



China's narrative of the fight against COVID-19: a case study of the representation of social actors in China Keywords

by Chiara Bertulesi

ABSTRACT: Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the Chinese political leadership has devoted substantial efforts to shape, through media and institutional discourses, a specific narrative of its response to the crisis, framing it as a fight in which the Chinese people, under the leadership of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party, promptly came together to defeat the virus.

The present paper examines this dominant narrative focusing on the Chinese language section on the fight against COVID-19 of the multilingual online platform *China Keywords*, a project run by State and Party-affiliated institutions. Drawing on the theoretical background and analytical tools from Critical Discourse Studies, the paper provides an analysis of the discursive representation of social actors constructed by this tool. The analysis shows how different discursive strategies employed to represent specific social actors contribute to reinforce the constitutive elements of the Chinese leadership's dominant narrative of the events of early 2020. Moreover, the paper argues that the section of *China Keywords* on the topic should be understood as one of the products of the multifaceted institutional efforts to "tell China's Covid-19 story well," both domestically and internationally.

KEY WORDS: Chinese political discourse; *China Keywords*; COVID-19; narrative; social actors representation; Critical Discourse Studies



INTRODUCTION

Since the official acknowledgement of the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, the political leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has extensively worked to shape, through institutional and media discourse, a specific narrative of its response to the crisis. As is the case for many other countries around the world, China's narrative on the subject was constructed within the discursive frame of conflict, and its response to the epidemic was portrayed as a "people's war" since the very beginning (Gallelli). This narrative, imbued with nationalist sentiments, has also focused on the promotion of "positive energies" (Xi, "tongchou") in public communication, as opposed to the dissemination of "negative" information, such as those related to mismanagement during the early phases of the COVID-19 outbreak. Since the first months of 2020, political and mainstream media discourse in China has thus largely emphasised the success of the strategies deployed for the containment of the virus (Yang and Chen 90). This approach has also been used to strongly reaffirm, as early as February 2020, "the remarkable advantages of the leadership of the CCP and the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics" in light of "the results of the work for prevention and control"¹ in the epidemic (Xi, "tongchou").

Considerable efforts were therefore very soon devoted to construct and spread a dominant "China's COVID-19 story" (Bandurski). Media products and institutional discourse produced since the early months of 2020 have been serving the function of building and spreading a narrative that emphasises the idea that all Chinese people, under the leadership of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), promptly came together in the fight against COVID-19, a fight that "will go down in history as a great victory for China and the world" (Bandurski). Another recurrent element in this narrative is that China's response to the epidemic can constitute an example of a "Chinese model of health protection" for the international community (Bandurski; Yang and Chen 90). One authoritative document that emphasises these elements is the white paper issued in June 2020 by State Council Information Office of the PRC (SCIO). Published only six months after the outbreak, this constitutes a source "on how China wishes the coronavirus epidemic to be understood and written into the history books" (Bandurski) and should be interpreted as part of the leadership's general approach to propaganda and international diplomacy, guided by the principle (introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013) of "telling China's story well" (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事) (Renminwang).

Other sources (e.g., Xinhua) show that, already by the spring of 2020, the events related to COVID-19 involving Wuhan, Hubei province and, more in general, China's response to the crisis had already been subject to a process of historicization, in that specific events and actors had been selected as representatives for what should be told and remembered. Interestingly, one of the sources performing this function is the multilingual online platform *Zhongguo guanjianci* 中国关键词, hereinafter *China Keywords*. As will be discussed in the paragraphs that follow, this is one of the outputs

¹ Original in Chinese.



of a project run by State and Party-affiliated institutions, whose objective is to explain the “essential expressions” used to describe contemporary China, through selected keywords and their respective definitions (Zhongguowang). On the online platform, the keywords are organised in thematic categories, one of which, added as early as March 2020, is centred on the PRC’s “fight against COVID-19.”

Since 2020, some studies have started to analyse the Chinese discourses surrounding the epidemic, from the perspective of both the general public and the political leadership (e.g., Liu and Liu; Zhao; Yang and Chen; Gallelli). With the aim to contribute to the research on how China’s story of the epidemic is being told in the contemporary institutional and media discourse of the PRC, the present paper examines the Chinese language version of the *China Keywords* section on COVID-19. The paper provides an analysis of the ways in which selected keywords and their definitions contribute to disseminate and consolidate the official narrative of China’s response to the epidemic crisis in early 2020. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the discursive representation of social actors (from the perspective of Critical Discourse Studies) included in the official narrative of the subject, highlighting the discursive strategies that, on the one hand, contribute to fostering an idea of success and prompt response on the part of the leadership, while on the other work to legitimise the role of the social actors selected as model representatives within this narrative.

