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Discourse and the Contemporary Chinese Media
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Editorial

Discourse and the Contemporary Chinese Media: An Expanding Research Field

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1. INVESTIGATING CHINESE MEDIA THROUGH A DISCOURSE-ANALYTICAL LENS

When looking back at the development of the contemporary Chinese media system since the beginning of the present century, one cannot but notice a tremendous evolution that has paralleled China's rise as a global economic and political powerhouse. Yet, at the same time, one cannot miss the high consistency of the Chinese official vision regarding the role of the media and the relative stability of media-state relations over several decades. Therefore, the present-day Chinese media ecology can be seen as revealing a dual picture that combines both “conservative” and “transformative functions of discourse”. The conservative aspect is “characterised predominantly by the political elites’ attempt to maintain continuities with its revolutionary past, and the intellectual elites’ efforts to preserve China’s cultural heritage”, while the transformative aspect is “driven mostly by the imperative of innovative, imaginative discursive strategies in managing social change through language use” (Cao 2014, 5). From its foundation, the media scene has been explicitly bound to politics, as its intended purpose was to serve the ideological project of the leading party and reinforce it. As a multilayered system producing news and views, it spreads the leadership’s interpretation of reality, not only ensuring its prominence throughout society but also fostering its

comprehension. As a pervasive instrument, it performs a didactic function, by promoting and consolidating a specific use of language among the public, thereby advancing particular understandings of sociopolitical and historical reality, reproducing social values, and building identities. The underlying mechanism of this mediatic intervention entails activation or hindrance of social processes and collective action.

Based on these premises, the Chinese metapragmatic awareness of the media system's affordances cannot be underestimated and the expectations of media impact were often very high. Therefore, plans for media development were constantly updated and redirected, renewing but never renouncing the need for a top-down, proactive role in content production, distribution and access management, and control. Nonetheless, economic choices, partially leading to economic self-reliance and to decisions to allow and promote a regulated inward and outward internationalisation of the system, were adopted for both official and commercial outlets, thereby keeping the Chinese mediascape lively in terms of content and technological development. In parallel, the institutional background of propaganda and censorship, as well as the legal framework, were updated to ensure substantial consistency of the targeted aims, notwithstanding the growing plurality of channels and voices.

In addition, audience design received more attention, precisely because of political and financial interests. The globalisation of the media landscape, associated with the internationalisation of the Chinese media outlets, required a deeper understanding of the variety of users/readers and of the peculiarities of the domestic market compared to those of other contexts. Confronting this challenge, Chinese media organisations enhanced investments in technological innovation, news flow orientation, and, not in the least, refined professional skills both in producing visually attractive work as well as adapting language choices relevant to particular audiences.

As editors, aware of the multifaceted reality of contemporary Chinese media, we decided to design the current project, leading to this issue of *Lingue Culture Mediazioni / Languages Cultures Mediation*, with great attention to methodological clarity and variability in the range of themes. In a global academic context where the analysis of media products is rich and diverse, we focused on the dynamics between geographical location (of media production and reception) and the use of language, welcoming rigorous studies on discourse, stemming from different perspectives centred on the contemporary Chinese mediascape.

Based on a variety of case studies and building on scholarly insights about discursive processes and strategies in the Chinese media (Lams 2017, 2018, 2019, 2026; de Burgh, Lupano, and Mottura 2018; Lams, Zhang, and Lupano 2025), this issue adduces further evidence of how language and ideology operate in the Chinese media context. It aims to highlight the ways in which discursive approaches can be applied productively and effectively to Chinese media products. We view ‘discourse’ as a foundational concept and a most valuable analytical lens for a fine-grained examination of Chinese media output. Although this might sound like common ground among researchers, we believe this assumption deserves continued scholarly attention in the contemporary world, where boundaries between fiction and reality have been increasingly, and quite often intentionally, blurred.

Being conscious of the history and constraints shaping the contemporary Chinese media scene should not automatically imply a vision of the studied context as ‘exceptional’, or isolated from the international media world and requiring local theories to be analysed. Nor should methods, such as critical discourse analysis or language-pragmatic analysis, developed in Western contexts, be shunned for application in non-Western contexts because of their origin. Nonetheless, when examining discursive products or strategies, researchers should, as a default universal mode of academic rigour, at all times adopt a transparent and consistent methodological approach to enable replicability, and, in the interpretation process, consider the relevant contextual factors in production and reception of media products. After all, the adagio that context provides meaning lies at the core of a language pragmatic analysis of text and talk. Interpretation that takes local contexts into consideration can thus reduce risks of bias. This basic premise brings to the surface a crucial question about universalistic and relativist approaches to discourse studies, already touched upon by Tian and Chilton (2014, 197-199), Cao (2014, 4), and Lams (2017, 9). As argued by Lams, while “epistemological reflections on culturally inclusive diversification of discourse within cultural discourse studies are legitimate and merit support, especially the need to consider contextual factors when doing media analysis”, “it is equally worth questioning the validity of epistemological relativism”, if one considers that “political or ideological factors also play a role in affirming national specificity or cultural characteristics in scientific discourse or in the drive to indigenize scientific disciplines” (2017, 9). This dilemma begs the question: how can researchers adopt European-born critical discourse-based approaches to account for the socio-political,

