



## **“We Are Together”**

### **Cultural trauma and discourse of collectivism in Chinese video representation of the Covid-19 epidemic**

MSc in Media and Communication

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## **Abstract**

This thesis has two aims. One is to situate COVID-19 in a macro narrative that characterizes our time as a risk society or reflexive modernization. The other is to bring public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic into the sharp focus of cultural trauma study which is closely related to media representations. The research scope is set in media and communication studies. Through the theoretical lens of risk society, ontological insecurity and cultural trauma, the thesis explores whether there exists a universal discourse in Chinese mainstream media responding to social risks like the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, China. The qualitative textual analysis shows there is a general discourse schema hidden in the video representation of COVID-19 in China which can be characterized as “a three-step collectivism”. The first step is to depict the epidemic in Wuhan as a war-like situation that causes a lot of pains and sufferings to Wuhan people. Next, to contain the epidemic and to reply to the cultural trauma, people of all trades in Chinese society are represented as mobilized by the government and CPC to help a part in small ways. Finally, the videos claim with the strength of unity the epidemic is successfully contained and life in Wuhan is back to normal.

To articulate the significance of the containment and the greatness of CPC and the government who led the containment, military metaphors are frequently used in this process to highlight the terror of the disease. The metaphorical thinking suggesting all Chinese citizens are involved in this war justifies the intervention of the CPC in this epidemic. Meanwhile the epidemic is shaped as a cultural trauma overall, where a disruption of daily lives that causes ontological insecurity is defined as the nature of the pain. Medical workers and mass media who narrate the “darkest time” play the role of carrier groups in the trauma drama. And the responsibility of the pains is attributed to the virus and those who discount the disease. In the end, the thesis discusses whether the discourse of collectivism can truly enhance social solidarity or on the contrary, lead to polarization. It contributes to COVID-19 study and cultural trauma scholarship by providing a local perspective of discursive construction of a public health emergency in Chinese context.

**Keywords:** risk society, ontological insecurity, cultural trauma, collectivism, COVID-19

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## Introduction

In December, 2019, a novel coronavirus disease, which was later named by the World Health Organization (WHO) as COVID-19, was identified in a Chinese city, Wuhan. At the time the infectious disease has not evolved into a pandemic, and Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province, was the epic center first and severely struck by the disease. In January, 2020, when the situation in Wuhan continued deteriorating and more cases reported outside of the city in China, a special order was issued to Wuhan by Chinese president, Xi Jinping. Following the order, from January 23rd, 2020, the city of Wuhan went into a lockdown with all public transportations suspended and gateways closed, and residents mandated to stay at home. The lockdown lasted for 76 days until April 8<sup>th</sup> when no more new case of the infected were reported in Hubei Province. During the course more than 50,000 people in total are reported infected in Wuhan, of which 2572 lost their lives<sup>1</sup> (NHCPRC, 2020-04-08).

This period from December 2019 to early April, without official declaration, though, is generally regarded as the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, which has been extensively represented in video works produced by Chinese mainstream media. As the vast majority in China could not experience the epidemic in Wuhan by themselves, their knowledge of the lockdown in Wuhan is mainly learnt through media representation. Although it seems too early to judge how COVID-19 is represented while the pandemic is still ongoing, the first wave of the epidemic in Wuhan can be treated as a relatively micro case for exploration of how mass media in China deal with risks or crises, like COVID-19, that have emerged much more often in recent decades than previous eras of human history (Beck,1992).

Media representation is one of the crucial links of human society responding to the aftermath of major social tragic events (Eyerman, 2020). In a sense this could be a serious matter as to answer the famous less cultural question – “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living” (Adorno, 1961), yet this thesis focuses more on how mass media can insert certain values and ideas in producing the “truth” of the event or social reality. As is often the case, the

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<sup>1</sup> The statistics is extracted from official website of National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China (NHCPRC), Available at: <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/yjb/s7860/202004/5e2b6f0bd47d48559582242e3878447d.shtml> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

representation by media is never an objective reflection of social practices but a process of discursive construction of social reality with different interpretations compete and conflate with each other, and always entangled with the constraints, affordances and power-relations attached to media as infrastructures for communication (Hall, 1997; Couldry and Hepp, 2017:7).

The question of power has always been placed in the center of this case study, and this raises requirement of further elaboration of the background knowledge of Chinese political regime and media system. To put it briefly, People's Republic of China is a socialist state mainly run by two sets of leaderships – the Chinese government and the Communist party of China (CPC)<sup>2</sup>. The former is the state administrative organization which takes charge of all sorts of administrative matters, the containment of the epidemic included. The latter is the ruling party in China which claims to represent the interests of the working class and the Chinese nation. Under special circumstances such as the COVID-19, the two sets can conflate as a general leadership, as many government officers in China are also members of the CPC.

