



When a Party Paper Meets COVID-19: Crisis and Legitimacy in Renmin Ribao's Commentary Articles

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ABSTRACT: Similar to many other countries, journalistic production in China during the first half of 2020 was dominated on a thematic level by the COVID-19 pandemic. The trend included the mouthpiece of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), *Renmin Ribao*. Its news and commentary articles, which are widely republished by other media, influence the country's political life, and contribute to the process of meaning generation in the news discourse and to the CCP's effort to align Chinese citizens to official narratives. *Renmin Ribao* can therefore provide a relevant source to investigate the relationship between political power and the COVID-19 pandemic, starting from the hypothesis that the paper's narrative would aim at discursively turning the international health crisis into a piece of positive propaganda. This study aims to verify whether and how the paper did so, and to question the assumption that the outlet's media discourse can be equated to the CCP official discourse.

The research is developed as a case study and blends quantitative and qualitative tools grounded on Applied Linguistics, Discourse-Historical Approach, and Frame Analysis, in order to analyse a corpus of commentaries that have appeared in the outlet's online edition in 2020. By applying a Genre Analysis approach, the study also offers insights into the possibility to identify distinguishing characteristics and communicative goals in the different sub-genres of *Renmin Ribao* commentaries.

KEY WORDS: Frame analysis; Chinese media; journalistic genres; News commentary; People's Daily; Covid-19



INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Similar to many other countries, journalistic production in China during the first half of 2020 was dominated on a thematic level by the COVID-19 epidemic (Jones). Many column inches were given to both the narration of facts and commentary, a general trend that included a diverse array of newspapers in the People's Republic of China (PRC). According to a search on the Factiva database,¹ more than 80,000 articles were published in that period that contained, either in the title or in the lead paragraph, the most common term to refer to the disease, "new corona pneumonia" (新冠肺炎).²

Between the beginning of January and the end of June 2020, *Renmin Ribao* (人民日报, RMRB), the newspaper that this study focuses on, published 3,813 articles containing the term. For comparison, in the same period the news outlet featured 5,666 articles carrying the name of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and President of the PRC, Xi Jinping, in the title or in the lead paragraph.

As the mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee, and despite its lack of popularity among the general readership, RMRB holds a special position in the country's media landscape because of its close editorial alignment with CCP policy. Its commentary articles are particularly influential in China's political life, being the expression of the CCP's orientation, and are widely (sometimes forcibly) republished by the other national and local media. Therefore, they can be considered an important ingredient in the process of meaning generation in the Chinese media discourse and in the effort to align Chinese citizens to the official narratives (de Burgh).

As a result, RMRB provides a relevant source to investigate the relationship between political power and the COVID-19 pandemic, starting from the hypothesis that the paper's narrative would aim at discursively turning the international health crisis into a piece of positive propaganda (Lemus-Delgado; Yang and Chen). The first research question of this study is whether (and how) the newspaper attempted to do so, and, in relation to this, whether RMRB media discourse can be equated to the CCP official discourse (RQ 1). Any study regarding RMRB is done under the assumption that, being the voice of the highest power ranks in the country, it offers one-dimensional, propaganda-oriented narratives when faced with topical issues—a good example of which is the national and global crisis that followed the COVID-19 outbreak.

¹ The research was carried out on the Factiva database in December 2020. This study is part of the research projects developed by the Contemporary Asia Research Centre of the University of Milan, of which the author is a member.

² The official, full term is 'New type of crown-shaped virus' (新型冠状病毒), which features the 'buzzword' (热词) list of the online translation platform created within the China Keywords research project, promoted since 2014 by the China International Publishing Group and the Chinese Academy of Translation (See Mottura 7-8).



