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News and Views: Definitions and Characteristics of Genres in Chinese Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Journalistic genres in China have acquired distinctive characteristics and have shaped original sub-genres that are unique to the local journalistic tradition. While many studies analyzing their characteristics have been written in Chinese, works on the subject in other languages are still scarce. This contribution aims to fill this void by presenting the two main genres in which written journalistic production can be understood, i.e., "news" and "views", as well as their sub-genres, and showing how they are interpreted in Chinese media studies. The analysis is based on a corpus of recent academic publications that represent the current Chinese scholarly interpretations of local genres of journalism. In doing so, the paper also offers insights on recent theoretical reflections about the functions of journalistic writing in the People's Republic of China.

Keywords: China; commentary; editorial; genre; investigative journalism; journalism; news; news report; opinion article; views.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of media language research, many studies focus on the linguistic characteristics of the genres of journalism, such as news reports and news commentaries (Lavid, Arus, and Moraton 2012; Bouzis and Creech 2018). However, the linguistic, cultural and socio-political peculiarities of the communities from which the genres develop can influence their characteristics, while the self-identification and goals of the

authors, who are part of the same discourse community, similarly shape the intended purposes of the genres (Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

Academic publications that analyze the definitions and characteristics of the genres of Chinese journalism, and compare the Chinese and the Anglo-American traditions are abundant. However, publications on the subject are mainly available in Chinese, being the product of Chinese academics working in Chinese universities. Publications in international languages on this subject are still scarce: important insights have been offered on single genres, as in the case of investigative journalism (Bandurski and Hala 2010; Tong 2011; Svensson, Saether, and Zhang 2013) and, to a lesser extent, news commentaries (Valli 2010; Lupano 2016), but comprehensive studies on the genres of Chinese journalism in languages other than Chinese are, to date, difficult to find.

The aim of this contribution is therefore to present, from a media studies perspective, how "news" and "views" – the two main genres in which written journalistic production can be understood – are interpreted in the Chinese tradition of media studies. Even if Chinese scholars widely apply Anglo-American definitions of journalistic genres to the local production (Wang and Lee 2014), they also hold that genres in China have acquired distinguishing characteristics and have shaped original sub-genres that are unique to the Chinese journalistic tradition (Xia 2014, 156).

The analysis is based on a corpus of recent academic publications that represent the current scholarly reflections on local journalism genres in China. In doing so, this paper also offers insights into the current state of research on the functions of journalistic texts and journalistic practice in the People's Republic of China. Since such studies are included in publications that are commonly available in the country, they can be considered as accepted by the political authorities and in line with the official discourse.

2. Preliminary remarks

2.1. *The corpus selection*

The corpus selected for this study consists of 14 academic publications that are currently available in China and have been produced between 2004 and 2017. I have selected works by authors who are media scholars

working in Journalism and Communication Departments of renowned Chinese universities, and whose studies have been promoted by established Chinese academic publishers connected to higher education institutions, such as Peking University, People's University of China, Suzhou University, Jin'an University and Zhongshan University.

All the publications included in the corpus focus on written journalism, either on both news and views or on just one of the two. While they all provide more or less extensive lists of sub-genres, some also study the genres of broadcast journalism. Those categories have not been taken into consideration in this study.

Only works that analyze the subject from a media studies perspective have been selected for this research. Nevertheless, their approach can vary: some treat the topic in a somewhat abstract way, dwelling on the theoretical aspects of the different genres; others offer a more practical approach to genre writing, aiming to support aspiring journalists or professionals who already work in the sector. The latter have a clear didactic purpose and provide samples of the genres and sub-genres that they discuss, reprinting and analyzing articles or parts of articles that have been published in Chinese newspapers. In doing so, they often refer to elements that define genres, such as texts sharing distinctive characteristics, a set of communicative purposes, constraints and conventions (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993).

2.2. *News and views writing in China*

This contribution focuses on the two macro-genres of which journalism is comprised: news and views. I have so far deliberately used these rather vague terms, in order to focus on the differences between the two fundamental types of output of journalistic production that represent the main functions and goals of the profession: reporting facts and expressing opinions. News aspires to objectivity; views value subjectivity.