Against this political context, Chinese media can be also roughly divided into three different components, one works as the official organs of the CPC, namely official party-owned media institutions; another consists of market-oriented commercial media agencies which are both funded and managed by private capitals; and the third is a hybrid which is administratively dominated by the CPC but independently run by private capitals (Gao and Zhao, 1999). All three parts are demanded to obey the laws and regulations in China. Whereas the Chinese Constitution<sup>3</sup> (*Xinhua*, 2018-03-22) states all citizens of China enjoy freedom of speech and the press, and the state promotes the development of all forms of media including the press, the television broadcasting, publishing and distribution services, in social practice, individual expressions can be easily suppressed on the pretext of maintaining public order (Winfield, Mizuno and Beaudoin, 2000).

It is based on such sociopolitical contextual understanding that the case study is conducted. Particular emphasis is given to the discursive construction of the social reality instead of

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<sup>2</sup> Judicial system in China such as People's Court and People's Procuratorate is independent from Chinese government and CPC, but they are not directly involved in this epidemic and thus, are not discussed in this case study..

<sup>3</sup> Link: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/22/c\\_1122572202.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/22/c_1122572202.htm) (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

aesthetics. As is often discursively represented in China as a collectivistic society, major social disasters such as the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008, tend to be thematized as a great challenge for the Chinese nation. Combined with a construction of cultural trauma by mass media that characterizes the occurrence of a horrendous event leaving gashes upon the core of collective identity, and attribution of the responsibility, the thematization may possibly lead to reconstructions of Chinese collective identity, either expanding the circle of the “we”, or to the opposite, intensifying social division (Alexander and Breese, 2011).

Previous cultural trauma studies in media research scope have seldom paid attention to the trauma potentials in public health emergencies. Meanwhile current literature on COVID-19 disease has been mostly accumulated in the clinical, epidemiological or information technological fields. In sociocultural academia most articles are simply general descriptions or quantitative analysis of the pandemic that treat the COVID-19 as a total social fact. Few empirical qualitative studies have been conducted to scrutinize media representation particularly from the perspective of discourse analysis. This thesis attempts to take both sides into consideration, for one thing, to fill the blank and remedy the scarcity of cultural trauma studies on infectious disease, and for another, to examine whether there exist a universal discourse of togetherness or collectivism in Chinese media representation of COVID-19.

The aims of the thesis are first, to situate COVID-19 in a macro narrative that characterizes our time as a risk society or reflexive modernization, and second, to bring public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic into the sharp focus of cultural trauma study which is closely related to media representations. With the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan treated as a case, the present thesis primarily explores whether and how the COVID-19 epidemic is constructed as a cultural trauma through video representations by Chinese media, and then relates the process to the broader discourse of collectivism in China, and finally discusses the latent consequences of such construction. The research questions are boiled down as follows:

1. How is the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan discursively represented as both a social crisis and a cultural crisis?
2. How does the ideological attachment of collectivism (togetherness) shape the

representations?

3. In what ways can the discourse of togetherness contribute to expanding or shrinking the boundaries of imagined social community?



## **Literature Review**

This review is composed of four parts. It starts with a general description of the existing circumstances of human society in historical modernization process in the view of risk society theory, which is reflected in the case of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Then, to understand the meanings of the widespread insecure and anxious feelings generating from modernization as well as its consequences at the sociocultural level, the second part introduces cultural trauma theory that takes growing interests in non-traditional security problems and scrutinizes the relation between the representation of shocking incidents-where the mass media plays an important part-and the construction of collective memory and identity. As cultural trauma often points to enhancing social solidarity, successively, there follows a brief retrospection of the notion of collectivism in the third part which thematically emerges in the discourses of Chinese media representing the first wave of COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, China. The discussion is accompanied by a reference to the individualization in reflexive modernization. Finally, the chapter comes to an end with a critical review of the recent literatures on media representation of illness and disease that brings the COVID-19 pandemic to the center of the discussion.

### **Risk society and COVID-19**

The past few decades have seen a growing number of scholars from social science notice a drastic shift in the trajectory of historical development of modernity. Whether termed as “second modernity” (Beck, 1992), “high/late modernity” (Giddens, 1991) or “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000), a new form of modernization manifested in all dimensions of human society have been characterized by social philosophers with emphases upon risks and security, and individuality and community. Such a modernization is conceptualized as “reflexive modernization” by Beck (1992). It refers to a stage where pre-modern organizational mode and functional principles of human society being increasingly challenged and questioned because the technological and economic development of our society has brought human beings not only gains or “advancement” but intractable risks as well.

