Between the Lines

Genres and Expression
in Contemporary Chinese Journalism

Emma Lupano

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Between the Lines

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To Andy, Elsa,
Luca, and Rosa

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Introduction

Outside China, the Chinese media environment and products are often described as a monolith, where actors are tightly controlled and no expression that differs from the official discourse is ever allowed. While the political and professional context where Chinese journalists work is undoubtedly a very challenging one, the situation has been varying over time, since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The control exercised by the Communist Party of China (CPC) on media production has experienced peaks and lows, in line with political trends and cycles. For instance, following an almost complete ban on free expression during the Cultural Revolution, the 1980s are described by Chinese practitioners and scholars as a decade of unprecedented liveliness and debate in the journalistic sector, a period of experiment and hope that the Tian'anmen "incident" (*shijian* 事件) in 1989 brought to an abrupt end.

Despite certain limitations, the late 1990s and 2000s are also often referred to as a "golden era" (*jin shidai* 金时代) (Chan, 2010), during which investigative journalism thrived, and certain types of opinion articles pushed the boundaries further and further. However, after President Xi Jinping took the reins of the country in 2012, internal and international hopes that China's trajectory towards opening up and democratisation was inevitable have been dashed. While guaranteeing for himself the possibility to be the first Communist leader since Mao Zedong to maintain the leadership position for more than ten years,[1] President Xi has also made genuine debate and criticism increasingly riskier for intellectuals, journalists and any other citizen, compared to the recent past. In this scenario, how much has changed, over the last decade, in regards to the possibility of Chinese journalists to express themselves?

In recent years, a wealth of both Chinese and international scholars have engaged with case studies focusing on the Chinese media output, especially

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[1] In 2018, a Constitutional amendment abolished the term limits for the country's presidency (Blanchard & Shepherd, 2018).

using discursive approaches.[2] Very few, however, have dealt with the phenomenon from the perspective of genres, or have systematically incorporated the characteristics of the outlets under scrutiny.[3] The present study aims to contribute to the existing literature on this subject in the contemporary Chinese media environment by examining the dynamic relationship between (1) journalistic genres (and sub-genres), (2) individual media outlets, and (3) content variation, i.e. the possibility to express independent opinions and points of view. A mixed-method approach is employed, transitioning from a genre analysis perspective and qualitatively applying tools belonging to the domains of Critical Discourse Analysis, corpus linguistics and frame analysis.

This work argues that, irrespective of the political climate, Chinese journalists and commentators retain the ability to navigate the system, knowing when it is possible to grasp the opportunity to circumvent the constraints imposed by the official narrative. Undoubtedly, this study does not attempt to depict a rosy view of reality.

However, by examining particular events and cases, it seeks to discuss the extent to which expressive boundaries in Chinese written journalism remain open to negotiation.

This volume also intends to contribute to the foregrounding of genre analysis as a relevant tool with which to interpret the Chinese media sphere and the professional role of Chinese journalists in this ecosystem.

Moreover, in the current era of artificial intelligence, this work also aims to underscore the enduring significance of original linguistic analyses that directly engage with both official and unofficial Chinese jargon, and with the multi-layered, intertextual complexity of *putonghua* (普通话, the "common language" of China).

By doing so, it calls for sustained human-driven, if technologically assisted, language-based research within the extensive domain of Chinese studies—and, indeed, beyond.

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[2] Among the various examples that could be cited, Lutgard Lams, Nancy Liu, Cao Qing, Xu Jing, and others stand out as some of the few who have consistently pursued research in this area. In Italy, a small group of then early-career scholars—including Bettina Mottura, Natalia Riva, Chiara Bertulessi, and myself—began conducting systematic research on these topics in the late 2000s, drawing inspiration from the work and guidance of Alessandra C. Lavagnino at the University of Milan.

[3] An interesting study that applies genre perspective to the Chinese institutional discourse is Yu (2020).

1. Theoretical framework: genre, discourse, and media studies

The structure and analyses presented in this volume primarily draw on the principles of Critical Genre Analysis (CGA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Despite Bhatia's oppositional stance to CDA (Bhatia, 2015), the two frameworks notably share objects of study, preoccupations and—to some extent— aims. Thus, while acknowledging CGA as the overarching and inspirational framework underpinning this study, in this work CDA, including the Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) is regarded as a valuable guide for the analytical phase, depending on the specific characteristics of the cases under examination and the available data. However, CDA's stated objective of actively addressing social inequalities by revealing how discourse constructs social practices to convey ideological bias lies beyond the scope of this volume.

Genre analysis

Genres can be defined as "easily recognisable forms of discourse with particular *purposes* for particular *audiences* which share certain elements of *structure* and *content*" (Jones et al., 2021: 14; italics in original). John Swales' seminal work outlining genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share a certain set of communicative purposes" (1990: 58), has laid the basis for genre analysis. His approach has emerged as an important framework in understanding the communicative functions and structures of different text types, by emphasising the importance of context and the discourse community involved.

Vijay K. Bhatia has expanded upon this by highlighting the dynamic nature of genres in specific settings, and, in particular, by paying attention to their rhetorical purposes and the interdiscursive practices that shape them— that is, the way genres interact and influence each other within specific contexts (Bhatia, 1993; 1996; 2010). He articulated that genres are characterised by specific communicative purposes and are realised through conventionalised structures and linguistic features that reflect the expectations of particular discourse communities. This is the focus of Critical Genre Analysis: an approach that looks at professional practices as the "outcome of specific discursive procedures." Because they "contribute significantly to the production, communication and negotiation of meaning" (Bhatia, 2015: 18), CGA argues that comprehensive genre analysis must consider the interplay between textual features and the socio-cultural dynamics that inform their use, thus advocating for a critical approach that

examines how genres are appropriated and transformed in professional communication (Bhatia, 2010).

This approach emphasises the interplay between genre structures and the socio-cultural dynamics that shape them, advocating for a multi-dimensional analysis that considers not only the textual features of genres but also their contextual influence, appropriations and interdiscursivity. This perspective, and CGA's interest for the "specific disciplinary, institutional and more generally professional cultures" within which interdiscursive performance tends to be accomplished in "all discursive acts" (Bhatia 2015: 18), make it a fitting approach to analyse the complex context in which Chinese journalists operate and produce their texts.

As suggested by CGA, this study also builds on ethnographic research conducted by the author in the past (Lupano, 2016). That work was indeed concerned with the aim, pursued by Bhatia, of "seek[ing] all that we need to know about how expert professionals construct, interpret, use and exploit genre conventions in the performance of their everyday professional tasks in their specific disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts" (Bhatia, 2015: 18). However, the resources of that investigation did not include texts produced by journalists in their professional capacity (i.e. their articles). Fulfilling that analytical step has been the focus of part of my successive, ten-year-long research; one of the aims of this book is precisely to complement the previous work in the field by foregrounding textual analysis.

Such analysis naturally builds on awareness that the language of newspapers is the result of a number of factors: in addition to genre, it is determined by the newspaper type, the subject domain, the individual writing style, and the cultural/political context. News values, which are also culture-specific, are another key factor in journalistic discourse: they establish what is news (or newsworthiness) and influence the relationship that practitioners maintain with the news, as defined by their professional community (Ngai, 2022: 4-5).

Language

The local context has direct effects on genre and texts construction, also due to the specific characteristics of Chinese language. Its flexibility, evocative power, and semantical richness are the result of a structure based on blocks of monosyllabic sounds. Since each character is phonetically expressed by a tonal syllable—and given that humans can produce only a limited number of syllabic sounds—homophony and near-homophony are common phenomena in Chinese. This allows native speakers to play with

sound and rhythm, to evoke meanings without explicit mention, and to create puns.

Another relevant characteristic of Chinese spoken in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is what Perry Link has called a bifurcation between the everyday, unofficial language and the official language. These two ways of speaking, or versions of Chinese language, were mixed consciously and unconsciously during Maoism, when people had to learn to handle both, in order to avoid (or to fix) political issues. However, the official language has remained intact long after the Cultural Revolution, keeping its "distinctive diction, grammar, and aura" (Link, 2013: 237-238).

Arguably, the overlap between the two idiolects is still a common phenomenon in Chinese today:

In considering the differences between official and unofficial language, therefore, it is important *not* to think of them as two different kinds of language that two different groups of people speak. They are, rather, ways of speaking, and people of many kinds draw on them as needed. […] The two kinds of language can even be intertwined within the same conversation (Link 2013: 242; italics in original).

As a result, expressions and key words of the official language still contaminate the unofficial language in conversations as well as in written communication. This applies in particular to journalistic texts, due to their constitutive function of mediators between institutional and public discourses. The extent to which they mix official and unofficial language can vary depending on the subject, the positioning of the outlet, the historical period, and individual expressive choices. Against this backdrop, a mixed set of tools coming from different frameworks is needed to carry out textual analysis properly.

2. A mixed-method approach

Discourse analysis can be approached with different methods. The case studies presented in this book display some variability in the way analysis is conducted, relying for instance on frame analysis and legitimacy theories, and/or other approaches. At the same time, these studies also share several features: for one, they are all based on manually constructed corpora that contain journalistic texts coming from selected Chinese news outlets, belonging to one genre only (opinion article), but including a range of sub-genres in order to explore intertextual variability. Opinion articles have been chosen as the genre to interrogate, since they are constitutively more likely to

allow for the display of authorial subjectivity and, therefore, to collectively manifest expressive variability and independence. Other consistent traits are that each study comprises two or more corpora, each related to one news outlet, in order to take into account the individual medium's characteristics as an independent variable.

As Sinclair put it,

The beginning of any corpus study is the creation of a corpus itself. The decisions that are taken about what is to be in the corpus, and how the selection is to be organised, control almost everything that happens subsequently. The results are only as good as the corpus (Sinclair, 1991: 13).

Bearing this in mind, each case study in Chapter 4 begins by detailing the construction of the corpora employed in the analysis, outlining the design process and criteria for textual selection, before moving on to in depth discussion.

Another common feature is that the case studies collected in this volume are all qualitative work. However, in order to reduce the inherent subjectivity in qualitative research (Simon, 2001), three out of four have been supported by devices that typically belong to quantitative approaches such as softwares used in corpus linguistics analyses (*AntConc*, *SegmentAnt*, and *SketchEngine*). Nevertheless, heuristic elements such as word frequency, collocates, keyness and concordance lines have been qualitatively analysed (Gabrielatos, 2018).

The goals of these investigations is to highlight discursive features of the Chinese (written) media narrative on a specific event or phenomenon in a limited time frame. The starting point of each analysis is that different opinion articles, as journalistic texts defined by the communicative purpose of expressing viewpoints about the world (Wang, 2004; Wang, 2008: 170; Ding, 2008; Lavid, Arus & Moraton, 2012: 5), can be expected to collectively display some variability on one given topic, and to at least partly distance themselves from the official discourse on a specific subject. Therefore, the news outlets selected for corpus construction were chosen aiming for diversity maximisation. This meant comparing corpora from institutional outlets (such as party papers) and commercial outlets (both legacy media and specialised ones).

The articles were selected in a variety of manners and using a variety of resources that include the *Factiva* database, the CNKI repository, and newspapers' own websites (insofar as they mirror the print editions). Social media accounts on Wechat or other platforms have not been used. One or more search keywords were used in each study for data selection, generally looking at the articles headline and the lead paragraph. Further details about

each data collection can be found in Chapter 4, dedicated to the presentation of the case studies.

3. Structure of the book

The structure of this volume is designed to provide a linguistic examination of journalistic expression variability in contemporary China, situating it within its political, historical, and professional context, by analysing in-depth case studies.

The first chapter traces historical trends, focusing on key periods, from the post-1978 media reform (*meiti gaige* 媒体改革) to the so-called "golden era" of the 1990s, from the 2000s Hu-Wen leadership to the transformations that took place under President Xi Jinping. The section touches on events and phenomena that have marked the development of Chinese journalism in the country, and that Chinese journalists themselves still refer to as turning points in their professional practice. This chapter also outlines the media's role and the local codes and standards of journalistic professionalism, as they are understood in the PRC context.

Chapter 2 explores the original definitions and characteristics of genres and sub-genres in Chinese written journalism, laying out fundamental information and specialised terms that are used in the analysis of the case studies. In addition, this chapter offers a general classification of contemporary Chinese media outlets, based on their positioning between political ties and commercial leaning.

The third chapter explores the linguistic dimension of news writing by looking at language use in the People's Republic of China. It examines the strategic "engineering" of official language and the role of keywords (Williams, 1976; Durant, 2008) and "fixed expressions" (*tifa* 提法) in public discourse, elements that emerge in the analysis of the case studies. To provide a rounded picture, the chapter also examines the space for linguistic creativity against the backdrop of CPC language management.

The individual case studies, spanning almost a decade (during President Xi's rule), are presented in Chapter 4. Through concrete, situated analyses of journalistic discourse on issues such as terrorism and freedom of speech, the relationship between sport and national power, crisis management, and artificial intelligence, this chapter shows the degree of variability in journalistic expression that emerges in relation to key events, in key news outlets and within key sub-genres of Chinese journalism.

The concluding chapter looks to the future of Chinese journalism, discussing the impact of technological innovation on news writing in the

country and beyond. It also briefly underscores the theoretical contribution of this work to media studies and its wider implications for international media studies.

This book distils over 15 years of research into Chinese media and discourse, and it would be an incommensurable task to mention every single colleague and friend who, across China, Europe and Italy, have in many ways contributed to this endeavour. While I regret not being able to name each and every one for fear of missing someone, I feel truly grateful for every conversation, suggestion, help, exchange, support, and laugh over these years. Were it not for these essential contributions and insights, the shortcomings of this volume—which remain entirely my own—would be even greater.

1. Historical Trends in Contemporary Chinese Journalism

Over the past five decades, the Chinese media landscape has experienced profound transformations, many of which can be traced back to the market—oriented reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) in the late 1970s (Lynch, 1999; Zhao Y., 2008). The sector's evolution from a system rooted in direct state control to one characterised by commercial imperatives and a nominally private ownership structure has increasingly tethered media institutions to the preferences and demands of their audiences (Stockmann, 2013: 7-8).

Several scholars have pointed out that, as with other reforms implemented under Deng's economic agenda, the restructuring of the media was largely pragmatic in nature—focused more on improving financial sustainability and operational efficiency than on dismantling the ideological oversight of the Party (Zhao Y., 2008; Hearns-Branaman, 2015). Nevertheless, these structural and commercial adjustments significantly influenced the nature of media output, resulting in greater stylistic and thematic diversity than in previous decades (Zheng, 2004; Shirk, 2011).

The reintroduction of advertising in 1979, together with the gradual phasing out of state subsidies, has been seen as the key to this change, since it pushed news organisations to respond more directly to public interest, leading to a partial relaxation of the formerly rigid and ideologically uniform content. This shift brought about an expansion in the coverage of social issues, lifestyle, and entertainment (Zhao Y., 2008; Sæther, 2008; Lavagnino, 2010). The 1990s further accelerated this transformation through increased foreign investment, journalistic exchanges, and exposure to international standards of media professionalism, encouraging adaptation to meet the expectations of a more discerning and diversified readership.

China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 is marked in literature as another turning point. By incentivising domestic media outlets to modernise their institutional structures and to adopt global

communicative strategies, it contributed to Beijing's broader efforts to shape a more favourable international image (Colomb, 2008).

Among Chinese newspapers, the so-called commercial papers (*shichang bao* 市场报), which do not receive financial support from the CPC or state institutions, were the first to adapt to this new landscape. In contrast, party-affiliated (*dangbao* 党报) or institutional newspapers (*jiguanbao* 机关报) were slower in modernising their style and content.[1]

However, scholars have consistently pointed out that, despite these reforms, the Chinese media have remained under strict political oversight at both local and national levels. This applies to both state-funded institutional outlets and commercial ones that do not receive direct government funding (Qian & Bandurski, 2011; Young, 2013). Various administrative and political bodies—including the CPC's Central Propaganda Department (*Zhonggong zhongyang xuanxchuan bu* 中共中央宣传部), the National Press and Publication Administration (*Guojia xinwen chuan shu* 国家新闻出版署), the National Radio and Television Administration (*Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju* 国家广播电视总局), and the State Council Information Office (*Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi* 国务院新闻办公室)—regulate media content at multiple levels. Journalists must also adhere to political guidelines, as professional regulations and administrative measures ensure that media workers remain accountable to Party leadership. Ultimately, publishing rights and career stability in the industry are linked to political compliance, with journalists expected to tune in with Party narratives to shape public opinion in line with government objectives (Polumbaum & Lei, 2008; Stockman, 2013). As a result, the principle of freedom of expression is still a contested one in China, both in official discourse and in journalistic practice (Lavagnino, 2010; Young 2013; Lupano, 2016).

The almost five decades of media reform can be divided into different phases, depending on the focus (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1773-1774). Concerning this work, four phases are considered: the first decade of reforms (roughly 1978-1990), the "golden era" (roughly 1991-2002), the Hu Jintao (胡锦涛)-Wen Jiabao (温家宝) era (2003-2012), and Xi Jinping's "new era" (2013-present).

1. Let a hundred newspapers bloom

The key to the transformation of the Chinese media sector after Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) death is contained in a strip of text and images featuring

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[1] See Chapter 2 for a brief classification of contemporary Chinese media.

the face of a woman, a child, and a tube labeled "Blue Sky" (*lan tian* 蓝天). Such was the first documented advertisement in post-Cultural Revolution China. Its appearance in the *Tianjin Ribao* (天津日报) on 4 January 1979 sealed the return of commercial communication in the country's press (Wang, 2008; Xu, 2010). The event, which occurred shortly after the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in December 1978—considered the symbolic moment of Deng Xiaoping's rise to power and the beginning of the reform and opening-up policy (Cheek, 2011)—marked the reintroduction of market logic into the Chinese media system. On television, it was Shanghai TV that aired the first commercial, advertising Shengui tonic wine (*Shengui yanrong jiu* 参桂养荣酒). Only weeks later, the first foreign commercial spot followed, advertising a Swiss Rado watch (Zhao C., 2008; Chen, 2014).

Financial trigger

The media reform (媒体改革 *meiti gaige*) is strongly linked to this return of commercial advertisement. The policy essentially started as a financial manouvre, much like the reforms promoted in other sectors since the end of 1978. Despite profoundly impacting the entire ecosystem of journalism and mass communication in China to date, the media reform was conceived primarily to pursue two goals: to relieve the state budget from the burden of maintaining newspapers that were not financially viable; and to restore the credibility and appeal of the country's media, which had emerged from the Cultural Revolution both quantitatively decimated and qualitatively depleted. In the previous decade, people had come to address the country's journalism as "false" (假 *jia*), "exaggerated" (大 *da*), and "empty" (空 *kong*) (Lavagnino, 2000).

Concerning the first goal, the reform started when the Ministry of Finance approved the decision that *Renmin ribao* (RMRB hereafter) and other seven outlets would experiment a series of changes in order to become "public institutions" (事业单位 *shiye danwei*) that were "run like an enterprise" (企业管理 *qiye guanli*) (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1175). The project rapidly extended to the whole sector, contributing to the withdrawal of the Party and the government from media's day-to-day operations (Chen 1999).

In this context, more and more news outlets, formerly relying on state funds, were required to become financially self-sufficient, adopting a growingly business-oriented mind-set and generating profits. Thus began a phase of rapid recovery for the media industry, not least because in the

Chinese press virtually any available space could be used to reference a sponsor. In addition to standard commercial advertisements, companies could have their names, logo, product references, or even contact information printed alongside any article, column, or commentary. This practice extended to news sponsorship: in exchange for payment, a company could place its logo next to the most eye-catching article or the day's most prominent news item. Moreover, media outlets began to publish paid content laid out indistinguishably from regular news articles. As a result, readers were unable to discern authentic journalism from advertising, a situation that overwhelmingly favoured advertisers (Zhao, 1998: 61-63).

In addition to advertising and other forms of "grey" sponsorship by investors who covered part of production costs, Chinese media organisations began to pursue a wide array of other activities in search of alternative revenue streams. Newspapers, even in the absence of clear legal provisions authorising such ventures, began launching business initiatives entirely unrelated to their core journalistic functions. The advertising sector quickly became the most important non-governmental source of income for newspapers, and advertising placements played a decisive role in both page layout and editorial decisions (Zhao, 1998). In their effort to attract audiences and advertisers alike, Chinese newspapers began to reduce the visibility of political news while placing greater emphasis on social and entertainment stories—those more attuned to the everyday concerns and interests of ordinary people.

Throughout the 1980s, the press discovered new freedom to engage with social issues and to broach topics previously deemed politically sensitive, such as education, employment, and corruption (Latham, 2007). One of the most emblematic cases that illustrate the evolving political environment in which the media operated during the first decade of reform is that of the *World Economic Herald* (世界经济导报 *Shijie Jingji Daobao*). Counting on powerful sponsors in the reformist wing of the Party, the paper adopted an overtly reformist editorial stance and frequently challenged the local propaganda department. This bold approach proved commercially successful but ultimately led to the paper's downfall: after being associated with the 1989 student movement and losing its political backing following the purge of the reformist Prime minister Zhao Ziyang (赵紫阳), the *Herald* was forcibly shut down in the aftermath of the Tian'anmen protest (He, 1997; de Burgh, 2003b).

With the fundamental support of advertising and the need to appeal to readers (also in order to attract advertisers), most Chinese media were forced to change their style to avoid succumbing, while many new ones emerged. As public funding dwindled, they learned to become bolder and more

creative. However, despite the initial experiment, core institutional media such as RMRB, *Xinhua News Agency* and CCTV were protected from the market, guaranteeing unrestricted public funding to ensure that at least a number of key media would keep performing the traditional "loudspeaker's role" (*houshe* 喉舌, lit. "throat and tongue") that was traditionally attributed to journalism in the PRC.

Experiment and debate

The first phase of the media reform was also marked by a flourishing debate within the journalistic sphere. In the climate of change and openness brought about by the rise to power of the "pragmatist faction" (*shijian pai* 实践派) led by Deng Xiaoping, the Central Propaganda Department of the CPC convened a national conference on journalistic work in the spring of 1979. During this conference, Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦), then head of the Department and chair of the event, encouraged the media to become more active and original in their reporting (Goldman 1991). Party committees at all levels were urged to launch new newspapers, both to strengthen the flow of information deemed useful for economic development and to rebuild the authority of the propaganda apparatus. As a result, local newspapers began to proliferate; within a single decade, their number increased more than tenfold (Lee 1990: 14-15).

Since the founding of the PRC, the media system had been brought under the State management and fully controlled by Party or State organs. Supported by public money, newspapers prioritised adherence to the party line by obeying the "principle of the party character" (*dang xing de yuanze* 党性的原则) rather than representing the public's needs according to the "principle of the people's character" (*renmin xing de yuanze* 人民性的原则), despite CPC-style journalism ethics deeming both necessary (Zhao, 1998: 37-38; De Giorgi, 1999: 25). Throughout the reform period, the media remained tools of the Party; however, their primary purpose was no longer to promote class struggle, but rather to advance economic and social development, with a particular focus on economic information and entertainment (Zhao, 1998: 34). Therefore, as mentioned above, the catalyst for change was not political innovation but economic reform. The changes introduced in the commercial and financial sectors triggered transformations in the editorial approach to news publishing and in journalistic practice; these shifts gave rise to greater content pluralism, modernisation of language, redefinition of the media's

mission, and general increase in the degree of freedom enjoyed by both the press and individual journalists (Lynch 1999: 5-6).

The expansion of media formats and the proliferation of media outlets in the country was noticeable. In 1967, following the closure of nearly all newspapers established by social and political organisations, government departments, or mass organisations within the Party, only 43 regular newspapers remained nationwide, in addition to the numerous irregular publications produced by the Red Guards. By 1979, the number of titles had already reached 320, but by 1987 it had grown to 2,509, over 80 percent of which were sectorial or specialised publications (Zhao, 1998: 17; Lee, 2005).

The desire to renew the content and language of newspapers to make them more appealing to the public infused journalists and intellectuals with a strong sense of hope and a desire to experiment. That extended even to party papers such as the RMRB. Hu Jiwei (胡绩伟), appointed editor-in-chief by Deng Xiaoping in 1977, was among the first in the country to promote the genre of investigative report, counting on highly respected reporters such as Liu Binyan (刘宾雁). The effects of this practice were so strong—bringing ministries to resign or dismantling revolutionary myths such as the Dazhai (大寨) "model commune"—that Hu was soon invited to resign in 1983, during the campaign against "spiritual pollution" (*jingshen wuran* 精神污染). Nonetheless, he remained active among the advocates for reform and press liberalisation, who argued that the media should no longer serve as the Party's mouthpiece, but rather refer to the "principle of the people character", to speak on behalf of the people and represent the interests of the people. In their view, China's modernisation required a greater degree of journalistic independence from state control, and they called for the adoption of a press law that would establish both the duties and the rights of media professionals. Opponents of the reform, by contrast, maintained that censorship and Party oversight of journalism were the best guarantee of national stability (Lupano, 2012: 31-34).

The debate over the desirability of enacting legislation to define the rights and responsibilities of the country's journalists and to enshrine the principle of press freedom continued throughout the decade, conducted across a variety of outlets. Even though, under the premiership of reform-leaning Zhao Ziyang, media control was relatively loose, the most outspoken journalists were still punished. Liu Binyan, in particular, was expelled from the Party after publishing an article in which he advocated the right to have different opinions from the CPC. In 1989, during the Tian'anmen protest, he

was at Harvard University as a visiting fellow. He was never allowed back to China, and died in the United States in 2005 (Liu & Link, 2006; Link, 2005).

Protest

Historical recounts show that journalists became key actors during the student protest in Tian'anmen square, legitimising the movement as soon (and as long) as circumstances allowed. In many cases, they also personally joined the movement (Zhou, 1996). On 4 May, hundreds of journalists gathered in front of the Beijing headquarters of the *Xinhua News Agency* to protest against the dismissal of the editor-in-chief of the *World Economic Herald*, and against the restrictions inflicted to the media in relation to the students' manifestation. "Freedom of press", "Newspapers have to speak the truth", and similar slogans were shown during the protest. A few days later, other journalists in Beijing and in other cities across the country organised rallies (Jernow, 1999; Faison, 1999).

The introduction of the martial law on 20 May ended an experience that is still considered exceptional in the history of the country. One after the other, news outlets had to stop supporting the students and by 3 June the RMRB ended the coverage of the protest. Many journalists were at Tian'anmen square on 4 June, but none could report what they witnessed. The tragic events of that day reversed what many had assumed to be an irreversible process, extinguishing the hopes of Chinese journalists for significant change (Lupano, 2012: 33-35).

2. Accelerating commercialisation

The second phase of the reform era—characterised by accelerated commercialisation—began with a sweep of the media sector. Journalists and editors who had taken part in the protests were arrested or dismissed, several outlets were shut down, among which the *Herald*, and widespread inspections were carried out in editorial offices. A review process was also launched to assess coverage of the Tian'anmen protest by each media organisation. The long-anticipated journalism law, which had been scheduled for review by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in June, was abruptly shelved. For journalists, this was a time of realism rather than idealism. Media professionals who managed to retain their positions—despite the profound disillusionment, and in some cases outright trauma—generally fell in line with the government's stance in the name of economic

development. Political obedience was exchanged for greater entrepreneurial and managerial autonomy.