Chinese scholarly interpretations do consider objectivity and accuracy as prescriptive traits of news, and describe the effective expression of original opinions from an individual perspective as a fundamental element to the genre of views. Similar statements, however, do not seem to fully take into account the Chinese Communist Party's discourse on the role and function of journalism in the People's Republic of China, and overlook the reality of everyday professional practice in China, which is still very much affected by the political agenda and constraints. Ideologi-

cal control of news and views production in China is a fact, according to a long tradition of Chinese media studies [1], but this is not openly discussed in the texts selected for the corpus. The historical European and Anglo-American influence on the development of both modern journalistic practice and media studies in China could be a reason for this contradiction.

In terms of journalistic practice, European protestant missionaries founded the first periodicals that, since the early nineteenth century, have been introducing foreign concepts, know-how and professional values into the Chinese communication system, which, previously, had ensured the flow of information only between the imperial court and the peripheral levels of the administration (Mittler 2004).

Later, journalism in China incorporated different traditions and ethical systems, which continue to inform the current professional practice (Hassid 2011; Tong 2014; Lupano in press). Confucianism has played an important part in inspiring the work and goals of Chinese journalists from the end of the 1800s (Nathan 1986; Vittinghoff 2002) and, after the May 4th Movement in 1919, ideology became a fundamental ingredient of information. The idea that the media have to be the "throat and tongue" (*houshe* 喉舌) [2] of the CCP has strongly influenced the professional practice since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, while the post-1978 process of commercialization has added another set of tensions and challenges to the work of journalists (Stockmann 2015; Lavagnino e Mottura 2016).

Nevertheless, the first official journalism programme in China was created by American envoys from the University of Missouri in 1920. Thus, when the field became academic, journalistic concepts and ethics taught in China had much in common with those taught in American journalism schools (Zhao J. 2008, 126; Weston 2010, 332-334). As the corpus used for this study shows, European and Anglo-American principles of journalism still appear to be the most relevant as far as the theoretical definition of genres of Chinese journalism is concerned.

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[1] See Brady 2008, Young 2013, and Stockmann 2015 among the many relevant studies on the subject.

[2] The expression has been part of the CCP's terminology since the 1940s, in connection with the spokesperson role assigned to the Party media. It became a full theory in 1985, when the General Secretary of the CCP, Hu Yaobang, claimed in an official discourse that "Party journalism has to be the 'throat and tongue' of the Party" (Lavagnino e Mottura 2016, 181-182).

3. News

3.1. *The genre of news report*

The most common and comprehensive term for news in Chinese is *xinwen baodao* (新闻报道), which can be translated as "news report". It is used in the title of many academic publications that discuss the meaning, structure and production of news and elaborate on the most relevant sub-genres.

The general understanding is that the news report genre[3] can be defined by two fundamental principles: the "principle of truthfulness" (*zhenshi xing yuanze* 真实性原则) and the "principle of objectivity" (*keguan xing yuanze* 客观性原则). The first principle means that "facts are the source for a news report. The truthfulness of a news report requires an accurate reconstruction of the true colours of a news event" (Xue and Zhang 2013a, 42-43); while the second principle states that the news report consists of "reporting an event in a truthful, balanced, fair manner, without directly and openly expressing the writer's personal bias and opinions" (Xue and Zhang 2013a, 75).

Other authors add further attributes to the news report genre: "fairness" (*gongzheng xing* 公正性), "timeliness" (*shixiao xing* 时效性), "readability" (*kedu xing* 可读性), and "other social concepts" (*qita shehui linian* 其他社会理念).

"Fairness" is considered the response to the readers' expectation that journalists "act in a professional manner when they report, write, and edit" and "chase news having the common interest in mind". Fairness is also described by its opposite: unfair journalism means to report facts that are "incorrect, incomplete, partial, superficial, without interpretation, without a background, and decontextualized" (Zhang 2014, 9).

"Timeliness" has to do with the speed with which facts are reported, without compromising the principles of news reporting (Xu 2013, 33-37).

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[3] References to the concept of genre are somewhat inconsistent in the corpus. Some scholars use the general term *leixing* (类型), defined by the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (现代汉语词典 Dictionary of Modern Chinese 2016) as a "category made of things that possess common characteristics" (791); others prefer the term *wenti* (文体), which means "genre of text" (1373); while others use *ticai* (体裁), defined as "the form of expression of a literary work" (1287).

