APPI Hate” through mass media influence and using the findings to advance the law. Finally, while the CAA coverage was objective and neutral, there was also praise in the media for the achievements of the CAA program. Then, CAA’s programs have been helped by the Black and LGBTQ+ communities and have generally been shown to have a positive impact on advancing racial equality.

The findings of this study indicate that major social crises serve not only as stages for social organizations’ actions but also as pivotal junctures where their public images are redefined and solidified. For the CAA, the pandemic period saw its image as the “Stop APPI Hate” intensified to an unprecedented degree in the public sphere. While this reflects its influence, it may also pose new challenges to its identity and strategic approach in the future—namely, how to balance this dominant image with other equity initiatives in the “post-pandemic era.” Thus, the value of this study lies in revealing a dynamic process: how media, crisis, and civil rights organizations interact to produce public narratives with enduring impact.

This study focuses on the San Francisco Bay Area, a media environment characterized by strong liberal leanings. Its findings may not be directly extrapolated to media coverage in other regions of the United States. Future research could conduct comparative analyses to explore how political ideology influences media reporting on organizations such as the CAA. Furthermore, while this study concentrates on newspaper texts, future research could incorporate social media content to analyze the differences and interactions between framing approaches across various media platforms.

Announcement

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