The research, which mixes quantitative and qualitative tools and is methodologically grounded in the Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak), Frame Analysis and Applied Linguistics, focuses on discourse and language, following a tradition of studies that have highlighted the characteristics of Chinese “official language” (Link) in the CCP political discourse. The term refers to a language that is highly centered on “formulations” (提法), meaning keywords (Williams; Durant) and fixed expressions as well as the order in which they have to appear in a speech or be written in a text (Schoenals). Such language is the result of the CCP’s theorization on ‘correct’ words in the national public discourse being a fundamental tool to rule the people (Ji; Lu; Qian; Li Z.). The study is also characterized by a Genre Analysis perspective (Swales; Bhatia) and discusses, as a secondary question, whether distinguishing features and communicative goals can be found in different RMRB commentary sub-genres (RQ 2).

The research is carried out by applying qualitative text analysis to a corpus of journalistic texts dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic that have appeared in the paper’s online edition in the first six months of 2020. Only articles belonging to the genre of commentaries made it into the corpus. For this reason, after a description of the corpus selection, the paper briefly summarizes the most relevant sub-genres of commentary before moving to the analysis of the corpus and the discussion of results.

CORPUS SELECTION

The time frame of the research was identified according to the evolution of the pandemic in the PRC. After the outbreak in January 2020 and a peak between February and March, by June 2020 China’s political authorities had declared the ‘war on the virus’ a national success, discursively sealing the event as an epic endeavor of the whole people. The turn was marked by the issue of the white paper “Fighting COVID-19: China in Action” by the State Council Information Office of the PRC (China Daily). The situation was consequently deemed under control for the following year, until new outbreaks at the end of 2021 again put the country under pressure (Reuters). At the time of writing, the events following the new wave were still unfolding, therefore the study was maintained within the 2020 pandemic cycle.

The first RMRB article of the almost 4,000 (of all genres) that displayed the Chinese term for COVID-19 in the title or lead paragraph between January and June 2020 appeared on 25 January 2020, with noticeable delay compared to the actual beginning of the health emergency. The number of articles published over the period was consistent with the evolution of the pandemic in China, with 5 appearing in January, 663 in February, 1035 in March, 926 in April, 622 in May and 562 in June.

For this study, the corpus only included opinion articles that appeared on a specific sub-section of the RMRB portal (人民网) called “Array of the most important opinions” (重要言论军), a basic online database that collects the majority of opinion



articles published by RMRB, divided by sub-genres and presented in chronological order.

RMRB features sub-genres of commentary articles that belong to the general categories identified by the Chinese literature on the subject as well as sub-genres that are peculiar to the outlet. They tend to vary in themes, breadth, expressive style, authors and authoritativeness. The next two paragraphs offer a presentation of the sub-genres of commentary in the Chinese press and in RMRB.

THE GENRE OF COMMENTARY IN CHINESE JOURNALISM

Journalistic production can be divided into two main textual genres, news (or news article), and opinion (or journalistic commentary), which represent the main functions and objectives of the journalistic profession: to tell facts and express ideas. News aspires to be objective; opinions enhance subjectivity. In the Chinese journalistic tradition, these two genres include a multitude of sub-genres (次类型) which, while sharing many fundamental characteristics, differ in style, structure and content.

The Chinese literature on journalism suggests objectivity and correctness are prescriptive traits of news, while identifying the core elements in the genre of opinion to be the expression of original ideas from an individual point of view. Such statements, however, ignore the CCP's view on the role and functions of journalism in the PRC, and do not take into account the reality of daily professional practice in China, which is heavily influenced by the political agenda. As a long tradition of Chinese media studies states, ideological control over news and opinion production in China is a fact. However, journalism studies produced and disseminated in China do not dwell on this aspect (Liao).

The genre of journalistic commentary (新闻评论) has experienced an increase of popularity since the reform era, particularly since the 1990s. For many scholars, journalistic commentary is a key ingredient for newspapers (Zhao Z.) as it is used to "guide readers in understanding the news" and to "express the point of view" of the editorial teams (Wang H. 8). The basic structure of these texts includes an opening (开头), which usually refers to the event or phenomenon discussed by the comment; a transition (入题过程), used to introduce the topic and make it interesting; a demonstration (论证部分), which is the core of the comment; and a conclusion (结尾), which summarizes the main points and brings the argumentation back to the specific case (She 244-262).