"Readability" is linked to the readers' ease in understanding the content of an article and to the journalist's attempt to adapt the text to the target readers. The aim is to deliver the news efficiently to the most extensive readership by taking into account the gaps of age, education and cultural level of the receivers when writing. "Improving readability is the basis of the survival of the media", which can be enhanced by "paying attention to the storytelling of a news story", by providing a proper background, by offering detailed descriptions, by using a beautiful writing style, and by being creative in the use of language and in the structure of an article, thus "breaking worn-out expressions" (Zhang 2014, 10-11).

"Other social concepts" include the "guidance of society's public opinion" (*yindao shehui yulun* 引导社会舆论), meaning the educational role of the news media and their capability to promote the development of Chinese society, and the "realisation of the supervision by public opinion" (*shixing yulun jiandu* 实行舆论监督), meaning the media's function to serve as a means for the masses to exercise control over the government and administrative bodies, mainly through criticism (Xu 2013, 37-41)[4].

After describing the principles of news reports, scholars often provide writing guidance and suggestions for the most common types of articles in Chinese journalism. By doing so, they list and analyze what can be understood as "sub-genres" (*ci leixing* 次类型). Some base this analysis on the content of the articles, distinguishing between "news report on current politics" (*shizheng xinwen baodao* 时政新闻报道), "financial news report" (*caijing xinwen baodao* 财经新闻报道), "social news report" (*shehui xinwen baodao* 社会新闻报道), "culture and entertainment news report" (*wenhua yule xinwen baodao* 文化娱乐新闻报道), and "crisis report" (*tufa shijian baodao* 突发事件报道) (Xue and Zhang 2013a). Others focus on the structural characteristics and the communicative purposes of each sub-genre, listing them as "news article" (*xinxi* 信息), "news story" (*tongxun* 通讯), "special interview" (*zhuanfang*专访), "investigative report" (*diaocha baodao* 调查报道), "in-depth report" (*shendu baodao* 深度报道), "field report" (*xianchang xinwen* 现场新闻), and "event report" (*shijian xinwen* 事件新闻). Some scholars consider the means as part of the message when they add to the list the sub-genre of "e-media news" (*dianzi meiti xinwen* 电子媒体新闻) (Xia 2014; Zhang 2014).

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[4] The expression is considered controversial in the Chinese context and has been defined as a "euphemism for 'agenda control'". See Qian and Bandurski 2011; Lupano 2016, 81.

3.2. *Sub-genres of news report*

News article

As in the Anglo-American tradition, a news article in Chinese journalism is described as "a journalistic text that promptly covers relevant events that have recently happened in a succinct and straightforward manner" (Zhang 2014, 116). It is considered the most commonly used vehicle for journalistic information in the papers, on radio and on television. In terms of quantity, it is the most prolific sub-genre of news, covering two-thirds of the total of over three million articles that are published in China every day (Xu 2013, 173). Its characteristics are speed of reaction, clarity and brevity; accuracy and truthfulness; and the capability to take the readers straight into the story, as if they were seeing and perceiving the event directly. It is composed of a "headline" (*biaoti* 标题); a "date-line" (*xinxi tou* 信息头), used to give details of the source (news outlet) of the article, where it has been produced and the time it was published; an "introduction" (*daoyu* 导语); a "main body" (*zhuti* 主体); and a "conclusion" (*jieyu* 结语) (Xu 2013, 173-174; Zhang 2014, 116-120).

News story

The sub-genre of news story is defined as a text used to report in a detailed and lively manner the scene of an event or the features of a person. It uses narrative and descriptive means to convey emotions and present comments (Xia 2014, 157; Zhang 2014, 129). As the authors say, news story is "a genre of news report" that is "unique to our country. In the West, the genres of news report are distinguished as 'pure news' (*chun xinwen* 纯新闻) and 'special article' (*te gao* 特稿)". The first one corresponds to the Chinese news article, while "our country's news story belongs to the category of special article, [but] the scope of special article is wider" (Xia 2014, 156).

　　Its defining features are the "news character" (*xinwen xing* 新闻性), being the attention paid to truthfulness and to the "five Ws" of journalism writing (Who, Where, When, What, Why); the "commentary character" (*pinglun xing* 评论性), i.e., the focus on explaining the meaning of an event or on presenting points of view and opinions; and the "figurative character" (*xingxiang xing* 形象性), i.e., the use of different writing styles – such as descriptive, expressive and dialogic forms – in order to unfold a plot, describe a person or depict an environment (Zhang 2014, 129-130).