historical, and cultural specificities of the environment under scrutiny? In our understanding, this question sets the foundation for the present journal issue, and the contributions convincingly point towards an answer: discourse-analytical methods do not necessarily require adaptation across contexts, provided that researchers maintain a rigorous and transparent methodological approach and therefore recognise the primary importance of knowledge of the relevant context.

2. ANALYSING MEDIA DISCOURSE: METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS

Discourse studies define language as a social product and a productive means to replicate or unhinge social patterns, values, hierarchies. Drawing from different research approaches, the studies traditionally focus on lexical choices, syntactic patterns, texts cohesion strategies, textual genres analysis, argumentative structures, etc. to shed light on how conscious or automatic responses by individual or collective authors shape the texts and influence the target audience.

Based on all the mentioned premises, this issue seeks to contribute to the discussion on how Chinese media products – both in Chinese and in other languages – construct and reinforce specific narratives on contemporary social, political, and economic challenges, targeting both domestic and international audiences. It thus participates to on-going scholarly discussions on studying the Chinese media through discourse-approaches and builds on insights from recent academic cooperations between the editors, rooted in research projects developed by the Contemporary Asia Research Centre of the University of Milan and the Brussels Centre for Chinese Discourse Studies workgroup at KU Leuven.

The authors writing for this issue concentrate on different objects of study, as far as language and discourse types are concerned, and select specific methods and tools for their analysis, thus forming a tree of distinct but interconnected branches. The first bifurcation we can see is based on the selection of the language in use: one contribution focuses on English texts published by Chinese media, one on multilingual versions of the same text (Chinese-Arabic-English-Italian), while the other contributions analyse texts in Chinese. Another crucial bifurcation emerges from the kind of discourse analysed. Most of the contributions focus on official discourses, as published by well-established party

or state-affiliated media outlets, as well as by academic journals, and authored by institutions or other authoritative personalities. Nonetheless, a few authors concentrate on counternarratives, the popularisation of specialised language, or a strategic use of official language partially reorientating discourse towards somehow different communicative purposes. This variety is tangible also through the wide range of media outlets as objects of analysis. Thus, the diversity displayed in this journal issue is realised not only by engaging with heterogeneous discourse types and textual genres, but also by examining different media platforms. We can find traditional and official media outlets, institutions and websites (e.g. *People's Daily / Renmin Ribao*, *China Daily*, *Global Times*, *Guangming Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, online local government websites, Xinhua News Agency and the Foreign Language Press), academic journals, as well as commercial outlets and websites. Finally, this issue also pays attention to social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin (TikTok).

Still referring to the tree metaphor, the theoretical insights cited in the articles are diverging branches with discourse analysis as a common root. To study Chinese media discourse in its different realisations, all authors engage in in-depth textual analysis at both the macro and micro level, encompassing argumentation structures, syntactical configurations, lexical choices, etc. To foster a critical understanding of Chinese media production, the contributors follow different methodologies and draw on varying theories from different disciplines (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Charmaz 2006), deeply influenced by the nature of the media considered. Across the contributions well-known concepts emerge, such as 'strategic narratives' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013), 'representational practices' (Hall 2003; van Leeuwen's 2008), 'frames' (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974; van Dijk 1998), 'positioning' (Bamberg 1997), 'affective publics' (Papacharissi 2014), 'networked public sphere' and 'counternarratives' (Bruns 2023), 'popularisation of specialised language' (Garzone 2006; Boginskaya 2023; Sterk and van Goch 2023), etc. Together, these branches lead to highlighting the deep links between media, power, and society, and the influence of ideology and didactic purposes in most objects of study.

3. THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS ISSUE

The first article in this issue, by Lams, is concerned with Chinese media discourse in the English language, examining the representation China projects of itself and of other institutional actors when engaging with foreign publics. Lams analyses discursive patterns in the representation of the Chinese Self and the European Other in China's official English-language media outlets (*China Daily*, *People's Daily*, and *Global Times*) with a case study on their coverage of the EU-China Summits in 2022 and 2023. Focusing on how the EU-China relationship and its key actors are framed and positioned, the analysis uncovers the linguistic mechanisms underpinning these representations. It sheds light on how China's hope for enhanced cooperation with the EU coexists with moralistic directives regarding the EU's future conduct, along with negative depictions of the EU's diminished normative influence on the global stage and strategic eulogies of China's position in the global hierarchy.