Chinese scholars break the genre of news commentary down into different sub-genres, which enjoy different degrees of authoritativeness. The editorial (社论) is considered the most authoritative as it represents the position of the paper on a current political situation, a story, or on an important social phenomenon (Zhao Z. 134). Since it deals only with very prominent subjects, it is not frequent. RMRB publishes, on average, no more than six or seven editorials per month, while provincial or local newspapers produce only two or three, sometimes even none, in a month. The editorial is the "flag



and political face of a newspaper” (Yang 209), therefore those published by institutional newspapers are more authoritative than those produced by commercial news outlets.³ In both cases, an essential feature is the lack of signature. Consequently, the positions presented in the texts are close to the official discourse (Wang W. 361).

Relevant topics that are not considered key enough to be covered in editorials are addressed by the ‘commentator’s article’ (评论员文章), a sub-genre that has become more pervasive in recent years due to the decline in the frequency of editorials. These articles are also produced by the paper’s editorial staff, but are shorter than editorials. When anonymous, they represent the voice of the institutions (Yang 209-210).

Commentary on current affairs (时评) first appeared in 1994 on *Southern Weekend* (Ding). It expresses the author’s opinion on a recent event or on an important social issue and has enjoyed great success in commercial and later in institutional outlets (Cheng). These texts are linked to the news of the day, to recent events, or to pressing social problems, which they approach from a specialist perspective (Zhao Z. 152). Independent contributors (自由撰稿人), who write in line with their expertise, produce a large part of the commentary on current affairs. Often, they are professionals such as lawyers, doctors, engineers or academics. An author’s bio normally appears next to their signature (Yang 94-96; Yuan D. 105-106). Due to their formal and economic independence from any media outlet, as well as their specialist knowledge, these contributors can exercise some degree of autonomy within the boundaries of editorial gatekeeping (Gongyang; Lupano, “Freelancers” 160-161). The author takes responsibility for the opinions they express, which, in theory, could be in contrast with the editorial line and with the official discourse. Commentaries on current affairs can therefore differ greatly from one another in terms of meaning and writing style (Yang 219-224). A critical stance is fundamental in these commentaries, which, in most cases, offer advice aimed at improving a situation or solving a problem.⁴

COMMENTARY SUB-GENRES IN RMRB

In addition to the above-mentioned sub-genres, RMRB also publishes a number of sub-genres of commentary that are unique to the outlet. The tone, argumentation, writing style and focus in each article may vary, despite all being published by a newspaper conceived for propaganda and political mobilization, and despite the consistent editorial line and the recurrence of key terms, formulations and concepts.

RMRB marks its opinion articles with the indication of the sub-genre they belong to. In the digital version of the newspaper, the name of the sub-genre is part of the title

³ For a discussion of the differences between institutional and commercial media in China, see Lupano, “Sport” 43-44.

⁴ For details about other sub-genres such as column (专栏), essay (杂文), short comment (短评), editor’s comment (编者按语) and others, which are not relevant to this case study, see Yang (214-2168) and Lupano, “News.”



and is repeated in the byline. On the “Array of the most important opinions” page the articles are also grouped by sub-genre, whose hierarchy is visually clear.

As expected, the editorial is RMRB’s most authoritative comment, being the direct expression of the views prevailing in the CCP Central Committee (Gitter and Fang). Its status is matched by the sophisticated writing style, characterised by a cultured and refined language, rich in abstract, metaphorical, magniloquent and redundant expressions and images.