By way of definition, risks refer to “a systematical way of dealing with hazards and

insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself' (ibid:21). They are the side effects of techno-economic progress of industrialization and globalization. There is an inevitable contradiction, as contemporary world suggests, between the objectification and naturalization of legal institutions that sustain the normal functioning of our society, and human indeterminacy that manifests itself in an increasing number of great disasters and tragic events in the past few decades (ibid).

Take the nuclear disaster in Fukushima for example. In 2011 after a massive earthquake struck off the coast of east Japan and triggered a tsunami, the nuclear power plant established by Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO) in Fukushima got severely hit. Three reactors went into meltdown and a series of explosion went off with a release of radioactive contamination. To prevent the situation from getting worse, TEPCO had to use water to cool down the reactors, which in turn have produced more than one million tons of radioactive wastewater being kept at the site (*BBC*<sup>4</sup>, 2018-03-11). Ten years after the leakage, in 2021, however, the Japanese government has announced they cannot keep the wastewater anymore as there are no more land for TEPCO to place the reservoirs. As a result, the government has decided to release the treated water into the Pacific Ocean when some scientists claim the potential risk of doing so to human and animal health can be low, and others believe the radioactive element that cannot be purified in water will probably damage human DNA (*BBC*<sup>5</sup>, 2021-03-10). This case shows how risks induced by nuclear energy technology and managed by institutions have potentials to cause disasters that last for generations beyond human determination.

Giddens (1991; 1994) agrees with the theory that describes modernity as a risk culture. He also accentuates that high or late modernity must be understood on an institutional level. According to Giddens (1991: 2-3), it is not that pre-modern society is inherently free of risks or less risky than today, (even though he acknowledges that modernity introduces many risks that previous eras have never faced), but the institutional reflexivity of modernity, together with the reorganization of time and space and expansion of disembedding mechanisms reshapes the way we see and handle risks:

the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the way both lay actors and technical

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-43078960> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56252695> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

specialists organize the social world. Under conditions of modernity, the future is continually drawn into the present by means of the reflexive organization of knowledge environments (ibid:3).

In risk society where traditional authorities are replaced by institutional expert system, an idealistic vision is that human society can assess and manage the risks that may occur in the future with aid of modern science and knowledge. However, the reflexive core of modernity has made expert knowledge itself to be unreliable and questionable (ibid: 21). Expertise can be problematic, as it is constantly shifting and developing and seldom reach absolute consensus within. Besides, what the future signifies are imponderables. There are risks which we humans need to confront, such as nuclear leak, but for now can do little about (Giddens, 1991, Beck, 1994). To sum up, people today are living within an unsettling risk climate of uncertainty about future that no one can virtually escapes from. In such circumstances trust has become more crucial an issue, which is interwoven with the concept of ontological (in)security.

### ***Ontological (in)security***

Laing (1965:39-42) defines ontological security as a stable sense of being of individuals who can assure themselves of their existential position. When such an assurance is unavailable, one may experience anxieties and dangers, their identity and autonomy being in question, and hence, achieves a condition of ontological insecurity. From Laing's psychoanalytic perspective, individuals who are in ontological insecure state cannot go on their lives as they are constantly facing existentially threatening problems. Giddens (1991) brought Laing's insights to sociological discussion and connect ontological security with the notion of trust. Simply put, Giddens believes that those taken-for-granted routines and conventional social narratives embedded in human society are the fundamental elements that provide people with sense of continuity of life, essential to individuals' self-identity constitution and personality development (ibid: 36-42). As human beings we learn how to trust the surrounding object-world in our infancy through early interaction with our caretakers, the maintenance of routines and conventions also build the "protective cocoon" (ibid: 129) we can trust to screen off existential anxieties, gain a sense of security, and keep our lives going.

While Giddens did not in detail discuss ontological (in)security in sociopolitical context,

scholars from critical security studies have borrowed and developed the pair of concepts to explain the underlying motivation of some collectivities making choices for their own interests. For example, Steele (2008) infers from Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that the reason Britain adopted a neutral attitude towards American Civil War instead of meddling in could be at that time British people were in need of ontological security to keep a stable sense of identity. Ontological (in)security has also been used to explain why some parties "enjoy" being attached to social conflicts as conflicts help generate narratives concerned with existential anxieties and ontological insecurity (Rumelili, 2015). It is easier for institutional power to tell friends and enemies apart and set moral standards for societies when members of collectivity feel ontologically insecure and desperately seek for opportunities to survive (Mitzen, 2006). In this sense, ontological insecurity is not inevitably a natural emotional response. It can be intentionally used by political actors to manipulate the production of distrust, which in consequence, however, may hamper normal peace processes (Rumelili, 2015; Lupovici, 2012).