ABOUT CHINA KEYWORDS

The *Zhongguo guanjianci* 中国关键词 project, or *China Keywords*, is defined as a multilanguage platform intended to provide the international community with a tool to interpret and explain keywords and expressions that describe the development, politics, and core cultural and ideological discourses of contemporary China (Zhongguowang). In addition to a book series, its main output is the online portal of *China Keywords*, which can be regarded as an online reference tool and, more precisely, as a multi-language glossary of specialised language, organised on the basis of thematic criteria.

The main actor behind the project is the China International Publishing Group (CIPG), an organisation founded in 1949, directly under the control of the Central Committee of the CCP. The project, launched in 2014, is also carried out by the China Academy of Translation and the Translators Association of China (respectively founded in 2014 and 1982 and both part of the CIPG), and the International Communication Research Centre. The online platform is hosted on the China.org.cn domain, the website of the China Internet Information Centre (also known as *Zhongguowang* 中国网), a state-run media outlet controlled by the SCIO and CIPG. According to the project description, it is addressed at political parties, politicians, think tanks, and research and media institutions all over the world, and should also be used as a reference tool for Chinese publicity organisations engaging in activities outside China, such as foreign affairs offices, consulates, and embassies (Zhongguowang). Therefore, it poses itself as



an authoritative guide for people and institutions to discuss and present, in different contexts and genres, matters that are deemed as essential for the discourse surrounding contemporary China, especially when outward communication is involved.

As of February 2022, 14 languages (other than Chinese, in which the keywords are originally drafted) are listed on the website; however, to date, not the whole content has been translated in all the languages. The writing of the original texts in Chinese and their translation were carried out by a committee composed of experts from relevant departments of the central government of the PRC and experts in translation, while foreign experts joined the review process of the translations (Zhongguowang). To date, the Chinese language version consists of 27 categories, each collecting different number of keywords.

This paper focuses on the section titled “*Kangji xin guan feiyan yiqing* 抗击新冠肺炎疫情,” or “Fight against the COVID-19 epidemic,” which currently lists 82 keywords (uploaded between early March and April 2020), covering a wide range of covid-related topics and events. As discussed in the paragraphs that follow, the keywords dealing with social actors constitute the primary object of analysis of this paper.

ON SELECTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF KEYWORDS

In the past decades, the concept of keywords, as defined by Raymond Williams in his 1976 seminal work, has acquired growing importance in the field of Cultural Studies. As he wrote in the famous preface of the book, Williams conceived keywords as “significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation” and “indicative words in certain forms of thoughts” (15). His definition rests on the idea that keywords are primarily defined by the significance they acquire in a historical, social, or political context. In turn, the “significance” of the collected words and expressions (that he saw as a category open for “amendments, corrections and additions”) is first and foremost “in the selection,” which, however, can often be arbitrary (14).

Williams’ work was translated and published in China in the mid-2000s, and, as observed by Mottura (“Keywords” 7), several books “revolving around the concept of keyword” were published in the PRC over the last fifteen years, some of which explicitly draw on Williams’ book and the tradition of Cultural Studies, while others, although employing the terminology and the concept of keywords (*guanjianci* 关键词), do not reference the scholarly background (Mottura, “Keywords” 8). Despite the obvious differences existing between Williams’ work and objectives and those of the *China Keywords* project, Williams’ idea that “the significance [...] is in the selection” (14) proves to be particularly useful in approaching this tool.²

As already pointed out, the content collected on *China Keywords* is the result of a process of selection carried out by Party-state institutions to explain to the international

² It should be noted that most of those that are referred to as “keywords” in the tool are not necessarily strictly “words” in syntactic terms, but also include multi-word expressions and sentences.



community words and expressions that are deemed as essential to understand contemporary China. In this perspective, the keywords on the fight against COVID-19 should be regarded as an authoritative reference for the correct and acceptable way of presenting the events of 2020. In other words, given the institutional nature of the project and the actors involved, the keywords analysed in this paper should be understood as a manifestation of the dominant Chinese political discourse on the country's response to the epidemic, adapted to the specific genre of an online reference tool, as is the *China Keywords* platform. In this respect, drawing on Mottura ("discursive creation"), it could be argued that this product constitutes a part of the genre repertoire (Devitt) of contemporary Chinese politics. This argument rests on the hypothesis that different, but connected genres concur (also by means of intertextuality, Reisigl and Wodak "Discourse-Historical") to building a discursive strategy that aims to disseminate and strengthen a specific narrative of the topic and behind which "one single ideal institutional author, the Party-state in its broadest sense" can be identified (Mottura, "discursive creation" 202, 209).³ Based on these premises, the analysis conducted in this paper also starts from the hypothesis that *China Keywords* constitutes one of the products of the efforts to "tell China's story well," with regards to the events related to COVID-19.