On the state side, this period marked the forceful re-launch of the economic modernisation of the media. Following Deng Xiaoping's so-called "Southern Tour" (*nanxun* 南巡) in 1992, the reform's focus pointed to the financial and managerial restructuring of Chinese media. Editorial control remained firmly in the hands of government authorities, even though the reforms inevitably impacted content production and opened up editorial spaces that were not always easily controlled. Once again, the content changes that did occur were primarily driven by economic motivations. It was, to a large extent, the market competition that guided the further development of the media (Latham, 2007: 39).

A media industry

The "status" of the media was officially redefined in the 1990s. No more defined as "public institutions" (*shiye danwei* 事业单位), they were now all considered "enterprises" (*qiye danwei* 企业单位), and the entire sector began to be referred to as a "media industry" (*meiti chanye* 媒体产业) from 1994 onward (Lavagnino, 2006: 6-7). In this new scenario, media conglomerates started to emerge when, in an effort to survive the intense competition and to attract advertisers, party newspapers and magazines started to launch new editorial ventures such as special or weekend supplements that operated as distinct publications. They were aggressively market-oriented and designed to draw the largest possible audience. The first to be officially approved by the then State Administration of Press and Publications was the *Guangzhou Ribao* group in January 1996. Similar conglomerates followed, connected to *Guangming Ribao* 光明日报, *Jingji Ribao* (经济日报), *Nanfang Ribao* (南方日报 publisher of the well-known *Nanfang Zhoumo* 南方周末 and *Nanfang Dushi Bao* 南方都市报), and *Yangcheng Wanbao* (羊成晚报) (Lee, 2000: 12). The trend, which was supported and promoted at national level, was largely caused by the heavy cuts to public subsidies for most media outlets. It was also motivated by the internationalisation of the media sector, which, in particular after China's access to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, urged the creation of national groups that would be able to compete with global conglomerates.

Another effect of commercialisation—and of advertising in particular—was a significant power shift within the media system. The popularity and influence of metropolitan newspapers grew at the expense of national and

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provincial party organs (Zhao, 1998: 68; Lee, 2000: 11). National papers, bound by obligations to cover a wide range of economic, political, and social issues and to serve both urban and rural audiences, were increasingly shadowed by municipal outlets, which bore fewer political responsibilities and could focus on local urban life, making them more immediately relevant to their readership (Zhao, 1998: 69).

Wu Guogang (2000) described the phenomenon as part of the broader process of media diversification, which evolved along three dimensions: decentralisation, socialisation, and commercialisation. Decentralisation proceeded outward from Beijing to the provinces, and from provinces to municipalities; at the state level, it moved from the central government to peripheral departments and government offices. Increasingly localised government entities obtained and managed publishing licenses—an essential legal requirement to found a media entity in China, granted only to Party or state organisations. At times, these licenses were passed on to third parties, who operated with varying degrees of oversight. Decentralisation offered local governments a far stronger media voice compared to the past, which became even stronger and more widespread once the Internet allowed local media to reach the national audience.

Secondly, socialisation brought the gradual shift from a media system that was monopolised by the state to a structure in which a growing number of non-state actors (such as semi-governmental bodies, professional associations and academic societies) played significant roles, reallocating media resources. Finally, commercial competition required media to pursue novelty and diversification of style, content, audience targeting, and packaging. In order to attract advertisers and subscribers, they needed to produce a new genre of journalism that set them apart from party journalism. Some outlets embraced infotainment and gossip; others focused on investigative journalism. In the 1990s, for instance, the *Beijing Qingnian Bao* (北京青年报) deliberately used investigative reporting and public debate on controversial issues as a marketing strategy. By exposing scandals and social problems, investigative journalism was useful for the Party because it monitored local governments and promoted public trust in the leadership (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1178).

Naturally, this push toward pluralisation was continually tempered by the need to "serve the Party," or at least to strike a precarious balance between party loyalty and market responsiveness—one that would allow outlets to survive both politically and commercially. This was especially true for party and government-affiliated media, which strove to modernise without relinquishing their role as mouthpieces of the leadership. Many such outlets adopted a form of internal differentiation: the front pages featured content

with high political approval; the middle pages offered moderate content; and the back pages included bolder or provocative articles. The same logic applied to television: on CCTV, the 7 p.m. newscast was more restrained than the 11 p.m. bulletin (Wu, 2000).

Despite limitations, the power of supervision embodied by investigative journalism and by commentary genres such as the innovative "commentary on current affairs" (*shiping* 时评, see Chapter 3) was able to impact the agenda-setting and to solve controversial issues in different domains: from judicial injustice to environmental scandals, from Party officials corruption to public health crises. This contributed to infusing journalists with new hopes and principles and to the spread of journalism ideals of Western tradition (Tong, 2011), contributing to new professional models (as discussed in Chapter 2).

With the emergence of media conglomerates and the decentralisation of media management, the professional discourse began to distinguish between institutional papers (government and Party newspapers) and commercial papers (market-oriented papers), also known as metropolitan papers (*dushi bao* 都市报). This term, in particular, came to epitomise publications most decisively geared toward commercial imperatives. They were the ones to lead the change in subjects and forms of expression and to obtain the best economic performances. Being financially independent and only indirectly controlled by the Communist Party authorities, they had to rely on the most appreciated genres to win readers and advertisers (Shirk, 2011).

3. The "Golden Era" of Chinese Journalism

The Third Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central committee, in 2003, adopted the "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on several issues in perfecting the socialist market economy". The document declared that the first period of economic reform had been completed, shifting to the phase of solving the issues produced in the previous two decades (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1179-1180). It was the beginning of the "post-reform" phase (Bai & Wu, 2012), during which, under the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao leadership (2002-2012), two forces contributed significantly to steering the media reform path: internationalisation and the Internet.

Going out

While no international media outlet could enter the Chinese market directly, after China joined the WTO in 2001, companies based abroad could invest in Chinese media, even if their involvement in content production remained strongly limited. Conversely, the PRC began to draw a strategy aimed at expanding its national influence abroad. It was one of the materialisations of the "grand external propaganda" programme (*da wai xuan* 大外宣) and the "going-out" policy (*zou chu qu* 走出去) launched by Hu Jintao in 2009 (Lams, 2018) in connection with the CPC's "soft power" (*ruan shili* 软实力) theorisations (Nye, 1990 and 2004; Riva, 2023) aimed at broadening the reach of its narratives on the global stage (Hu & Ji, 2012; Sun, 2014). Whereas in the past China had focused primarily on spreading Chinese-language media abroad to reach the diaspora, the 2009 investment campaign aimed at creating and strengthening foreign-language news platforms, broadcasters, and publications with the goal of directly engaging public opinion in various countries. Among the first beneficiaries of these funds were the national TV and news agencies, most capable of expanding their international presence by opening regional bureaus across the globe, enlarging existing offices, and hiring local journalists.

Among the most prominent developments in this context is the international expansion of the China Central Television (CCTV), which started to operate multiple channels in several languages expanding its international influence thanks to the 2009 investment programme. By 2012, it was already broadcasting in seven languages and operating an increasing number of foreign bureaus, with a growing contingent of locally recruited journalists. These were the years in which the Chinese state broadcaster, later rebranded as China Global Television Network (CGTN), began producing original content locally rather than simply broadcasting material made in China. In 2018, CGTN opened its first European production studio in London, hiring hundreds of European journalists (Lupano, 2021: 175-176).

China International Radio (CRI), founded in 1941, has long been one of China's primary voices abroad, offering programming in 56 languages. Since 2009 it has been equipped with an international broadcasting platform and with stations overseas to air content produced in Beijing. Before that, it had relied solely on shortwave transmission to reach global audiences. In March 2018, China National Radio, CRI, and CGTN merged into a single multimedia state entity, the China Media Group (*Zhongyang guangbo dianshi zong tai* 中央广播电视总台), also known as the *Voice of China* (Diamond & Schell, 2019: 102-104), with branches worldwide.

Similarly, the state news agency *Xinhua* expanded its editorial offices abroad from 120 in 2009 to over 200 to date. The agency publishes dispatches in seven languages, openly competing with major international news agencies. In 2010 it launched its English-language television platform, CNC World. Designed to offer continuous, around-the-clock news coverage, CNC was introduced as a tool to provide global audiences with international news coverage interpreted from a Chinese perspective. At the inauguration, *Xinhua* president Li Congjun emphasised the outlet's ambition to deliver timely and "objective" reporting, while simultaneously broadening the range of available global information sources (Xinhuanet, 2010).

As for print media, in 2009 both the *People's Daily online* (the online English edition of the RMRB), and the *China Daily* (the institutional English-language paper founded in 1981) started to launch localised international editions targeting specific regions and continents—for instance, the *China Daily Europe* and the English-language edition of the RMRB spin-off *Huanqiu shibao* (环球时报), called *Global Times* (Mi, 2018). Scholars have interpreted this state-driven effort variously—as a form of external propaganda (Nye, 2011) or as a tool of public diplomacy via media communication (Wang, 2011). Regardless of its classification, the strategy has significantly accelerated the global outreach of Chinese media institutions. Although the actual impact of this internationalisation— particularly in terms of audience engagement or influence—remains difficult to assess, it is clear that the ability to shape global perceptions through media has come to be regarded as a strategic imperative at the institutional level (Jirik, 2009; Hu & Ji, 2012; Marsh, 2023).

In addition to these official outlets, publications that appear to be independent from the state—such as the respected financial magazines *Caijing* (财经) and *Caixin* (财新) —now publish content in foreign languages and/or distribute abroad. These are joined by numerous Chinese-language newspapers aimed at the diaspora, which, although formally independent from the PRC, are often generously funded by businesspeople with close ties to the Party (Lupano & Ornaghi, 2025).

This evolving scenario has raised the attention of international scholars and non-governmental organisations, concerned with the lack of transparency surrounding Beijing's efforts to influence the public opinion outside China.

Going online

The rise of the internet has also deeply affected society and politics in China, including the media. China's digital landscape has undergone a

profound transformation since its initial connection to the global internet in 1994. From a modest user base of approximately 10,000 individuals, the number of internet users had surged to 1.1 billion by December 2024, achieving a penetration rate of 78.6% (CNNIC, 2025).

Initially, the Chinese government had promoted internet development to bolster military capability and stimulate the economic growth. However, the rapid expansion of the internet in the country has also reshaped daily life, political engagement, and state-society relations. From the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, platforms like Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and blogs became central to online public discourse. Forums such as *Tianya Community* and RMRB online *Strong Nation Forum* (*Qiangguo luntan* 强国论坛) provided spaces for citizens to discuss a wide range of topics, while blogging platforms like Bokee and Blogchina enabled individuals to express themselves and build communities (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1180-1181).

The advent of social media in the late 2000s marked a new era. In 2009, Sina Weibo (*Xin lang weibo* 新浪微博) was launched, combining features of microblogging and social networking. By June 2013, it had amassed 330 million users. In 2011, Tencent introduced WeChat (*Weixin* 微信), which evolved into a multifunctional platform and "super-app" offering messaging, social networking, and mobile payment services. By early 2016, WeChat had over 762 million monthly active users. While Weibo served as a public forum for discourse and mobilisation, WeChat facilitated more private, group-based communication (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1184).

Between oversight and activism

Despite the proliferation of platforms, online activities have consistently been subject to stringent state oversight. The government employs a dual approach to internet regulation: since 2003, the so-called "Great Firewall" (*Jindun Gongcheng* 金盾工程) restricts access to certain foreign websites, while domestic platforms are legally mandated to monitor and censor content that is deemed sensitive or subversive via automatic as well as human filters (Lupano, 2012: 199-122). This regulatory framework ensures that digital expression aligns with state-defined parameters (Yang, 2009; Xiao, 2011; MacKinnon, 2012).

Nonetheless, the internet has also shown its potential for civic engagement. In the media environment, 2003 was referred to as "the year of online public opinion" (*wangluo yulun nian* 网络舆论年). It was deemed the first time that online voices played a decisive role in shaping government

responses to public crises, including the SARS outbreak[2] and the widely publicised case of Sun Zhigang.[3] Since then, new "internet incidents" (*wangluo shijian* 网络事件) have become central to research on Chinese digital activism. Scholars have focused on analysing different forms of online engagement and their political implications, especially in relation to environmental issues, corruption, rights protection, and social unrest (Qiu & Chan, 2011). Two practices have become especially characteristic of Chinese netizens' digital activism: *e'gao* (恶搞), a form of online satire (Yu & Xu, 2016), and *weiguan* (围观) the collective observation and discussion of controversial events. Both illustrate that, even within a highly regulated online space, subtle yet meaningful forms of political participation could still take shape (Yang, 2009; Xu, 2015, 2016).

Due to its liveliness and contradictions, China's digital media landscape has drawn increasing attention from scholars, especially regarding the political dimensions of internet use and social media engagement. As Yang (2014) noted, much of the research has been framed through a binary lens—state versus citizens, authoritarianism versus democracy—which has led to a rather polarised academic debate. Those who highlight the empowering potential of digital technologies suggest that they can strengthen civil society and perhaps even contribute, over time, to processes of political liberalisation (Yang, 2009; Yu, 2009). Other scholars point to the state's ability to maintain tight control over the digital sphere, not only through censorship and surveillance, but also by adapting flexibly to technological changes to reinforce authoritarian governance (MacKinnon, 2011; Han, 2015).

The evolution on the internet in China has shown that reality places itself somewhere between these two views. While people also used the internet as

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[2] The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in late 2002 marked a significant moment in the evolution of digital public discourse in China. At first, authorities attempted to suppress information about the health emergency, limiting both media coverage and public access to reliable data. However, growing frustration among internet users quickly translated into widespread online criticism. This digital backlash compelled the government to break its silence in April 2003, releasing more accurate information and subsequently introducing new policies and regulations related to crisis management. The SARS episode is considered a watershed moment in China's approach to crisis communication (Yu, 2009).

[3] Sun Zhigang was a young migrant worker who died in police custody in Guangzhou in 2003 after being detained for failing to present a temporary residence permit. His case sparked outrage across Chinese online platforms, where users condemned the systemic abuses associated with the custody and repatriation system. The intensity of public reaction forced the government not only to prosecute those involved in Sun's death, but also to dismantle the controversial system altogether (Zhao Y., 2008), becoming a symbol of the possibility of online public opinion to influence reality.

a microphone to speak up and criticise the institutions, defending rights and venting discontent, the Party-State used it as a safety valve for the people and as a means to intercept public opinion in order to supress or to respond to their demands where possible. As Xu & Sun (2018: 1187) have argued, "we need to consider both the democratic and authoritarian uses of the new media technologies" in China, where "the interplay between user innovation and governmental control continues to shape the trajectory of China's digital development."

Despite the many contradictions, Chinese practitioners still refer to this period as the "golden era" of journalism. In a 2022 episode of the podcast "Don't understand" (*Bu mingbai boke* 不明播客), independent journalist Jiang Xue (江雪) attempted to describe the reasons why:

In retrospect, it might seem [a] better [period compared to 2022], but at the time, it was extremely difficult—there were bans every day. "Don't touch this, don't report that." What made that period feel golden was the existence of a sense of professional community. We weren't just propagandists—we were journalists. We believed in the responsibility of reporting, of doing investigations, covering social issues. There was a shared sense of mission. And the bans weren't absolute. With the exception of a few "iron rules" like reporting on the military or prisons, there was room to test boundaries. What made it golden was that people were willing to push those limits. If there was a ceiling, we were willing to push it higher. (Yuan, 2022)

This mission that the Chinese journalists perceived and shared was not pursued with strong oppositional means. As some scholars have noted, the Hu-Wen era was characterised by broader collaboration between the Party-State and China's (critical) journalists. On the one hand, the Party-State endorsed limited critical reporting and opinion expression as an officially accepted form of "media supervision" (*yulun jiandu* 舆论监督). On the other hand, the journalists generally acted as critical partners of the institutions, accepting to address social issues and supporting governance improvement by promoting the change from within the system (Repnikova, 2017: 74). This positioning emerged clearly in the practitioners' discourse of those years, who, while describing themselves as critics of the government, also expressed their firm belief that change could only be effected from within (Lupano, 2016).

Repnikova has used the term "guarded improvisation" to refer to this fluid relationship between institutions and journalists, where—in the absence of clear-cut instructions, openings, and boundaries to tell media practitioners the limits not to overcome—both sides have learned to adapt their behavior based on the other side's attitude or actions. Presenting several cases, the scholar illustrates how, in the Hu-Wen era, ambiguity and

grey areas have allowed Chinese critical and investigative journalists to use improvisation, creativity and boundary testing to push their agenda (Repnikova, 2017).

4. The "New Era" of Xi Jinping

The development of Chinese media has been anything but linear; instead, it has proceeded through twists, reversals, and contested shifts, while political, technological, and economic forces have interacted influencing the direction of media change. In this fluid scenario, the Party—State has demonstrated the capability to adapt and maintain a decisive role in an increasingly complex media system. Arguably, since 1949, the most consistent feature of Chinese media governance has been the cyclical pattern of tightening and relaxing control in response to shifting political and social dynamics (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1187), in line with the Party's overall ability to maintain its position and legitimacy balancing atrophy and adaptation (Shambaugh, 2008).

The CPC has proven able to appropriate successive media technologies—print, broadcast, and digital—for its objectives in propaganda and political communication. In light of this pattern, there is little evidence to suggest that the Chinese media landscape will gradually move toward greater liberalisation or democratisation in the near future, regardless the many predictions made over time by various scholars and international observers. This has been particularly clear since 2012, after Xi Jinping took the reins of the Party and the country.

In the (sur)name of the Party

Chinese scholars and media experts widely agree that restrictions on expression have intensified under Xi Jinping's rule. From increasingly violent methods of media repression—such as the imprisonment of journalists—to the imposition of mandatory ideological study sessions about Xi Jinping's thought for university professors,[4] state control over expression has intensified in the last decade compared to the Hu-Wen period (Freedom House 2013; Yang 2014; Bandurski 2016a, 2016b; Brady, 2016).

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[4] Source: private conversations with Chinese academics whose name will not be disclosed to protect their identity (January-February 2024).

Xi Jinping cleared his view of the media and journalism work speaking at the Party's News and Public Opinion Work Conference in Beijing on 19 February 2016, after visiting the RMRB, the *Xinhua News Agency* and the CCTV headquarters on the same morning (China Copyright and Media, 2016a). On that occasion, he reaffirmed that Chinese media outlets are expected to represent and support the CPC policies by upholding the "principle of the Party character." In addition, he introduced the notion that Party—affiliated media should "hold the Party's surname" (*xing dang* 姓党), reinforcing the expectation that they fully align with the Party's ideological stance (Lupano, 2016: 82-83). According to the RMRB coverage of the event, in this "important speech" President Xi Jinping said that:

Correct public opinion orientation must be upheld in all areas and all segments [of] news and public opinion work. All levels' Party newspapers and Party periodicals, radio and television stations must stress the orientation, metropolitan newspapers and new media must also stress the orientation; news reports must stress the orientation, supplements, special feature programmes and advertising must also stress the orientation; the orientation must be stressed in current affairs and news, the orientation must also be stressed in entertainment and social news; the orientation must be stressed in domestic news reports, the orientation must also be stressed in international news reports. (China Copyright and Media, 2016a)

The *tifa* "correct orientation of public opinion" (*zhengque yulun daoxiang* 正确舆论导向) refers to the principle that news and information should guide public sentiment in a direction that aligns with the policies and ideological goals of the Party. The concept emphasises the role of media in shaping societal values, maintaining stability, and promoting positive discourse in line with official narratives.

Bandurski (2016a) has argued that Xi Jinping's speech embodies a stricter view of media control, specifically an "all-dimensional control", where every type of media outlet (including new media, *xin meiti* 新媒体, metropolitan/commercial press, *dushi lei baokan* 都市类报刊); every type of journalistic genre (such as entertainment and social journalism *yule lei, shehui lei xinwen* 娱乐类、社会类新闻); and even adverts (*guanggao xuanchuan* 广告宣传) are expected to rigorously follow the party line.

The strengthening of media control with more intense and wider repression has affected the scope of critical journalism in recent years, with many professionals leaving their work positions, migrating to other platforms, retreating from the industry or moving to alternative or international media outlets (Fang, 2024).

The social media sphere

Among the phenomena that characterise Xi Jinping's era, the rise of social media has provided new spaces for expression (Li & Du, 2016). When control over traditional media and their online editions had become too tight, many journalists and commentators moved to platforms such as Weibo (first) and then WeChat (especially once also Weibo started to be more strictly monitored). For some, it became an opportunity to broadcast themselves as "self media" (*zi meiti* 自媒体) (Giusto, 2016), while also making some money, since popularity on Chinese social media can be monetised by hosting advertisement (Lupano, 2016: 29).

Social media have also provided the ground for disclosing critical events and scandals, making it harder for censorship to "erase" existing facts or issues and allowing journalists to keep exercising "guarded improvisation". Also, as Repnikova has pointed out, "pockets of critical journalism have shrunk, but have managed to survive and redefine themselves in the Xi era" (2017: 213), also by exploring new forms of expression such as documentary and digital video reporting (Fang, 2024).

However, control is palpable also online, where state and party institutions have growingly occupied the digital space by setting up governmental and party public accounts that send messages to their subscribers. The CPC's and the government's strategic use of mainstream social media platforms is clearly reflected in President Xi Jinping's address at the Cybersecurity and Informatisation Work Conference in April 2016, where he said:

[W]herever the masses are, there our leading cadres must go as well. All levels' Party and government bodies, as well as leading cadres, must learn how to march the mass line through the network, regularly go online to look around, understand what the masses think and want, collect good ideas and good suggestions, and vigorously respond to netizens' concerns, relieve their doubts and dispel their worries. (China Copyright and Media, 2016 b)

The CPC's approach to social media reflects a form of governance that is both adaptive and resilient in the digital age. Rather than resisting online discourse, the Party incorporates deliberative practices into its authoritarian rule. These dynamics have been conceptualised as "responsive authoritarianism" (Stockmann, 2013) and "authoritarianism 2.0" (Mertha, 2009), stressing how digital media can reinforce, rather than undermine, authoritarian control (Xu & Sun, 2018: 1184).

Strengthening discourse power

While the national media landscape remains partially fluid and contested despite fiercer control, the international projection of Chinese media is a less nuanced business. Xi Jinping's policy in this respect took off in 2013, when, speaking at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work held in Beijing on 19 August 2013, he outlined a strategic vision aimed at elevating China's global "discourse power" (*huayu quan* 话语权) to match its growing economic stature. He presented the issue in these terms[5]:

In the international public opinion structure, the West is strong and we are weak, Western major media control global public opinion […]. This problem must be resolved with great efforts. We must strive to move international communications capacity construction forward, innovate foreign propaganda methods, strengthen discourse system construction, strive to forge new concepts, new categories and new expressions that circulate between China and the outside world, tell China's story well, disseminate China's voice well, and strengthen our discourse power internationally. Hostile forces are doing their utmost to propagate so-called "universal values". Are these people really talking about "universal values"? Fundamentally not […]. If we allow this discourse to have its own way and deliberately misrepresent matters, those false efforts will lead people astray, which is bound to bring chaos to the Party's hearts and the people's hearts, endanger the Party's leadership and the security of the Socialist national regime […]. Our comrades must absolutely strengthen their sense of the battlefield. If we do not go and occupy the propaganda and ideology battlefield, others will occupy it. (China Copyright and Media, 2013)

Chinese theorists and policymakers refer to "discurse power" as the capacity to shape global public discourse by narrating both Chinese and international events from a distinctly Chinese perspective. At both academic and political levels, the PRC has long positioned itself within the international debate advocating for the establishment of a "new world media order" (*shijie chuanmei xin zhixu* 世界传媒新秩序), aiming to challenge the dominance of the Anglophone world in promoting ideals and models of journalism and media governance (Jiang, 2011). The concept of a "United Nations of the Media" (*meiti lianheguo* 媒体联合国), which was first proposed in 2011 by prominent media figures closely aligned with the

[5] The following translations was made available by China Copyright and Media on 12 November, after China Digital Times, on 4 November, had posted a document that is considered the outline of Xi Jinping's speech at the conference (China Digital Times, 2013). The official script remained unpublished.

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Communist Party, is instead a China-born idea that was later incorporated into the theoretical framework of Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road Initiative" (*yi dai yi lu* 一带一路, lit. "One belt one road"). Despite being presented as equitable, inclusive, and less dichotomous than that of the "new world media order" (Shi, 2018), it reveals Beijing's underlying ambition to redraw the global information landscape in line with Chinese values and strategic interests.

Xi Jinping's remarks in 2013 (reaffirmed in countless other occasions) reflected a renewed determination to build a strong alternative narrative capable of countering the dominant Western-centric flow of information. The objective was not only to shape global public opinion more effectively but also to "tell China's story well"—a phrase that has since become emblematic of the CPC's international media strategy (Mottura, 2014: 193). The full version of the slogan is to "effectively tell China's story, propagate China's story and explain Chinese characteristics" (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi, chuanbo hao Zhongguo shengyin, chanshi hao Zhongguo tese* 讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音，阐释好中国特色), but it is often shortened and officially translated as "Tell China's stories and convey China's voice"[6]. The formulation prompts the country to speak up and make itself heard in the international media space by narrating, from its own perspective and in its own words, what China is and does ("story"). The aim is to counterbalance what China perceives as Western bias in global communication (Marsh, 2023; Riva, 2023: 120).

The imperative to take control of the global news agenda concerning China had already emerged with stark clarity in 2003, in the wake of the Sars scandal. The outbreak was concealed from the international community— and from Chinese citizens themselves—for several months, thanks to the CPC's tight grip on the country's media (Zhang & Fleming, 2005). Once the scale of the epidemic became public knowledge, international criticism of China's media system was swift and unequivocal. In 2008, a year that was supposed to celebrate the PRC's emergence as a modern, fully developed nation through the successful stage of the Olympic Games in Beijing, European and North American media focused on human rights violations and the unrest in Tibet, once again depriving China of control over its narrative outside of China (Young, 2013).

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[6] This is the official translation published on the "China Keywords" portal (http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/china_key_words/), which will be briefly presented in Chapter 3.