Exclusive to RMRB is a Ren Zhongping (任仲平) article. It belongs to a sub-genre of commentary that only some Chinese institutional outlets produce, which are written under pseudonyms by anonymous teams representing the voice of the institution that rules over a paper. In the case of RMRB, the leading institution is the Central Propaganda Department, the highest authority in terms of official communication in the country. Therefore, a Ren Zhongping article, whose homophone is a contraction of the expression “RMRB important commentary” (人民日报重要评论) (Mi; Tsai and Kao), is considered the most authoritative team commentary. It is used only to address key topics and ranks immediately below the editorial, even if its limited appearances (only 2 were published in 2020; 4 in 2019; 3 in 2018) and its large size (over 6000-7000 characters, more than three times the length of an editorial) make it a unique text in the landscape of opinion articles. Despite its indisputable importance, a Ren Zhongping commentary is characterized by a more accessible language than the editorial (Li F. 231-234).

Other important issues that would not make it into an editorial or a Ren Zhongping article can feature in a RMRB commentator’s article (评论员文章), which is generally produced by the outlet’s internal commentators and has a standard size of 1500-2000 characters.

A RMRB commentary on current affairs ranks below a commentator’s article and often presents a hybrid style: due to its ‘specialist’ character, it can display specialised language and original argumentation, while remaining within the boundaries of the official discourse. It is shorter than texts belonging to other sub-genres and deals with themes that are close to everyday life.

Another sub-genre that is unique to RMRB is a commentary called Wang Hai Lou (望海楼).⁵ Since 2005, it appears regularly as a column on the overseas edition of the paper (海外版), dealing with issues concerning international relations or national phenomena of international relevance (Zhou H.). The text can be anonymous or signed by members of the editorial staff, but also by prominent personalities. The style draws on formulations and expressions taken from the official discourse. The size of these texts is halfway between editorials and commentaries on current affairs. The communicative goal of Wang Hai Lou articles is to promote the interests and image of China abroad (Zeng and Li).

⁵ The name means “The building overlooking the sea.”



ANALYSIS: FRAMES

This analysis was carried out first through extensive reading, in order to identify the topics linked to the main theme of COVID-19 in the texts of the sub-corpus. The following dominant topics were found: economic development; health and the healthcare system; international relations; matters of life; and societal response to the epidemic.

The final corpus contains sub-genres that the Chinese academic literature and RMRB itself consider the most authoritative or the most popular, as outlined in the previous paragraphs. In order to allow a significant qualitative analysis, up to ten articles were picked per single sub-genre, each one embodying at least one of the dominant topics. With the aim to maximize the variation within the corpus, the selection also took into account the dates of publication, attempting to include texts published across the duration of time covered by the case study. The final corpus accounts for 43,979 Chinese characters, and includes 1 editorial, 1 Ren Zhongping article, 10 commentator's articles, 6 Wang Hai Lou articles and 10 commentaries on current affairs.

In order to answer RQ 1, an inductive approach (Smetko and Valkenburg) was used in order to detect any frames that, in connection with each topic, discursively contribute to turning the international health crisis into positive propaganda. Frames, as "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese 150), are valuable theoretical resources when investigating the interplay between the political and the journalistic discourses. Consciously or unconsciously, journalists frame stories, and their articles can communicate issues "in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 52).

The articles were then divided in accordance with their dominant topic, and their content and language were analyzed. Entman's idea (52) that a "text contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images [...] and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" can be applied to China. Given the previously mentioned fundamental role of formulations in the Chinese public discourse, the link between keywords/expressions and frames is a particularly strong and direct one.

For this study, keywords were extracted based on word lists, concordances and collocations via AntConc software (Anthony, *Segment* and *Ant*) in order to support the identification of recurrent frames. Four frames were found: 1) People's War, 2) Putting Life First, 3) Moderate Prosperity, 4) Community of Destiny. The titles of these frames are all existing formulations, which are located at the core of the current Chinese political discourse.

The sub-paragraphs below offer a brief presentation of each frame, followed by Table 1, which displays the identified frames and the most relevant keywords connected to each frame. The relevance of keywords was assessed in terms of frequency and meaning (capability to represent the frame). Frames are presented from left to right



from the most to the least frequent within the corpus; keywords are presented in descending order of frequency (keyword 1 being the most frequent).