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on the theoretical framework and analytical tools from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Fairclough; Wodak; Reisigl and Wodak "Discourse-Historical") and, specifically, on the analysis of processes of social actors' representation within discourse. As with most of the research carried out in the field of CDS on this topic, the theoretical assumptions from which this paper starts are very much indebted to Theo Van Leeuwen's model of social actors' and actions representation.

Van Leeuwen proposed a complex system of categorisation (a "sociosemantic inventory") of the many possible ways in which actors within society can be referred to and represented in discourse. He started from two apparently simple questions: 1) "what are the ways in which social actors can be represented in English discourse?" and 2) "Which choices does the English language give us for referring to people?" (Van Leeuwen 32). Given that Van Leeuwen's categories were shaped on the English language, many difficulties arise when trying to employ them in the analysis of Chinese language texts. However, his approach provides a useful framework that can be adapted to texts⁴ in different languages. Therefore, this paper draws on Van Leeuwen's perspective on the possibilities that language offers to refer to and represent people (as individuals or groups) within discourse, taking it as a starting point to analyse the

³ Mottura's approach is informed by the Discourse-Historical Approach to CDS (Reisigl and Wodak, "Discourse-Historical").

⁴ i.e., "any piece of linguistic product," be it "verbal, visual or multimodal" (KhosraviNik 69).



representation of social actors within the discourse constructed by the Chinese version of the keywords on China's fight against COVID-19.

Research focusing on the analysis on the representation social actors has generally examined processes of definition of in-group and out-group identities and of inclusion and exclusions in discourse (e.g., Reisigl and Wodak "Discourse"; Wodak et al.; Baxter and Wallace). This paper addresses discursive processes of inclusion, that is, the representation of the social actors that have been selected (as keywords) to be an integral part of China's history of its early response to the pandemic. As pointed out by Koller, "social actors as a discursive analytical category are seen as the textual instantiations of models of the self and others, both individual and collective." Most of the social actors under scrutiny in this paper can thus be regarded as models of in-groups and as representatives of the dominant narrative of China's fight against COVID-19. Moreover, selected keywords that discuss the role of international actors (other countries, supranational institutions, foreign actors) are considered. Although not being a part of Chinese society, their inclusion in this discourse and the ways they are represented concur to frame them as part of a category of actors that support and legitimise China's actions in response to the epidemic, both domestically and internationally.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on a three-level analytical framework for textual analysis of the representation of social actors; it draws on the framework outlined by KhosraviNik, who suggests that this sort of analysis should address three domains: social actors, social actions, and argumentation. In this paper, this framework is adapted to the features of Chinese language and the object of analysis, and structured as follows: 1) Identification of the social actors mentioned in the texts (focus on inclusion), and how they are referred to (e.g., nomination, categorisation, etc.); 2) Identification of the actions attributed to the actors and how; 3) Identification of presence and qualities of argumentative strategies, i.e., a critical analysis of the arguments that are presented for certain social actors (KhosraviNik 65). Finally, given that discourse is understood as a "cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social actions" (Reisigl and Wodak "Discourse-Historical" 89), the descriptive analysis of discourse is combined with references to context. Specifically, the two levels of context considered in this paper are: the text-internal co-text and co-discourse, and the broader socio-political and historical context "which discursive practices are embedded in and related to" (Reisigl and Wodak, "Discourse-Historical" 93).

THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL ACTORS

As discussed above, to date, the section of *China Keywords* on the fight against COVID-19 collects 82 keywords, presenting a wide variety of terms which can be grouped as follows: a) medical and scientific terminology b) health information c) actions of prevention and control d) key places; e) slogans f) social actors. The paragraphs that follow provide an analysis of the keywords that in their title (i.e., the keyword itself)



explicitly mention specific social actors and the definitions of which are presented as a description of such actors; the social actors represented by the selected keywords form a part of those that, as groups or individuals, have been included in the narrative of China’s fight to COVID-19 constructed (or reinforced) by *China Keywords*. The choice to examine this specific topic is related to the prominence given—in the dominant political discourse, of which *China Keywords* is here regarded as a component—to the crucial role of different social actors in what has been defined as a “people’s war” to fight the virus.

The analysis focuses on three groups of social actors that have been identified and are referred to as follows: a) groups of Chinese society; b) model citizens; c) foreign actors. While a) and b) include keywords dealing with different actors that are presented as fully integrated members of Chinese society, c) collects a variety of keywords that address the relationship between China and the international community. However, as will be discussed below, the analysis shows that references to foreign actors are mostly employed to reinforce positive evaluation of the PRC’s response to the epidemic crisis, domestically and internationally.