Strategies

Since then, efforts to influence the construction of the PRC's international image have taken various forms and initiatives, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 — Strategies to influence global media narratives

Strategy	Description	Goals
Expansion	Heavy investment in Chinese media outlets, channels, and broadcasters that operate in foreign languages	To directly reach international audiences
Acquisition	Purchase of foreign media organisations	To reduce the volume of critical reporting on the PRC published outside China
Infiltration	Paid inserts produced by Chinese state media published in established international outlets; purchase of advertising space	To disseminate Chinese propaganda and create economic dependency among participating outlets
Cooperation	Organisation of international media forums and conferences; signing of cooperation agreements between Chinese and foreign media for content exchange and co—production	To shape discourse and professional standards in journalism, promoting the Chinese model over the Anglo—American one
Protection	Restriction of access to the Chinese market for international media	To preserve the CCP's monopoly over domestic journalistic narratives

Similar to the expansion moves described earlier in this chapter, initiatives to acquire foreign media started at the end of 2000s. In line with the attempt to expand China's cultural and narrative reach, investors from the PRC have either tried (and failed) or actually succeeded in buying foreign media companies. According to Bloomberg, since 2008 Chinese companies of various kinds have invested approximately 2.8 billion dollars in European media outlets and broadcasters. These investments range from the British channel Propeller TV—acquired in 2009 and subsequently used as a platform to broadcast China International Radio in the UK—to a number of Eastern European media groups and broadcasters, such as Medea, Empresa Media, and Nova TV in the Czech Republic, and TV Markiza in Slovakia (Tartar, Rojanasakul & Diamond, 2018; Rajczyk, 2019). Earlier, Chinese investors

had also attempted to acquire *Forbes* and *Newsweek*, although neither deal ultimately came to fruition (Osnos, 2010).

A more successful move was the acquisition of the historical English-language newspaper *South China Morning Post*, published in Hong Kong since 1903. The newspaper was acquired at the end of 2015 by Jack Ma, owner of the Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba. Since then, the editorial line of the newspaper—long known for its independence—has been closely watched by a wide range of analysts and media experts. While many have noted a greater sensitivity to the preferences of Beijing, the newspaper continues to feature pluralistic perspectives and to employ respected journalists, some of whom remain active and critical of the PRC authorities on their personal social media accounts (Lim, 2018; Committee to protect journalists, 2019).

China's protection of its media system is guaranteed by the limitations imposed on the ability of foreign media organisations to directly influence Chinese public opinion. Conversely, the PRC has fully capitalised on the popularity of global multimedia and social platforms, as well as the openness of European and Anglo-American media systems, to disseminate its own narratives abroad. From YouTube to Facebook to X, Chinese political institutions and state-affiliated media outlets have long maintained official accounts, using these platforms to circulate propaganda content directly to international audiences. For instance, on 6 August 2020, YouTube removed over two thousand channels linked to China, accusing them of spreading disinformation (Kuo, 2020).

Another means used to spread the Chinese message has been, especially in the 2010s, the production of propaganda videos—often animated and targeted at foreign viewers—that are distributed through YouTube. Although these productions may appear simplistic or overtly propagandistic to the extent that they seem unlikely to resonate with international audiences, their actual impact remains difficult to assess (Fu, 2017; Lupano, 2019). The same holds true for China's broader efforts to shape global media narratives and public opinion—an endeavour that demands full awareness and critical engagement from both policymakers and the wider public.

The notable expansion of the activities and influence of the PRC media beyond the national borders is viewed with suspicion—particularly in North America, Oceania, and parts of Western and Central Europe (Troianovsky, 2010)—and it has even been described by Reporters Without Borders as "a threat to press freedom worldwide" (Reporters sans frontiers, 2019). By contrast, it has been met with a more receptive or neutral attitude in regions such as Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia, and Eastern Europe.

In the US, the Chinese media have been accused to operating as intelligence agencies—or, at the very least, as entities politically subordinate to the Chinese government. In September 2018, Washington ordered CGTN and *Xinhua* to register as foreign agents on American soil and to disclose full details of their operations and financial transactions. President Trump's intention to shut Tiktok outside of the country in 2024 was based on some of these considerations. Through its commercial arm, *China Watch*, the state-run *China Daily* has strategically placed paid advertorial inserts—reportedly costing around $250,000 each—in prominent Anglo-American newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Daily Telegraph*. These inserts, while paid advertisements, are often not clearly labelled as such and are far from politically neutral, thereby contributing to a subtle yet significant influence on international public opinion through non-transparent means.

It is a documented fact that China has also tried to filter into well—established international media in recent years, offering cases for critics to confirm their worries. The financial crisis that traditional media all over the world have faced over the last decade has created the opportunity for external agents such as the CPC to gain "discourse power" by providing vital monetary investments.

In the US, only in 2021 did *The New York Times* adopt a policy of no longer accepting advertising or sponsored content from foreign state-affiliated media outlets, including *China Daily*. According to data that *China Daily* itself was legally obliged to disclose to US judicial authorities, both *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* received over 100,000 dollars per month to feature China—produced content in their print editions. In Europe, Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* also decided to discontinue its collaboration with *China Watch* in 2018. Nevertheless, agreements of the same sort have been established by China with a diverse range of international publications, spanning countries such as Japan, Australia, Thailand, France, Spain, New Zealand, Belgium, and Argentina.

Increasing investments in cooperation and professional training as tools to promote its own "story" has been another strategy pursued by the PRC to realise its ambition to reshape the global media order. Beginning with the 2009 World Media Summit in Beijing, China launched a series of international events targeting leading global media players, offering an alternative platform to those sponsored by the United Nations and traditionally grounded in Anglo-American principles. Initiatives of this kind—including the World Internet Conference in Wuzhen and the BRICS Media Forum—enable Beijing to disseminate abroad its normative vision for media governance and journalism. These events help position China as

a peer interlocutor alongside the world's major media organisations and allow it to share its regulatory strategies with governments interested in replicating its style of information control (Reporters sands frontiers, 2019).

Arguably, the Chinese "model" of journalism can hold appeal for media professionals outside China, drawn in particular by the country's technological sophistication in the communications sector. Towards the end of 2010s, Chinese universities have launched a variety of training programmes—often fully subsidised by Chinese institutions—targeted at journalists from Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe. These courses, which range in focus from digital media and financial journalism to big data and artificial intelligence, promote a distinctive Chinese conceptual framework for journalism. In doing so, they explicitly position themselves as a counterpoint to the dominant Western paradigms, while simultaneously aiming to challenge prevailing international critiques of China's media system (Yuan & Zhuang, 2016; Lim, 2018).

China's undisputable success in the development of AI models is only going to reinforce this trend.

5. The trajectory of journalistic ethics and professionalism

The Western model of journalism entered China in the early 18th century through European missionaries who established publications in both English and Chinese, primarily for proselytising purposes. It was, however, the Opium Wars and the subsequent expansion of European influence that sparked a more profound transformation. The increasing presence of colonial powers fostered a unique Sino-European exchange, particularly visible in port cities such as Hong Kong and Shanghai, which became key sites for the development of modern Chinese journalistic practices (Mittler, 2004; Weston, 2010; Lavagnino & Mottura, 2016).

Modern journalism in China emerged during the late Qing period, rooted in the activities of small Protestant printing presses in Southeast Asia's port cities. Beforehand, China had a long history of official communication through gazettes and bulletins, but these were internal bureaucratic tools, not public-facing media. Produced by and for government officials, they primarily reported on court affairs and administrative matters. Despite being regularly issued and distributed via the postal system, they were inaccessible to the general public and cannot be considered predecessors of modern journalism (De Giorgi, 2001; Zhang X., 2007).

Modern journalists

Wang Tao (王韬 1828-1897) was one of China's earliest modern journalists. He began his career as a translator for the London Missionary Society Press in Shanghai, then one of the most influential publishing houses in China (Schell & Delury, 2013; Uchida 2017). After moving to Hong Kong and spending time in Great Britain with the Scottish missionary James Legge, Wang returned to Asia and, in 1884, he founded the *Universal Circulating Herald* (*Xunhuan ribao* 循环日报), the first commercially owned Chinese newspaper. Its success in colonial Hong Kong stemmed from its distinctive content: timely news, practical trade-related information, and editorials (*yanlun* 言论) written in classical Chinese (Cohen, 1974). Wang also contributed to the influential *Shenbao* (申报), and viewed journalism as a tool to inform governance and promote social harmony (Hu, 1987). Like many reform—minded intellectuals of the time, he believed that a robust press was one of the key strengths of Western societies (De Giorgi, 2001: 70-71).

By the early 20th century, many members of the social and intellectual elite had grown disillusioned with Qing rule, and saw journalism as a means to promote political and social reform. Rather than neutral reporting, the new publications that they produced prioritised public debate and advocacy. Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929), a central figure in the late Qing reformist movement and arguably the most influential media personality of his time, viewed journalism as essential to shaping public opinion (*yulun* 舆论) and to holding the government accountable (Nathan, 1986; Vittinghoff, 2002; De Burgh, 2003a). In editorials published as early as 1886, Liang emphasized the importance of transparent communication between society and the state. By 1902, he was arguing that newspapers should both supervise government activities (*jiandu zhengfu* 监督政府) and guide the public in participating in national affairs (De Giorgi, 2001: 79-110). In this vision, journalists acted as intermediaries between state and society (Weston 2010).

By the end of the 19th century, the number of newspapers in China had increased rapidly. Many were now referred to as "people's newspapers" (*minbao* 民报), to distinguish them from "official newspapers" (*guanbao* 管报) that were produced within government circles. The legitimacy of journalism began to derive less from state sanction and more from a sense of moral obligation to serve public opinion (De Giorgi, 2001: 72-74). The 1911 Xinhai Revolution, which Liang Qichao called the "ink revolution" (*heixue geming* 黑血革命) for the pivotal role played by newspapers, marked a turning point.

Competing models

The competing models that emerged at that time continue to influence how Chinese journalists conceptualise their role today. One strand was inspired by Western ideals, particularly the values of objectivity, government oversight, and journalistic independence. These principles gained strength in the early Republican era through the professionalisation of journalism. From 1912 onward, journalists began forming professional associations to advocate for their rights (Zhao J., 2008). Journalism education also started when, in 1920, St. John's University in Shanghai launched the country's first journalism programme, developed in partnership with the University of Missouri. In 1924, Yenching University in Beijing followed suit. These programmes introduced North-American standards and ethics to Chinese journalism, and helped define the field as an academic discipline (Hamilton, 1986; Li, 2004; Weston, 2010). At the same time, traditional Confucian ideals remained influential. Many journalists saw themselves not just as professionals but also as moral intellectuals with a duty to serve the public. This idea, which has been described as a "moral concern over the nation's well-being" (Davies, 2007), framed journalism as a form of civic responsibility, rooted in a long-standing Confucian mandate to think, write, and speak for the good of the nation. Reformers such as Liang Qichao also emphasised the educational function of the press, believing it should enlighten and uplift the public.

A decisive shift occurred with the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Whereas early reformers had viewed journalists as virtuous intermediaries, a new generation of politicised youth—mobilised by the New Culture Movement—began to see the press as an instrument for political change. By 1920, the *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian* 新青年), initially launched in 1915 as a space for cultural exchange, became the voice of the nascent Communist Party of China. In this new context, journalists were expected to conform at both the ideological and practical levels. Many newspapers became overt political tools, and their editorial positions aligned closely with party agendas (Ouyang, 2009).

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, this politicised model became institutionalised. Under Mao Zedong's leadership, the press was redefined as the Party's "throat and tongue", and its primary mission was to serve the CPC. As mentioned above, the "principle of the party character" required journalists to promote the Party's ideology and policies, while the "principle of the people character" required journalists to give voice to popular concerns (Zhao, 1998). In practice, however, from 1957 to 1979, the advocacy function of journalism was largely restricted to reinforcing party objectives.

Journalists were no longer seen as mediators between state and society but as functionaries of the party line (Tong, 2014).

With the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the death of Mao Zedong, China's society rediscovered values and ideas that the previous decades had swept away, resuming discourses that dated back to before the CPC's rule. However, as seen in Paragraph 2, the Tian'anmen crackdown in 1989 marked a definitive end to what Tong (2014) has termed the "liberalisation discourse of the 1980s" —a political and cultural climate that had temporarily allowed for greater media freedom and prioritised the "principle of the people character" over the "principle of the party character." In the aftermath of the protest, once political stability was restored, then General Secretary Jiang Zemin (江泽民) reasserted the primacy of the Party in journalistic practice. He re-emphasised that party journalists had to uphold the "principle of the party character" above all, arguing that serving the CPC ultimately meant serving the people, as the two were inherently aligned (Tong, 2014).

Yet, even as political control tightened, in the 1990s alternative models of journalism emerged, driven by profound structural and financial reforms within the media sector as the push toward commercialisation reshaped journalistic production. This transition gave rise to a populist orientation in reporting, with newspapers increasingly foregrounding everyday concerns and human-interest stories, in an effort to distinguish themselves from the elite-focused discourse of official Party media (Lynch 1999; Zhao Y. 2008; Xin 2012; Shao, Lu & Ye 2016). The shift towards a populist style of journalism involved highlighting the experiences and grievances of ordinary citizens, particularly the marginalised. However, because the "people character" could be expressed only in non-political terms, it often translated into soft news and sensationalism rather than investigative or critical coverage (Tong 2014).

Nonetheless, a small but influential group of commercial newspapers and their reporters gained recognition—and market share—through the practice of investigative journalism (Saether 2008; Tong & Sparks 2009; Bandurski & Hala 2010; Svensson, Saether & Zhang 2013). Their activity drew inspiration directly from principles associated with Western liberal journalism, such as the notion of the press as the Fourth Estate, but also resonated with indigenous traditions, including Liang Qichao's vision of the press as a watchdog of government power. In addition, it echoed Confucian literati ideals, in which intellectuals had a duty to speak truth to power and act as moral advisors on behalf of the people.

The ethos underpinning investigative journalism—grounded in social responsibility and truth-telling—thus formed part of a longer lineage of

intellectual commitment within Chinese journalistic culture. These ideals reflected a convergence between the modern drive for professional autonomy and a historical "intellectual willingness of Chinese journalists to save the nation and enlighten the people," as well as a broader desire for independence and truth reminiscent of 19th-century liberal journalism (Tong, 2014).

To be a journalist

Notwithstanding the changing landscape, the official discourse on the role and values of journalism in China has remained largely unchanged since the beginning of the reform era, despite the many transformations the media landscape and journalistic profession have undergone, including the emergence of freelance contributors (*ziyou zhuangaoren* 自由撰稿人) (Zhu, 2000; Shen, 2003; Gongyang, 2008) and fact-checking journalists (Zhang, 2025). Promoting CPC policies and acknowledging its leading role continued to be the baseline requirement for journalists, as reaffirmed times and again by Xi Jinping himself.

The Chinese information system is structured in such a way that the authorities can exert control not only over the content produced by media professionals—via the Propaganda Department—but also over their career access and job security within their work units (*danwei* 单位, see Lu & Perry 1997). This includes the issuance or revocation of the journalist credential (*jizhe zheng* 记者证, lit. journalist card). Only full-time, system-affiliated journalists (*tizhi nei* 体制内, lit. "inside the system") are eligible to hold a journalist card, which certifies their professional status and grants access to top-level interviews, official events such as government or party press conferences, and other politically significant gatherings. Because the card is issued through the newsroom that the journalist is affiliated with, following a period of stable employment, those considered "outside the system" (*tizhi wai* 体制外) cannot obtain it. Being dismissed or leaving one's post without immediately joining another accredited organisation leads to the loss of the credential. Renewal, every five years, can be denied for disciplinary reasons. Journalists must also undergo periodic training and assessments to verify their "ideological correctness" (Thomas, 2013; Li & Feng, 2013; China Media Project, 2022).

There is no formalised path to becoming a journalist in the PRC, although most professionals come from journalism undergraduate and graduate programmes offered at universities across the country. Awards recognising

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journalistic excellence are administered by the Central Propaganda Department and the All-China Journalists Association, helping to promote an official image of the qualities a "good" journalist should possess. Yet, defining the exact standards of professional excellence remains a challenge for Chinese journalists.

Courses grounded in Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and now Xi Jinping Thought are core components of journalism degrees and are also mandatory for working journalists through ongoing training and testing every five years. Still, these do little to address the practical and ethical skills necessary for the profession—such as writing ability, stylistic competence, use of technology, interviewing techniques, source management, and factual accuracy.

Professionalism

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, journalists also lack a legal framework defining their rights and responsibilities. The absence of proper regulation reinforces the ambiguous and often precarious position in which Chinese journalists operate, while enabling unchecked abuse by authorities. With no specific rights to invoke and no clear legal boundaries for their work, journalists in China have developed a keen ability to interpret the political climate and gauge how far they can push, depending on current circumstances. At the same time, they regularly practice self-censorship as a protective measure against sanctions (Tong, 2014; Repnikova, 2017).

This phenomenon is often referred to by Chinese practitioners as the "bottom line" (*dixian* 底线) that separates what is politically correct from what is considered politically sensitive. This boundary is perceived as uncertain—and thus all the more unsettling—even though the very practice of self-censorship by Chinese journalists can also be seen as a mechanism that enables newsrooms to avoid political minefields in order to focus on other issues that are nonetheless highly sensitive from a political standpoint (Tong, 2009).

The notion of professionalism (*zhuanyezhuyi* 专业主义) that gained attention among academics and practitioners in the 2000s and 2010s reflects growing awareness among journalists of shared values related to their professional identity (Qian & Bandurski, 2011: 57). What those values are, however, remains a topic of debate. Some took an optimistic view, pointing to instances of investigative journalism or new professional forms such as fact-checking journalism (Zhang, 2025), and interpreting such efforts as a "third force" positioned between market pressures and the authoritarian

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state—one that "has played, and will continue to play, a critical role in shaping the future of Chinese journalism" (Chan, 2011: 17). Others rejected the idea that Chinese journalists follow independent professional values, branding them instead as "servants of three masters": the Party, the readers-consumers, and the advertisers (Yu, 2005), and arguing the de-professionalisation of journalists in the country (Wang & Meng, 2022; Wang & Li, 2024). Timothy Cheek (1992) used the term "mandarin vocation" to frame professional integrity in terms of patriotic ideals and a paternalistic attitude towards the public. Lee Chin-chuan (2005) identified three historical models of journalism in China (Confucian liberalism in the early 20th century, Maoist journalism from 1949 to 1978, and "communist capitalism" from the 1980s), arguing that professionalism was consistently understood by Chinese journalists as behaviour oriented towards the national interest.

Hugo de Burgh (2003b) highlighted contradictions and compromises in Chinese journalist's activity, revealing how many openly claim to uphold high ideals such as watchdog journalism, only to find themselves actually working in ways shaped by market or political pressures. According to Judy Polumbaum and Xiong (2009), "the most reflexive journalists have strong social consciousness and ethical awareness," favouring "fact over preconception," showing human sensitivity, and strategically negotiating "with sources, editors, and officials in the interest of illuminating important public issues," while expressing concern over the commercial pressures eroding journalistic purpose (2009: 4-5).

For Pan & Lu (2003) Chinese journalists localise the universal model of professionalism by irregularly adopting and improvising a variety of often conflicting values that coincide with the variety of models available. Depending on the situation, the topic, the outlet, the time and the political climate, they can pragmatically embody the Confucian intellectual committed to national welfare and public education; the Party-mass "transmission belt" (*chuandongdai* 传动带); the Western ideals of objectivity, autonomy, and specialisation; or the market-driven approach, focused on audience preferences and boosting circulation.

Noting how scholarly discourse has often struggled to keep pace with the evolving role of journalism in China, Hassid (2011) has pointed out that the binary framework that opposes mouthpiece journalism to American-style professionalism tends to oversimplify a far nuanced landscape. While such figures certainly exist, he argues that they represent only a fraction of the profession.

More widespread and influential are two lesser-studied profiles: the "advocate professional," who seeks to shape public opinion and policy within system-defined boundaries, and the "workaday journalist," motivated

primarily by commercial goals rather than ideals of public service. These categories reflect better the pragmatic and often ambivalent realities shaping Chinese journalistic practice today.

Adding to this complex landscape is the category of freelance journalists, i.e. professionals who are not regularly employed by the outlets that they work for. As shown in Lupano (2016) by means of interviews and fieldwork, while presenting significant differences regarding their practical life, freelancers appear no different from regularly employed journalists when it comes to professional ethics. Their ideals also oscillate between the "Confucian intellectual", the "Party cadre", the "workaday journalist" and the "watchdog journalist" models, depending on individual priorities, imaginary and beliefs.

Glocalised ethics

To conclude, since the emergence of journalism in China, media professionals have drawn upon both domestic and foreign sources to define and legitimise their roles. Internally, they have referenced the Confucian literati tradition, which views intellectuals as moral agents responsible for advising rulers and serving the public good. Externally, they have looked to the Western model of the press as the Fourth Estate, with its emphasis on neutrality, objectivity, and independence. These two value systems have historically coexisted—often uneasily—in the evolving self-understanding of Chinese journalists.

The notion of journalism as a tool for political advocacy and popular mobilisation pre-dates the founding of the PRC. However, following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 and until the late 1970s, this vision became institutionalised as the only legitimate model. During this period, journalism was narrowly defined as a mechanism to serve party interests and mobilise public opinion in line with ideological goals.

With the economic "reform and opening-up" policies of the 1980s, previously suppressed conceptions of the profession resurfaced. Competing discourses of legitimation began to take shape, drawing from a more diverse set of moral and professional standards. Although Western ideals had played a formative role in the early development of Chinese journalism, indigenous cultural values continued to shape professional norms.

Despite the fundamentally illiberal structure of the Chinese media system, a substantial body of research produced globally over the past 40 years has demonstrated that journalists in the PRC are not necessarily opposed to the model within which they operate. In practice, this system is often tempered

and hybridised with alternative ethical paradigms—most notably, the figure of the Confucian public intellectual, who feels morally responsible for the fate of the country, and the Anglo-American journalistic tradition of watchdog journalism. These influences can lead to an expanded sense of professional purpose, extending beyond the remit defined by the CPC.

Depending on the individual journalist's commitment and the orientation of their media outlet, such engagement may even approach the normative ideals of watchdog journalism aimed at scrutinising those in power. When Chinese journalists articulate the principles guiding their work, they often invoke values such as objectivity, independence, and truth-seeking standards that closely align with liberal Western journalism. At the same time, many continue to describe their mission in terms of social responsibility and national service, echoing the Confucian model of the intellectual as a guardian of the common good.

This dual orientation suggests that Western ideals have not fully supplanted indigenous conceptions of journalism. Rather than being deeply transformed by global influences, Chinese journalistic ethics have developed through a process of glocalisation (Robertson, 1995), wherein imported values are selectively adapted and integrated with local traditions. The result is a hybrid ethical framework, in which multiple and conflicting moral imperatives coexist.

Moreover, while globalisation has reintroduced Western journalistic norms into Chinese professional discourse, it has also opened a new stage in China's media development. In recent years, China has began to actively seeking to shape global journalistic standards, promoting alternative models of news production and dissemination that reflect the country's own political values and strategic interests.

2. Genres, Outlets and Journalistic Expression in China

1. Genre in written journalism

In linguistics and in discourse analysis, the concept of genre has come to refer to texts or communicative events that are characterised by specific purposes, structures and styles, and that embody a particular type of interaction (for instance writers and readers, speakers and listeners, participants in a dialogue, etc.). Genres result from specific social practices and are produced by a (often professional) discourse community. This conception distinguishes genre from other ways of characterising texts, such as discourse and style (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; van Leeuwen, 2008: 345).

In written journalism, genre refers to how a text is categorised and is defined within the specific professional community, but also within the specific outlet where a text appears. As Aitchison (2007: 72) put it, "newspapers are somewhat like mega-stores with multiple departments": their discourse is not made of a single, homogenous type of text, but of a variety of texts that are normally "shelved" in clearly designated sections within a given newspaper.

While there is commonality between articles of the same genre, such as foregrounded news values in the introduction of a hard news story, there can be linguistic and structural differences and peculiarities across different newspapers (Ngai, 2022: 5). The very name of a genre can vary between outlets: in the attempt to distinguish themselves from competitors, different outlets can use different terms to refer to similar genres.

A web of interrelated contextual factors have a profound impact on genre, including authorial choices, industry norms, and audience interpretations, thus revealing a dynamic relationship between texts and their contexts, where material and symbolic dimensions continuously influence one another (Mast, 2020). In other words, the linguistic, cultural and socio-political context in which they emerge significantly influence

genre features. The individual aims and professional self-perceptions of authors—members of the same discourse community—also contribute to shaping genre functions and conventions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Chinese journalists and scholars frequently adopt Western frameworks in their analysis of domestic journalistic output (Hu et al., 1998; Valli, 2010; Wang & Lee, 2014). As seen in Chapter 1, modern journalism and modern genres in China stemmed from the Anglo-American tradition; however, local genres have also developed distinctive characteristics within the Chinese context. Over time, original sub-genres generated, reflecting the unique linguistic, cultural and socio-political conditions, local traditions and norms (Xia, 2014: 156). Therefore, when investigating journalistic genres in the Chinese media environment, combining textual and contextual analysis proves particularly valuable.

A considerable body of academic literature have addressed (also contrastively) the definition and distinctive features of journalistic genres in China. However, being largely produced by researchers affiliated with institutions within China, much of this scholarship remains accessible only in Chinese. Publications on the subject in other languages are still relatively limited. Notable exceptions include studies on specific genres such as investigative journalism (Tong & Sparks, 2009; Bandurski & Hala, 2010; Svensson, Sæther & Zhang, 2013), and, to a lesser extent, news commentary (Valli, 2010; Lupano, 2016). The interest for these two types of text lies in their being identified as two particularly dynamic and innovative sub-genres in the Chinese media landscape. They surfaced (or re-surfaced) in the late 1990s, as a result of the process of commercialisation and internationalisation of the sector (see Chapter 1).

Yet, comprehensive analyses of Chinese journalism genres written in international languages remain rare. Drawing on a selection of scholarly publications, this chapter examines how the two principal journalistic genres—news and opinions—are conceptualised within Chinese media studies. In the evolving landscape of contemporary journalism—where the distinction between producers and consumers has blurred, and where digital formats growingly influence narrative construction by hybridising genres (Li & Du, 2016; Tong, 2022)—scholars have highlighted the need to account for new complex genres that diverge from their original versions (Graham & Whalen, 2008; Mast, 2020).

While acknowledging these changes and urgent theoretical need, in light of the data that this volume draws on, the analysis in this chapter is limited to the genres of written journalism and, in particular, to the genres that appear in the print and online editions of traditional newspapers. Besides being only textual, these types of article are also consistently

attributed the same categorisation across the print and digital versions of each outlet.

In Chinese newspapers, genre classification is not subject to personal interpretation: in the case of RMRB opinion articles, for instance, the sub-genre that each text belongs to is indicated above the title in the print, pdf format (*dianzi ban* 电子版), and web version. Online, articles are also grouped according to their belonging to the same sub-genre, and can be easily reached via links accessible from the newspaper's home page.

Before looking at the Chinese scholarly and professional definitions of the two main genres of news and opinions in Chinese written journalism, as well as their sub-genres, the following paragraph briefly outlines the newspapers' categorisation in the country.

2. Chinese news outlets: between the Party and the market

As discussed in Chapter 1, numerous studies have investigated the process of media reform in China, which has primarily involved commercialisation, localisation, partial privatisation, and, ultimately, the conglomeration of media organisations. However, relatively few scholars writing in languages other than Chinese have systematically analysed the categories into which the diverse array of journalistic outlets emerging from these reforms can be classified. Furthermore, both the choice of categories used and the translation of the corresponding Chinese terms remain only partially established in literature.