While news story shares some characteristics with news article, such as the goal "to describe meaningful people and facts of life in a timely and accurate way", news article is a wider sub-genre. The subjects covered by news story "are more restricted, as it only concentrates on very important events that touch the lives of common people". In terms of content, while news articles focus on giving a simple report of facts, news stories "do not just tell the readers which events have actually occurred, but also aim to explain the origins and development, the cause-effect relationship and the thoughts of the people involved" (Xia 2014, 157). News article is strictly tied to its codified structure, while news story can more freely use the structure most suited to a topic.

Special interview

Special interview targets personalities related to specific problems or events. It was originally just a means of investigating an issue and, as such, not distinguishable from news story, "but gradually it gained its own space and became an independent sub-genre" (Xue and Zhang 2013b, 263). Naturally, special interview and news story still share some characteristics: "Both strive for completeness and richness, and use many expressive systems to enhance their own liveliness and readability" (Zhang 2014, 138). Nevertheless, special interview gives priority to recorded words (the journalist's job is to ask questions and record the interviewee's answers, letting their words describe everything); has a specific communicative purpose and structure; is the result of questions, answers and follow-up questions, unlike interviewing spokespersons (Xue and Zhang 2013b, 263-271; Zhang 2014, 137-139). As such, it does not differ from the Anglo-American traditional interview.

Investigative report

Investigative report is a text written "after an objective investigation on the spot regarding an event". The article must "show the pattern of development of an event". It covers real life issues that affect a wide range of people: the stronger its focus, the more significant its relevance, the bigger its influence. Since it is based on facts, "its logic comes from facts, using facts as the tool to show patterns of phenomena" (Zhang 2014, 150-152). Its similarity to the Anglo-American homologue is probably among the reasons why, as mentioned above, it has been widely studied in international works.

In-depth report

The sub-genre of in-depth report "developed in the United States during the 1940s", and made its way into Chinese journalism "in the 1980s, performing an important function in promoting the reform of our news industry" (Xia 2014, 188-189). It is defined as "a form of report that sheds light on the cause and consequences of an event and analyzes the trend of development of a phenomenon. It offers a further step to the five 'Ws' and one 'H', going deeper into the 'Why' and 'How'". Its depth is about content, because it provides longer and less timely reports; about meaning, because "it has to be strictly related to social development, or to expose problems, or to promote development"; and about influence, because "it has to be thought-provoking and difficult to forget for a long time" (Xia 2014, 189-190).

If compared with the sub-genre of news article, in-depth report "goes from the surface to the deeper levels, from the event to its understanding; from external features of a phenomenon to its inner relations or its relations with people". It is also distinguished by its breadth of vision and its time extension, since "on the basis of the current situation it checks the past context, shedding light on the meaning of the future" (Xu 2013, 280-281).

Field report

Field report reproduces in a "witness" fashion the journalist's personal visit to the field where a news event has happened or is developing. By doing so, it enhances the truthfulness and credibility of the report itself. It has to be timely. It is defined as "the equivalent of live radio and TV broadcasting" (Zhang 2014, 156-157).

Event report

Event report, which is similar to field report, focuses mainly on unexpected incidents, natural disasters, health crises, serious crimes, economic crises. As such, it is the most indicated sub-genre to cover war, social protests, policy changes, mutiny etc. (Zhang 2014, 158).

E-media journalism

A number of studies focusing on news writing also dwell on e-media journalism (or new media journalism), but instead of filing it as an inde-

pendent genre, they list it as a sub-genre of news report. Among its recognized features are the capability to break time and space boundaries; to use multi-media; to overcome financial constraints, allowing netizens to spread news at low cost; to allow readers to tailor their sources of information; to make producers and consumers of news more interactive (Zhang 2014, 169).

On this point, some scholars argue that, in addition to being able to broadcast news 24/7, unlike traditional media journalism, new media journalism also "enhances the supervisory function" of journalism, since "it is not limited by governmental and administrative organisations", and since it "allows the audience to be informed about news that the institutions do not wish to broadcast" (Zhang 2014, 170). This is one of the very few instances in the corpus where authors acknowledge the limitations of expression that Chinese journalists face in their daily activity.