GROUPS OF CHINESE SOCIETY

Among the keywords of the section analysed, 10 out of 82 are noun phrases that identify social groups that are part of Chinese society. These, listed in Table 1 with an English translation, all feature in the section on the fight against COVID-19 as separate keywords, each with their respective definition.

KEYWORDS	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
广大医务工作者	Medical workers
解放军指战员	PLA commanders and soldiers
社区工作者	Community workers
公安干警	Police officers
基层干部	Grassroot officials
下沉干部	Officials designated from higher levels
志愿者	Volunteers
患者群众	Patients
普通民众	Common citizens
汶川村民：自发支援武汉 100吨蔬菜	Wenchuan quake survivors: supporting Wuhan with a donation of 100 tons of vegetables

Table 1. Keywords about groups of Chinese society.

With regards to the first level of analysis, linguistically, the form in which these ten social actors appear in the keyword list (Table 1) (and, therefore, are included in the discourse on the pandemic) is the result of a process of categorisation, in that they are represented “in terms of identities and functions they share with others” (Van Leeuwen 52). Categorisation is here dependent on different identities and functions, as their



profession and/or the role the group members shared during the pandemic or, more generally, within society.

As pointed out above, the second level of analysis focuses on actions, and, specifically, on the actions (and their qualities) attributed to the social actors under scrutiny. As a first step, actions can be identified by looking at the verbs of which the selected actors feature as subjects in the definitions provided by *China Keywords*, and especially by looking at action verbs.⁵ One of the features of action verbs is that they commonly indicate what Yip and Rimmington (88) define as a “transient performance,” and are therefore commonly used to fulfil “more narrative or descriptive” functions, a feature which, in the case in point, acquires a specific significance. Based on these premises, the list that follows includes a selection⁶ of the action verbs that (with the exception of “Patients,” *huanzhe qunzhong* 患者群众)⁷ are found in the definitions of the keywords included in this group to describe or narrate their actions amid the epidemic: *qiuzhi* 救治 ‘to provide care’ (Medical workers); *chiyuan* 驰援 ‘to rush to the rescue’ (PLA commanders and soldiers); *shixing* 实行 ‘to carry out’ (Community workers); *zuozhan* 作战 ‘to fight’ (Police officers); *benzhou* 奔走 ‘to rush about’ (Grassroot officials); *shenru* 深入 ‘to penetrate deeply’ (Officials designated from higher levels); *xiezhu* 协助 ‘to aid’ (Volunteers); *peihe* 配合 ‘to coordinate’ (Common citizens); *daoda* 到达 ‘to reach’ (Wenchuan quake survivors). Though not an exhaustive list, these verbs constitute examples of how the representation (and discursive legitimation) of actors constructed by these definitions relies not only on what *they are*, but also largely on what they *did* in the context of early 2020, thus stressing the active involvement of these social groups in the fight against the virus.

This leads to the third level of analysis, that aims to investigating the arguments that are made in favour of the role of social actors and their actions and, therefore, the discursive strategies through which their role is legitimised within the narrative of China’s fight against COVID-19. One of the recurring features of the definitions under scrutiny is the framing of actions as prompt and effective and, not least, as being carried out in adherence to the political leadership’s directives. This is realised through the inclusion of different linguistic elements and discursive strategies. First, the excerpts included below (1-2) constitute examples of how the representation of the groups analysed is realised, among other things, by means of clauses or sentences in which the social actors feature as the grammatical subjects of action verbs that are modified by

⁵ Following Yip and Rimmington (88), ‘action verb’ is employed here “as a portmanteau term” that refers to “all the verbs in the language apart from non-action verbs such as 是 *shì* ‘to be’ and 有 *yǒu* ‘to have’ and verbs of emotion or cognition.”

⁶ Due to space constraints, only one verb for each keyword has been included in the list; therefore, it is not meant to be exhaustive, but to provide the reader with a general idea with regards to the semantic meanings of the verbs found in the definitions.

⁷ Given their status, COVID patients are represented in the definition as having a passive, rather than active role, mostly featuring as the recipients of medical care and actions performed by other social actors.



adverbs indicating manner or time (e.g., *xunsu* 迅速 'promptly', *di yi shijian* 第一时间 'immediately'), thus stressing swiftness and promptness:

1. 新冠疫情发生后，人民解放军[...] 迅速启动联防联控工作机制 [...] ⁸
After the outbreak of COVID-19, the PLA [...] promptly started the joint prevention and control mechanism [...]
2. [...] 全军一万余名医护人员火线驰援，全力投入抗疫一线救治，第一时间批量接收患者，第一时间进入隔离病区，第一时间诊治危重病人
[...] more than 10,000 medical workers from the PLA rushed to the front line of COVID-19 treatment, received patients, entered isolation areas, and treated critically ill patients immediately.