At a general level, both in academic discourse and in the language of media professionals, the predominant distinction is between outlets commonly referred to as "commercial" and those labeled as "party-affiliated." This distinction emerged in the second half of the 1990s to describe the divide between media organisations that remained under direct state institutional control, and those that had acquired a certain degree of operational independence. This shift was mainly driven by the government's need to reduce financial support for the sector and to equip media organisations with corporate structures capable of competing in an increasingly globalised market.

Despite the prevalence of these terms in academic literature, their usage is rarely subject to in-depth discussion. Even scholars with strong command of Chinese and considerable expertise in media studies tend to use these terms inconsistently. A telling example can be found in the work of Hugo de Burgh (2017), a leading authority on Chinese journalism, who refers broadly to the categories of "local city newspapers" (*dushibao* 都市报) and

"party papers" (*dangbao* 党报) without systematically unpacking their nuances. When classifying various Chinese newspapers, he juxtaposes categories based on ownership (such as "newspapers of national political organs," *zhongyang jiguan bao* 中央机关报) with those defined by thematic specialisation (such as "industrial and professional newspapers," *chanye, zhuanye bao* 产业，专业报). A clear distinction is not provided. Similarly, other scholars of unquestionable expertise, such as Qian and Bandurski, also employ comparable categories without explicitly defining their meaning.

A significant effort toward the categorisation of Chinese newspapers has been made by Stockmann (2013), whose classification system is based on interviews conducted with Chinese journalists in Beijing and Chongqing. Her study identifies three primary categories: "official" (corresponding to terms such as *guanfang de baozhi* 官方的报纸, *dangbao* 党报, *jiguan bao* 机关报, and *dabao* 大报), "commercialised" (*shichanghua de baozhi* 市场化的报纸, *xiaobao* 小报, *dushibao* 都市报), and "semi-official" (*banguanfang de baozhi* 半官方的报纸 or *wanbao* 晚报).

According to Stockmann, official newspapers are those directly affiliated with the Party or government bodies, receiving state subsidies, often serving as the flagship publications within media conglomerates, and subject to significant editorial and personnel control by their affiliated institutions. These newspapers are typically managed by government officials or party members. At the opposite end of the spectrum, commercialised newspapers operate independently of media conglomerates or exist on an equal footing with their parent publications. They rely primarily on advertising revenue, are partially privatised (with non-public investors collectively allowed to own up to 49% of a newspaper), and are therefore market-driven, prioritising profitability and audience appeal. Their management is not necessarily composed of Party members. Finally, semi-official newspapers occupy a subordinate position within media conglomerates. While financially independent, they are not privatised; they function similarly to official newspapers in terms of governance but maintain a commercial facade, with Party members in leadership roles.

Given the scope and objectives of this study, reference will primarily be made to the two categories at the extremes of Stockmann's spectrum, as they best represent the cases under examination. This dichotomy also aligns with categorisations that emerged from a series of qualitative interviews with Chinese journalists and media experts conducted by the author during field research between 2009 and 2015 (Lupano, 2016).

In this volume, the term "institutional newspapers" will be used to translate *jiguan bao*, referring to media outlets that are directly affiliated

with—and funded by—government or Party entities, serve as their official voice, and operate with minimal consideration for market demands. Within this category, "party newspapers" (*dangbao*) should be understood as a specific subset. Conversely, the term "commercial newspapers" will be used to translate *shichanghua de baozhi*, denoting market-oriented outlets that generate revenue primarily through sales and advertising. These publications tend to be more daring and innovative, as they must navigate competition and market dynamics to sustain their operations.

3. News genre in Chinese journalistic writing

News, also referred to in English with terms such as "hard news" and "news story", is "a staple of newspaper writing" (Ngai, 2022: 56) and, therefore, particularly institutionalised and widely studied in literature.

In Chinese, the most common and comprehensive term that refers to the genre of news—featuring countless titles of academic publications—is *xinwen baodao* (新闻报道), which can be translated as "news report". Its definition is based on two fundamental criteria: 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). Truthfulness means that "facts are the source of news report. The truthfulness of a news report requires an accurate reconstruction of the true colours of a news event" (Xue & Zhang, 2013a: 42-43). Objectivity, instead, is described as "reporting about an event in a truthful, balanced, fair manner, without directly and openly expressing the writer's personal bias and opinions" (Xue & Zhang, 2013a: 75).

Other characteristics of the genre are 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). Journalists perform fairness if they "act in a professional manner when they report, write, and edit" and "chase news having the common interest in mind", as opposed to reporting facts that are "incorrect, incomplete, partial, superficial, without interpretation, without a background and de-contextualised" (Zhang, 2014: 9).

Timeliness relates to the speed in reporting a fact (Xu, 2013: 33-37), while readability requires that an article is easy to understand for the most extensive audience. It is considered "the basis of the survival of the media", and must be enhanced by "paying attention to the storytelling of a news story", providing proper background, offering detailed descriptions, using

beautiful writing style and being creative in order to "break expressions that are worn out" (Zhang, 2014: 10-11).

"Guiding social public opinion" (*yindao shehui yulun* 引导社会舆论) and "realising supervision by public opinion" (*shixing yulun jiandu* 实行舆论监督) are two formulations that embody the core of so-called "other social concepts". The former hints at the "educational" role of news media (Wang, 2019). The latter points to the media's function to serve as a means for the masses in order to exercise control over the government and administrative bodies, mainly through criticism (Xu, 2013: 37-41). However, in the contemporary political and media environment this concept is a highly contested one, to the point that critics have defined it as "the most common euphemism for agenda control" (Qian & Bandurski, 2011). Surely, the formulation has a long enough history to having acquired a multi-layered, ambiguous meaning (Repnikova, 2016).

Originally, *yulun jiandu* referred to the supervision that public opinion can exercise over political leaders thanks to information published in the media. This interpretation follows the definition given by Chinese leaders themselves, and aligns with the "watchdog" role of the press as conceived in the Anglo-American journalistic tradition. This is also how the then Premier and acting General secretary Zhao Ziyang employed the term in his report to the 13th National Congress of the CPC in 1987, where he emphasised the crucial role that public opinion should play in the country. However, following Zhao's political purge after the Tian'anmen protest (Zhao, 2010), the expression disappeared from official discourse, only to resurface in the mid-1990s. Its official revival dates to the 15th CPC Congress in 1998, when it was linked to the notion that journalists should give voice to the needs of the people, allowing political authorities to adjust policies accordingly. The new course was further cemented by then Premier Zhu Rongji's visit, in 1998, to the editorial offices of *Focus* (*Jiaodian Fangtan* 焦点访谈), a CCTV-1 programme devoted to investigative journalism (De Burgh, 2003; Cho, 2007; De Giorgi, 2008; Bandurski & Hala, 2010; Stockmann, 2015).

Zhan Jiang (展江), one of China's most prominent media scholars, also endorsed this interpretation. In an article published by the Xinhua News Agency in 2007, he explained that the term refers to the role of the media in representing the masses and monitoring corruption. However, after reviewing cases from 2001 to 2007 in which journalists performed power supervision, he concluded: "the prospects for *yulun jiandu* in China remain unclear, as they depend on the progress of the political, commercial and public spheres."

Yet, among many Chinese journalists and in the interpretations of Western scholars, the term *yulun jiandu* is more often associated with Maoist theory, which views the Party as in charge of shaping and standardising public opinion. In this sense, the expression should be more accurately translated as "supervision *of* public opinion." This was likely the meaning intended by Jiang Zemin, then General Secretary of the CPC, during the 1994 National Propaganda Work Conference in Beijing, where he emphasised the need to promote uplifting behavioural models and to uphold the media's "Party character". Scholars who support this reading of the term *yulun jiandu* highlight its close connection to another *tifa* of the official media discourse, "guidance of public opinion" (*yulun daoxiang* 舆论导向), whose link with media control is unambiguous (Zhao & Sun, 2007; Lavagnino, 2010: 60; Qian & Bandurski, 2011; Lupano, 2012: 49-54).

The opacity in the formulation *yulun jiandu* is a common trait of *tifa*. The power and longevity of these expressions lie precisely in their abstraction and openness to multiple interpretations (Kluver, 1996; Schoenhals, 1992; see Chapter 3).

Irrespective of this ongoing debate, the news report can be broken down into a variety of sub-genres (*ci leixing* 次类型) that scholars have identified in inconsistent ways. For some, categories are theme-dependent, going from report on current politics (*shizheng xinwen baodao* 时政新闻报道), to the 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 breaking news (*tufa shijian baodao* 突发事件报道) (Xue & Zhang, 2013a; Zhang, 2019). For others, structural characteristics and communicative purposes are the key defining elements of sub-genres, that can be listed 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). In this categorisation, new media news (*dianzi meiti xinwen* 电子媒体新闻) and microblog news (*weibo xinwen* 微薄新闻) are also treated as specific sub-genres, due to their specific traits (Zhang, 2014; Xia, 2014).

Below is a brief description of the most important sub-genres of news report identified according to the latter typology.

News article (*xinxi* 信息)

As "a journalistic text that promptly covers relevant and recent events in a concise and straightforward manner" (Zhang, 2014: 116), the news article in the Chinese theorisation is considered the most commonly used informative text in journalism. It is in fact the most prolific sub-genre of news, covering two thirds of over three million news that are published in China every day. It is characterised by speed, clarity, brevity, accuracy and truthfulness. It takes the readers straight into the story, as if they were seeing and perceiving the event directly. The structure is fixed and is composed of headline (*biaoti* 标题), dateline (*xinxi tou* 信息头)—containing the source of the article, the place where it was written and the time of publication—,introduction (*daoyu* 导语), main body (*zhuti* 主体), and conclusion (*jieyu* 结语) (Xu 2013, 173-174; Zhang 2014, 116-120).

News story (*tongxun* 通讯)

The news story reports in details and liveliness the scene of an event or the features of a person. It conveys emotions, contains comments and uses narrative and descriptive means (Zhang, 2014: 129; Xia, 2014: 157; Liao, 2017). It is considered "a genre of news report" that is "unique to our county. In the West, the genre of news report is divided in "pure news" (*chun xinwen* 纯新闻) and the "special article" (*te gao* 特稿). While the first one corresponds to the Chinese sub-genre of news article, the special article is similar to the Chinese news story, but with wider scope (Xia, 2014: 156).

The main feature of the news story is its "news character" (*xinwen xing* 新闻性), meaning the attention to truthfulness and to the "five Ws" of journalism writing (Who, Where, When, What, Why). It is also defined by its focus on explaining the meaning of an event or presenting points of view ("commentary character", *pinglun xing* 评论性); and by 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 ("figurative character", *xingxiang xing* 形象性) (Zhang, 2014: 129-130).

The news story shares some characteristics with the news article, such as the goal "to describe meaningful people and facts of life in a timely and accurate way". However, compared to the news article, the news story "only focuses on very important events that touch the lives of common

people", and "tells the readers not only which events have occurred in life, but also the origins, development, and cause-effect relations, as well as the thoughts of the people involved" (Xia, 2014: 157). Besides, the news story has a more flexible and adaptive structure (Liao, 2017).

Investigative report (*diaocha baodao* 调查报道)

The investigative report foregrounds empirical rigour, critical questioning, and evidence-based exposés. It is written "after an objective investigation on the spot regarding an event", and must "show the pattern of development of an event" (Zhang, 2014: 150). 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: 152). Its similarity to the Anglo-American homologue is among the reasons why it has been widely studied by international scholars. The other reason lies in the important role this sub-genre played in the Chinese media sector since the end of the 1990s. Previously, in-depth inquiry was largely confined to reportage literature (*baogao wenxue* 报告文学), a narrative mode combining factual data and literary style, where readers were left to infer meaning.

In-depth report (*shendu baodao* 深度报道)

The sub-genre of in-depth report "developed in the United States between 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 analyses 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 the 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 to 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 broadness 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 (*xianchang xinwen* 现场新闻) and event report (*shijian xinwen* 事件新闻)

Defined as "the equivalent of live radio and TV broadcasting" (Zhang, 2014: 156), field report narrates the journalist's visit to the field of a news event as a witness. Its aim is to enhance the credibility and truthfulness of the report; timeliness is key to this sub-genre. Its twin sub-genre is the event report, which specifically focuses on incidents, natural disasters, health crises, serious crimes etc. It also covers war and social protests (Zhang, 2014: 158).

Special interview (*zhuanfang* 专访)

Born out of news story, the special interview gradually became a sub-genre per se which targets personalities related to an important event or issue. Like the news story, it strives for "completeness and richness, and uses many expressive systems to enhance their own liveliness and readability", although it has a unique structure (Zhang, 2014: 138). It focuses on the interviewee's recorded words, which result from questions, answers, and follow-up questions (Xue & Zhang, 2013b: 263-271).

E-media journalism (*dianzi meiti xinwen* 电子媒体新闻)

Several studies on news writing have also addressed the emergence of e-media journalism (or new media journalism). However, rather than as a distinct genre, it is treated as a sub-genre of the broader news report category. E-media journalism is typically characterised by a set of defining features: its capacity to transcend temporal and spatial constraints; its use of multimedia formats; its ability to bypass traditional financial barriers, enabling netizens to disseminate news at minimal cost; its support for personalised news consumption; and its encouragement of greater interactivity between news producers and audiences (Zhang, 2014: 169).

In addition, some scholars argue that new media journalism also "enhances the supervision 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). While the validity of the statement is debatable, it is interesting to note this rare explicit reference to limitations of expression in journalism.

4. Opinion genre in Chinese journalistic writing

Opinion writing can be described as "overtly seek[ing] to evaluate events and persuade readers", and being "relentlessly driven by evaluation" (Ngai, 2022: 85). In the People's Republic of China, the commentary genre is firmly embedded in the tradition of Party journalism, a fact that is exemplified by the political commentaries of RMRB. These texts were intended to serve as a pedagogical tool, aimed at inculcating the population with the "correct" political line, eschewing the expression of genuinely independent perspectives. Nevertheless, the genre has undergone significant transformation, particularly since the 1990s. It has gained growing popularity and public influence, and become an important space for public debate and opinion, along with augmented possibilities for self-expression, enhanced by the reform period. As audiences demonstrated a desire for original and appealing content, new commercial newspapers utilised this and other genres as marketing tools, thereby effectively contributing to the change in subjects and forms of expression in the media (Zhao, 1998; Lee, 2000; Shirk, 2011).

In accordance with this tendency, opinion articles have also been the focal point of an expanding body of studies (Wang, 2007 and 2008; Cheng, 2008; Zhao, 2012; Du, 2013: 31). Chinese scholars posit that the effective articulation of original opinions from an individual standpoint constitutes a fundamental element of this genre. This element is deemed "a very important ingredient in every paper" that is utilised to elucidate the organisation's "standpoint and political viewpoint". The objective of this endeavour is to "guide the readers' orientation on the news" (Wang H., 2004: 8). A comparison of the 1990s with the pre-reform period reveals that news commentaries have achieved a significant increase in their influence on public opinion. It is evident that they constitute a pivotal element within the domain of online media. A button bearing the term "opinion" (*pinglun* 评论) or "views" (*guandian* 观点) is typically positioned at the upper section of news portals or social media accounts.

News commentary is characterised 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; and a "demonstration" (*lunzheng bufen* 论证), which constitutes the central and most dense part of a commentary. The "ending" (*jiewei* 结尾) fulfils the function of concluding the argumentation by means of summarising the previous points, returning to the specific case after a discussion in general terms, or by adding points that had not been mentioned yet (She, 2013: 244-262).

A significant element of the genre of news commentary pertains to its production. A mere fraction of commentaries on current affairs, and even of editorials, are authored by journalists who are in full-time employment with the organisations that publish them. It is a common practice for such texts to be composed by freelance contributors (*ziyou zhuangaoren* 自由撰稿人). These contributors may be academics, media professionals from other outlets, or specialists in other fields. These individuals are remunerated by the papers to produce single articles or columns (Shen, 2003; Lavagnino, 2006; Gongyang, 2008; Lupano, 2016). Since the early 2000s, the phenomenon of freelance contributors has emerged, signifying a departure from the conventional employment model in journalism. They enjoy formal independence from the outlet with which they are engaged, a distinction from the status of regular employees of news outlets who are bound by the CPC (Young, 2013). The financial and organisational autonomy of these entities, frequently accompanied by a specialist knowledge, positions them as key actors in the potential articulation of independent opinions and the expansion of the discourse within China's public sphere (Gongyang, 2008).

It is important to note that, in the case of texts published in traditional newspapers, whether in print or digital formats, access is typically determined by the prerogative of the editors. Editors are obligated to adhere to instructions from the newspaper's management and censorship bodies. In instances where authors contribute independently, access is subject to negotiation and filtration by the editors. It is evident that freedom of expression for commentators is not and could not be absolute. This is despite the multiplication and diversification of Chinese newspapers, the occasionally more permissive political climate and the reasons of the market, which have resulted in increasingly open debates on a progressively broader spectrum of topics (see Chapter 1).

Since the close of the first decade of the 2000s, the emergence of the "we media" has reduced the traditional role of the editor, allowing

individuals to disseminate their perspectives on a wide range of subjects directly from their Weibo or Weixin accounts. Nevertheless, the Chinese apparatus responsible for the regulation of media and public opinion has demonstrated its capacity to evolve in accordance with societal changes. As mentioned in Chapter 1, automatic methods and human workers are employed to restrict the use of certain words or the discussion of certain topics. Moreover, the regulatory ambiguity creates an environment conducive to self-censorship, also online.

Within the domain of news commentary, a variety of distinct sub-genres can be identified. A fundamental distinction can be delineated between commentaries that are produced internally, thereby reflecting the official stance of a publication's commentary department, and those that are authored externally by independent contributors. The following sub-genres are associated with the first group.

Editorial (*shelun* 社论)

In both the Chinese and Anglo-American traditions, the editorial remains the most authoritative form of news commentary. Chinese scholars describe it as "the political face and flag of a media organisation" (Yang, 2013: 209), whose mission is to express a publication's official position on major political and social issues, and significant news events (Zhao, 2012: 134). Its relevance is underscored by the position in the paper—typically the top right of the front page, an area known to attract readers' immediate attention (Wang H., 2004). Because they express institutional voices rather than individual opinions, editorials are not signed (Wang W., 2008: 361). However, editorial departments also commission its production externally, to field experts or to professional freelance commentators, who receive higher remuneration for editorials compared to other commentary types (Lupano, 2016). When they are not written internally, the editors provide clear guidance regarding the viewpoints to be conveyed, ensuring alignment with the paper's (and often the Party's) official discourse even when freelancers are involved (Wang W., 2008; Lupano, 2017b).

Because they are used only for prominent topics and events, editorials do not appear daily: the RMRB, for instance, publishes six to seven each month on average, whereas provincial newspapers may produce only a few or none at all in the same period (Yang, 2013: 209). Editorials from institutional outlets like the RMRB are regarded as particularly authoritative, since they represent, by extension, the voice of the CPC Central Committee (Gitter & Fang, 2018). Editorials from other outlets can also be considered particularly

relevant at times or in specific circumstances. This was the case, for instance, of the New Year's editorial published by NFZM (see Chapter 1).

Commentary signed Ren Zhongping (*Ren Zhongping shuming pinglun* 仁仲平署名评论)

A unique sub-genre of the Chinese media landscape is pseudonymous commentary or team commentary that appears only in some Chinese institutional outlets. In this sub-genre, the pen names, which at first glance appear like real names, conceal teams of anonymous writers who draft and edit the texts representing the voice of the institution that rules over a paper.

The practice of using pseudonyms dates back to pre-PRC times, serving to protect militant identities. Later, it became widespread again during the Cultural Revolution and the post-Mao reforms, as a means for CPC reformists to promote their views against party conservatives (Shen, 2009). Since the late 1990s, the system has been revitalised to counter increasing public scepticism towards CPC propaganda, creating the impression of diverse, independent commentaries on institutional papers (Gitter & Fang, 2018: 12). However, the pseudonyms are easily deciphered, and entire collections of commentaries published under one or another pen name are openly available in Chinese bookstores. In these collections, the meaning of pseudonyms are openly explained (Xu, 2023).

The most authoritative team commentary is the "commentary signed Ren Zhongping", which is published on the RMRB. The pen name (仁仲平) is homophonous of *Ren zhong ping* (人重评), an abbreviation of "important RMRB commentary" (*Renmin ribao zhongyao pinglun* 人民日报重要评论) (Mi, 2009; Tsai & Kao, 2013). Because the leading institution of the paper is the Central Publicity Department, the highest authority in terms of official communication in the country, the commentary signed Ren Zhongping enjoys the highest status within the sub-genre.

This text has featured the CPC newspaper since 1998. A uniquely lengthy article (often exceeding 6,000 characters, more than three times the length of an editorial), the Ren Zhongping commentary addresses significant domestic and international issues in an accessible style (Li, 2013: 231–234). It is usually placed on the front page and its importance is only second to the editorial. Only two or three are published every year, making its appearance a noteworthy event that other media timely report. Its content is also fully republished by other outlets across the country.

Commentator article (*pinglunyuan wenzhang* 评论员文章)

Important subjects that are not considered crucial enough to make it into an editorial can become the topic of a commentator article, a sub-genre that has grown significantly in recent years due to the decline of frequency of editorials. Like the editorial, a commentator article is produced within the commentary department of a newspaper. The main difference between the two sub-genres lies in the average size (a commentator article is typically shorter than an editorial) and the importance, with the editorial ranking above the commentator article (Yang, 2013: 209).

Texts that belong to this sub-genre can also be anonymous (*bu shuming pinglunyuan wenzhang* 不署名评论员文章). In this case, unlike editorials (which represent the official voice of the outlet) they are considered to have an "official character" (*guanfang secai* 官方色彩), meaning that they openly express the institutional discourse on a given topic (Yang, 2013: 210).

Short commentary and editor's note (*duanping* 短评)

Short commentary is characterised by its brevity, single-focus content, concise analysis, and flexible approach. It is typically "short, new, and lively": short because it avoids complex argumentation and heavy theorisation; new because it addresses the most resonant and sensitive issues; lively due to its vivid and engaging language (Yang, 2013: 214–215).

A related form is the editor's note (编者按语, *bianzhe anyu*), since both are attached to a news article rather than standing as independent text. An editor's note may explain a situation, offer background information, or highlight the author's credentials, aiming to help readers better understand the main report (Yang, 2013: 215).

Narrative commentary (*shuping* 述评)

Narrative commentary is a hybrid form, "combining elements of news reporting and commentary" (Yang, 2013: 215). While standard news reports prioritise fact-reporting and avoid subjective analysis, narrative commentary weaves factual narration with interpretation and analysis. Although the narrative passages usually occupy the larger portion of the article, its purpose is to serve the commentary part, which is "the soul of the narrative commentary" (Yang, 2013: 216).

The paragraphs that follow explore the main sub-genres of commentaries written by external, non-staff contributors.

Commentary on current affairs (*shiping* 时评)

The first commentary of this type appeared on the *Southern Weekend* in 1994 (Li, 2006; Ding, 2009) and enjoyed enormous success since, first in commercial outlets and later also in institutional publications, prompting journalists and scholars to write about a "commentary on current affairs fever" (*shiping re* 时评热) (Nong, 2002; Cheng, 2008; Du, 2013).

This sub-genre offers subjective interpretation of a recent important event or of an important social issue. One of the defining traits of commentaries on current affairs is their attention to newsworthiness and timeliness. As such, these texts are typically linked to the most important news of the day or to an issue that is particularly discussed at a given time, giving their authors very little time to draft them (Lupano, 2016: 63-65). Because they deal with themes that closely resonate with everyday life, they rank below the sub-genre of commentator article.

Another characteristic is the specialised, professional angle from which these texts look at a topic—be it that of a doctor, teacher, lawyer, engineer, historian, tech expert, etc.—bringing subject-specific insight into the discussion (Zhao, 2012: 152; Yuan, 2016: 105-106). Both features encourage and require external commissioning, since editorial departments are not be able to provide fast and informed opinions on any subject by relying solely on the internal staff (Shen, 2003; Gongyang, 2008).

Each commentary on current affairs is signed, and the author's by-line is followed by a short identifier. This may range from a general label such as "commentator" (*pinglunyuan* 评论员) or "columnist" (*zhuanlan zuojia* 专栏作家), to a precise professional designation. The contribution can also come from a reader, in which case the text is categorised as "letter to the editor" (*duzhe laixin* 读者来信) (Wang W., 2008; Li, 2013: 267-269).

A crucial element of this sub-genre is the notion of "citizen identity" (*gongmin shenfen* 公民身份), which conveys the idea that any citizen with relevant experience has the right to voice an opinion on matters of public interest. The emphasis on personal identity (*geren xing* 个人性) sets these texts apart from most sub-genres of commentary, as the author speaks in their own name, rather than on behalf of a media outlet or institution.

As a result, in the commentary on current affairs the writing style as well as the content can be hybrid: due to its "specialist" character, it can display

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specialised language and original argumentation, while at the same time employing politically accepted formulations and remaining within the boundaries of the official discourse. Typically, these commentaries lean toward concise, vivid, and accessible language (Yang, 2013: 219–224) and tend to follow a clear argumentative structure: presentation of the facts, main point, elaboration, conclusion, and closing (Yuan, 2016: 106).

Since commentaries on current affairs are 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 (Wei, 2008; Wang, 2014). However, editors remain the ultimate gatekeepers of what can and cannot be published (Gongyang, 2008; Lupano 2017a, 2018).

Column (*zhuanlan* 专栏)

Since the late 1970s, column has emerged as a distinct sub-genre within the category of news commentary. Characterised by its regularity and the personal voice of a single author, it typically appears under a fixed title and occupies a consistent space in a publication. Its individuality is reflected in both form and content, with authors enjoying considerable freedom in style and subject matter. Well-known writers and freelance contributors often maintain regular columns in newspapers, magazines, and online news platforms (Liao, 2017: 176–177).

A peculiar and authoritative column is the Wang Hai Lou (望海楼, lit. "the palace overlooking the sea") commentary, launched by the RMRB overseas edition (Renmin ribao haiwaiban 人民日报海外版) on 1 January 2005. It is described as a distinctive feature of China's international news commentary landscape and a "flagship column" of the paper, having consistently ranked as the most popular commentary column among readers and having been recognised within the media industry by winning awards such as the China Journalism Award for columns (Zhou, 2021). The goal of this commentary is to offer officially toned opinions on major Chinese and international affairs, with special focus on Sino-foreign relations, in order to promote the interests, narrative and image of China abroad (Zeng & Li, 2015). Targeting a global audience, the Wang Hai Lou commentary functions as an essential tool for China's external communication strategy and the promotion of its international image (Zhou, 2021). Consequentially, its style is very close to the institutional discourse and amply draws on formulations.

The column is published Monday to Saturday, does not exceed 1,500 characters and is generally positioned on the front page. While being conceived for the international readers, it holds a prominent space also in the online edition of the RMRB, reaching the national public too. Unlike many single-authored columns, texts published under the Wang Hai Lou name can be anonymous as well as signed by different authors, such as leading personalities or members of the editorial board.