Currently the greatest controversy in ontological (in)security studies is that whether this concept can be applied to study corporate actors, such as national states. Krolikowski (2008), for instance, argues that ontological (in)security should be understood only at the social level, focusing on the intersubjectivity of individuals. Other scholars, like Rossdale (2015), criticizes the academic atmosphere that overemphasizes subjectivity and ontological security-seeking behavior in security studies which limits the scope of critical analysis of political and social framework. Although Rossdale's intention is to revitalize security studies by bringing other theories and epistemology into the center discussion of political action, which gives little ground for blame, ontological (in)security is not only about individuals' aspirations of continuity and stability of self as he suggests. The way that Giddens links ontological security with high modernity implies considerations of individual socialization and human society being a whole (Croft, 2012). Rumilili (2015) finds ontological (in)security may also play a positive role in creating the necessities and potentials for change. In addition, this thesis will prove just being frequently referred to by scholars does not mean ontological (in)security as an academic concept has lost its values in today's dynamic sociopolitical and sociocultural spheres. Today's human society are still facing multifarious risks, of which one of the most

vivid examples is perhaps the ongoing COVID-19.

### ***COVID-19***

The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic embodies risk society theory in many aspects. It illustrates how techno-economic development as an outcome of the progress of human civilization can in the meantime, unexpectedly introduce risks that threaten our basic existence (Beck, 1989). Quite a few social scholars have realized the rapid spread of COVID-19 has proved the limitation and vulnerability of today's global human society. As humans we are subject to the byproducts of industrialization and globalization-the risks of interdependence and interconnectivity (Constantinou, 2020).

In such a public health emergency where literally no one can avoid being involved, the status of expert system in our society, as Beck and Giddens (1994) suggest, has been highlighted. Expert dependence has been manifested in governments and lay people relying on epidemiologists, virologists, and other medical specialists to make decisions, contain the spread of the virus, and find solutions (Nygren and Olofsson, 2020; Constantinou, 2020). This creates a symbolic power relation between medical experts and lay people as the latter are not equipped with the knowledge as the former to cognize the virus (Constantinou, 2020). Nevertheless, even the expert system itself lacks pre-established mechanism and sufficient capability to tackle the virus in the beginning of the pandemic and most of the coping responsibility around the world has been assigned to individuals who are advised or ordered to work or study at home, wash hands, use disinfectant, or wear masks (Nygren and Olofsson, 2020; Constantinou, 2020).

What emerges from the mitigation strategies is a "new normal" that free movement and social activities are restricted, and people are encouraged to stay the maximum physical immobility (Freudental-Pedersen and Kesselring, 2020). This means previously taken-for-granted daily routines such as taking public transportation and meeting friends in public spheres now have become much less available. The great disruption of lifetimes, as far as we can see, has led to intensified inequalities in our society. Evidence suggests women, ethnic minority groups, and people from lower socioeconomic classes are more likely to be negatively affected by the pandemic than others (Rollston and Galea, 2020). Worse still, even under the condition of

lockdown or quarantine overall, millions of people still lost their lives and until today the entire human race is still shadowed by the threats and side effects of the disease (Demertizis and Eyerman, 2020). The illusion of the invulnerability of modern science is shattered.

All these factors mentioned above will probably result in what Giddens describes as ontologically insecure experience with feelings of stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions of individuals (Zhukova, 2016). It damages the ontological reference points people need to continue their day-to-day life (Giddens, 1992). However, from another perspective, it also creates the space for new social narratives being constructed and changes being made.

### **Cultural trauma: theory and practice**

Zhukova (2016) argues ontological insecurity can evolve into a cultural trauma when a moral framework that attributes the responsibility for the cause of tragic events is established. According to Alexander, cultural trauma is an occurrence

when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (2004a:1).

The strong definition highlights collectiveness – one of the most important attributions of cultural trauma. Alexander (2004a) claims that trauma is not an aggregation of massive suffering of many individuals. To emerge as cultural trauma, social crises must become cultural crises with an acute discomfort impacting the core of the collectivity's sense of its identity. Through the process of sharing such crises, the circle of the "we" may be expanded. He and Breese (2011) also add that individual sufferings are separate from collective representation, as many historical events, however tragic they were, did not become cultural trauma because they disaccord with the mainstream narratives of collective identity and therefore, have the potential to detriment the unity and coherence of national societies.

Constructiveness is another distinct element repeatedly stressed by cultural trauma theorists. Smelser says cultural traumas "are made, not born" (2004b: 37). That collective suffering is established and mediated through symbolic representation is the ground base of cultural trauma theory (Alexander and Breese et al., 2011). To put it in another way, cultural trauma is not reflections of actual tragic events but simply symbolic renderings. This constructivist

approach is partly objected by Eyerman (2019; 2020), who acknowledges discursive processes of meaning-making being an essential part of cultural trauma theory, but considers the realistic ground in which cultural trauma can grow as well. Eyerman employs “trauma potential” to describe the shocking incidents that have power to disrupt normal social order and threaten the established collective identity and argues cultural trauma often stem from such incidents (2020:680). This middle position threading constructivism and realism together to some extent enriches cultural trauma theory.