PEOPLE'S WAR

People's war (人民战争) is a concept that enjoys a wide symbolic scope. Xi Jinping has used it since the early stages of the pandemic, but the concept traces back to Mao Zedong's Thought (毛泽东思想) and, in particular, to his theorization on how to win the war against the Japanese invaders at the end of 1930s.⁶ The idea was that the whole populace, in particular the peasants, be armed and participate in the struggle against the invaders. However, after the foundation of the PRC, the concept evolved into much more than just a military strategy:

For Mao, people's war was not only a blueprint for victory against the Japanese, but a source of political legitimacy. [...] [The] discourse of people's war supplied the CCP with an explanation for its victory over both the Japanese and the Nationalist Party, and a source of legitimacy. It was able to defeat armies with superior military and technological support on the basis of its magic weapon—the support of the people (Guan 175, 179).

In the corpus, this frame is manifested in the high number of terms related to the semantic area of war and in recurring discourses on unity of the people and heroism of groups and individuals such as medical personnel, Party cadres, taxi drivers etc.

PUTTING LIFE FIRST

As a self-declared representative of the people, one of the supposed characteristics of the CCP is to "put people first" (以人为本). The concept comes from the ancient book *Guanzi* (管子), which is a collection of the thoughts of Guan Zhong (管仲 725-645 a.C.), a famous minister of the Qi State during the "Spring and Autumn" period. Hu Jintao introduced it in the contemporary public discourse by making it part of the concept of "scientific development," the key formulation of his leadership (2002-2012).

In 2008, in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan province, the concept of "putting life first" (生命至上) was embedded into the official discourse on "putting people first" in order to describe the CCP's approach to the crisis.⁷ This formulation, which also became the title of a 2013 film directed by Lu Yunfei (路云飞), has been widely used in the official discourse on COVID-19.

⁶ The reference is to *On Protracted War*, the collection of a series of lectures that were delivered by Mao Zedong from May 26 to June 3, 1938, at the Yen-an Association for the Study of the War of Resistance Against Japan, which was later included in *Mao's Selected Works*.

⁷ See Li T. 8-10.



In the corpus, the concept frames the discourse on most medical and social aspects of the health crisis in China by showing the urgency from CCP leaders and cadres to save lives and to take care of the people's health.

MODERATE PROSPERITY

Moderate prosperity (小康社会) is the promise of the end of poverty and of prosperity for the whole people. According to the State Council Information Office of the PRC (SCIO),

Xiaokang [...] refers to a status of moderate prosperity whereby people are neither rich nor poor but free from want and toil. It has been the people's wish since ancient times to live a life of peace, stability and happiness. In the early period of reform and opening up, based on its own national conditions, China articulated the goal of building a moderately prosperous society, which demonstrated its concern for improving the people's wellbeing, and its commitment to protecting and promoting human rights.

The concept, which originates from classical Confucian discourse, has been part of the leadership lingo for decades. Deng Xiaoping set moderate prosperity as a goal for the country since 1979, when discussing his defining thought of the 'four modernizations'. The formulation was then adopted by Jiang Zemin, who in 2002 announced that China would achieve 'comprehensive moderate prosperity' by 2020; and by Hu Jintao, who reinforced the promise in 2007 and 2012. Xi Jinping embraced the task and made it

the goal of his tenure and almost synonymous with the rise of China [...]. [The concept] plays a role in Party-state legitimacy by forging a continuity between past Chinese traditions and a future Chinese utopia. Emphasis on the establishment of a *xiaokang* society highlights the success of the CCP in leading China along a path that is distinctively Chinese" (Smith 63).

In spring 2020, the articles in the corpus celebrated the achievement as an extraordinary success in the midst of a health crisis. The "White Paper on Moderate Prosperity" published in 2021 would later confirm the accomplishment (SCIO).

In the corpus, the frame often emerges in relation to the topics of economy and technology, and to words related to the industrial and manufacturing sector.