Looking at a sample of Wang Hai Lou commentaries published between 2005 and 2014, Zeng & Li (2015) found that more than 33% were authored by RMRB editors and journalists, above 37% by renowned scholars, and almost 18% by "specially commissioned commentators" (*benbao teyue pinglunyuan* 本报特约评论员, defined as important personalities that write about important theoretical or political issues; Shen, 2009), confirming the authoritative characteristic of these texts.

In a study based on a sample of Wang Hai Lou articles published between 2010 and 2014 (Zhou, 2021), the dominant discursive frames identified (communication, cooperation, and mutual benefit frame; defence and response frame; confidence and pride in China frame; promotion of world peace and justice frame; and problem recognition and self-improvement frame) underscore the distinctly official tone of the column by echoing well-known *tifa* and slogans.

Essay (*zawen* 杂文)

The essay, as a journalistic sub-genre, is often described as a form of "artistic political commentary" which is distinguished by its vivid tone and sharpness of expression. It tends to focus on lesser-covered or minor news events (Yang, 2013: 224–226).

Due to its narrative richness and stylistics, it is commonly associated with literary writing. However, its strong critical and argumentative dimensions have made it an appreciated type of journalistic product.

A notable feature of this form is its use of humour, which serves as a rhetorical tool to expose social hypocrisies, injustices, and scandals (Liao, 2017: 179–180).

3. Language Matters

1. Engineering the language

The approach employed in the research presented in this volume, which is strongly centred on linguistic analysis, is justified by the considerable importance traditionally attributed by the CPC to language and to the use of carefully crafted terms and fixed expressions, which constitute one of the key features of political discourse in the People's Republic of China.

Mao Zedong was convinced of the fundamental role of language and discourse in political control and experimented how to use the power of words for propaganda from the 1920s onwards. During the Party's exile in Yan'an (1935-1947) after the Long March, he transformed the CPC survivors in the red base in a "discourse community" based on a special language and on the undisputed acceptance of Maoist myths (Apter and Saich, 1994). Therefore, since 1949, the Party leaders and the veteran cadres that founded the PRC had the task to teach the "new" language to the masses. The end of the civil war marked the beginning of what Ji Fengyuan has called "a massive, nationwide program of linguistic engineering" (2004: 4). In her investigation of how language manipulation was carried out by the CPC leadership between the 1930s and the 1980s, she presents this programme as

involv[ing] the suppression of words that expressed incorrect thought, the substitution of new meanings for old ones, and the conversion of traditional terms to revolutionary purposes. It also required people to season their speech and writing with prescribed formulae—fixed expressions and scripts that embodied correct thought. Over time, it was hoped, the formulae would sink into people's minds, producing revolutionary beliefs and values. (Ji, 2004: 42)

A scholar who was directly exposed to the phenomenon, having been 18 when Mao Zedong died in 1976, Ji defines linguistic engineering as an attempt to influence people's minds by requiring them to use "correct"

revolutionary terms to express "correct" revolutionary concepts, stressing the form in addition to the content. In practical terms, she recognised two aspects of linguistic engineering: the reform of lexicon and semantics (suppressing some words and inventing neologisms to express new political concepts), and the strict enforcement of fixed expressions and formulae to be used in public and private life, as a sign of politically and morally correct thought (Ji, 2004: 4-5).

Different scholars over time have agreed that certain practices and beliefs made linguistic engineering policies easier to be accepted in China compared to other countries. The Confucian tradition, in particular, provided fertile ground, based on the idea that people's characters can be modified by education and that, therefore, "new people" can be created by re-education. Also the emphasis placed on memorisation and repetition as a way to virtue (materialised in the imperial exams system based on the study of classical texts) supported the traditional understanding of language as a key to behaviour. In particular, the doctrine of "rectification of names" (*zheng ming* 正名), contained in Confucius' *Analects* (论语), is considered the earliest reference for this concept, since it regarded names as "political catalysts" (Makeham, 1994: 46-47) and advised rulers to ensure that names were correct in order to promote correct thought and action (Lu, 2000: 5-6):

If names are not rectified, then words do not flow smoothly. If words do not flow smoothly, then affairs cannot be completed. If affairs cannot be completed, then ritual and musical performances cannot be upheld. If ritual and musical performances cannot be upheld, then punishments and penalties do not fit [the crimes]. If punishments and penalties do not fit [the crimes], then the people will not know hand from foot. Thus, when the gentleman bestows a name, it must be practicable in speech. When he speaks, it must be practicable in action. In his speech, the gentleman is never careless. (Yang, 1958: 141–142)

However, some scholars have contended that it was the later Confucian philosopher Xunzi (荀子, *circa* 310-237 BC) to present the fully developed doctrine of "rectification of names", by positing linguistic engineering as the fundamental act of government. Unlike the *Analects*, Xunzi placed the duty of the doctrine in the hands of the rulers, rather than the gentleman's (Makeham, 1994: 163). In Tavor's explanation of Xunzi's view,

Linguistic engineering, as a technique of power and knowledge, is thus above all a tool of government. As such, the mission of rectifying names should not be entrusted to philosophers, but placed in the hands of a single ruler, who is the sole caretaker of the linguistic system. Xunzi's proposed form of government can thus be called authoritarian, in the sense that the just ruler is quite literally the author of

the very language of the state—he governs by authoring a proper language which defines and structures reality for all of its subjects. (Tavor, 2014: 326)

Setting aside the origins of this concept, it can be safely affirmed that early Chinese thinkers were fully aware of the constitutive role of the language in maintaining socio-political stability, and portrayed linguistic engineering as an effective tool of government in a political system led by a single ruler. This established principle could explain the success of the Maoist linguistic engineering policies (Tavor, 2014: 314).

While recognising the favourable and inspirational philosophical background, in practical terms it was the growth of the state power that made the Maoist programme of linguistic engineering possible, as well as successful. In particular, the pervasive structure of the Party and its Central Propaganda Department allowed the programme to reach virtually every individual, via neighbourhood committees and work units in the cities, and via Party local committees in the villages. Political study groups, newspapers reading groups, radio listening groups, criticism and self-criticism sessions were regular and compulsory activities for every citizen (Ji, 2004: 54).

The main obstacle faced by the Maoist language engineering programme was the peasants' widespread illiteracy. The language reform, which produced its first list of simplified characters in 1956, was an attempt to spread the CPC message also among the less educated (Ji, 2004: 55-57). Besides erasing difficult characters and reducing the number of traits in many others, the language reform introduced *pinyin* (拼音), the alphabetic form of transcription of Chinese characters, which was considered useful to teach *putonghua* (普通话, lit. "common language") to speakers of other dialects (Lehmann, 1975: 48-54).

A few scholars writing in early 2000s have argued that, by then, the Party control on language and discourse had become significantly less efficient than during Maoism, and declared the Chinese linguistic experiment concluded (Ji, 2004: 317; Lu, 2004: 205). Linguistic engineering, after reaching its most intense expression during the Cultural Revolution, naturally declined during the "reform and opening up" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) period, when new modes of expression started to bloom in the intellectually exciting decade of the 1980s (Ji, 2004: 317). Nevertheless, the footprint of the past is still noticeable in public discourse.

Mao's awareness that lack of discourse control could erode his power explains his concern to control anyone with the capability to produce alternative discourses, such as intellectuals and journalists, throughout his rule. His successors did not forget his lesson, and recent studies have

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demonstrated the resilience of the CPC awareness of the power of language when it comes to generating meaning.

The linguistic engineering that had taken place during the decade between 1966 and 1976 could hardly be matched in the 1980s climate and beyond, once the country started to be flooded with new content, words and discourses coming from outside China. Nevertheless, several scholars have agreed that the "official language" enforced by the CPC is still worth studying due to its political and social relevance in the PRC. Geremie Barmé is one of those. Despite acknowledging its reduced ubiquity after the Cultural Revolution, he has argued that what he called "New China Newspeak" is still at work in contemporary China, even if its manifestations are less pervasive. The expression describes the official vernacular that, as a tool for official communication but also as a means of social and political engagement, permeated the Chinese public discourse since 1940s, and

was used by the Party, its propaganda organs, the media and educators to shape (and circumscribe) the way people express themselves in the public (and eventually private) sphere. It has enabled the party-state to inculcate its ideology by means of relentless verbal/written imposition and repetition. (Barmé, 2012)

In analysing the contrast between "official language" and "daily language" in Chinese also Perry Link (2013 a) has maintained that both still exist and that the former still very much affects the latter. Similarly, by looking at official speeches by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, Marinelli (2014) concluded that fixed formulations are still an important ingredient in political communication, despite their vagueness, abstractness and disembodiment have gradually brought the words quite far from reality (Marinelli, 2014: 41).

By consistently coining new slogans and fixed expressions, each generation of Chinese leaders has perpetuated the idea that language deeply matters in politics and that infusing the correct words in the public supports the goal of making them act correctly. Klimeš and Marinelli have stressed that this "continuous reassertion-cum-innovation" of the fundamental link between ideology, propaganda and political discourse is aimed at strengthening the one-party rule (2018: 321).

Awareness of this enduring function of formulations in China's political and social life has animated the work of several scholars and research centres (such as the China Media Project of the University of Hong Kong and the China Digital Times of the University of Berkeley, California) that have been keeping track of the evolution of keywords and *tifa* over time. For decades, they have monitored the emergence, use and re-proposal of old and

new expressions in the political and media language, testifying to the CPC persistent attention to language, and demonstrating the Party's continued efforts to employ language as an ideological tool and a means of political mobilisation.

The attention paid by Chinese scholars such as Qian (2012) and Li (2018), and official research projects such as the multi-language, multi-media platform *China Keywords*[1] (Mottura 2020, 7; Bertulessi 2022, 3) show that *tifa* and keywords are still very much a relevant component of the Chinese contemporary political debate (Wang, 2025).

More than three decades after the launch of reform policies, and despite the processes of media commercialisation, internationalisation, and the ongoing digital transformation, the Chinese leadership appears firmly committed to shaping and managing media discourse—while its ability to do so has not diminished. On the contrary, the Party-state continues to pursue a discourse marked by the "main melody" (主旋律) (Chen, 2022) while seeking to expand its influence both domestically and globally. Although the rhetorical strategies and modes of delivery are periodically adapted to suit particular events or target audiences, the underlying ideological motifs remain remarkably consistent (Lupano, Lams & Zhang, 2025: 182).

Going back more than 2000 years, "a prosperous state, argues Xunzi, must be of one mind, speak in one voice—that of its one and true ruler" (Tavor, 2014: 325). Every CPC leader, also after Mao, has made sure to fabricate and impose their own set of phrases and keywords during their rule.

Naturally, linguistic engineering is effectively enforced by going hand in hand with linguistic control and censorship. As far as the media are concerned, this is done in several ways and at several levels. Lists of proscribed words and expressions, automated control of the web via the Great Firewall, and human control by the so-called "fifty-cent party" (*wu mao dang* 五毛党)[2] all contribute to supporting the most efficient way of

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[1] *China Keywords* is a multi-language, multimedia platform that presents analysis, explanation and translation of key expressions from the Chinese political discourse and theories. The programme was created by the China International Publishing Group (CIPG) and the China Academy of Translation, and implemented by the Translators association of China and the International Communication Research Centre at CIPG. Available at: http://www.china.org.cn/english/china_key_words/index.htm.

[2] The term is a derogatory expression used to describe so-called "internet commentators" (*wangluo pinglunyuan* 网络评论员)—ordinary citizens who are recruited, trained, and paid by the Propaganda Department to post government- and Party-favourable comments on online platforms. Their mission is to anonymously steer the online public opinion in favour of official narratives. The nickname derives from the claim that these individuals were paid 5 *mao* (0.5 RMB) for each comment they post (Bandurski, 2008; Brady, 2008; Link, 2013 b).

limiting free expression: self-censorship (*zi shencha* 自审查) and language correctness.

2. *Tifa*

In light of the enduring importance of *tifa* in the Chinese public discourse, it seems useful to propose again its conceptualisation by Michael Schoenhals. In his seminal 1999 work, he defined them as "fixed units of discourse designed to produce a certain effect upon feelings, thought, or actions of a target audience". *Tifa* are characterised by semantic precision and structure rigidity, meaning that the order in which the chosen terms appear cannot be modified, in light of their specific and often multi-layered political meanings—some inherited from the past, others newly introduced. They are deemed politically and morally correct and are evaluated by the central authorities according to a set of pre-established criteria, such as having to "contribute to the attainment of specific goals", having to be "scientific", and having to be understood as "politically useful and clever" (Schoenhals, 1999: 8-12).

In his study, Schoenhals traced how these official linguistic *formulae* are created, standardised, and spread, and how the Chinese leadership has used them strategically to promote certain policies, mobilise the people, support allies and discredit rivals. Although acknowledging that language is just one of many tools that the CPC uses to assert control, Schoenhals considered it as a particularly important and often underestimated one. In particular, he pointed out that while "correct" expressions in both speech and writing have shifted dramatically over time—sometimes even reversing completely—what has remained striking is the Party's insistence on regulating language with extraordinary precision as a means to enhance political power. This linguistic discipline has held firm despite intense internal conflicts, suggesting a rare point of continuity in an otherwise fractious political environment.

Some recent examples might help to distinguish between *tifa* and what can be defined as keywords in Raymond William's sense (Williams, 1976; Durant, 2008). One fixed expression that has become a typical occurrence in the political and media discourse in Xi Jinping's era—and one that also appears in the case studies presented in Chapter 4—is "building a [insert word] powerhouse" (*jianshe* [*shenme shenme*] *qiangguo* 建设 [什么什么] 强国). The phrase is built around the term "powerhouse" (*qiangguo* 强国, lit. "strong country"), which has emerged as a proper keyword in political discourse in recent years due to it being "currently used", "polysemous",

"categorical", "actively contested", and "part of a cluster" (Durant, 2008: 135-137; and Mottura, 2021: 9-10 for an application to the Chinese context). The phrase that includes this term can be considered a *tifa* because of its fixed order, political keyness, and goal orientation. However, unlike other *tifa*, this expression contains one term (indicated within brackets in the example) that is interchangeable. It functions as a modifier that indicates the domain to which the statement is related to. The official discourse has produced many variations of this expression. *Jianshe* wenhua *qiangguo* (建设文化强国 to build a *culture* powerhouse); *jianshe* jiaoyu *qiangguo* (to build an *education* powerhouse); *jianshe* tiyu *qiangguo* (建设体育强国 to build a *sports* powerhouse); *jianshe* keji *qiangguo* (建设科技强国 to build a *scientific and technological* powerhouse); and *jianshe* hangtian *qiangguo* (to build a *space* powerhouse 建设航天强国) are some widespread cases (Lupano, 2022: 49-50; Lupano, 2024: 463).

The most emblematic *tifa* of the Xi Jinping era is arguably "realising the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*shixian Zhonghua minzu [de] weida fuxing de Zhongguo meng* 实现中华民族伟大的复兴的中国梦), which is built around the keyword "Chinese dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦). The expression reflects a desire to restore China's perceived rightful place in the global arena after the so-called "century of humiliation" (*bai nian guo chi* 百年国耻) that unfolded after the Opium Wars. Implicit in this narrative is a critical perspective on China's historical relations with European powers, which are viewed as responsible for the national decline in the 19th-century (Schell & Delury, 2013). The *tifa* made its first appearance in 2012, in the speech delivered by Xi Jinping to Chinese and foreign journalists at the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the 18th CPC Central Committee on 15 November, and was later explained by the CPC General secretary at a speech at the National Museum in Beijing (Xi, 2013). The notion includes the ambition to enhance China's "discourse power" (*huayu quan* 话语权; another keyword in itself) to match its economic prominence (Lavagnino & Mottura, 2016).

Related to the concept of "discourse power" is also the *tifa* "enhancing the country's cultural soft power" (*tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili* 提高国家文化软实力), which Riva (2023) has analysed in deep, arguing its pervasive use in texts pertaining to the intellectual and political discourses in contemporary China (2023: 134). The keyword that this *tifa* is built on is "soft power" (*ruan shili* 软实力), both a concept and term whose presence in public (especially intellectual) discourse increased toward the end of 2000s, to peak in 2012 (Riva, 2023: 43).

3. The Spirit of "May 35th"

The unintended consequence of linguistic engineering and of the persistence of fixed expressions in contemporary Chinese is the skill that native speakers have developed in de-constructing, re-constructing and playing with them, and with language in general, in creative and critical ways. In an editorial published on *The New York Times* in 2011, Chinese novelist Yu Hua defined this capability as "the spirit of May 35th". The term is a code for 4 June 1989, the date of the crackdown on the protests around Tian'anmen square. The event is normally referred to as 64 (*liu si* 六四, abbreviation of "4 June", or "the fourth day of the sixth month"), but since the expression is considered a politically sensitive one and is blocked by automated filters, netizens started to use a "grass-mud horsism"[3] instead.

In his article, Yu Hua explained that his novels are written in the "May 35th mode", whereas his essay, titled *China in ten words*, was written in the "June 4th mode":

May 35th freedom is an art form. To evade censorship when expressing their opinions on the Internet, Chinese people give full rein to the rhetorical functions of language, elevating to a sublime level both innuendo and metaphor, parody and hyperbole, conveying sarcasm and scorn through veiled gibes and wily indirection. Surely our language has never been as rich and vital as it is today. Sometimes I can't help but wonder, if one day the June 4th kind of freedom were to arrive, would we still be so creative, so ingenious? (Yu, 2011)

The *Nanfang Zhoumo* (南方周末 *Southern Weekend*, hereafter NFZM) "incident" at the beginning of 2013 is a case in point, offering an example of the tension between control and linguistic creativity in Chinese journalism.

Each year, on the first day of January, it was tradition for the Guangzhou-based periodical, famous for its liberal stance, its investigative reporting and critical commentaries, to publish a special issue featuring a New Year's editorial (*xin nian xianci* 新年献词, lit. "New Year greetings"). Intended as a wrap-up of the previous 12 months and a wishful message for the year to unfold, the article was carefully watched by the local propaganda authority,

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[3] The term refers to the well-known phenomenon of the "grass mud horse", in Chinese *căonímă* (草泥马), quasi-homophonous of the vulgar expression *càonǐmā* (肏你妈, lit. "fuck your mother"). Grass mud horse has become a symbol of the cat and mouse game that Chinese netizens play against internet control and censorship of vulgar and politically sensitive content online. See Berkeley University's China Digitial Space relevant pages for grass mud horse (https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-mud_horse) and for May 35th (https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Thirty-Fifth_of_May).

which typically subjected it to pre-publication oversight. In practical terms, the text would normally travel back and forth between the editorial staff and the local propaganda department, until both sides agreed on a final draft. What happened in the first few hours of 2013, instead, went far beyond these established patterns of pre-publication negotiation that Chinese newsrooms are familiar with, becoming a focal point of online and offline controversy.

The editorial published in the paper on 3 January looked very different from the version that the editorial team had delivered for print after the exchanges with the propaganda officials. The new version had a number of grammatical and factual errors, it was shorter than the original one, and it differed in content and title. The original headline was "The Chinese dream, the dream of constitutionalism" (*xianzheng meng* 中国梦宪政梦). Its altered version was: "We have never been so close to our dream" (*women bi renhe shihou dou geng jiejin mengxiang* 我们比任何时候都更接近梦想). This way, the editorial went from revolving around the contested term "constitutionalism" (Bandurski, 2013d; Yuen, 2013; Creemers, 2015) to "Chinese dream", one of Xi Jinping's trademark keywords.[4]

The NFZM staff members immediately attributed the changes to the local propaganda department and in particular to Tuo Zhen (庹震), the then newly appointed chief of CPC provincial committee and a former vice president of the state news agency Xinhua (Li and Lau, 2013), who had already dissatisfied the local journalists with heavy-handed measures. The editorial was introduced by a message from Tuo titled "Pursuing Our Dreams" (*zhui meng* 追梦), which praised the CPC and quoted a New Year message published by the RMRB (Bandurski, 2013a; Meng, 2018: 71-73).

Even if it soon emerged that Tuo Zhen was actually on a business trip that night and that he did not intervene in the editorial changes, the NFZM staff protested against Tuo Zhen on Sina Weibo, China's leading microblogging platform, and 50 former journalists from the outlet signed an open letter calling for his resignation. They defined the intervention "an act of crossing boundaries; a domineering act; an act of ignorance; an unnecessary move" (Bandurski, 2013b; Meng, 2018: 71). Reportedly, the final version of the article was in reality the result of rushed amendments by the NFZM deputy editor, in response to last minute changes requested by the propaganda department after the paper's editorial team had already signed off the page (Meng, 2018: 71-73). Nevertheless, the incident was perceived as a sign of unprecedented trespassing of established censorship protocols, and the protest kept mounting against the local CPC committee,

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[4] See Chapter 4, par. 3; also Wang (2014), and Lupano (2024a).

spreading nationally through Weibo and journalists' informal networks (Freedom House, 2013; Qian, 2013; Repnikova 2016: 106).

Initially, journalists and media organisations across the country expressed solidarity by circumventing the prohibition by the national propaganda authorities' to mention the NFZM. However, in a few hours, Sina Weibo, following instructions from the CPC Central Propaganda Department, began to block all posts containing keywords related to the incident. This provoked a wave of user backlash, as the microblogging platform was inundated with complaints and insults. In a rare move, one of Sina's own content moderators, frustrated by pressure from the authorities and in response to user protests, published a post under the username @genuine_Yu_Yang. In it, they described in details how the microblog's censorship division had handled the "*Nanfang* case," revealing both the difficult position in which Sina had found itself and the small measures taken by the staff to allow for some flow of information (Lam, 2013).

The author(s) of the post explained that after noticing that the platform was being targeted by netizens accusing it of cowardice and servitude to the Party, "I became so frustrated that I ended up arguing online with a well-known screenwriter. When I calmed down, I reflected on the situation and felt compelled to explain it in detail." They added: "one cannot see the truth by only observing its outward appearances, or when overcome with anger." They then outlined four points.

Firstly, they stressed that disobeying orders was not an option: "If we don't delete your post [with sensitive content], we are forced to suspend your account... A special internal team has the power to shut down Weibo like stepping on ants, entirely indifferent to the needs of users. When urgent instructions arrive, we must act."

Secondly, the author(s) suggested that many content moderators do not wish to hinder the flow of information: "Think about it—users continue to post, and we continue to delete. We could just block your accounts and save ourselves time. But in the *Nanfang* case, you were able to see posts before they were taken down, weren't you? Your accounts still work, don't they? The technology allows us to delete instantly. Think carefully."

The third point emphasised that Sina faced more pressure than other platforms: "Some platforms may enjoy more freedom than Sina. But Sina is the biggest tree—everyone uses it. 'Comrade Xuan' (*Xuan tongxue* 宣同学)[5] watches our every move. When a leaf stirs, the bell rings... and we must obey every time we hear it."

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[5] The expression is used here to hint at the Central propaganda department (*xuanchuanbu* 宣传部).

In this context, according to the post author(s), Sina Weibo moderators made a concerted effort to resist the pressure "in order to allow messages to spread," which, they claimed, "was already a success." They cited one example: "the platform's official account, @Sina_Media, reported on NFZM's suspension immediately, and the post was quickly shared by @headline_news, reaching 30,000 reposts in ten minutes—until 'Comrade Xuan' issued a takedown order."

The fourth point simply noted that, as expected, their superiors were once again summoned to "drink tea" (*he cha* 喝茶)—a euphemism for political questioning.

Unsurprisingly, both the post and the account @genuine_Yu_Yang were swiftly deleted. In connection with this incident, the Beijing-based *Xin Jing Bao* offered an intriguing example of expressive subtlety. On 9 January, while direct references to the Guangzhou-based paper were still prohibited nationwide, the *Xin Jing Bao* published a lengthy, seemingly innocuous feature on the "southern porridge" (*nan zhou* 南粥), describing it as a comforting winter dish to have at difficult times: "In the coldest nights, a white mist rises as you open your mouth… There are so many problems in the world. All you can count on to warm you up is this bowl of rice porridge" (Lavagnino & Lupano, 2013: 14-15).

This benign culinary homage was, in fact, a clever rhetorical gesture of solidarity from the northern journalists towards the southern colleagues. The term "nan zhou" is homophone to the commonly used abbreviation of the NFZM into *Nanzhou* (南周). By praising the (non-existing) southern porridge, the *Xin Jing Bao* staff sent a message in "May 35th style" to the colleagues in Guangzhou, implicitly making a point about circumventing control through linguistic creativity (Bandurski, 2013c).

4. Journalistic Expression and Variability under Xi Jinping: Case Studies

1. Premises and hypotheses

The case studies presented in this chapter share the fundamental goal to find whether, and to what extent, the genre of news commentary is able to perform its very nature, which is to voice a plurality of original opinions regarding a fact or phenomenon. Investigating the variability of the views expressed is therefore the ultimate focus of these studies, which were carried out using quantitative tools to then develop qualitative analyses.

With the exception of one study, at least two corpora were built for each inquiry in order to allow for the comparison between at least one institutional and one commercial outlet. The general hypothesis is that variability should be more limited in opinion articles coming from institutional outlets, due to the closer overview of their content performed by the Party or State-related actors. Conversely, more variability can be expected in commercial outlets, depending on their degree of autonomy from the public system. However, these case studies also debate whether any plurality of opinion is possible at all, when highly critical and politically "sensitive" facts or phenomena are unfolding in the country. This comparative approach is maintained also when one media corpus is used, with its variability being measured against the narrative that emerges from the analysis of official documents on the topic at hand.

The investigations included in this chapter explore events spanning almost ten years during Xi Jinping's rule that allow for addressing crucial issues in contemporary China such as soft power and freedom of expression, as well as historical phenomena like the Covid-19 pandemic and the popularisation of artificial intelligence.

Each of the next four paragraphs is dedicated to one study respectively. Following a chronological order, the first one examines the Chinese reaction to the attack to the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015; the second one looks into China's use of a 2017 sport story to project its internal

soft power; and the third one inquiries into the unfolding of the Covid-19 crisis in the first semester of 2020. The fourth study investigates the narrative about artificial intelligence following the release of ChatGPT at the end of 2022.

2. Freedom of expression

The terrorist attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015 received extensive media coverage in Europe in the days following the event, sparking a debate centred on terrorism and press freedom. Chinese media also paid significant attention to the event, as Islamic terrorism is regarded as a national concern, primarily—but not exclusively—in relation to the situation in the Xinjiang province.[1]

Perspectives in European media ranged from warnings about the risk that press freedom could contribute to fuelling terrorism and a clash of civilizations, to strong support for unrestricted press freedom as a fundamental European value to be protected and upheld. The phrase "Je suis Charlie" quickly became a widely recognised slogan in both traditional and digital media worldwide, symbolising solidarity with the magazine's stance on press freedom.