Adverbs also play a significant role, among other elements, in the description of the actors' sense of determination, resolution, and sacrifice. Examples 3-5 below provide instances of clauses and sentences in which the actors' determination and dedication to the common cause is linguistically reinforced by adverbs such as *yiran* 毅然 'resolutely' (3), *shizhong* 始终 'from beginning to end' (4), or *lianxu* 连续 'continuously' (5), which modify verbs that describe the actions undertaken by these actors:

3. 新冠肺炎疫情发生后，广大医务工作者毅然告别家人， [...]
After the outbreak of COVID-19, medical workers resolutely bid farewell to their families, [...]
4. 在抗击疫情的斗争中，社区工作者们克服了[...] 等各种困难，始终坚守着城市的第一道防线。
In the fight against the epidemic, community workers overcame various difficulties [...], and stick to the first line of defence of the city from beginning to end.
5. 他们不怕疲劳、连续作战，用生命护卫人民、维护安全。
Not afraid of fatigue, they fought continuously, protecting the people and safeguarding security with their own lives.

Another recurrent strategy employed in some of the definitions to present arguments in favour of these social actors is the explicit reference to the fact that their actions were carried out in accordance with the directives and indications of the political leadership. In this respect, actions are framed within the general strategy for the containment of the virus initiated and guided by the leadership (6-7):

6. 新冠疫情发生后，人民解放军坚决贯彻中共中央决策部署， [...]
After the outbreak of the epidemic, the PLA resolutely implemented the decisions and instructions of the CCP Central Committee, [...]
7. 新冠肺炎疫情发生以来，全国公安机关坚决贯彻落实习近平总书记重要指示精神和党中央决策部署 [...]

⁸ Due to space limits, only few examples could be included in the paragraphs. As a general criterion, examples that more effectively encapsulate the features and strategies discussed in each section were selected.



Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China's public security organs have resolutely implemented the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important directives and the decisions and instructions of the CCP Central Committee [...]

On the one hand, the inclusion of this kind of information contributes to framing these actors as members of the wide in-group of the Chinese people who contribute to the nation's common objective, promoted and guided by the political leadership. On the other, the discursive legitimisation of the role played by these social groups in the virus containment does not only emerge from the reference and the linguistically positive evaluation of their actions, but also from the fact that these were carried out in response to the leadership's call for action and in accordance with its directives, thus implying trust and obedience.⁹

A similar objective is also achieved through the inclusion in the texts of statements pronounced by Xi Jinping, that address these groups' roles and actions. It should be noted that, if compared to those described above, these sections do not necessarily make explicit reference to actions, in that positive evaluation relies more on the presentation of their qualities through Xi's words. In examples 8-9, the specific qualifications and characteristics attributed to these actors are presented by clauses with *shi* 是 'to be', of which actors feature as the grammatical subjects (e.g., *tamen shi* 他们是 'they are'; *yiwu rennyuan shi* 医务人员是 'medical workers are'); more precisely, these comments are explicitly attributed to Xi Jinping and presented as (indirect) quotations introduced by verbs of utterance (*qiangdiao* 强调 'to highlight'; *zhichu* 指出 'to point out') or by verbs and constructions expressing praise and approval (*chengzan* 称赞 'to praise'; *jiyu gaodu pingjia* 给予高度评价 'to value highly'):

8. 习近平在武汉考察时对奋战在一线的医务工作者给予高度评价，称赞他们是新时代最可爱的人，是光明的使者、希望的使者，是最美的天使，是真正的英雄！

During his inspection tour of Wuhan, Xi Jinping spoke highly of front-line medical workers, praising them as the loveliest people in the new era, as emissaries of light and hope, as the most beautiful angels and true heroes!

9. 他强调，医务人员是战胜疫情的中坚力量，务必高度重视对他们的保护、关心、爱护。

He [Xi Jinping] stressed that medical workers are the backbone of the fight against the epidemic. Therefore, we must value their protection, care, and love highly.

Being explicitly attributed to Xi Jinping, the positive evaluation of social actors that is realised as shown in examples 8 and 9 acquires an even greater significance, in

⁹ In terms of linguistic representational choices, examples 6-7 also show instances of inclusion of the political leadership through the name of key political institutions (e.g., *Zhonggong zhongyang* 中共中央 'The Central Committee of the CCP') or by mentioning Xi Jinping. In example 7, Xi is referred to through a form of titulated nomination (Van Leeuwen, 53), i.e., *Xi Jinping zong shuji* 习近平总书记 'General Secretary Xi Jinping', while in examples 8-9 he is mentioned by means of his full name (semi-formal nomination, Van Leeuwen 53) and the third person pronoun *ta* 他 'he'.



that their role and functions in the narrative are explicitly legitimised through the words of the country’s top political leader.