COMMUNITY OF SHARED FUTURE

In the past, the use of the concept of 'community' (共同体) was rather limited and the term was used to name foreign entities such as the European Economic Community (欧洲经济共同体). However, in recent years 'community' has become an important part of the public discourse on international relations, especially since the introduction of the 'Belt and Road Project' (一带一路). One of the concepts elaborated within this theorization is in fact the 'global community of shared future' (人类命运共同体), which



entails Beijing's positive stance towards globalization and the presentation of China as a champion of global harmony and prosperity. Stemming from the idea that "the future of each and every nation and country is interlocked" (Cui), the concept has become a four-season *topos* in Chinese public diplomacy. It has been included in the statute of the CCP in 2017 and in the Constitution of the PRC in 2018, and it was one chapter of the White Paper on COVID-19 in 2020.

In the corpus, the concept of community of shared future frames the discourse on international relations by showing that the CCP contributes to global public health, for example by sharing scientific data and sending aid to other countries.

	<i>PEOPLE'S WAR</i>	<i>PUTTING LIFE FIRST</i>	<i>MODERATE PROSPERITY</i>	<i>COMMUNITY OF SHARED FUTURE</i>
KEYWORD 1	我们 We 人民 The people 群众 The masses 全国 The whole country 中华民族 The Chinese nation	疫情 Epidemic 病毒 Virus	发展 Development	人类 The human kind
KEYWORD 2	抗疫 To fight the pandemic 斗争 Battle 抗击 To resist 防线 Defensive line 阻击战 The battle to stop	健康 Health	物资 Goods, supplies	合作 Co-operation
KEYWORD 3	力量 Strength	医疗 Medical treatment	脱贫 Lifting out of poverty	共同体 Community
KEYWORD 4	战胜 To defeat 打赢 To win	生命 Life 生活 Life	企业 Companies 国有企业 State companies	各国 Every country
KEYWORD 5	服务 To serve	保障 To safeguard	复工 To return to work	全世界 The whole world
KEYWORD 6	能力 Capability	公共卫生 Public health	小康社会 Moderately prosperous society	
KEYWORD 7	信心 Trust, faith	民生 People's welfare		
KEYWORD 8	精神 [Chinese] Spirit	生命安全 Life safety		
KEYWORD 9	团结 Unity 凝聚 To come together			
Keyword 10	共同 Common 英雄 Hero			

Table 1. Frames and associated keywords (with recurrent synonymous) in sub-corpus B.



ANALYSIS: GENRES

In order to answer RQ 2, fine-grained qualitative analysis of the corpus followed, focusing on potential links between frames and the sub-genre to which each text belongs. The following sub-paragraphs discuss the results of analysis per single sub-genre.

EDITORIAL

Two editorials featured the selected RMRB page in the first semester of 2020 that had COVID-19 as main topic. Both appeared in May, but only one fulfils the criteria for sub-corpus B. Falling into the economy topic, the text, published on 1 May 2020 (Workers' Day) stresses the role of workers in the pandemic, praising their efforts and sense of responsibility in "fighting against COVID-19 and in promoting economic and social development." The CCP is presented as the actor that, in unity with the people, has led the country with wisdom, allowing the people to join forces to successfully fight the war against the pandemic. Trust in the CCP is discursively promoted through the recurrence of the 'people's war' and the 'moderate prosperity' frames.

The article satisfies the sub-genre's goal of expressing the voice of the institutions, by echoing the CCP's discourse on the exceptional unity of the Chinese people; the heroic attitude of citizens at all levels; and the success of the Chinese model in resuming its economy after the setback produced by the pandemic.

REN ZHONGPING COMMENTARY

Only one Ren Zhongping article was published in the first semester of 2020 (on 26 March), and it was dedicated to COVID-19. The 7,265 character-long text covers all the frames, but it particularly stresses the 'people's war' frame by celebrating the Chinese people's epic efforts to overcome the crisis. It commends the courage, heroism, selflessness, unity and cooperation displayed by all the citizens and by Wuhan residents in particular, while also advertising China's open and generous attitude towards the rest of the world. The article argues that China's strength lies in the people's capability to resist through hardship and to come together as one, which is presented as an effect of the CCP's successful leadership and of the advantages and superiority of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The stress on the concept of unity is supported by a variety of related expressions (i.e. 'concentrate the forces' 集中力量, 'help each other on the same boat' 同舟共济).