What matters most in cultural trauma study is to understand the processes in which individual suffering is transformed into collective trauma (Alexander, 2004a). This cultural work entails the carrier groups, namely people who speak of trauma, persuasively projecting trauma claim to its audience, reinforcing the strong emotional bonds between the public and the actual victims. In this trauma process four questions must be answered through the collective representation: the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the victim and the wider audience, and the attributions of responsibility (ibid: 13-15). While the meaning-making process is not necessarily rational, it is always intentional. The carrier groups who tie their interests to social narratives about who did what to whom can decide the constitution of traumatic meanings and hence, are always central (Alexander and Breese et al., 2011). In this course of articulation and designation is the mass media playing a leading role (Eyerman, 2002).

### ***Cultural trauma and the mass media***

Li and Huang (2017) identify two aspects linking mass media to cultural trauma: capacity of framing, and capacity of interpretation and representation. In their case study of the Nanjing Massacre, one of the most recurring themes in narratives of the anti-Japanese war in China, the two scholars explore how the historical event has been memorized by Chinese people and even the global audience through media practice. Drawn from their conclusion, news reports contribute to the establishment of trauma events and news media can attach contemporary relevance to these events by means of using current affairs as pretexts to rake up the past. Besides, memorial reports are rather important in sustaining or reproducing cultural trauma and shaping collective memory (ibid: 263-264).

In spite that social media prevails today, the vast majority remains receiving messages of shocking incidents first through the mass media (Eyerman, 2020). Television, radio, and print media, together with their electronic version, provide the initial structures of chaotic incidents, which determines the temporal structures and designation of cultural trauma, what voices being heard and others filtered (Eyerman, 2020). Mediated mass communication also allows these incidents to be expressively dramatized and competitively performed with multimedia technology under the scope of systemized media norms or regulations (Alexander, 2004a). Notably, different narratives can coexist, but which narrative wins out is “a matter of power and resources and the demographics of the audiences who are listening” (Alexander and Breese, 2011: XII).

The representation of cultural trauma by mass media is directly related to the construction of collective memories and identities. With the aid of memorial signs such as texts, images, symbols, and through narrative and discourse, institutions and larger social groups, such as nations, can build a memory shared by their members and circumscribe the boundaries of the reformed collective (Assmann, 2008). The aim of building such trauma drama, as Giesen (2004c) suggests, is to unify a nation or community through time as well as space by providing individuals and societies with a temporal map, making the past serve the present. It is surely a great accomplishment if there are dominant trauma narratives which can stabilize the sense of social reality and point the future directions for the community, yet in the real scenario, trauma dramas can lead to polarization instead of reconciliation sometimes, resulting in conflict and traumatic injury at graver level (Alexander and Breese, 2011).

### ***Applications of cultural trauma theory***

It is almost impossible to list all the case studies inspired by cultural trauma theory as there are too many. Ever since cultural trauma theory was first introduced in the beginning of 21st century, over the years the concept has been turned into a research framework that have almost reached a paradigm in sociocultural study (Eyerman, 2011).

Earlier work of cultural trauma study, also shown as the mainstream application of collective trauma theory, takes great interest in pre-modern or modern major historical events which threaten human securities in a traditional sense. As examples there is a great deal of literature



investigating holocaust, genocide, slavery, and other massacres or persecutions happened during the two world wars and regional ethnic conflicts (e.g., Eyerman, 2002; Alexander, 2012; Debs, 2013; de Smet, Breyne and Stalpaert, 2015; Eyerman, Madigan and Ring, 2016; Li and Huang, 2017; Gross, 2020). To illustrate, Ivana Spasić (2011) finds that the national identity of Serbian people is mainly rooted in the painful but proud remembrance of “Kosovo sore”, where the Serbian army fought with the forces of Ottoman Turks in 1389. However, Spasić questions whether the war even actually happened in history. There is a separation between actual experience and the symbolic construction of cultural trauma and collective memory.

Yet most of the works in trauma study have explored the narratives, rituals and discourses employed in the remembrance of heavy stories and the effects brought by these memories on the victims’ understandings of their collective identity, some scholars (e.g., Giesen, 2004c; Hashimoto, 2011) find cultural trauma can be constructed also for those whose father generations are deemed as the perpetrators in history. Giesen’s study of German national identity after the second world war, for example, shows it took three generations of Germans to get rid of the hatred-filled feelings in their collective identity and separate themselves from their fathers who lived under the atrocity of Adolph Hitler (2004c).