MODEL CITIZENS

Among the keywords on COVID-19, several include the full name of Chinese individuals who, for different reasons, were chosen to be representatives of the Chinese people’s actions in the fight against the virus. Each of these keywords focuses on one individual, emphasising the importance of his or her own contribution in the first months of 2020, and can therefore be regarded as keywords introducing the role “model citizens” in the discourse.

Based on their roles and the contents of their definitions, the keywords representing model citizens can be divided into two sub-groups: medical experts and non-experts (or common citizens) (Table 2). As discussed below, this distinction is relevant in terms of the different discursive strategies employed for their representation and the legitimisation, through the definitions, of their role in China’s story of the early response to the emergence of COVID-19.

KEYWORDS	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<i>Medical experts</i>	
朱国超：至亲感染却冲在战“疫”最前线	Zhu Guochao: battling on the front line of the epidemic while her family members were infected
李兰娟：国家传染病重点学科带头人	Li Lanjuan: national pioneer of epidemiology
钟南山：新冠肺炎疫情科研攻关专家组组长	Zhong Nanshan: Head of China's COVID-19 expert team
张继先：疫情上报“第一人”	Zhang Jixian: the first person to report the epidemic
刘智明：因患新冠肺炎不幸殉职的武昌医院院长	Liu Zhiming: Wuchang Hospital Chief who died of COVID-19
<i>Non-experts</i>	
袁传伟：一个人扛起整条生产线	Yuan Chuanwei: carrying the whole production line alone
武汉快递小哥汪勇：组织志愿者接送医护人员	Wuhan courier Wang Yong: organising volunteers to pick up medical staff
英雄机长刘传健：主动请缨运送医护人员和相关物资	Hero captain Liu Chuanjian: volunteering to transport medical staff and supplies

Table 2. Keywords about model citizens.

While the keywords introducing the social groups within Chinese society were based on categorisation, those introducing model citizens resort to semi-formal nomination (which is commonly realised by proper nouns, Van Leeuwen 53) as the main representational choice. However, as shown in Table 2, these keywords also typically include a short comment (realised through a sentence, a clause or phrase) that very



succinctly informs the reader about the reasons that make them worthy of being included among the notable agents of the nation's response to the epidemic crisis. Specifically, the eight keywords of this group provide the actor's surname-name, followed by a short comment (introduced by a semicolon) that summarises representative actions or functions carried out amid the epidemic; in two of these keywords, the actors' names are preceded by modifiers that further characterises them (i.e., *Wuhan kuaidi xiaoge* 武汉快递小哥 'Wuhan Courier'; *yingxiong jizhang* 英雄机长 'Hero captain').

Elements that have been discussed above with regards to the keywords representing groups of Chinese society can also be found in the definitions associated with 'model citizens'. For instance, these individual actors feature as subjects of verbs that describe and/or narrate their actions and highlight their mobilisation and active engagement in the national response to the epidemic; moreover, considerable emphasis is again placed on their prompt response and actions, as well as on their dedication and sacrifices. However, the most distinctive features of the representation of these actors pertain to the third level of analysis, which focuses on the arguments that are presented in their favour and on the positive representation of two the sub-groups of 'model citizens' through different discursive strategies.

First, the legitimisation of the role of experts is constructed, among other things, upon elements that are not directly related to the events of 2020, a choice that contributes to building their image as authoritative members within their professional community and fields of action. The extract provided in 10 shows that the construction of the authority of these experts first relies on references to professional qualifications or to previous experiences in the management of health emergencies (such as the 2003 SARS epidemic), or even a combination of these two. It should also be noted that information of this kind typically occurs in the first part of the definitions, thus establishing authoritativeness, and preparing the reader to the narration of the events relating to COVID-19. The definition introducing Dr. Zhang Jixian (10) constitute an effective example of this discursive choice:

10. 张继先，湖北省中西医结合医院呼吸与重症医学科主任，在非典疫情防治期间曾担任武汉市江汉区专家组成员。

Zhang Jixian is director of the Respiratory and Intensive Care Unit of Hubei Provincial Hospital of Integrated Chinese and Western Medicine. She was a member of the Expert Group of Jiangnan District of Wuhan during the phase of prevention and treatment of the SARS epidemic.

Given the lack of professional expertise and qualifications in the medical and scientific fields, the representation of the non-expert model citizens relies on other elements. For instance, an interesting strategy that occurs in the definitions of all the keywords focusing on 'non experts' is the inclusion of a direct (or presented as such) quotation of words they pronounced in commenting on the actions carried out amidst the pandemic (11-12):



11. [...]他说：“辛苦总比疫情夺去人的生命要好。”

He [Yuan Chuanwei] said “Hard work is better than having lives taken away by the epidemic.”