Chinese media also expressed a firm position against radicalism and violence in the aftermath of the attack, aligning with the CPC official discourse on both domestic and international terrorism. On 8 January, the French Embassy in Beijing shared an image on its Sina Weibo (新浪微博)[2] account featuring the Chinese translation of "Je suis Charlie" (*Wo shi Zhali* 我是查理). This case study discusses the extent to which Chinese media narratives reflected France's perspective, by examining the discursive features of the positions on the event displayed by two influential Chinese-language newspapers: the Party-affiliated *Huanqiu Shibao* (环球时报 Global Times) and the comparatively more commercially driven *Xin Jing Bao* (新京报 Beijing News).

The two corpora under scrutiny include news commentaries published in the four weeks following the attack. A qualitative and quantitative approach was used to identify relevant themes and keywords (as understood by Wil-

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[1] This paragraph is partly based on a study by the author titled "Wo shi Zhali ma?: the representation of the Charlie Hebdo case in Chinese press commentaries and editorials." In Mottura Bettina, Osti Letizia & Riboni Giorgia (eds*.) Media and Politics: Discourses, Cultures, and Practices*. Newcaste upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 127-145.
[2] Sina Weibo is a Twitter-like microblog platform launched in 2009 by Sina Corp.

liams, 1976, as discussed in the previous chapter). The underlying research question is whether news commentaries in Chinese media managed to convey a plurality of viewpoints on a controversial subject such as the interpretation of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack as an assault on press freedom.

Discussing this case posed a dual challenge for China's news commentators. Firstly, they had to navigate a complex global topic such as terrorism. The official discourse that emerges from official documents and regulations in China (Xinhua 2015, 2016a) is of clear-cut opposition to terrorism, which has to be fought through international cooperation and intelligence exchange, while respecting both the sovereignty of every country and different cultures and religions. In line with the Anti-Terrorism Law of the People's Republic of China, which assigns the media the duty to "disseminate and educate the society on anti-terrorism" (art. 17), overall consistency is to be expected in the opinion articles about the attack to *Charlie Hebdo*.[3]

Secondly, commentators had to address a theme that is particularly sensitive in China's official discourse: freedom of expression. As described in Chapter 1, despite the reforms, the Chinese media remain under strict political oversight at both local and national levels. Journalists are expected to align with Party narratives to shape public opinion in line with governmental objectives (Polumbaum & Xiong 2008; Young 2013). Consequently, freedom of expression remains a contentious matter in China, reflected both in official rhetoric and in the everyday realities of journalistic practice. Several regulations introduced under Xi Jinping's leadership that tightened control over both traditional and digital media confirm that freedom of expression is not treated as a fundamental right to be safeguarded in China (Freedom House 2013; Yang 2014; Bandurski 2016a, 2016b).

In this scenario, a diverse range of viewpoints on an event that brings into question the principle of freedom of expression is unlikely to appear in news commentaries, leaving the fundamental communicative function of the genre—offering independent perspectives—unfulfilled. But was that actually the case?

Corpus selection

The term used to select the corpus articles published by the two outlets was the mainstream translation of "Charlie Hebdo" in Chinese (*Zhali*

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[3] In 2018, the Law was amended. The new version is available at: https://flk.npc.gov.cn/detail2.html?MmM5MDlmZGQ2NzhiZjE3OTAxNjc4YmY3ZjMwYTA4N2Y%3D. [Accessed 12/04/2025]

Zhoukan 查理周刊, lit. "Charlie Weekly"). The period covered was the month following the attack, between 8 January and 8 February 2015.

While the outlets were chosen to represent Party papers and commercial papers respectively, the classification is not clear-cut. The *Huanqiu Shibao* is a daily paper founded in 1993 by the Renmin Ribao Group, the official voice of the Party's central committee. Therefore, it is safe to classify it as a Party paper. However, its focus on international news, lively writing style and bold nationalistic positions make it a hybrid entity that responds also to commercial demands, to the point that Chinese media practitioners define it as "semi-official" (Stockmann, 2013: 71-72).

The *Xin Jing Bao* was jointly founded in 2003 by the Nanfang Newspapers Group—the publisher of liberal-leaning commercial outlets such as the *Nanfang Dushi Bao* (南方都市报 *Southern Metropolis Daily*) and the NFZM (extensively discussed in Chapter 3, par. 3)—with the institutional Guangming Ribao Group. Regardless the semi-official belonging, the *Xin Jing Bao* is generally defined as a commercial paper, due to its financial independence and its market orientation (Stockmann, 2013: 71). However, it is worth noting that, with the Chinese media system constantly subject to oscillations and shifts, commercial media also oscillate between varying degrees of openness.

For a long time, the NFZM was deemed the most outspoken outlet available on China's newsstands, but after changes in its editorial board, its autonomy was significantly reduced (Qian, 2013; Lavagnino & Lupano, 2013:14; Repnikova & Fang, 2015; see also Chapter 3, par. 3). At the time of this research, which took place immediately after the event, it was common opinion among practitioners that *Xin Jing Bao*'s news commentaries were among the most interesting and outspoken in the Chinese media sphere (Lupano, 2016: 20, 80-81).

The *Factiva* database[4] was used to retrieve the articles. A total of 23 articles was found on *Huanqiu Shibao* containing the keyword in the body of the text. Among them, five were editorials and five commentaries on current affairs. *Xin Jing Bao* published two editorials and three commentaries on current affairs on the subject.

The remaining articles belong to the genre of news article, therefore they have not been considered for this study.

[4] The database was made available for the purpose of this study by the China Media Observatory at the University of Lugano, Switzerland, in 2015.

Dominant themes

A quantitative analysis was conducted using the AntConc software (Anthony 2017, 2021) in order to identify, based on word frequency, the prominent themes in both corpora:

1) Terrorism, marked by terms such as "attack 袭击", "jihad 圣战", and "violence 暴力";

2) *Charlie Hebdo*'s activity, signalled by terms such as "blasphemous 亵渎", "to satirise 讽刺", and "to offend 冒犯");

3) Freedom of expression, indicated by terms such as "mode of expression 表达方式", "religion 宗教", "to re-think 反思", and "extremism 极端主义");

4) Cultural pluralism, marked by terms such as "religious belief 宗教信仰", "culture 文化", "set of values 价值观", and "Muslim 穆斯林").

Interestingly, the recurring terms "extremism" and "religion" appeared in relation with both the theme of terrorism—to refer to the violent actions of extremists who attack innocent people in the name of religion—and with the theme of *Charlie Hebdo*'s activity—criticising the Western ideal of freedom of expression.

For the purpose of this analysis, the outlet's type of management (Party or commercial paper) and the sub-genres that each article belongs to (editorial or commentary on current affairs) are considered relevant variables in influencing the discursive choices of the two papers. Concerning the first variable, the adherence of a Party paper such as the *Huanqiu Shibao* to the official discourse can be assumed, as opposed to the attempt to express autonomous views that characterises commercial outlets such as the *Xin Jing Bao*. Regarding the second variable (as described in Chapter 3) the two sub-genres differ in the fact that editorials, being anonymous, express the outlet's position and are more likely to align with the official discourse. Conversely, commentaries on current affairs, which are generally signed, are more inclined to voice the personal, independent opinion of the author.

By combining the two variables, it can be expected that both editorials and commentaries on current affairs published by the *Huanqiu Shibao* followed the official discourse. However, given the controversial subject of freedom of expression that is linked to the *Charlie Hebdo* case, also the *Xin Jing Bao* editorials are likely to echo the official discourse, and very little variability can be expected also in the commentaries on current affairs.

Narrative in the *Huanqiu Shibao*

The analysis showed that, in the *Huanqiu Shibao* narrative related to the event, terrorism is a phenomenon to condemn and curb. The articles appeal for international unity and cooperation as a means to counter violence and extremism.

全世界反对恐怖主义和爱好和平的力量应当联合起来。那样的话，恐怖分子就是比小偷们加在一起还要小得多的力量。千万别让意识形态分歧成为反恐阵线里的一个突出元素，那将是恐怖分子希望看到的。
All the forces around the world that oppose terrorism and love peace should unite. If they do, the power of terrorists will be smaller than that of a group of common criminals. It is crucial not to let ideological differences become a dividing line within the global front against terrorism—that would be precisely the outcome terrorists hope for.

However, the *Huanqiu Shibao* editorials are severe towards the French magazine and its satirical approach. They argue that *Charlie Hebdo* should not be defended on the basis of freedom of expression, and that condemnation for the attack in Paris should not translate into unconditional support for the magazine's editorial line. They also express understanding and sympathy for the discomfort that the cartoons, defined as "blasphemous", have produced in Muslim communities. One of the editorials even defines "clumsy" for Europe to support the extremism of *Charlie Hebdo*, as such a position could prove counterproductive for stability and security in the continent.

从东方的视角看，《查理周刊》的做法是有争议空间的。一些穆斯林因它的漫画感觉受到伤害，可以理解。
From an Eastern perspective, *Charlie Hebdo*'s approach is debatable. It is understandable that some Muslims felt offended by its cartoons.

该杂志反复刊登被穆斯林认为"亵渎先知"的争议漫画，这在什么样的新闻自由里大概都不能是"主业"。
The magazine's repeated publication of cartoons deemed blasphemous by many Muslims can hardly be considered a legitimate core practice under any conception of press freedom.

《查理周刊》原本是法国的一本低端漫画杂志，在与外部世界的交流中，它是法国大家庭中"最淘气的孩子"。现在全欧洲因为它挨了打，吃了亏，从同情它、反对对它施以暴行，延伸为支持它，纵容它，从而客观上让它代表了法国和欧洲，这是很蠢的行为。

Charlie Hebdo began as a fringe satirical magazine in France—arguably the most unruly member of the national media family. Yet, following the attacks against it, much of Europe, having initially responded with sympathy and outrage at the violence, gradually shifted toward uncritical support and even indulgence. This shift has allowed the publication to stand in as a symbol for France and Europe at large—a clumsy behaviour.

Freedom of expression is further criticised with the argument that this value, regarded as distinctly European or specifically French, should not be universally imposed. Because different cultures have varying perspectives on the appropriate boundaries of free speech, the Europeans should reconsider their faith in unlimited freedom of speech. The dialogue with other religions, such as Islam, has become increasingly challenging because, in Europe, freedom of expression has itself been elevated to the status of a religion.

让穆斯林改变信仰，比法国和欧洲调整对言论自由的理解要难得多。如果法国人认为做这种世俗的调整是一种奇耻大辱的话，那么他们的言论自由就真的与"宗教信仰"差不多了。外界将以新的视角来看《查理周刊》带出的系列冲突。

It is far more difficult to change the religious beliefs of millions of Muslims than it is for France or Europe to reconsider the contours of their approach to free expression. If French society views even modest adjustments to its secular stance as a disgrace, then its conception of free speech begins to resemble a form of dogma itself.

The discourse on cultural pluralism is employed to criticise Europe, which is accused of imposing its value system on other societies. Such actions, the editorials argue, may provoke violent repercussions, as exemplified by the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

西方的新闻自由是其政治体制和社会形态的一部分，也是西方社会的核心价值之一。但在全球化时代，当西方有关做法同其他社会的核心价值发生冲突时，西方应当有缓解冲突的意愿，而不宜以自己的价值为中心，以零和态度推动摩擦升级。

Western notions of press freedom are deeply embedded in their political systems and social structures, and are considered a core value of their societies. However, in an era of globalisation, when these practices come into conflict with the core values of other societies, the West should show the willingness to ease tensions, rather than insisting on its own value framework and fuelling friction through a zero-sum approach.

恐怕还是要劝欧洲一句：退一步海阔天空。言论自由是好东西，但连罗马教皇方济各 15 日在赞同言论自由的同时，都表示它是”有限度的”，认为它不能用来”挑衅、侮辱他人的信仰”。

I am afraid a word of advice to Europe is in order: take a step back, and a broader perspective may emerge. Freedom of expression is a good thing, but even Pope Francis, while affirming its importance on 15 [January], acknowledged that it "has boundaries" and that it cannot be used to "provoke or insult the beliefs of others."

In the above excerpt, an additional theme emerges compared to the others that are in common between the two outlets: explicit criticism of Europe and the West, where the terms "Europe" and "the West" are conflated and often used interchangeably. Another theme that surfaced is the positive representation of China. In contrast to Europe's lack of respect for non-European (non-Western) values and cultures, China is depicted as a secular and inherently inclusive society. The Confucian tradition is framed as a positive force fostering harmony, positioning China as the only nation actively promoting stability and global harmony.

中国，则是唯一具有”世俗文化”主体特性的地区大国与世界性大国。[…]以儒家伦理为核心的中国世俗文化讲”己所不欲勿施于人”，讲和谐、中庸和关系的协调，反对极端主义，因而有着极高的包容性品质。

China is the only major regional and global power whose dominant cultural foundation is secular in nature. Rooted in Confucian ethics, Chinese secular culture emphasises the principle of "do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself", values harmony, moderation, and the balance of relationships, and rejects extremism—thus displaying a high degree of inclusiveness.

与西方和中东的一神教国家相比，中国的传统是世俗文化主导宗教，而非宗教主导世俗生活，因此极少发生宗教冲突。

Compared with monotheistic nations in the West and the Middle East, in China's tradition secular culture takes precedence over religion, rather than the other way around. As a result, religious conflict has been relatively rare.

Commentaries on current affairs within the corpus place greater emphasis on Islam. In one instance, a Chinese expert on Islam examines the fundamental aspects of the religion, stressing that peace is a central value for Muslims and advocating for a clear distinction between Islam and terrorism.

伊斯兰的价值观较为宽泛，除了核心的价值观——”和平”以外，还有”公平”和”正义”两个重要价值观。”和平”是伊斯兰的本质和首要价值观，伊斯兰尊重生命，反对杀戮和暴力，这是不可动摇的原则。

Islamic values are broad in scope, besides its core principle of peace, two other key values—justice and fairness—are also stand. Peace lies at the heart of Islam and represents its foremost ideal: Islam upholds the sanctity of life and firmly opposes killing and violence. These are unwavering principles.

Also in the commentaries the theme of terrorism is used to criticise the West, with claims that Europe and the West devoted significantly more attention to the *Charlie Hebdo* case than to the Boko Haram attacks in Africa. The commentaries argue that, since international unity is essential to fight against terrorism, no bias should be tolerated in addressing terrorist incidents worldwide.

不论法国还是尼日利亚，哪里发生的恐怖主义都应得到各国政要、媒体及公众无差别的关注 […]。反恐整合的前提是反恐共识。没有对全球恐怖主义的无差异关注，又何谈共识与合作。
Whether in France or Nigeria, acts of terrorism anywhere should receive equal attention from political leaders, the media, and the public alike […]. A unified front against terrorism requires a shared consensus. Without a consistent, non-discriminatory focus on all acts of terrorism worldwide, consensus and cooperation will be out of reach.

The strong stance expressed in the *Huanqiu Shibao* editorials concerning *Charlie Hebdo* is reiterated in the commentaries on current affairs. The French magazine is accused of having been stubborn and having made the same mistake over the years, by publishing cartoons perceived as offensive by Muslim communities. This behaviour is directly linked to what is implicitly understood as an inevitable outcome: since the French magazine did not respect religious beliefs of others, an extremist reaction to its provocations was foreseeable.

事件的文化原由在于该刊既不懂得"己所不欲勿施于人"的人际伦理，也不知道对他人的宗教神"敬而远之"的处事哲学
The cultural roots of the controversy lie in the magazine's failure to grasp two key principles: the interpersonal ethics of "do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself," and the pragmatic wisdom of maintaining respectful distance from others' sacred beliefs.

当一种文明的价值观念受到威胁，底线被冲破时，冲突必然发生。只有相互尊重，彼此欣赏，才是防范冲突、消除暴力的有效途径。
When the core values of a civilisation are threatened and its fundamental boundaries are breached, conflict becomes inevitable. Only through mutual respect and genuine appreciation of one another can violence be prevented and lasting harmony achieved.

Regarding freedom of expression, no significant differences in content emerge between the *Huanqiu Shibao*'s commentaries and editorials:

但法国政府显然也受制于极端自由观念的束缚，《查理周刊》的继续"任性"让有关自由与平等的争论无法中止，更让"宗教战争"与反恐的界限模糊难辨。

The French authorities appear constrained by an extreme interpretation of freedom, which continues to legitimise Charlie Hebdo's provocations. This has stalled meaningful discussion on the balance between liberty and equality, and has further blurred the line between a so-called "religious war" and the battle against terrorism.

Narrative(s) in the *Xin Jing Bao*

The *Xin Jing Bao* editorials consistently condemn terrorism, but distance themselves from *Charlie Hebdo* by adopting the slogan "I am not Charlie" (我不是查理)[5]. The articles challenge the French view of freedom of expression, arguing that without limits, it risks turning into a form of extremism itself.

在保障言论自由权利之外，无论是媒体还是公众，慎重行使言论自由的权利，尊重与包容不同的信仰，当是更加积极，也更为可取的方式。"自由与激进"、"自由与保守"的不同组合，导向和结果将大为不同。

Besides protecting freedom of expression, both the media and the public would do well to exercise this right with caution. Respect and tolerance towards differing beliefs may be the more constructive and commendable path. Different combinations, such as "freedom and radicalism" versus "freedom and conservatism", can lead to significantly different orientations and outcomes.

Attention is drawn more to the international situation than to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, and discussing about *jihad* and Arabic countries such as Yemen and Libya. The article calls for more extensive intelligence cooperation and coordination in fighting terrorism, while it argues that terrorism damages the populations that are linked to terrorist groups and makes the integration between different cultures and religions more difficult.

巴黎查理周刊袭击事件，应是世界反恐斗争中的一个转折点，恐怖组织和极端组织正走向更"团结"，更趋于服从于同一权威，这会使这些组织的号召力

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[5] The counter-slogan was used by US journalist David Brooks in a controversial editorial appeared in *The New York Times* (Brooks 2015).

更具有破坏性，其行动更会趋向频繁化。世界各国必须在情报合作上更上一层楼，才能有效地遏制已经在转型中的新的恐怖威胁。

The *Charlie Hebdo* attack may mark a turning point in the global fight against terrorism. Extremist groups are showing signs of increased coordination and consolidation under unified leadership, potentially amplifying their capacity to mobilise followers and execute attacks with greater frequency and impact. All countries must enhance intelligence cooperation to effectively contain the evolving and increasingly complex threats posed by modern terrorism.

Compared to both the outlet's own editorials and the *Huanqiu Shibao* corpus, *Xin Jing Bao* commentaries on current affairs stand out when discussing freedom of expression in general, and the editorial line of the French magazine in particular. While acknowledging that *Charlie Hebdo* may have been excessive at times, the authors of these articles argue that, since words do not kill, no violent response to satire can be justified. As an implicit rebuttal to some positions expressed in the *Huanqiu Shibao*, the *Xin Jing Bao* commentaries on current affairs stipulate that the bloodshed in Paris is not caused by the cartoons, but by extremist violence, thus rejecting the idea of a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the magazine's activity and the terrorist attack.

巴黎恐袭案不是一起漫画引发的血案，而是极端暴力思想引发的血案。

The terrorist attacks in Paris were not the result of a cartoon, but of violent extremist ideology.

有人说，这家杂志屡次刊登取笑伊斯兰教先知的漫画，因此招祸 […]。是的，这家杂志的漫画经常引发争议与和平抗议，周刊负责人甚至因此被告上过法庭。但是，要记住，这些回应都是和平进行的。用恐怖袭击的方式加以报复，情无可原，罪无可恕。我们最好能记得，7 日遇害的杂志主编夏尔伯生前说过的一句话："漫画从来没有杀过一个人。"

Some have argued that *Charlie Hebdo* brought this upon itself by repeatedly publishing provocative cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. […] The magazine's satire has indeed stirred controversy for a long time, sparking protests and even lawsuits. Yet until now, the responses had remained within the bounds of peaceful expression. Resorting to terrorism cannot be defended and cannot be forgiven. We would do well to recall the words of *Charlie Hebdo*'s late editor, Stéphane Charbonnier: "A cartoon has never killed anyone."

The *Xin Jing Bao* commentaries on current affairs also distance themselves from its own editorials in the way they develop the discourse on cultural pluralism. Instead of highlighting the need for Europe to refrain from imposing its values universally, they focus on condemning terrorist culture

and the communities that support it. They also claim that Muslims should not consider themselves as victims of France's freedom of expression, and stress that violence can only provoke disgust and contempt for those who endorse it.

袭击《查理周刊》这种用暴力强行钳制言论，甚至"改造世界"的做法，注定只能令社会对相关特定群体更加反感和反对，也无助于欧洲各国宗教、族群的融合。事实证明，那些宗教极端群体必须从这种以受害者自居、无法接受多元文化、多种价值观和生活方式并存的误区中解脱出来，否则恶性循环会愈演愈烈，而最终的受害者是所有各方，最大受害者则只能是诉诸极端主义的一方。

Acts of violence such as the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, intended to forcibly silence speech or even "remake the world," are bound to deepen public resentment and opposition toward the groups perceived as responsible. Such actions do nothing to support the integration of religions and ethnic communities in Europe. It is clear that extremist religious groups must free themselves from the illusion of perpetual victimhood and the inability to accept cultural plurality, diverse values, and coexistence. Without this shift, the vicious cycle will only intensify—ultimately harming all sides involved, and most of all, those who resort to extremism.

The role of commentary on current affairs

The Party and commercial papers examined in this study delivered an interpretation of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack that appears generally consistent with the official narrative on terrorism and freedom of expression—and far from the European view on the subjects. Besides condemning national and international terrorism, in line with China's policies and laws, most articles used the *Charlie Hebdo* case as an opportunity to reinforce the CPC discourse on both terrorism and press freedom and to emphasise China-specific values in opposition to Western ideals, implicitly echoing the Party discourse on a "China model" (*Zhongguo moshi* 中国模式, Miranda & Spalletta 2011; Miranda 2016). In particular, in an international debate where the notion of unlimited press freedom was among the issues discussed, the Chinese media appeared in most cases unwilling, or unable, to support France's position.

Expectedly, that was the case in the Party-run, nationalist-oriented *Huanqiu Shibao*, where editorials and commentaries on current affairs were bound to merely elaborate on the official discourse without alternative views. In relation to a highly sensitive topic such as freedom of expression, the market-oriented *Xin Jing Bao* also showed little autonomy in its editorials. However, the sub-genre of commentary on current affairs offered a different scenario,

allowing the authors—freelance contributors—to present more original and varied views.

While refraining from adopting independent standpoints as the paper's official position in editorials, *Xin Jing Bao* nonetheless provided a broader spectrum of perspectives on the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. By allowing independent contributors to express potentially controversial views in the sub-genre of commentary on current affairs, the paper fulfilled the communicative function of the opinion genre—namely, to give voice to diverse personal views.

To conclude, in relation to the *Charlie Hebdo* case, regardless the highly controversial topic discussed—freedom of expression—some variation from the official line was allowed in the Chinese media sphere. Notably, it was the sub-genre of commentary on current affairs, and the freelance commentators who authored them, that played the main role in broadening the scope of public discourse within in the country's media sphere.

3. Dreams

On 6 June 2016, at a press conference held in Nanjing, the prominent Chinese electronics retailer Suning Commerce Group Co. Ltd. (*Suning yunshang jituan gufen youxian gongsi* 苏宁云商集团股份有限公司) announced its acquisition of the Italian football club Internazionale. As reported by the *Xinhua News Agency*, Suning made a substantial investment of 270 million euros to acquire a 68.55% stake in the club (Xinhua, 2016; Xinhua She, 2016b). This acquisition attracted significant attention from both international and Chinese media, being perceived as part of the Chinese government's broader initiative to realise Xi Jinping's vision for the development of football in China.[6]

Xi was the first leader in post-Mao China to position himself as an advocate for the revitalisation of football in the country, marking a significant shift in the national agenda towards sports development. His engagement with football as a national priority began during his tenure as Vice President of the People's Republic of China in 2009, when he emphasised the need to promote elite football and expressed aspirations for China to win the World Cup (Tan et al., 2016). During a state visit to South Korea in 2011, Xi articu-

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[6] This paragraph is based on the author's study titled "Conflict and Supremacy in Chinese Sports News Commentaries: A Case Study." In Garzone Giuliana Elena, Logaldo Mara & Santulli Francesca (2020, eds.) *Investigating Conflict Discourses in the Periodical Press.* Bern: Peter Lang, 115-134.

lated his "three wishes" (*san da yuanwang* 三大愿望) for Chinese football: to qualify for the World Cup, to host the World Cup, and ultimately to win it (Wangyi tiyu, 2013). More recently, he has framed the nation's football ambitions within the context of the "Chinese Dream", a concept that has become emblematic of his leadership since 2012 (see Chapter 3).

These ambitions materialised in the "General Programme for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football" (*Zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fanwei* 中国足球改革发展总体方案, hereafter Programme) that the State Council issued in 2015. The document underscored the government's commitment to enhancing the sport's profile and infrastructure within China, outlining a comprehensive framework consisting of 50 points that detailed the strategies for advancing the institutional reform, popularisation, professionalisation, and internationalisation of football in China until 2050. As such, the plan sums up the leadership's vision on football in China until 2050.

The promotion of Chinese football can be understood from three main viewpoints: sport, economy, and politics.

From a sporting perspective, the initiative aims to popularise football—by making it a compulsory subject in schools and constructing thousands of sports facilities across the nation—as a means to promote a healthier lifestyle and cultivate a new generation of athletes that could be capable of enhancing the performance of Chinese football on the international stage. In contrast with the country's success in Olympic sports, the unremarkable achievements of the Chinese football team has led to profound dissatisfaction among the population (Economist, 2014).

On the economic front, the reform is viewed as a catalyst for the growth of China's sports industry, a goal that is explicitly mentioned within the Programme. The document articulates an objective to "build a sports power" (*jianshe tiyu qiangguo* 建设体育强国), and the recent trend of Chinese investments in European football are presented as a strategic move to support this ambition (Sullivan et al., 2019)[7]. This investment strategy also fulfils the

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[7] Huge investments in foreign clubs and players started to receive less institutional support, and even suffered heavy limitations, starting in June 2017, with regulations that discouraged Chinese Superleague clubs from making expensive signings from European leagues. Following a new regulation approved in May 2017 by the Chinese Football Association (*Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui* 中国足球协会) and implemented from June 2017, Chinese Superleague clubs who buy a player from foreign leagues have to pay a further 100 percent of the amount paid to buy the athlete into a national fund for the development of youth football in China. The rule clearly targeted the shopping spree in an attempt to slow down investments (de Menezes, 2017). In August 2017 investments abroad in sport and entertainment were further tightened (Wu, 2017).

need to foster new, promising industries amidst the economic slowdown referred to as the "New Normal" (*xin changtai* 新常态) (China.org, 2015; Li, 2015)[8].

In political terms, the lack of success in football has been framed as a national embarrassment; a sentiment that can be traced back to Deng Xiaoping's purported remark about his frustration with the national team (Bartram, 2012). The men's national team has struggled significantly, ranking poorly compared to nations with lesser economic and demographic stature, and has only qualified for the World Cup once, in 2002, where it failed to score any goals (Bellinazzo, 2017: 201-2). In contrast, the women's national team has achieved considerable success, repeatedly ranking among the top twenty teams globally.