With cultural trauma theory continuing to develop these years, nevertheless, a shift from the focus on traditional security issues to non-traditional security challenges has emerged in recent trauma studies. Closer attention has been paid to various risks stemming from the “late modernity” of industrial society with the progression of globalization and industrialization, such as global terrorism (Eriksson, 2018), nuclear leak (Zhukova, 2016), climate change (Brulle and Norgaard, 2019), natural disasters (Debs, 2012), and infectious disease (Baselga, 2020). Take Debs (2012) investigation on the impact of Umbria-Marche earthquake in 1977 on Italian national identity, for example. The model she establishes for the case indicates cultural trauma can be attached to not only narratives but also material objects that have totemic significance to a collectivity, such as the Giotto frescoes damaged in this earthquake.

As to studies of infectious disease in cultural trauma field as the present project is concerned, unfortunately, the amount of relevant literature is still quite small. Baselga (2020), for

instance, explores the role of two interactive documentaries in raising the awareness of structural stigma and cultural trauma of the HIV disease. However, her explanation of why HIV has been constructed as a cultural trauma is not explicit enough. Demertzis and Eyerman published a paper in autumn, 2020, which probes into the general situation of COVID-19 in Greece and Sweden to discuss whether the COVID-19 pandemic had evolved into a cultural trauma in the two countries. The paper is one of the most relevant academic reference for this thesis which argues, while the pandemic had created a time-space compression, it had not been constructed as a cultural trauma in Greece and Sweden because the pandemic had not marked the core values in both Greek and Swedish collective identity.

This thesis has no intention to dispute their conclusion, as the pandemic is still ongoing and the situation is constantly changing. However, in social science where the value of context is underlined (Flyvberg, 2001), it needs to be clarified researches of the COVID-19 pandemic should be treated with a developmental point of view. Even with the same theoretical framework being used, when time, space, social context and research scope change, the conclusions may vary. Besides, taking a step back, Demertzis and Eyerman (2020) point out that COVID-19 has potentials in various aspects to be constructed as a cultural trauma, considering the great pains it has caused to the global world.

Additionally, Sciortino (2018) elaborates on the new expansions he notices of cultural trauma research in recent years. The use of the concept of “trauma drama” which regards trauma as intentional social performances for cultural political goals has gained increasing popularity, coupled to the expansion of potential carrier groups performing the drama (Hashimoto, 2015; Degloma, 2019; Gao, 2015; Ushiyama and Baert, 2016). For example, Rui Gao (2015) raises and explains the question why Chinese people’s sufferings from the Japanese invasion during the second world war were not translated into a cultural trauma in postwar era. The answers can be found if we expand our vision to the carrier group who spoke or wrote the history at that time – the triumphant Communist Party. After the war, the party was engaged in its own establishment of the narrative that depicts itself or the class it represented to be the victim of the war rather than the whole nation. What mattered most was the political goal hidden in the performance of the trauma rather than simply a reflection of Chinese history (ibid).

While most trauma dramas are retrospective and focus on the past, Schmidt (2013) finds that cultural trauma exists not only in shocking incidents of human history but everyday life and daily social activities as well. In the case of Mother's Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Schmidt coins the concept, "perpetual trauma" (ibid), to describe the fear and anxieties of being the victims of risks that may happen in the future, which opens up a new space for the application of cultural trauma theory. This may be also inspiring in scrutinizing whether the COVID-19 pandemic has potentials to become a perpetual trauma or continuous trauma as the pandemic is still ongoing and when it will be ended remains a question.

## **Collectivism**

In a relatively standard fashion, collectivism refers to a theory or a social phenomenon that individuals place the interests of the collectivity they belong ahead of their own (Early, 1989). In other words, to enhance the well-being of the group and attain group goals, members of a collectivistic society are willing to subordinate to the high demands of in-group and cooperate with each other for collective outcome (Ho, 1979; Triandis et al., 1985; Wagner and Moch, 1986). Westen (1985: 241-281) concludes there are four stages of the development of collectivism in western society, namely the primary communitarian collectivism, the secondary communitarian collectivism, individuated collectivism, and synthesis collectivism. The first two stages of collectivism appeared in the pre-modern era when cultural differentiation of self, society, and nature were still developing, and "sacred collectivity" (ibid: 258) still existed. Later with the development of capitalism, individuals got emancipated from the traditions and a new kind of social cohesion which was identified as "organic solidarity" by Durkheim (1933) is built upon specialization and interdependence. There is a priority inversion in individuated collectivism, as Westen writes, that societal cohesion which was the goal of self-interest now has become a byproduct of personal interest (ibid:267). Westen's cultural ideal is to achieve a synthetic collectivism where neither the society nor the individuals are means or ends but both together contributing to the integration of culture.