12. 他说：“我是一个没有资源的人，一路走来，特别感谢参与的志愿者和企业的帮助。大家都在努力，我只是一个组织的人。”

He [Wang Yong] said, “I am a person without resources. On this path, I am especially grateful to the volunteers and companies for their help. Everybody is working hard; I am just one part of a group”

These quotes perform the function of effectively proving, through simple language, their dedication to the cause and personal sacrifice in the fight against COVID-19. Also contributing to this objective is the modesty that transpires from the words that were selected to be included in the definitions.

The representation of model citizens within China’s fight against COVID-19 proves to rely on discursive strategies that also tend to highlight the contribution—small or big—of individuals to the common project, guided by the political leadership, but carried out by all the Chinese citizens, from officials and medical workers to common people finding their way of being actively helpful. In this respect, the emphasis on qualities such as sense of devotion, self-sacrifice, selflessness, and altruism shows to be consistent with the CCP’s long-standing tradition of eulogizing selected individuals as national role models and heroes (Zhou and Xie 3).

FOREIGN ACTORS

The two previous paragraphs discussed the discursive representation of social actors that belonged to Chinese society. This paragraph focuses on keywords addressing foreign actors, such as other countries or regions, the WHO, individuals, as well as the ‘international community’ in its broad sense (Table 3).

<i>KEYWORDS</i>	<i>ENGLISH TRANSLATION</i>
韩国：向 12 城市捐赠物资	The Republic of Korea: donating goods to 12 Chinese cities
日本：山川异域，风月同天	Japan: divided by mountains and rivers, but under the same sky
新加坡：拒绝歧视与仇华	Singapore: rejecting discrimination and Sinophobia
科摩罗：千里送鹅毛，礼轻情意重	Comoros: it’s the thought that counts
巴铁信任值千金	The trust in Sino-Pakistani friendship is worth more than gold
盖茨夫妇：用慈善拯救世界	Mr. and Ms. Gates: saving the world with charity
世界卫生组织专家组赴武汉考察	Group of WHO experts inspecting Wuhan
世界卫生组织大力支持和帮助	Strong support and aid from the WHO
国际社会积极合作与援助	Active cooperation and aid from the international community

Table 3. Keywords about foreign actors.

Different representational choices can be identified in the keywords listed in Table 3, which form a more heterogenous than the two analysed above. Countries (The Republic of Korea, Japan, Singapore, Comoros) are referred to in the keyword as



collective entities, by employing their common name, which (similarly to some of the keywords portraying 'model citizens') is followed by a comment that more or less explicitly summarises information relevant to this discourse and the narrative it constructs, while Pakistan is mentioned with regards to the friendship between the two countries. 'The WHO' (*Shijie weisheng zuzhi* 世界卫生组织) and the 'international community' (*guoji shehui* 国际社会) are also referred to as collective entities, while the 'Group of WHO experts' (*Shijie weisheng zuzhi zhuanjia zu* 世界卫生组织专家组) is categorised. Finally, Bill and Melinda Gates are nominated by means of a formal nomination (their surname in Chinese), followed by the reference to their status as 'husband and wife' (*fufu* 夫妇, i.e. 'The Gates') and a comment encapsulating their positive actions.

Despite the heterogeneity of this third groups, some common traits can be identified in their definitions. The lexicon employed in the definitions contributes to represent foreign actors within a frame that places emphasis on three main elements: a) actions and gestures of support towards China; b) global cooperation; c) praise of the PRC's response to the pandemic.

First, foreign actors¹⁰ appear as the agents of actions of support towards China, including both material (donations) and symbolic gestures (performed by institutional figures or citizens). Secondly, ideas of mutual support, help and cooperation are conveyed, among others, by the presence in the definitions of verbs that communicate meanings of support and cooperation, as *zhichi* 支持 'to support', *tigong* 提供 'to provide' and *bangzhu* 帮助 'to help' or *ganxie* 感谢 'to thank'.¹¹

On the discursive level, the positive representation of these foreign actors is thus strictly connected to their relationship with the PRC within the context (though not exclusively) of the emergence of the epidemic outbreak, a relationship portrayed as being based on forms of mutual support and harmonious cooperation. Such considerable emphasis on global cooperation shows to be consistent with the PRC's discourse on the importance of cooperation with other countries and multilateral institutions against COVID-19 (Xi, "Tuanjie"). This discourse should, in turn, be understood as part of China's "longstanding diplomatic discourse on globalism," exemplified by formulas commonly employed in the leadership's contemporary political and diplomatic discourse, the most widely known being "*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体" 'Community with a shared future for mankind' (Yang and Chen 90; Xi, "Gongtong").