COMMENTATOR'S ARTICLE

A commentator's article was the first commentary on COVID-19 to appear on RMRB. It was published on 3 February 2020, more than a month after the warning coming from local health professionals that there was a possible SARS-like outbreak in Wuhan (Li Y.). The text looks at the crisis through the 'people's war' frame, as it argues that the "strong spirit of unity" (伟大团结精神) of the Chinese people and their ability to "join forces to achieve great results" (集中力量办大事) is a manifestation of the "superiority" (优越性) of the socialist system.

Following this first text, there is abundant production of commentator's articles in the first six months of 2020, but only ten satisfied the criteria to enter the sub-corpus. The ones published between February and March celebrate the dedication of medical and community workers in the hardest days of the pandemic. The dominating frames are 'people's war' and 'putting life first'. In April, the 'moderate prosperity' frame prevailed, with commentaries that discuss how to react to the negative effects of the pandemic and insist on the goals set by the PRC to alleviate poverty by 2020. The commentaries published in May highlight China's co-operative attitude and generous actions towards the rest of the world, as well as China's success over COVID-19. The people's heroism and a trademark 'Chinese spirit' when facing adversities discursively become factors that prove the advantages of the Chinese government model. A slight change in tone appears in the commentator's article published in June, where it briefly reflects on shortcomings in the Chinese healthcare system, just before reverting to a positive propaganda style by stressing once again that the people's health always comes first in the CCP preoccupations. The articles show no distancing from the official discourse, both in terms of arguments and set expressions.

WANG HAI LOU ARTICLE

Six articles belonging to this sub-genre and satisfying the selection criteria were found. Three were published in February, one in March and two in June.

Two February commentaries frame the discourse in terms of 'people's war', particularly in relation to the concept of unity, similarly to the commentator's articles published in the same month. However, the other Wang Hai Lou article published in February presents distinguishing features, as it focuses on a matter-of-life subject rather than dwelling on strictly propaganda subjects. The text discusses the need for a law to ban the trade and consumption of wild animals, starting from the hypothesis that COVID-19 was the result of zoonosis. In line with its content, the article stands out in the sub-corpus and among Wang Hai Lou commentaries for the use of direct, simple language which matches the communicative goal to provide suggestions to the rulers and to express a call for practical action to contain a practical problem.

The March commentary goes back to typical Wang Hai Lou expressive means and goals, as well as to the 'people's war' frame, as it celebrates the CCP as the one political



party in the world which, in contrast with capitalist parties, is truly able to respond to the people's needs and which truly works with the people's interest in mind. In the commentary, these are described as the factors that allowed the Chinese people to react as one to the hardship of the health crisis.

One of the two June commentaries takes a similar line, by arguing the superiority of the Chinese government system and the CCP's attitude as the reasons behind China's declared success in its war against COVID-19. The other one was written on the occasion of a China-Africa solidarity and anti-epidemic summit. 'Community of shared future' frames the discourse when the text focuses on the 'friendship' between the two areas and stresses their mutual help and co-operation in the pandemic.

COMMENTARY ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

Plenty of commentaries on current affairs revolving around the pandemic appeared on RMRB during the first semester of 2020, but only ten made it into the sub-corpus. Their distribution over the first half of 2020 is as follows: none in January, three in February, one in March, two in April, two in May and two in June. The earliest commentary on current affairs focusing on Covid-19 was published on 6 February.