4. Views

4.1. *The genre of news commentary*

Like other popular genres currently found in Chinese print and online media, the genre of "news commentary" (*xinwen pinglun* 新闻评论) has developed through the media reform period: as audiences craved original and appealing content, the new commercial newspapers used the most successful genres as marketing tools, effectively contributing to the change in subjects and forms of expression in the media, including Party media organisations (Shirk 2011).

This genre has become ubiquitous in Chinese papers and websites since the second half of the 1990s, gaining significant attention among Chinese media researchers, who have pointed out its innovative character (Cheng 2008; Wang W. 2008; Zhao Z. 2012; Du 2013, 31). It is defined as "commentary conducted on a news event" (Yang 2013, 4) and as a "very important ingredient in every paper", used to express the organization's "standpoint and political viewpoint", aiming to "guide the readers' orientation on the news" (Wang H. 2004, 8). Even if, as seen before, it is not a new genre in the history of the People's Republic of China, the popularity and influence on public opinion achieved by news

commentary since the 1990s is new. News commentary is also a key ingredient for online news outlets: a button with the term "opinion" (*pinglun* 评论) or "views" (*guandian* 观点) can be found at the top of most news portals.

News commentary is characterized by a specific structure, comprising an "opening" (*kaitou* 开头), which is generally a neutral reference to the event or phenomenon that the commentary discusses; a "transition into the issue" (*ruti guocheng* 入题过程), which is needed to introduce the topic by making it interesting; an "argumentation" (*lunzheng bufen* 论证部分), which is the central and most dense part of a commentary; and an "ending" (*jiewei* 结尾), whose function is to conclude the reasoning by summarizing the previous points, by moving back to the specific case after a discussion in general terms, or by adding points that have not yet been mentioned (She 2013, 244-262).

An important aspect of the genre of news commentary lies in its production. Only a small percentage is written by employed journalists. Very often news commentaries are crafted by "independent editorial contributors" (*ziyou zhuangaoren* 自由撰稿人): academics, media workers of other outlets and professionals of other fields, who are paid by the papers to produce single articles or columns (Shen W. 2003; Gongyang 2008; Yang 2013, 94-96; Lupano 2017a). Freelance contributors, who have emerged since the early 2000s, are not constrained by the official relationship that ties regularly employed journalists to the CCP (Young 2013): their financial and organisational autonomy, often linked by a specialist knowledge, places them in an innovative position when it comes to the possibility of voicing independent opinions and expanding the debate in China's public arena. Obviously, editors remain the ultimate gatekeepers of what can and cannot be published (Gongyang 2008; Lupano 2017a, 2018).

4.2. *Sub-genres of news commentary: from the commentary department*

The genre of news commentary can be fragmented into a variety of sub-genres, but the main difference occurs between those that are produced internally, and therefore represent the voice of the publishing paper's commentary department, and those that are produced externally by independent contributors. The following are the main sub-genres of commentaries produced internally.

Editorial

The most authoritative sub-genre of news commentary is, as in the Anglo-American tradition, the editorial (*shelun* 社论), an article that represents a paper's position on the current political situation, on a very important news story, or on a crucial social phenomenon (Zhao Z. 2012, 134). Its importance is confirmed by its position – editorials often appear on the top right angle of page one, the area that most attracts the eye (Wang H. 2004).

As an expression of the paper's line, an editorial is not signed (Wang W. 2008, 361). Nevertheless, commentary departments often ask freelance contributors to provide editorials, which are paid more than other types of news commentary (Lupano 2016). When they are not written internally, the paper's editors give instructions to the contributor on the viewpoint that they want to be presented, resulting in stances that, even if produced by freelancers, are closer to the official discourse when compared with other types of commentary (Wang W. 2008; Lupano 2017b).

Editorials are considered "the media organization's political face and flag" (Yang 2013, 209), and only cover subjects that are extremely prominent. For this reason, in China, they do not appear regularly: *People's Daily* publishes six or seven editorials per month on average, while provincial papers publish two or three or even none in a month (Yang 2013, 209). The ones published by institutional papers are more authoritative than the ones published by commercial papers[5]: the *People's Daily* editorials are "the most authoritative commentary vehicle in use", since they represent "by extension the CCP Central Committee" (Gitter and Fang 2018).