¹⁰ In the definitions, foreign actors are included in several different forms, among which feature the country as a collective entity (e.g. Hanguo 韩国 'The Republic of Korea') or representatives of political and government institutions (e.g., *Xinjiapo zongli Li Xianlong* 新加坡总理李显龙 'Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long'), institutions or the citizens.

¹¹ Although based on a very small corpus, their presence in the definitions can also be regarded as relevant in quantitative terms, in that these verbs feature among the first 20 elements in the Wordlist (of verbs only) generated by the software Sketch Engine (www.sketchengine.eu) which is based on frequency.



Finally, the definitions stress positive evaluation not only towards the actions performed by the selected foreign actors (i.e., to support China), but also towards China's actions in facing the epidemic:

13. 李显龙还特别称赞道，中国正尽全力、倾全力地控制疫情扩散，包括取消所有出境旅游团，安排专机把那些在海外的湖北人接回国，中国做的是负责任的事情。

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also commended China for doing everything in its power to control the spread of the virus, including cancelling all outbound tour groups and arranging special flights to bring back people from Hubei, and said that what China is responsible.

14. 世界卫生组织积极评价并充分肯定中国抗击疫情的努力，总干事谭德塞表示，中方行动之快、规模之大，世所罕见；这是中国制度的优势，有关经验值得其他国家借鉴；

The WHO has spoken positively of and fully affirmed China's efforts in fighting the epidemic. Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that the speed and scale of China's actions are rarely seen in the world. This is the strength of the Chinese system, and its experience is worth learning from.

Specifically, examples 13-14 show that positive evaluation towards China's actions focuses on qualities and elements such as the country's swiftness in handling the situation domestically and in sharing information and cooperating with the WHO and the international community. Moreover, 13 and 14 constitute effective examples of the ways the expression of positive evaluation of China's conduct is attributed to other, foreign actors, who are included in the text by employing the name of the organisation or by nominating individuals by means of their full name and/or their relevant institutional title.

A TOOL TO "TELL CHINA'S COVID-19 STORY WELL"

The present paper has addressed the topic of how different social actors are represented in a dominant discourse by means of references to their actions and their qualities. This approach has been employed to examine the discursive representation of selected social actors that are given prominence to among the keywords on the fight against COVID-19. The analysis has shown that processes of inclusion of specific actors in the discourse rely on different discursive strategies, which often differ based on the features of the actor represented.

However, several common elements have also been identified, especially with regards to the function performed by the different strategies put in play. Specifically, the strategies employed in the discourse of *China Keywords* concur to the reinforcement of two main discourse topics: first, the unity of the Chinese people, who faced with the crisis, have responded promptly with unremitting efforts and adherence to the leadership's directives; second, the unquestionable leadership of the Party-state and its positive role in the process, in that its actions are consistently described as timely and effective, both with regards to the relationship with citizens and the international community.



Although the level of intertextuality has not been addressed systematically in the analysis, with regards to the entries analysed in this paper, the prominence given to these specific topics in the discourse constructed by *China Keywords* shows to be consistent with the general narrative of the fight against COVID-19, promoted since the early months 2020 through institutional and media discourse in the PRC (e.g., Zhou and Xie; Fedtke, Ibahrine, Wang; Yang and Chen). Faced with threats to its authority and credibility brought by the epidemic and accusations about its handling in the early stages, the Chinese leadership has devoted sustained effort into shaping a dominant and 'correct' narrative of the events. The strategies for the representation of social actors discussed in this paper thus constitute an interesting output of the efforts that the Chinese leadership has put in place on the discursive level since the first months of 2020. Moreover, as shown throughout the analysis, the unity of the Chinese people, the leadership of the Party-state and its positioning in the international community appear to emerge as prominent *topoi* of this narrative, and appear to be related to the paramount objectives of both domestic legitimisation and "international branding" amid the pandemic (Wen 59).

Also based on these considerations, the *China Keywords* multilingual reference tool should therefore be understood both as one of the many different genres that concur to building and reinforce the specific dominant narrative of the topic promoted by the Party-state and as a source produced to be used as a reference for "telling China's Covid-19 story well," both domestically and internationally.

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Chiara Bertulesi is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Chinese Studies at the University of Milan. She holds a PhD from the University of Milan, obtained with a thesis on the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (*Xiandai hanyu cidian* 现代汉语词典) from the perspective of critical lexicography. Her main research interests include Chinese lexicography and lexicology, the critical analysis of lexicographical discourse and Critical Discourse Studies applied to the analysis of contemporary Chinese political discourse.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9966-1751>

chiara.bertulesi@unimi.it