In terms of content and style, three out of ten commentaries appear extremely close to the official discourse on COVID-19, and (had the outlet not filed them under this sub-genre) could be easily confused with texts belonging to more 'institutional' sub-genres, such as editorials and Wang Hai Lou articles. Two of these appeared in February, one praising the heroism and spirit of unity of the Chinese people, the other celebrating the speed at which the two new COVID-19 hospitals in Wuhan were built, as a manifestation of the superiority of the Chinese system (Wang, Zhu and Umlauf). On 11 March, a commentary on donations coming from CCP members to support the fight against COVID-19 offers once again the chance to dwell on the subject of the Party's devotion to the people. The dominant frames are 'people's war' and 'putting life first'.

The other commentaries on current affairs included in the sub-corpus develop matter-of-life subjects, either by stressing unexpected positive outcomes of the pandemic or by discussing how to tackle problems that emerged as side effects in the management of the health crisis. Topics go from the development of smart cities, AI and online health services as a consequence of the pandemic, to discussing how to avoid sight problems in kids as a result of online teaching; from praising the key role of State companies in supporting the needs of the people in times of emergency, to presenting a programme of international solidarity in co-operation with the World Health Organisation. 'Moderate prosperity' frames the discourse on technological or financial advancements, while 'putting life first' and 'community of shared future' also emerge as minor frames.



LIMITATIONS AND REMARKS

The choice of working on a single news outlet, where the direct influence of the CCP's narrative and communication priorities is palpable, is a fundamental limitation to this research. A wider corpus that included also commercial papers could offer further insights. However, would different frames emerge if more 'outspoken' outlets were analyzed? Due to the extremely sensitive topic at hand and the tight control of the CCP on the country's media, this would be an interesting line of research to pursue. Another limitation to this paper, which is due to space restriction, is the lack of observations on writing styles in relation to sub-genres, an analysis that could add to the study of genres of Chinese journalism. At theoretical level, instead, further reflection should be encouraged on the direct link between formulations and frames in the Chinese context. Is such a link stronger in the Chinese case compared to other language, political and social contexts? If so, why?

As far as this paper's research questions are concerned, starting from RQ 2, propaganda appears as the predominant communicative purpose of the texts of the corpus. As per RMRB's mission, they are aimed at spreading opinions, policies, orientations and keywords of the CCP leadership, correctly carrying out the function of being the Party's "throat and tongue" (喉舌) that is the defining mission of the outlet. The corpus does not offer a variety of points of view on COVID-19. Many intertextual references can be identified in the corpus, both at meaning and expressive levels. Keywords, formulations and entire phrases echo between articles. These intertextual 'loans' are also due to the origin of many such expressions, coming from speeches given by Xi Jinping over the six months.

At the same time, some sub-genres of commentary present a relatively diverse range of arguments within the boundaries of the official discourse. Articles belonging to the most 'institutional' sub-genres tend to promote and adhere to keywords of the official discourse. However, commentaries belonging to 'less institutional' sub-genres tend to discuss pragmatic subjects in a practical way. Even in RMRB, the sub-genre of commentary on current affairs maintains some degree of originality and closeness to real life. Therefore, the majority of commentaries included in this study appear consistent with the features and communicative goals that characterize the sub-genre they belong to. However, the analysis showed that, at times, lines can be blurred. RMRB more 'institutional' sub-genres (such as Wang Hai Lou articles and commentator's articles) sometimes widen their horizons, while 'less institutional' sub-genres (such as commentaries on current affairs) sometimes restrict their breadth.

Nevertheless, in response to RQ 1, the message provided by the texts included in this study appears quite consistent. No matter the dominant frame in each article, the narrative presented by RMRB commentaries aims at building consensus towards the CCP management of the epidemic, in order to conceal the original erratic response to the virus outbreak. In line with the newspaper's purpose, the texts' unanimous goal is to increase the CCP political legitimacy and the people's trust in the Party by arguing its strength, unity, proactivity, international responsibility, and wisdom. The message is that the CCP is China's right ruler because it is devoted to the people's lives, and because



it is the champion of China's socialist model: a model which is 'superior' because it unites the people in order to overcome difficulties, while also providing economic prosperity for all.

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