Commentary signed Ren Zhongping

A sub-genre that is strictly linked to the Chinese political setting is commentary signed with the alias Ren Zhongping (*Ren Zhongping shuming pinglun* 仁仲平署名评论), which has been published in the *People's Daily* since 1998. It generally appears on page one and is regularly republished by other outlets. These articles are very long (over 6,000 words). Although

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[5] Definitions of institutional and commercial papers and discussions of their characteristics can be found, among others, in Stockmann 2015 and Lupano 2016.

focusing on very important internal or international issues, their writing style is kept close to the spoken language (Li F. 2013, 231-234).

An alias such as Ren Zhongping conceals anonymous teams that, working under pen-names, are responsible for the production, editing and approval of such texts. Such groups exist in the most important Party papers, with the aim of establishing authoritative names, in order to better compete in the crowded commentary environment, while also diversifying the perceived sources of official commentaries. In fact, at first glance, the pen-names appear to be normal names, but they are actually homophones for the CCP organs that they come from (Gitter and Fang 2018). Their status is higher than that of other commentaries, and Ren Zhongping is the most authoritative of such names, being homophonous of "Important People's Daily Commentary" (*Renmin Ribao zhongyao pinglun* 人民日报重要评论) (Mi 2009).

This system was in place before the foundation of the People's Republic of China to protect the militants' identity, and it was also widely used both during the Cultural Revolution and after Mao Zedong's death, when it helped CCP reformists promote their views against the Party conservatives (Shen B. 2009). Since the second half of the 1990s, they have been rediscovered, with the aim of circumventing the public's growing resistance to CCP propaganda. Nevertheless, pen-names are relatively easy to decode and collections of commentaries published as books under one or another pen-name are on sale in the country's bookstores, describing the production process and the link with the institution for which they speak (Gitter and Fang 2018, 12).

Commentator's article

Important subjects that are not considered crucial enough to make it into an editorial can become the topic of a commentator's article (*pinglunyuan wenzhang* 评论员文章), a sub-genre that has grown significantly in recent years due to the decline of frequency of editorials. Like editorials, commentator's articles are produced by the paper's commentary department. Their main difference lies in their average size, which is shorter than editorial, and its importance, which is second only to editorial (Yang 2013, 209).

Commentator's articles can also be anonymous (*bu shuming pinglunyuan wenzhang* 不署名评论员文章), but in this case, unlike editorials, they are considered a voice with "official character" (*guanfang secai* 官方色彩), instead of the official voice of the paper (Yang 2013, 210).

Short commentary and editor's commentary

Short commentary (*duanping* 短评) is defined as a "short and pithy commentary, with limited length, unitary content, to-the-point analysis and flexible use". It focuses on one main point and is "short, new and lively". It is short, because "it does not use many arguments, its theoretical features are not very strong and it is straightforward". It is new, because it tends to "stick to the most sensitive point that can better resonate with the people", but its analysis is carried out "from an independent point of view, with the result of often presenting new conceptions". Its liveliness comes from its wording, which is "vivid and varied" (Yang 2013, 214-215).

Editor's commentary (*bianzhe anyu* 编者按语) is similar to short commentary, since both are attached to a news report and do not exist as independent texts. Editor's commentary can be a critique, an explanation or a suggestion added to a news report. It can "explain a situation connected to the main story, provide relevant background and present the identity of the author, in order to help the reader fully understand the content of the report" (Yang 2013, 215).

Narrative commentary

Defined as "a combination of news report and news commentary" (Yang 2013, 215), narrative commentary (*shuping* 述评) is an interesting sub-genre of news commentary. "News reports tell facts, clearly distinct from analytical comments". However, if journalists feel that the mere narration of news does not fully allow it to express its meaning clearly, they can use narrative commentary. This sub-genre mixes a narrative part and a commentary part, but "even if the narrative part takes up the bigger space in the article, its purpose is to serve the commentary part, which is the soul of narrative commentary" (Yang 2013, 216). Its goal is to express the author's point of view and analysis of the facts that are central to the text.