This case study sets out to explore the characteristics of Chinese media discourse on football by focusing on the analysis of the coverage of a significant event such as the acquisition of FC Internazionale.[9] Based on the emphasis on the development of football as a national priority, and on the stringent political oversight on the country's media, it can be expected that journalists would merely disseminate the institutional discourse. This narrative emphasises the sport's role in cultivating "patriotism and collectivism" (*aiguozhuyi jitizhuyi* 爱国主义集体主义). As a result, it can be posited that the discourse within Chinese media regarding football is likely to revolve around these two themes.

Corpora selection

This case study builds on a corpus of articles belonging to the genre of news commentaries coming from three news outlets: the financial periodical *Caixin Zhoukan* (财新周刊 Financial News), the sports weekly *Titan Zhoubao* (体坛周报 Titan Weekly), and the generalist, government-run *Xinhua News Agency*.

Unlike the news agency, which is directly financed by the institutions and whose political link is manifest, the two periodicals fall within the commer-

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[8] The relationship between the development of the sports industry and the transition from a manufacturing-based economy to one centred on culture and services was further elaborated in the "Key Points of the National Plan for Cultural Reform and Development during the 13th Five-Year Plan" (*Guojia "sanshiwu" shiqi wenhua fazhan gaige guihua gangyao* 国家'十三五'时期文化发展改革规划纲要), published in May 2017. The document designates the cultural industry as a "pillar" of China's development (Guowuyuan, 2017a).

[9] Its importance lied in it being the first Chinese acquisition of a successful, well-established football club in Europe.

cial category. The *Caixin Zhoukan* is considered one of the most respected and outspoken periodicals in China, due to its bold, yet political-savvy editor-in-chief, famous journalist Hu Shuli (Shirk, 2011: 12-13). The *Titan Zhoubao*, which was founded in 1998 in Changsha, is now at the centre of a media conglomerate that includes a number of magazines and the news portal www.titan24.com. It is one of the most successful sport papers in the country.

Due to its pivotal role in the Chinese media system, the *Xinhua News Agency* is an important outlet to look at. When sensitive topics are at stake, its articles are imposed as the only legal source of information to the rest of the country's media (Xin, 2012). At a time when football was at the core of the leadership's discourse, it can be assumed that the narrative of the acquisition of FC Internazionale was dictated by the country's top institutional outlet.

After selecting the outlets, their publicly available online archives were used to retrieve opinion articles published in the month when the deal was struck (between 1 and 30 June 2016). The keywords used for the database search were "Suning" and "FC Internazionale" (*Guoji Milan* 国际米兰). Collectively, 19 news items were found, for a total of over 35,000 words, including different sub-genres, such as news articles, dispatches, sport commentaries and news commentaries. Analysis of structure and content led to the identification and selection of the articles to include in each outlet's corpus, accounting for around 10,000 Chinese characters.

The mix of commercial and institutional media was aimed at guaranteeing maximum variation in the opinions expressed.

From purchasing power to national power

The linguistic analysis of the articles drew inspiration from Raymond Williams' methodology regarding keywords (Williams, 1985; Durant, 2008). The objective was to identify the most significant semantic fields and link them to representative keywords. They were identified through close reading of the texts, which led to a manual, qualitative coding. Three semantic fields emerged the sports semantic field, exemplified by the term "competitiveness" (*jingzheng nengli* 竞争能力); the financial semantic field, linked to the term "commercial benefits" (*shangye liyi* 商业利益); and the political semantic field, indicated by the term "national power" (*guoli* 国力).

Among the three dimensions examined in this corpus, the sports-related aspect is the least prominent. Commentaries adopting this perspective come

mainly from the *Titan Zhoubao* corpus and express positive views regarding the acquisition, emphasising the potential benefits for soccer exchanges between Suning and FC Internazionale. Such interactions are perceived as an opportunity to enhance the performance and competitiveness of Jiangsu Suning, another club under the company's ownership that competed in the Chinese Super League.

(1) 国际米兰先进的足球管理理念，科学的训练体系和青训梯队，都能够帮助江苏苏宁足球俱乐部夯实基础，提高成绩，提升核心竞争能力。
FC Internazionale's advanced management system, scientific training model and youth training branch will help Jiangsu Suning lay the foundations for improving its own results and increasing its own competitivity.

The commentators also argue that the transaction will contribute positively to the broader national sports system:

(2) 对提升整个中国足球而言又何尝不是一件好事？
How can this not be a positive event for the improvement of Chinese football as a whole?

The recurring term "competitiveness" in these discussions is particularly noteworthy, given that, for a long time, the notion of competition in sports was largely absent from China's public discourse due to its perceived association with capitalist ideologies. The slogan "friendship comes first, competition comes second" (*youyi di yi bisai di er* 友谊第一 比赛第二), reportedly pronounced by Mao Zedong in 1969 while watching a basketball match (Wang, 2003), is considered one of the reasons for China's lack of sporting success in the past.

A prevailing interpretation in these commentaries is that investments in soccer are not merely individual business decisions but part of a coordinated national strategy to elevate Chinese soccer on the global stage, ultimately serving the broader goal of national prestige. Consequently, such investments are framed as acts of patriotism. Commentators also underscore that Suning should serve as a model for other Chinese corporations seeking to enter the football industry. Learning from Suning's experience, other companies can contribute to the advancement of the Chinese sports industry:

(3) 有志于进入体育、足球产业的企业完全可以借鉴苏宁等企业的经验和教训，中国体育产业、中国足球发展的道路。

From the experience and lessons of Suning and others, companies that aim to enter the sport and football industry can learn how to develop Chinese sport industry and Chinese football.

As far as sport is concerned, the deal is presented as a positive initiative: "improvement" (*tishen* 提升), "development" (*fazhan* 发展), "increasing" (*tigao* 提高) are recurring words in this area, expressing the idea of future growth. In this narrative, China is presented as fully benefitting from the European superior sport expertise.

The commentaries also discuss the financial implications of Suning's acquisition with particular emphasis on the commercial benefits it may yield for the Chinese investor and its role in the company's internationalisation strategy. Beyond corporate gains, analysts also highlight the broader advantages for the Chinese sports industry as a whole.

(4) 苏宁并购国米无疑对其国际化战略意义重大。
Suning's acquisition of FC Internazionale has a very important meaning for the company's internationalisation strategy.

(5) 如果从品牌、社会价值的角度来衡量的话，苏宁此举无疑将有助于提升其在海外的知名度，抑或可以提升其美誉度，为其海外战略布局做好铺垫。
Looking at the brand and the social value, Suning's initiative will surely enhance its recognition abroad, and it could improve its reputation, serving as a vehicle for its strategic position internationally.

(6) 并购国米就是苏宁自２００８年迈出国际化发展步伐以来，全产业国际化发展的重要组成部分。
The acquisition of FC Internazionale is a step in the international development that the company has strived for since 2008, and it is an important component of the international development of the whole industry.

Two contrasting perspectives emerge in the financial field. One viewpoint regards the acquisition of FC Internazionale as a risky endeavour, citing concerns over the financial instability of Serie A (*yi jia jingji bu jing* 意甲经济不景). Critics argue that the club is in decline (*shuailuo* 衰落), and that for Suning to generate substantial commercial returns, it must break the "vicious cycle" (*e'xing xunhuan* 恶性循环) in which the club is stuck. This cycle—where poor performance leads to declining revenues, which in turn limit investment, thereby exacerbating failures—is seen as a significant challenge. Some commentaries even caution that FC Internazionale may become a "money-eating slot machine" (*chi qian de laohuji* 吃钱的老虎机).

Conversely, a more optimistic interpretation views the acquisition as a strategic commercial move for Suning. Advocates of this perspective assert that the deal will enhance the company's brand recognition, bolster its "international reputation" (*zai haiwai de zhimingdu* 在海外的知名度), and provide a strategic foothold in global markets. Additionally, it is seen as a means to promote the "Chinese managerial and commercial model" (*Zhongguo guanli he shangye moshi* 中国管理和商业模式). These analysts emphasise that the transaction holds "great significance" (*yiyi zhongda* 意义重大) not only for Suning's "internationalisation strategy" (*guojihua zhanlue* 国际化战略) but also for the global expansion of China's sports industry.

Recurring terms like "brand", "industry", "strategic position" and "internationalisation" do not refer only to the individual company that signed the deal, but to the whole nation. Investing in football is presented as an act of internationalisation that is part of the process of the internationalisation of China's football industry. As such, these investments are understood as a highly patriotic activity because they contribute to the triumph of the nation through sport.

The political dimension of this discourse, which emerges as the most pervasive theme in the corpus, reflects an implicit ambition to project a strong and prosperous China in the world. The use of terminology borrowed from international relations, such as "hard power" (*ying shili* 硬实力), underscores the perception of China's football investments as manifestations of national strength. In many instances, the commentaries explicitly frame the development of Chinese soccer as both a national achievement and a means of reaffirming the country's historical significance on the global stage. Consequently, the acquisition of FC Internazionale is met with a strong sense of national pride.

The commentators celebrate the deal as a historic milestone, noting that it marks the first time in which a Chinese company has taken control of a club with substantial international influence. The acquisition is portrayed as symbolic of China's rising global status, facilitated by the government's "favourable policies" (*lihao zhengce* 利好政策), which have ushered in a new era for China's sports industry. The feeling of achievement is palpable:

(7) 从今天开始, 蓝黑军团将流淌着中国的血液。
Starting today, Chinese blood is running in the army of the Nerazzurri.

The event is interpreted as a demonstration of Beijing's growing supremacy, particularly in contrast to Europe's historical dominance (Tan & Bairner, 2010). The phenomenon is thus seen as a reversal of historical injustices,

suggesting that the European nations that once humiliated China during the Opium Wars have now been "conquered" by Chinese capital. Expressions such as "to catch the French and Europeans by surprise" (*rang Faguoren naizhi Ouzhouren jieshou bu ji* 让法国人乃至欧洲人措手不及) and references to China's "buying fever" (*maimaimai* 买买买) targeting major Western enterprises reinforce this narrative (Tao, 2016). The claim that "China's purchasing power is making Europe nervous" (*rang Ouzhou gangdao jingzhang* 让欧洲感到紧张) further highlights this geopolitical interpretation.

From an emotional perspective, the commentaries highlight the impact of this acquisition on Chinese soccer fans:

(8) 国际米兰是中国最著名的欧洲顶级俱乐部之一，是中央电视台开播意甲后第一批进入中国球迷心灵的球队。
FC Internazionale is one of the most famous European teams, and it was the first to make it to the hearts of Chinese fans when CCTV started to broadcast Serie A.

(9) 它对中国球迷的心理震撼完全不同，正如不少球迷对笔者道出的心声："我从小看意甲时，做梦也没想过有朝一日中国人会买下米兰双雄！"。
The shock for the Chinese fans has been different, as many of them have told me: "Since I have watched the Serie A as a kid, I never even dreamt that one day in the future a Chinese person could buy the Milan teams!".

(10) 如今将其收购，变成中国人自己的资产，就好像一个小时候羡慕地盯着玩具橱窗的少年孩童，成为一个成熟壮实的成年人后，有了自己的事业，儿时看得起买不起的玩具，现在可以拥有了。
Today's acquisition, which has made [FC Internazionale] the asset of a Chinese, is like the case of a child who, after staring at a toy in a shop window that he could not afford as a kid, having grown up and having made a career for himself has now become able to own that very toy.

The concept is also expressed literally:

(11) 随着中国经济的强劲增长，国力日益提升，中国球迷对米兰双雄的态度，也从过去无条件的仰视膜拜变为理性的平视。
With the growth of China's economic power and the continuous rise of its national power, the attitude of Chinese fans towards the Milan teams has gone from unconditional devotion and admiration to a rational view.

To some commentators, the effect of Suning's acquisition will go so far as to change China's position in the world. In this view, China has gained

more "discourse power" in the circles of international football. This shift is interpreted as a manifestation of China's soft power.

(12) 中国人在国际足坛也必然拥有更多话语权，这是中国国家软实力的体现，也是中国大力提高足球的姿态。
The Chinese must have gained more discourse power on the international football stage, which is an expression of Chinese soft power, and of the vigorous improvement of China's position in football.

(13) 这些都迫使欧洲人不得不正视中国实力的插足。
From now on, Europe cannot avoid facing China's power.

(14) 今后国际米兰就有充足理由，要求将重量级对决安排在周末黄金时段，满足中国观众。
FC Internazionale now has legitimate reasons to request that the most important matches will be organised in the weekend prime time, in order to satisfy the Chinese audience.

The sense of pride in the face of the traditional football powerhouses is clear. Verbs and nouns related to possession, purchasing, buying, affording, and even the image of the shop window all confirm the strong link between China's national power and its economic power. This purchasing power is depicted in a conflictual frame and presented as a tool of resurgence in the face of the European powers. The narrative of conflict that informs the media discourse on the acquisition of FC Internazionale emerges most clearly in sentences and metaphors where terms such as "blood", "army" and "subjugate" are used.

One country, one melody

The analysis of the three corpora related to the Suning-Internazionale case study revealed overall uniformity in the perspectives presented, with commentaries from all outlets largely aligning with the official discourse on football as an instrument of national revitalisation. The texts similarly framed the event as a direct embodiment of Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream," reinforcing a vision of China as a prosperous and dominant global force. For this reason, the analysis was presented in a collective manner in order to avoid repetitions.

The Chinese portrayal of the acquisition reflects a broader convergence of economic and political imperatives. The success of a private enterprise backed by Chinese capital is equated with the success of the nation, while fi-

nancial takeovers of foreign football clubs are reimagined as acts of historical redemption. These narrative positions China's growing purchasing power as an extension of its national power. Moreover, the presentation of sport as an arena of conflict and power contention between China and Europe discursively nurtures patriotic and nationalistic feelings, performing internal soft power.

In conclusion, this study showed how a sport-related story was consistently used across a variety of media outlets to achieve the same discursive goals, singing the same "melody" in line with the official narrative on the topic.

4. Crisis

As in many other countries (Jones, 2021), media coverage in China during the first half of 2020 was overwhelmingly centered on the Covid-19 pandemic. Across a wide range of newspapers in the country, substantial column space was dedicated to both factual reporting and analytical commentary on the crisis. A search conducted using the *Factiva* database[10] indicates that over 80,000 of the articles published during this period featured the most commonly used term for the disease, "new corona pneumonia" (*xin guan feiyan* 新冠肺炎), either in the headline or the lead paragraph.[11]

Considering the Covid-19 crisis as a subject of high sensitivity in Chinese public discourse at the time of its unfolding, this case study seeks to test the variability in opinion expression within one single outlet, the *Renmin wang* (People's Net), the online version of the RMRB.

Between early January and late June 2020, the RMRB published a total of 3,813 articles containing this term. For context, within the same period, the outlet featured 5,666 articles in which the name of Xi Jinping appeared in the title or opening paragraph. By focusing on a selection of sub-genres of commentaries that are published by the Party outlet, this study seeks to highlight even small discrepancies in the Party paper's narrative regarding this critical subject.

While the RMRB (and its online version) is not a popular read among Chinese laymen, its editorial and commentary articles do play a crucial role in China's political landscape. This is not only because these writings are

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[10] The database was used thanks to the access provided to the author as a member of the Contemporary Asia Research Centre at the University of Milan.

[11] This paragraph is partly based on the author's article titled "When a Party Paper Meets Covid-19: Crisis and Legitimacy in *Renmin Ribao*'s Commentary Articles." *Other-Modernities* (2022) 28: 101-118.

closely monitored by Party officials and intellectuals seeking to understand the Party's stance and internal debates. It is also because, despite the limited direct readership, the newspaper's opinion articles permeate public discourse by being frequently (sometimes forcibly) republished by both local and national media outlets. This widespread dissemination ensures that the themes and language used in the RMRB influence broader societal narratives (de Burgh, 2017).

This study is based on the assumption that the issue of legitimacy is at the forefront of the CPC's agenda. Due to the role of loudspeaker assigned to the official media by the leadership—the mission to both reflect and disseminate the views of the leadership to the rest of society (Young, 2013)—it can be assumed that re-establishing the Party's legitimacy was at the core of the media's discursive preoccupations throughout the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore it can be expected that the *Renmin wang*'s narrative aimed at transforming the international health crisis in an opportunity to reinforce the political legitimacy of the Party rule, neutralising the risk of potential social and political dissatisfaction in the country (Lemus-Delgado, 2020; Yang & Chen, 2021; Zhou & Zhong, 2021).

In exploring this premise, this study investigates the degree of variation in the meanings generated by the outlet, in order to test the assumption that *Renmin wang* would present a uniformity of perspectives within its opinion articles when faced with a topical issue such as the global crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. The widespread media coverage, both within China and internationally, provides the rationale for selecting this event as a case study.

Methodologically, the research employs a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative analysis, drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and using tools from corpus linguistics. To investigate the extent of variation in the meanings constructed by the outlet, this qualitative study offers insights into how the newspaper framed the crisis within its broader discursive landscape. Legitimacy theories (van Leeuwen, 1996, 2007, 2008; Reyes, 2011; Wang, 2020) have been used as a heuristic means to explore the strategical discursive construction of CPC's positive image regardless the challenging circumstances.

Corpus construction

For the purposes of this study, the corpus is exclusively composed of articles published by the *Renmin Wang*. In line with the progression of the pandemic in China, the analysis focused on the period between January and June

2020. After the initial outbreak in January, the crisis peaked between February and March. By June, the State Council Information Office of China (SCIO) officially declared victory over the virus in the White paper *Fighting COVID-19: China in action* (China Daily, 2020). The situation remained stable for over a year until late 2021, when new outbreaks triggered another cycle of restrictions (Reuters, 2022). The period under study coincides with the most critical and challenging phase of the pandemic in China—one that tested the credibility of a Party whose legitimacy is rooted in ensuring stability and continuous improvements in living conditions (Sandby-Thomas, 2014).

The first *Renmin wang* article of the almost 4,000 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 texts were unevenly distributed over the period, showing a trend consistent to the evolution of the pandemic in China: five in January 2020, 663 in February, 1,035 in March, 926 in April, 622 in May, and 562 in June.

The articles were included in the corpus according to their belonging to five sub-genres of commentary articles, selected based on their authoritative status or widespread readership (see Chapter 3): editorials, Ren Zhongping commentaries, Wang Hai Lou articles, commentator's articles, and commentaries on current affairs.

The RMRB provides a categorisation of its opinion pieces according to their respective sub-genres. In the digital version of the newspaper, the sub-genre label appears next to the article title, as well as in the header section (*xinxi tou* 信息头), where details such as date, source, and author (if applicable) are listed. Additionally, the newspaper's online portal features a dedicated section titled "Repository of important commentaries" (*zhongyao yanlun ku* 重要言论库), where opinion articles are systematically grouped by sub-genre. The articles analysed in this study were drawn manually from this archive.

The selection resulted in a collection of 78 articles. To reduce the width of the corpus in order to allow for significant qualitative analysis, up to ten articles were randomly selected per sub-genre, provided they were available and represented at least one of the dominant themes. Where a vast number of articles was available the selection prioritised those deemed particularly representative based on temporal, thematic, or stylistic significance. This was the case for the commentator's articles and the commentaries on current affairs. Conversely, for sub-genres like the Ren Zhongping articles, the selection was straightforward, as only a single relevant article was found.

To ensure diversity within the corpus, the selection also took into account publication dates, aiming to include texts spanning the entire period under

review. The final corpus consists of 46,137 Chinese characters and includes two editorials (the only ones available), one the Ren Zhongping article (the only one available), ten commentator's articles (out of 44), seven Wang Hai Lou articles, and ten current affairs commentaries (selected from 24).

Singing the official tune

In the initial phase of this research, using the *SegmentAnt* and *AntConc* softwares, recurring and noteworthy terms were extracted through word lists, concordance analysis, and collocation identification, allowing for the recognition of dominant themes. Seven were found:

- Economy (problems and success in the economic realm: work, poverty alleviation plans etc);
- Health (disease information; life protection in the pandemic);
- Matters of life (practical phenomena linked to the pandemic such as technological advancements, food habits, effects of online teaching on kids' health etc);
- People's war (war on the virus, heroism of the people);
- Socialism and nationalism (CPC's engagement and efforts; success and advantages of the Chinese system and spirit);
- International consequences (global crisis and cooperation, China's attitude and generosity, international praises);
- Unity (joint and selfless effort from common people).

The subsequent linguistic analysis looked at potential links between themes, expressive choices, and the sub-genre to which each text belonged.

Despite the significance of the topic, only two editorials published on the selected *Renmin wang* page during the first half of 2020 focused primarily on Covid-19. Both appeared in May, yet only one met the criterion of including the keyword used for the database search in the title or lead paragraph. The text centres on the Chinese government's longstanding objective of achieving "moderate prosperity" by 2020. The editorial, published on 1 May (Workers' Day), highlights the contributions of workers during the pandemic, commending their dedication and responsibility in both combating Covid-19 and sustaining economic and social development. The CPC is depicted as the guiding force that, in unity with the people, has successfully steered the country through the crisis.

In content, the editorial aligns with its sub-genre's purpose of articulating the official institutional stance. It echoes key CPC narratives, emphasising

national unity, the resilience of the Chinese people, and the success of China's model in restoring economic stability. Unlike other texts in the sub-corpus, however, it dedicates comparatively little space to praising the superiority of the Chinese political system.

Only one 7,265-character long Ren Zhongping article was published that directly addressing Covid-19. The text incorporates multiple themes but primarily stresses the challenges faced by the Chinese people and their collective determination to overcome adversity. It praises the courage, heroism, and solidarity of citizens, while also emphasising China's generosity and openness in assisting other nations. The article portrays national resilience as a result of CPC leadership and the advantages of socialism with Chinese characteristics, reinforcing the notion that unity is central to China's success. Various metaphorical expressions, such as "concentrate the forces" (*jizhong liliang* 集中力量) and "help each other on the same boat" (*tong zhou gong ji* 同舟共济), reinforce this theme.

The first opinion piece on Covid-19 to appear on *Renmin wang* belongs to the sub-genre of the commentator's article. It was published on 3 February, more than a month after local health professionals had raised alarms about a SARS-like outbreak in Wuhan (Li Y., 2020). The text emphasises national unity, asserting that the Chinese people's "strong spirit of unity" (*wei da tuanjie jingsheng* 伟大团结精神) and ability to "join forces to achieve great results" (*jizhong liliang ban dashi* 集中力量办大事) exemplify the "superiority" (*youyue xing* 优越性) of the socialist system.

Following this, several other commentator's articles on Covid-19 appeared on *Renmin wang*. Those published between February and March highlight the dedication of medical and community workers, framed within themes of national unity and the "People's war" against the virus. In April, the dominant focus shifted to economic recovery, emphasising China's commitment to poverty alleviation and the achievement of a moderately prosperous society.

By May, the tone became celebratory and self-praising, portraying China's international cooperation and generosity, and the people's heroism as further proof of the CPC's leadership success—a discourse that unequivocally links national achievements to the Party's governance model. In June, one article briefly acknowledges shortcomings in China's healthcare system, before reaffirming the Party's commitment to prioritising public health.

Regardless some variability in themes, argumentation and terminology showcased in the commentator's articles remained firmly aligned with official CPC discourse on the pandemic.

The Wang Hai Lou commentaries share the simplified writing style of the commentator's articles, yet they strongly adhere to the institutional rhetoric and propaganda framework. Two February articles focus on unity, echoing the dominant theme in the commentator's articles from the same period. However, another February commentary takes a more pragmatic approach, discussing the necessity of banning the trade and consumption of wild animals—an issue linked to hypotheses about Covid-19's zoonotic origins. Distinct from other texts in the sub-corpus, this piece offers practical policy, standing out in the corpus and in the sub-genre.

The other articles go back to the institutional discursive path, contrasting the CPC's governance with capitalist political systems and arguing that the Party truly works with the people's interest in mind and is truly able to respond to the people's needs.

Similar to commentator's articles, numerous current affairs commentaries on Covid-19 were published in *Renmin wang* during the first half of 2020—the first one on 6 February.

Four out of ten in the corpus closely align with official discourse to the extent that they could be mistaken for editorials or Wang Hai Lou articles. They celebrate national unity, offer concrete evidence of the efficiency of the Chinese system, and reinforce narratives of Party cohesion and dedication to the people.

However, the others explore practical topics, often emphasising unexpected positive outcomes of the pandemic or addressing emerging challenges. Themes include the role of smart cities, AI and telemedicine, vision problems among children engaged in online learning, shifts in work culture, and the enrichment potential of reading during lockdown. Additionally, some texts discuss state-owned enterprises' contributions during the crisis.

Although these articles do not deny the Party's narrative on the pandemic, by engaging with practical problems and phenomena they contribute to expanding the range of perspectives on Covid-19, and to bringing some originality to the outlet's discourse.

Genre variability in *Renmin Wang*

As it could be expected, rather than offering a range of diverse viewpoints, the majority of commentary articles published by *Renmin Wang* support a common narrative that legitimises the Party's role and activity in managing the crisis. Therefore, propaganda emerges as the dominant communicative function in the sub-genres included in the corpus. In line with the paper's mission, these articles serve to disseminate the opinions, policies, directives,

and key terminology of the leadership, effectively fulfilling the newspaper's long-established role as the Party's "throat and tongue". Little opinion variability can be seen in relation to the Covid-19 crisis. A dense web of intertextual references emerges instead, both in terms of meaning and linguistic expression. Terms, set phrases, and entire formulations are repeated across articles, often because they originate from speeches delivered by Xi Jinping over the six-month period under examination.

Nonetheless, some of the sub-genres of commentary do exhibit a degree of variation within the boundaries of official discourse, showing the relationship between content originality and article sub-genre.

Texts belonging to more "institutional" sub-genres predominantly reinforce and adhere to the central tenets of official rhetoric. In contrast, commentary sub-genres that are "less institutional" tend to engage with practical issues in a relatively pragmatic manner. This is the case, particularly, of the commentary on current affairs. Even in *Renmin wang*, this sub-genre maintains some degree of originality and closer connection to everyday life, managing to provide relatively diverse views or approaches in the otherwise monotonous discourse presented by the Party outlet.

While most of the commentaries analysed align with the communicative goals and structural features that characterise their respective sub-genres, the analysis also indicates occasional overlap between categories. Articles from the more institutional sub-genres (Wang Hai Lou articles and commentator's articles) sometimes extend beyond their conventional thematic scope; those belonging to less institutional sub-genres (commentaries on current affairs) occasionally display a narrower focus.

Despite these nuances, the overarching message conveyed by the texts remained generally consistent in the case of Covid-19, seeking to veil the Party's initially erratic response to the outbreak by constructing a narrative that consolidates support for its handling of the crisis. In line with the *Renmin wang* mission, these texts collectively work to reinforce the political legitimacy of the CPC by emphasising its strength, unity, decisiveness, international responsibility, and strategic wisdom.