What Beck (1992: 127-137) suggests in risk society theory confirms the first half of the Westen's ideal that in second modernity individuals are gradually removed from previous traditions of social forms and boundaries and are empowered to make more choices on their

own and take the corresponding responsibility of the consequences. A cohesive society, however, does not necessarily come from such individualization. As Bauman (2000) asserts in his insights on liquid stage of modernity, all communities, especially nation-state, are postulated. He uses “cloakroom/carnival communities” (ibid: 199-201) to describe the modernity landscape that people otherwise having no deep entanglement with one another are temporarily brought together by similar interests, which cannot last for long. While community is a delusion, the brittleness of human bond has real painful consequence- “the deepening imbalance between individual freedom and security” (ibid: 170). The appeal of collectivism, or communitarianism, as Bauman points out, is the provision of a sociological sense of safety and certainty, albeit imagined, needed by all of us (ibid: 171-172). What catches our eye in recent years most is that these imagining collectivities themselves have become more diverse and even more contradictory internally with more diverse media infrastructures emerging and deep mediatization (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Baym and Boyd, 2012).

### ***Collectivism in China***

Chinese society has long been described as dominated by a collectivistic culture (Oh, 1976; Li, 1978; Shenkar and Ronen, 1987). At the cultural level, China, and other east Asian countries have a long tradition being deeply influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism (Winfield, Mizuno and Beaudoin, 2000). The former attaches great importance to establishing social harmony drawing on strict hierarchy that assigns roles and responsibilities of individuals in their families as well as societies, which closely associates individual accomplishments with the in-groups’ development and interests. Buddhism originating from South Asia, in addition, profoundly impact Chinese society in terms of Chinese national characters that praises highly of peacefulness, conformity, and compassion, which build the solid foundation for the prevalence of collectivistic discourses (Winfield, Mizuno and Beaudoin, 2000). As for the political factors considered, historically Chinese society has long been ruled by feudal monarchy and has not ridded the convention of authority worship. Besides, the communist revolution that values individual contribution to society and group welfare to great extent encourages the rise of collectivism in China (Li, 1978; Lai and Lam, 1986).

Nevertheless, regarding Chinese society as a purely collectivistic society is also problematic, as many scholars have noted that individualistic goals, personal rights and interests are also desired and treasured in China (Bor, 1985; Feather, 1986; Lau, 1988; Stipek, Weiner and Li, 1989). Surveys and other case studies conducted in China or Chinese communities suggest that Chinese people will also react against political control and cultural domination and take individualistic values seriously (Cheung and Lau, 1985; Lau and Cheung, 1987; Lau, Lew, Hau, Cheung and Berndt, 1990). In some sense collectivism can even act as an effective means to fulfill individualistic wishes (Lau, 1991).

### **Media representation of illness and disease**

Illness, disease and pain exist as undeniable biological realities in our lives, and they are constantly given meaning (Lupton, 2012). As Brandt (2020: 393) underlines, disease cannot be understood outside the culture in which it occurs. The biological world is fundamentally transformed by culture and politics. In this meaning-construction activity the role of the mass media is nonnegligible. They are “forums for the portrayal of medicine, illness and disease” (Lupton, 2012: 51). By aid of textual or visual representation, mass media can affect individuals’ impression of medical infrastructure, illness and disease. In their study on the news coverage of health, Briggs and Hallin (2016) argue today we have reached a stage of “biomediatization”, where health journalists, medical researchers and public health officials communicate with each other and coproduce the public knowledge about illness and disease.

With biomediatization, emerging infectious disease and epidemics in these decades, such as AIDS, SARS, Ebola or H1N1 have been given increasing attention by media agents as an embodiment of reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Two frames are widely used by mass media in representing these public health emergencies: the “responsibility” frame, which seeks for explanations or the cause of the disease from authorities; and the “human interest” frame that provides emotional charge through the representations of tragic events (Idoiaga Mondragon et al, 2018). In such representation, it is noteworthy how metaphorical thinking is embedded in creating communicable texts. The metaphors that are linked to the descriptions of infectious disease include but are not limited to wars, sports, business, family, religion, freedom and masculinity/femininity (Stein, 1990).

As Lupton (2012) warns, the rhetorical use of metaphors may shape the social perception and individual identity of being ill. Moreover, metaphors sometimes can be utilized as a linguistic strategy to project certain ideology to the audience (ibid).

Unsurprisingly, some scholars are opposed to assigning metaphors to infectious disease. As Sontag (1989: 3) puts it, “The most truthful way of regarding illness-and the healthiest way of being ill-is one most purified of, resistant to, metaphoric thinking.” Wiggins (2012) appeals to stopping using military metaphors for disease like AIDS as it makes those who are deprived of life seem not tough enough so that they lose the fight. Nevertheless, others criticize Sontag of ideally assuming that human disease can be freed of metaphors. Lethal disease is naturally born with myths and social values which can be hardly treated with pure ratiom and neutrality in human nature (Brandt, 2020). On second thought, people need metaphors to help define notions they are not familiar with so that they can construct some subjectivity in general sense (Lupton, 2012).