4.3. *Sub-genres of news commentary: from external commentators*

Commentary on current affairs

Chinese researchers have highlighted the sub-genre of commentary on current affairs (*shiping* 时评), defined as an article that expresses the

author's opinion on a recent event or on a social issue (Lupano 2016, 63-65). The success of these articles, particularly in commercial newspapers, has been such that journalists and scholars have written about a "commentary on current affairs fever" (*shiping re* 时评热) (Nong 2002; Cheng 2008). The first commentary of this type appeared in the *Southern Weekend* in 1994 (Li W. 2006; Ding 2009).

Commentary on current affairs is often published in conjunction with the most important news of the day. Newsworthiness and timeliness are described as its main features, along with an approach from an individual perspective, normally a specialist's angle: that of a lawyer, a doctor, a teacher, an IT expert, an engineer, a historian etc (Zhao 2012, 152; Yuan 2016, 105-106).

Since commentaries on current affairs are always signed, the author takes responsibility for the opinions expressed, which, in theory, could diverge from the orientation of the paper and from the official discourse on the specific subject. The name of the author is always followed by a basic profile: it can vary from "commentator" (*pinglunyuan* 评论员) or "column writer" (*zhuanlan zuojia* 专栏作家) to the precise professional role of the person. The author can also be a reader, in which case the article falls into the category of "readers' letters" (*duzhe lai xin* 读者来信) (Wang W. 2008; Li F. 2013, 267-269).

Among the characteristics of commentary on current affairs, scholars mention the "citizen identity" (*gongmin shenfen* 公民身份), meaning that the authors are citizens who, due to their profession or personal experience, are entitled to express their opinion on the subject in hand. This feature is linked to the individuality (*geren xing* 个人性) of the writers, meaning that they do not represent a media organization or a social group, but voice their personal opinions arising from their own individual perspective. This produces a diversification of opinions and a diversification of styles. Another feature is a direct, poignant, simple and agile style of writing (Yang 2013, 219-224). The "critical character" has also been identified as an important attribute of this sub-genre, which is strictly structured into presentation of the original fact, main argument, discussion of the argument, conclusion, and ending (Yuan 2016, 106).

Column

Columns (*zhuanlan* 专栏) started to develop from the end of the 1970s as a sub-genre of news commentary. They belong to a single writer who regularly publishes under a recurrent title in a recurrent page space. The

writing style is diversified and so is the content, since column has a very pronounced individual character. Currently, many famous authors and freelance contributors have their own column in magazines and news portals (Liao 2017, 176-177).

Essay

The sub-genre of essay (*zawen* 杂文) is defined as an "artistic political comment" with vivid and hard-hitting features. Its focus is on minor news stories (Yang 2013, 224-226). Despite being considered a genre of literary writing due to its attention to narrative detail, its strong critical and argumentative features make it a common form of newspaper writing. Humour is an important element of this sub-genre and is used to unveil social fakes, evils and scandals (Liao 2017, 179-180).

5. Final remarks

This paper has aimed to present the ways in which news, views and their sub-genres are interpreted in Chinese media studies, a topic on which works in international languages are still scarce.

The analysis of a corpus of Chinese language scholarly books has demonstrated that such genres have, in some cases, acquired distinctive characteristics and shaped sub-genres that are unique to the local tradition. However, it has also shown how Chinese academic reflections on media studies, when focusing on the prescriptive characteristics of news and views, are still strongly inspired by the Anglo-American tradition, and therefore overlook the specific political and media context in which Chinese journalism operates.

This contradiction has an influence on the life and production of journalists working in the Chinese news media, who have to negotiate their professional identity in a context characterized by strong ideological constraints, high market competition and a demanding public.

Starting from this analysis of the established academic field on journalistic genres, I plan to deepen my research on the topic in future, taking two different directions. First, I will investigate texts produced by Chinese-language media outlets, in order to verify how far the definitions of genres described in this paper actually apply to the practice of journalistic production in China today. Since journalists can be consid-

ered members of a discourse community of professionals who produce texts that are codified in genres, a linguistic analysis of relevant journalistic texts could be carried out by applying Swales (1990) and Bhatia's (1993) approach to genre studies. Secondly, I will discuss my findings with members of the discourse community, in order to assess how the journalistic genres are understood and defined by the journalists who use them. The aim will be to clarify if, how and to what extent the media studies theory perspective and the reality of journalistic practice differ in today's China.

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