5. Innovation

When OpenAI released ChatGPT in November 2022, China had already been embarked on the mission to unleash its artificial intelligence (AI) poten-

tial for years[12]. In hindsight, it can be argued that the move by the California-based company was a global watershed moment for the evolution of the relation between humans and AI. However, China soon banned ChatGPT, while at the same time encouraging local initiatives in generative AI. The release of DeepSeek in January 2025 by the Chinese company Flytech, and of Manus by ButterflyEffect in March 2025, marked another historical event, with China proving its ability to truly compete and match the US in the innovation sector (Baptista, 2025; Cassidy, 2025; Ottinger & Schneider, 2025).[13]

Surely, the development of AI and of technological innovation in general have been considered top priority during Xi Jinping's second mandate. The goals described in the 2017 *Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan*[14] (新一代人工智能发展规划, Plan hereafter) by the State Council outline a national rise culminating in 2030. The ambition, spelled out in the document, is for China to become a global "AI power" (人工智能强国) by then (Guowuyuan, 2017b).

The objectives set by the Plan are driven by economic considerations: for China to continue growing, and therefore, to keep fuelling the popular legitimation of the Party, innovation appears as the only way to go. Moreover, dominating the AI sector in considered key to occupying a dominant position on the world's stage: in recent years, the country's leaders have in many cases described innovation—AI, robotics, 5G, new energy and biotechnology—is the top priority for China for the near future.

In light of the pivotal position occupied by innovation and AI in the Chinese contemporary political discourse, this case study investigates the jour-

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[12] Artificial intelligence faced ideological stigmatisation from the 1950s to the 1970s, emerging as a topic of open research and dialogue in the 1980s (Cai, 2016: 12-15). As noted by Yang & Huang (2022), the 1990s witnessed the introduction in the 1990s several policy documents advocated for AI development in China. The first significant acknowledgment of AI and related technologies by the top leadership dates back in June 2014, when Xi Jinping urged for strategic evaluation, planning, and progress of innovations such as AI, big data and cloud computing (Cai, 2016: 15). More recently, at the 20th CPC Congress in October 2022, Xi articulated the ambition to elevate China to the status of a technological powerhouse (keji qiangguo 科技强国). That unleashed the production of related documents at national and local levels, including the 2023 Interim Measures for the Administration of Generative Artificial Intelligence Services (Shengchangshi rengong zhineng fuwu guanli zanxing banfa 生成式人工智能服务管理暂行办法) (Guojia huliangwang xinxi bangongshe, 2023).

[13] This paragraph reviews and updates the author's study titled "Of Pride and Patriotism. The representation of Artificial Intelligence in China's official and media discourse", in Lupano Emma & Orrù Paolo (2025, eds.) *Artificial intelligence and human perception: media discourse and public opinion*. Milano, FrancoAngeli, 84-109.

[14] The plan can be seen as the foundation of the public narrative on AI in China (Roberts et al., 2021).

nalistic narratives surrounding the phenomenon. It looks at the discourse construction around a subject that is taken very seriously by the country's leadership, in order to observe whether, and to what extent, the media are capable to express a range of opinions or they merely reproduce the institutional discourse. In other words, this analysis seeks to critically assess the role of the Chinese media narratives on AI in legitimising the Party-state, and, while doing so, to evaluate discursive variability across different media outlets. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines theme and frame analysis (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001) with corpus linguistic tools, the study is situated within the theoretical framework of legitimation discourse strategies (van Leeuwen, 2007; Reyes, 2011; Wang 2020). Corpus linguistic tools have been used to support the identification of themes and frames, and to analyse the semantic and rhetorical elements underlying the discourse on AI in China.

Corpus construction

The media corpus used in this study comprises commentary articles published by two selected news outlets during the period from November 1, 2022, to November 30, 2023. This period was chosen to cover the year following the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, which coincided with a notable increase in global media focus on artificial intelligence, particularly generative AI.

The two media outlets included in this analysis are the *Renmin wang* and *Caixin Zhoukan* (财新周刊 Financial weekly). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, *Renmin ribao* and its online edition *Renmin wang* are regarded as the most authoritative institutional outlets in China, due to direct affiliation with the CPC (Stockmann, 2013). In contrast, *Caixin Zhoukan* is recognised as one of the leading yet relatively independent news sources in China, known for its specialised coverage of financial news and general news with a financial perspective (de Burgh, 2017). While the *Renmin wang* serves as the generalist party media, the commercial nature of *Caixin Zhoukan* allows for a potentially alternative viewpoint. The primary distinction between these two outlets lies in their financial structures, which in turn influences the content they produce.

As regards AI narratives, it can be expected that the *Renmin wang*'s coverage would reflect the Party's predominantly positive stance on AI, highlighting the technology's economic, social, and national benefits. Conversely, *Caixin Zhoukan* may offer a platform for a more critical discourse.

The articles to include in the corpus were manually sourced from Caixin.cn and the commentary section (评论版) of *Renmin wang* by search-

ing for the term "artificial intelligence" (人工智能) in titles and/or lead paragraphs. They were subsequently filtered to ensure they belonged to the commentary genre and were relevant to the topic. To facilitate this process, complete paragraphs containing the search term were collected from each preselected article. The selection resulted in 26 commentaries from the *Renmin wang* sub-corpus (approximately 35,000 Chinese characters) and 47 from the *Caixin Zhoukan* sub-corpus (over 56,000 Chinese characters). All selected articles were considered during the textual analysis phase.

Innovation and legitimacy

Despite being permanently restricted in the People's Republic of China since March 2023 (Chiu, 2024), ChatGPT is well known and frequently discussed among the Chinese populace (access is possible in the Prc via a virtual private network). Its launch at the end of 2022 immediately catalysed the emergence of local competitors, such as Baidu's ErnieBot, and led to the formulation of associated regulations, which attracted considerable media coverage. In light of this, the year since the release by OpenAI can be considered a relevant period to examine the media narratives related to artificial intelligence in China.

Focusing on the identification of dominant themes and framing strategies, the study built on a deductive approach to the content analysis of frames in news, which looks for five frames in discourses: conflict, human impact, responsibility, morality and economic consequences (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000: 94-95). Starting from the idea that specific words are the "building blocks" of frames (Entman, 1993), word frequency, collocates, keyness (against the Chinese Web 2017 corpus) and concordance lines were used via SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) in order to support the identification of frames in the two sub-corpora. In each sub-corpus, texts were analysed looking for manifestations of discursive legitimation strategies (Wang, 2020: 686) supporting the CPC.

The AI narrative from the *Renmin Wang* sub-corpus primarily emphasizes the leadership's positive actions and sense of responsibility at both the national and international level, aligning with the expected tone of its commentaries.

(1) 政府"该出手时就出手"…支持企业发展不断迈上新台阶。
The government takes action when it is necessary… to support the development of enterprises to keep reaching new levels.

(2) 机器人产业是一扇窗口，从中可窥见我国产业高端化发展的"大棋局"。
The robotics industry is a window through which we can get a glimpse of the "big chess game" of our country's high-end industrial development.

(3) 中国将与世界各国一道深化合作，共同推动构建网络空间命运共同体迈向新阶段，让更多国家和人民共享互联网发展成果。
China will work with countries around the world to strengthen cooperation, jointly promoting the advancement of a community with a shared future in cyberspace to a new stage, allowing more countries and people to share the benefits of internet development.

A generally favourable portrayal of AI applications, generating admiration for technological advances, indirectly legitimises the Party-state that promotes them and fosters a feeling of national pride for China's technological achievements.

(4) 有了聪明的"机器化学家"，从数百万种材料组合中找到理想结果，可能只需一两周。这不，仅用 10 多天，它就为实验室的科研团队找出了 20 多种高质量材料组合，极大提高了开发优质薄膜材料的效率。
With a smart "machine chemist", it may only take a week or two to find the ideal result from millions of material combinations. In just over 10 days, it found more than 20 high-quality material combinations for the laboratory's research team, greatly improving the efficiency of developing high-quality thin film materials.

(5) 科技改变生活，科技引领未来。…一个个新产品、一项项新技术，着眼群众现实需求，带来全新体验，描摹出未来生活的美好图景。
New products and new technologies focus on the actual needs of the masses, bring new experiences, and depict a beautiful picture of future life.

(6) 新征程上，我们有基础、有底气、有信心、有能力实现高水平科技自立自强，以科技创新的累累硕果惠及广大群众，创造更加美好的生活。
On the new journey, we have the foundation, confidence, and ability to achieve high-level scientific and technological self-reliance, to benefit the public with the fruitful results of scientific and technological innovation, and to create a better life.

When discussing negative impacts, the leadership is depicted as effectively managing issues through wisdom and foresight, thereby reinforcing official discourse and contributing to AI literacy.

(7) 建立"一张网"，提供"一站式"服务，彰显了政府部门为中小企业真心实意解难题、真招实招助发展的决心。健全公共服务体系，鼓励和支持中小企业

发展壮大，不断提振市场预期和信心，中国经济必将汇聚起更磅礴的内生动力。

The establishment of "one network" and the provision of "one-stop" services demonstrate the determination of government departments to sincerely solve the problems of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and support their development with real measures.

The *Caixin Zhoukan* corpus also employs discursive strategies to lend legitimacy to the CPC, mainly presenting it as a problem solver in the complex realm of AI development. To the same end, negative emotions of disapproval and fear are sometimes evoked towards others (such as the US) who are portrayed as not caring about the dangers posed by uncontrolled AI.

(8) 在对生成式 AI 的诸多评论中，人们很少提及一个关键问题：哪些国家将从中受益，哪些国家将受损。... 毫无疑问，美国在开发大型语言模型 (LLM）方面颇具优势。... 纵观历史，技术变革往往同时带来赢家和输家。我们需要确保 AI 带来更多的赢家和更少的输家。
Commentaries on generative AI rarely address a key question: which countries will benefit and which will suffer. ... There is no doubt that the United States has an advantage in developing large language models (LLMs). […] Throughout history, technological change has often created both winners and losers. We must ensure that AI creates more winners and fewer losers.

This othering discourse strategy (Lams, 2017) emphasises China's effort to ensuring balanced AI development in the world, presenting it as the champion of international harmony and cooperation and supporting the positive perception of a leadership that cares for the weaker.

However, in contrast with the *Renmin wang* narrative, *Caixin zhoukan* commentaries do not always mention the Party-state when they dwell on the numerous risks brought about by AI, overtly suggesting that the phenomenon is so disruptive that it could be beyond the leadership's control:

(9) ChatGPT 可能带来的失业规模和速度将比物理自动化浪潮更大更快，被淘汰的岗位将不仅限于体力劳动、低技能和低工资岗位。目前，尚不清楚人工智能将无法模拟哪些人类特质（如果有的话）。这些特质是人与生俱来的，还是可以后天习得的？... DALL·E 能够依照文本描述（如"一幅苹果画"或"留着胡子的'蒙娜丽莎'"）去生成复杂的图像。这已被用于设计杂志封面等工作，在艺术家中引起恐慌。
The scale and speed of unemployment that ChatGPT may bring will be greater and faster than the wave of physical automation, and the jobs that will be eliminated will not be limited to manual labour, low-skilled and low-wage jobs. At present, it is not clear which human traits (if any) artificial intelligence will not be able to

simulate. … DALL·E can generate complex images based on text descriptions … causing panic among artists.

(10) 倘若 AI 的设计者根本就不想造福人类，比如希特勒在柏林暗堡里组队并研发了 AI，那么人类基本就可以与世界告别了。
If the designers of AI do not want to benefit humanity at all, like Hitler forming a team and developing AI in a bunker in Berlin, then humanity can basically kiss the world goodbye.

Compared to the *Renmin wang* corpus, the *Caixin Zhoukan* commentaries are also clearer in arguing the fundamental role of Chinese private companies for the success of China's technological innovation. This may be interpreted as a subtle divergence from the official view on technology corporations, whose relationship with the CPC has been marked by some turbulence during Xi Jinping's leadership. (Bahree, 2020; Nikkei Sun; 2020)

(11) 民企已然成为中国科技创新的主体。离开民企，创新型国家建设就无从谈起。在科技创新上，民企用得上、离不开，自然也应当信得过。
Private enterprises have become the main body of China's scientific and technological innovation. Without private enterprises, it is impossible to talk about building an innovative country. In scientific and technological innovation, private enterprises are useful and indispensable, and of course they should be trusted.

(12) 在关键核心技术攻关中，让民企参与不是"不得已"，而是"必须有"。
In the research and development of key core technologies, it is not a "last resort" but a "must" to allow private enterprises to participate.

This corpus reflects only a partial alignment with the institutional narrative. The *Caixin Zhoukan* commentaries do reiterate the positive role of the leadership in AI development. However, compared to the *Renmin wang*, the texts focus more on the challenges brought by AI (unemployment, scientific integrity, enterprises, machine takeover, international competition, etc.) for which the CPC is not always indicated as the problem-solver.

Variability

The opinion articles from the *Renmin wang* sub-corpus advocate for the advancement of artificial intelligence as essential for national empowerment and social stability. While risks associated with AI are acknowledged, they are presented as manageable challenges that can be anticipated and ad-

dressed. The CPC-state is depicted as both responsible and proactive in leveraging opportunities to strengthen China, demonstrating wisdom and competence in navigating potential risks. Furthermore, the development of AI is framed as a patriotic endeavour, with the CPC positioned as the rightful entity to champion this initiative. National pride is invoked through an emphasis on the remarkable applications and capabilities of Chinese AI.

In contrast, the opinion pieces from the *Caixin Zhoukan* sub-corpus offer a more nuanced perspective, extensively addressing the challenges, uncertainties, and risks linked to AI, such as unemployment, scientific integrity, corporate influence, automation, and international competition. These articles often employ a mix of positive and negative emotions to portray the Party-State as the ideal leadership to manage AI, framing it as an opportunity for national advancement while also recognising the Party-State as a problem-solver. In several instances, commentators engage in a more genuine discussion of the social implications of AI.

This analysis indicates that the *Renmin wang* strongly aligns with the official narrative on AI, while *Caixin Zhoukan* appears more inclined toward an authentic exploration of AI—particularly its ethical and economic ramifications—and the expression of original opinions on it. This study suggests that, while institutional and commercial media employ overlapping framing strategies to legitimise AI development as integral to China's national approach, in line with the official discourse, commercial outlets maintain the capability to distance themselves from the "main melody", showing the potential for moderate deviations from official discourse even on critical topics and within prominent national media.

6. Threads

Individually, the studies presented in this chapter set out to uncover discursive patterns in written media narratives on specific events or issues within a defined period. While employing a range of analytical approaches—among them, frame analysis, theories of legitimation, and related discursive methods—they shared a number of methodological and conceptual features.

Each investigation was grounded in manually assembled corpora, composed exclusively of journalistic texts drawn from selected Chinese media outlets. The collections were limited to the genre of opinion writing, but encompassed a diversity of sub-genres, enabling an exploration of intertextual variation within this specific discursive domain. Article selection has been carried out using platforms such as *Factiva*, CNKI, and official newspaper

websites, with search keywords guiding the process. Social media content was not included.

Another point of convergence was the qualitative nature of all the contributions. Three of the four studies incorporated tools and techniques traditionally associated with quantitative methodologies, based on the use of corpus analysis software such as *AntConc*, *SegmentAnt*, and *SketchEngine*. These tools allowed for the extraction of features such as word frequency, collocational patterns, keyness, and concordance lines, which proved valuable resources to support the qualitative analyses. Three out of four studies included both party and commercial outlets, with the aim to comparatively discuss their output. An exception was the Covid-19 investigation, where only RMRB was analysed to test sub-corpus variability.

Methodological challenges

The applicability of theoretical approaches and methods—particularly discourse analysis—originally developed in Western linguistic and cultural contexts to the Chinese media landscape is a matter of scholarly debate (Shixu, 2005, 2024). While this volume does not aim to engage directly with that theoretical discussion, some practical reflections emerge from the experience of conducting genre-based textual analysis of Chinese journalistic content. One of the most immediate and tangible challenges concerns data access, which is, of course, central to any empirical research.

In many of the case studies presented in this volume, the main difficulty lay in securing consistent and reliable access to the desired written materials. Several practical obstacles frequently arise: paywalled content often requires payment systems incompatible with non-Chinese bank accounts; inconsistent and decentralised archiving practices vary widely across media outlets; and the availability of articles can change without notice, introducing a degree of instability into the research process. As a result, scholars are sometimes forced to revise or significantly adapt their research design simply to circumvent these limitations.

For example, in the case study analysing discourses on artificial intelligence, the initial plan was to build a third corpus using data from *Pengpai* (澎湃, or *The Paper*), a widely read commercial news platform. This choice was based on helpful suggestions from a Chinese colleague during the presentation of an earlier version of the study in mid-2024. However, the lack of genre or sub-genre categorisation on *Pengpai*'s site, combined with a poorly functioning search function, made the process unworkable, and the inclusion of this third corpus had to be abandoned.

Another recurring difficulty involves the frequent restructuring of newspaper websites. When such technical updates occur during data collection or analysis, researchers may find themselves unable to retrieve previously available material or to verify sources already used. In some cases, this can compromise the research process.

Despite these issues, newspaper websites are sometimes more practical to use than dedicated databases, which also come with their own limitations. One common problem encountered in this research was the inability to filter texts by genre or sub-genre within major digital repositories. This often extended the time required for corpus construction and reinforced the need of manual selection.

While manual extraction is labour-intensive, it does allow for greater precision in assembling a genre-specific corpus. It also provides the researcher with more control over the analytical material. However, this approach requires methodological discipline: researchers must guard against introducing bias in their selection process and ensure consistency in their inclusion criteria.

Taken together, these challenges point to the need for sustained reflexivity in research design and underscore the importance of methodological transparency, particularly when working with Chinese-language journalistic texts in digital environments that are constantly evolving.

Negotiating variability

Collectively, from the perspective of Chinese media studies, the cases illustrated in this chapter highlight the enduring differences between commercial and institutional outlets in the country, even under Xi Jinping's tighter governance. As suggested by previous analyses (Repnikova, 2018; Lupano, 2020), this differentiation can be noted even when challenging stories are concerned, as media whose management is not directly in the hands of the Party are sometimes able to maintain some degree of expressive autonomy and to offer nuanced stances. This is particularly evident in the genre of commentary, which is constitutively more prone to giving voice to original viewpoints.

Within the same outlet, significant differences can emerge also between specific sub-genres of opinion articles. As the case studies presented in this chapter have highlighted, in the same newspaper different types of texts can express different levels of creativity and autonomy. It was the case observed in the *Xin Jing Bao*'s opinion articles in relation to the *Charlie Hebdo* case study, which confirmed how, expectedly, the sub-genre of the editorial is

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likely to express positions that are aligned with the institutional discourse, regardless of the outlet that publishes it. On the contrary, commentaries on current affairs, being often written by freelance contributors who stand outside a paper's ranks, constitutively tend to maximise the possibility to explore and present a wider range of ideas and arguments on a given topic.

In this complex scenario, moderate departures from the "main melody" (主旋律) (Chen, 2022) can be observed within the journalistic discourse. While strict political control remains in place in the PRC, there exists some room for original viewpoints, due to the effects of media commercialisation and the widespread use of the Internet. News commentaries can occasionally provide a platform for diverse perspectives, albeit within certain boundaries, adding a manifold aspect to the Chinese public debate.

What emerged clearly from the analysis of the case studies is that there is limited predictability in the way one outlet or one sub-genre performs in terms of variability. It is also difficult to draw general conclusions about the factors that influence the possibility (or not) for variation. Political control, self-censorship and (more rarely) censorship can often be blamed for monotony when highly sensitive topics are concerned. Yet, among the four cases presented in this book, it was the media narrative about the arguably less sensitive story (Suning's acquisition of FC Internazionale) that displayed the least degree of variability across outlets and sub-genres. This is in line with what other scholars have found about Chinese journalists' improvised practices in uncertain scenarios, and about the fundamental role of individual agency in such context (as discussed in Chapter 1 and 3).

Moreover, the analyses included in this chapter show the durability of the Party's narrative focus over the years. In the *Charlie Hebdo* and the Covid-19 cases, the dominant discursive strategies were aimed at legitimising a supposedly "Chinese" cultural and political model, based on exceptionalism. In the first instance, in 2015, China was depicted as a country that can handle multiculturalism and terrorism better than European nations, due to its deep-rooted secular tradition. In the second instance, five years later, the emerging "story" presents the CPC leadership model and the unique spirit of unity and sacrifice that characterises the Chinese people as the factors that allowed the country to successfully manage the pandemic crisis.

In the cases of FC Internazionale (in 2016) and AI (in 2023), both stories were framed as manifestations of China's return to its due position in the world, by means of its financial power and technological innovation power respectively.

This consistency in media framing is linguistically manifested in a high degree of intertextuality, marked also by the iteration of political keywords and *tifa* across time and across stories (such as the term "powerhouse" and

the related fixed expression "building a [sport/technology] powerhouse"; the term "rejuvenation" and the related *tifa* "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"; the terms "Chinese model" and "national spirit"). Patterns like these remind us of the enduring stifled environment in which variability has to be negotiated.

Conclusion: What Lies Ahead?

This volume was designed to provide a linguistic examination of journalistic expression variability in contemporary China, situating it within its political, historical, and professional context, by analysing in-depth case studies in the current political phase. The investigation attempted to offer a contribution to Chinese media studies by bringing to the fore genre as a relevant interpretive tool to explore news and commentary production, testing the relationship between journalistic genres, outlets classification and content variation in the PRC. Drawing in particular on Critical Genre Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis to engage with case studies spanning a decade, this work demonstrated that moderate deviations from the official line can still be found in the Chinese journalistic discourse, even in an era of tighter control. This encourages continued research efforts in the field.

Indeed, compared to the recent past, the space for independent expression appears more constrained in China at present, due to a series of legislative and regulatory measures that have aimed at reinforcing the Party's control over the media since 2013 (Repnikova, 2017; Meng, 2018). Among the most recent ones is the revision of the Law on the protection of state secrets (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo baoshou guojia mimi fa* 中华人民共和国保守国家秘密法), which touches upon wide categories, including media professionals. The new version, approved on 27 February 2024, holds any organisation, company, institution, association, and individual with access to state secrets legally accountable for their disclosure. What has been seen as particularly concerning is the potential arbitrary application of the norm (Ren & Davies, 2024), facilitated by a broad and vague definition of state secrets. These include items related to national defence, state affairs, diplomacy, economic and social development, science and technology, as well as other unspecified "confidential matters determined by the Security Department"

(*jing guojia baomi xingzheng guanli bumen queding de qita mimi shixiang* 经国家保密行政管理部门确定的其他秘密事项, art. 13/7).[1]

As shown in the historical overview in this book (Chapter 1), journalists in the PRC are used to operating in a fluid situation, going through periods of tighter or looser control, with their autonomy and agency being continually subject to negotiation, and heavily case-dependant. Unlike in the past, this scenario, far from concerning only the national life, is growingly relevant also beyond China's borders, for at least two reasons.

Firstly, the tensions that permeate the Chinese media sector are becoming increasingly impactful on a global scale. This is due to the expansion of the PRC media outlets and the CPC strategic efforts to promote the Chinese narrative abroad, coupled with China's prominent role in AI development globally (as the advent of Deepseek, Manus and a plethora of other AI applications made in China have shown since early 2025).

Newsrooms worldwide began to face the challenges and opportunities posed by machines since the first half of the 2010s (Marconi, 2020). China promptly aligned with this trend, and even outpaced international competitors in certain applications of artificial intelligence. A notable example came in 2018, when the state-run news agency Xinhua introduced the world's first virtual news anchors in its television broadcasts (Xinhua She, 2018).

As in many other countries, automated writing has been employed in China for years now, both in state-run and commercial newsrooms. It is particularly used for reporting on current affairs, finance, and sports—such as during the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games (China Daily, 2016). Around the same time, *Media Brain* (*meiti da nao* 媒体大脑), the country's first multimedia artificial intelligence platform, was also launched. Jointly funded by *Xinhua News Agency* and tech giant Alibaba, it was developed to provide technical support and services to traditional media outlets, facilitating automated content production through technologies such as natural language processing and computer vision (Xinhua She, 2017).

The second reason is related to the mounting pressures that journalistic professionalism and spaces for free expression are suffering also in democratic contexts. Traditional gatekeeping practices are increasingly challenged by social media dynamics, algorithm-driven content production, and the public's scepticism towards established media. The growing pervasiveness of artificial intelligence, especially the use of LLMs and

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[1] The full text of the law is available on the website of the Chinese State Council at: https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202402/content_6934648.htm. [Accessed 30/04/2025]

generative models in newsrooms across the world, is not only reshaping news production processes, but also redefining professional standards, and raising critical questions about authorship, authenticity, and responsibility (Pranteddu et al., 2024). In China, these changes have been even more strategic, with state actors harnessing technological innovation also for ideological reinforcement and narrative control (Zhuang, 2024). With non-institutionalised actors wielding growingly disproportionate power, similar dynamics could be reproduced also in democratic contexts.

Started with the goal to review and collect case studies conducted over the last decade, this volume came to mark the transition to a new epoch after 45 years of post-Maoist reforms, drawing an ideal line to separate what can be considered the past from what lies ahead. The complexity of the present—the escalation of international conflicts, the rebalancing of the global order, the urgency of climate challenges, along with AI-enhanced need to reconceptualise the nature of humanity as we know it, calls for new (or renewed) interpretive tools and focus.

Amidst the profound transformations sweeping through the world of journalism, what remains key is the enduring role of the human element. The commitment, vision, moral tension, intellectual curiosity, and ability to mediate or creatively circumvent control that characterise the individual journalist are still crucial in carving out and defending spaces for debate and resistance in the media (and beyond). As the Chinese context shows—and how this volume has aimed to underscore—human agency can still make the difference.

Discourse analysis, among other approaches, remains a valid tool to identify and bring to light these signs of human creativity. In particular, the investigations in this book point to the lasting value of close linguistic research that engages not only with official expressions of Chinese political discourse, but also with the nuanced, interwoven textures of the unofficial language. They make a case for continuing human-led inquiry—supported, where appropriate, by technological tools—into the ways language operates within, and in response to, evolving political and cultural pressures.

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Between the Lines

Outside China, the country's media landscape is often depicted as a monolithic system, where journalists are subject to tight control and little room exists for perspectives that diverge from the official line. While the political and professional environment in which Chinese journalists operate remains challenging, it is far from static. This volume examines the dynamic interplay between journalistic genres, media outlet characteristics, and discourse variability in contemporary Chinese journalism, exploring how professional commentators navigate the boundaries between official narratives and self-expression. Focusing on the genre of opinion articles, the analysis draws on case studies spanning ten years to assess degrees of discursive flexibility in both institutional and commercial outlets. Though acknowledging growing restrictions under Xi Jinping's leadership, this qualitative research suggests that space for improvised, nuanced expression persists—albeit in limited and context-specific ways. Combining genre analysis with tools from Critical Discourse Analysis and corpus-assisted methods, the book offers an empirically grounded contribution to Chinese media studies and calls for continuing, human-informed linguistic engagement in this evolving field.

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