Digging into the multilingual self-promotion of Chinese official political discourse, Gallelli, Miotto, and Zappone conduct a case study of the English, Italian, and Arabic versions of first volume of *The Governance of China* to examine how translation contributes to reframing strategic narratives surrounding the Taiwan issue for different target audiences. Their study highlights how rhetorical devices, such as family metaphors, historical references, and economic portrayals construct a perception of inevitability around the Peoples Republic of China's position on Taiwan. The authors argue that translation becomes a site of ideological negotiation, by reframing narratives aimed at persuading readers of China's 'legitimate' claim to the island.

As Lams, Ng also explores the issue of representation in media outlets but focusing on media representation of thematic foci across the headlines of the Chinese-language *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报) during the years of the Covid-19 pandemic. The newspaper is shown to represent the Chinese authorities as benevolent actors, adamant on keeping the Covid-19 pandemic under control through science, while the foreign countries are depicted either as friendly nations that praised China's perseverance managing the pandemic situation or as hostile states that sought to discredit China's efforts.

Discourse related to Covid-19 is also addressed in Caccin's contribution, in which the author investigates institutional discourse in Chinese official and semi-official media during the Covid-19 crisis through a discursive-pragmatic analysis of anti-epidemic slogans circulating across

traditional and digital platforms. The study shows that these slogans functioned both as tools of health communication and as vehicles of ideological alignment and social mobilisation, and demonstrates how linguistic creativity in slogan construction served to reinforce state narratives and mobilise the population during an evolving emergency.

Scaringella's contribution delves into the debate surrounding English language teaching in the People's Republic of China as represented in Chinese official media between 2013 and 2023. Relying on a qualitative textual analysis, the study examines how social meanings and attitudes towards the English language are produced and promoted, identifying a substantial shift in public sentiment expressed within this debate.

The article authored by Yu analyses public discourse on social media as a field of contestation between official and consolidated positions and alternative voices. Examining a corpus of WeChat Official Accounts articles, Yu investigates the semantic and affective repurposing of the term *dongya* 东亚 (East Asia) within Chinese public discourse between 2016 and 2025. The study particularly digs into its recent resemanticisation in relation to personal anxieties regarding family, education, and psychological trauma, showing how 'East Asia' is mobilised by an affective public as a discursive shield through which social critique is articulated and collective vulnerability negotiated within a restrictive media environment.

In her essay, Caschera examines discourse on *lianhuanhua* 连环画 (LHH) 'on the easel', a distinctive version of LHH, a Chinese form of comic art consisting of one image accompanied by one caption per page. The study analyses how official discourse on this form of LHH, as represented by art and art-related journals and disseminated via the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, reframes the historical and social role of LHH, constructing and reinforcing narratives that emphasise its close relationship with art institutions.

The last two contributions in this issue both focus on meaning-making processes in audiovisual products. Ruscica focuses on Chinese animated media to explore how classical mythology is reconfigured in the construction of ideological discourse during periods of prolonged national instability. Through the analysis of two animated films from the 1940s and 1960s, the author shows how visual, narrative, and symbolic elements are orchestrated to produce ideologically charged messages that foster national identity and political legitimacy during periods of 'permacrisis', while also tracing continuities with contemporary forms of myth-based narratives in Chinese media.

Finally, Chinese medical television series are at the centre of Riva and Vallati's study, which considers these audiovisual products as hybrid cultural artefacts interweaving entertainment with informal health education while also conveying social and moral values. Analysing the case of a 2024 medical drama, their study examines popularisation discourse to investigate how these productions shape public perceptions of healthcare, trust in medical institutions, and doctor-patient relationships through verbal and visual strategies, while simultaneously facilitating the dissemination of specialised medical language and knowledge.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The nine contributions collected in this journal issue contribute to the expanding research field of discourse analysis of the contemporary Chinese media. All authors referred to authoritative literature for methodology, while drawing widely on Chinese scholarship related to their study object. The work of these scholars confirms the function European-born discourse studies theories can perform in critical analysis on media discourses stemming from a distant social background, while all the same demonstrating that this path is more convincing when it is associated with a strong knowledge of the linguistic, socio-political, historical, and cultural contexts in which the media discourse is embedded. The convergence of both competences sets a solid foundation for a grounded and critical adoption of discourse-based approaches that also account for the specificities of the fields explored. Our tree is tall and leafy and is likely to grow stronger in the future.

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