If one cannot avoid using metaphors in conceptualizing illness and disease, the focus on the representation of such disease should then be turned to how disease and illness are metaphorized, by whom and why. As Silverstone (2007) points out, media representation may have side effects if the media institutions who produce social discourses cannot stay neutral and just. There are moral concerns in media representation where radical, ritual, or ideological discourses may lead to bias, stigmatization, discrimination, stereotypes and politico-economic inequality (ibid: 144-145). Thus, media workers are expected to take the moral responsibility in selecting materials for representation and deciding whose voices being heard (ibid: 151).

### ***Media representation of COVID-19***

Facilitated with all the theories elaborated above, this thesis endeavors to push roles of media into the focus of the sociocultural academia against a background of the pandemic. In a time when mobility is restricted and information need skyrockets, mass media is most likely to play a leading role in constructing the images and narratives about COVID-19 by means of representation (Demertzis and Eyeran, 2020). Nevertheless, the empirical qualitative researches that scrutinize the representation of COVID-19 in social science are still very few.

As we can see, a lot of papers or articles relevant to media on COVID-19 are from computer science or cognitive behaviour studies which either develop multifarious mathematical models to describe the trend of wordings or speeches about COVID-19 on social media (e.g., Ito and Chakraborty, 2020; Yin et al., 2020), or explore how people behave after reading the news articles about the viral disease (eg. Scopelliti, Pacilli and Auino, 2021). Taking one random example, Al-Obeidat's team (2020) has modeled a huge amount of COVID-19 related news articles with the help of semantic knowledge graph to evaluate the varying attitude towards curbing the spread of the disease. Such researches are mostly quantitative and instrumental in depicting the general patterns of human behaviors under the circumstance of the pandemic. However, they lack in-depth knowledge of how infectious disease or social risks may possibly affect human society.

Among the small numbers of qualitative researches of the media representation of COVID-19, a great number explores the images of social groups or actors in this pandemic. Martikainen and Sakki (2020), for example, examines a series of newspaper photographs related to COVID-19 in Finland. Their identification shows different age groups are portrayed differently in Finnish media, where children are represented as joyful players, the youth as future-oriented students or reckless party animals, adults as adaptive and active professionals or caretakers, and the elderly as isolated loners. Some scholars take particular interest in certain groups of social members during the pandemic. For instance, John and Kapilashrami (2021) concentrate on the representation of migrants and refugees in Indian media reportage of COVID-19. They find migrants in India are often projected as carriers of the virus who have threats to social security, health, and economy. Meanwhile, migrants' voices are less heard by the public as marginalized groups in Indian society.

The elaboration can go on when it comes to the portrayal of older people in this social crisis, who are widely represented by news media as the most risky group to contract the disease with terrible consequences. Morgan, Wiles, Williams and Gott (2020) analyze the mainstream New Zealand media and outline the images of the elderly in this pandemic as a group of nameless, homogeneous, and passive recipients. Similar finding has been spotted in Zhang and Liu's study (2021) on the media representation of vulnerability of senior citizens on

Chinese media outlets, where the two scholars suggest such representation will perhaps intensify the dichotomy of the young and the old and cause ageism in China.

Zhang and Liu's article also raises the question about the material repercussions of media representation in human society which is also one of the present thesis's major concerns. As Demertzis and Eyerman (2020) infers, the way COVID-19 is represented may possibly affect the way people define and understand "social facts" and lead to actual social results. Such evidence can be found in Sitto and Lubinga's work where the media reports on South African online media reflect a socio-economic inequality in the country, which contribute to the non-compliance with healthcare directives for COVID-19 (2020).

Other scholars' analytical angle of media representation of COVID-19 is set in the conceptions of "Othering" or "Otherness". Rosa and Mannarini (2020), for example comb the track of the representation of the COVID-19 on Italian media and institutional discourses around the theme of "otherness" and draw the conclusion that although the voices on the COVID-19 pandemic are often polarized and responsibility attributed to the Chinese people or hidden powerful groups, the development infectious disease itself implies "other may be me/us". Gabore (2020), from other side, compares the Western and Chinese media in sourcing and framing the events in Africa as "Others" of COVID-19. The outcome indicate Chinese media tend to quote information from official sources in positive tone, while Western media is more open to diverse kinds of information sources and takes on diverse styles of news coverage.

When scanning through these case studies, one will see that all these articles mentioned above are situated in specific social context. While the pandemic is global, the representations of the pandemic are quite local. Further instances can be given, such as Delicado and Rowland's study (2021) of visual representations of science set in Portuguese and Spanish media context, or the Ethiopian case of depicting the virus and the disease as hungry predator or Satan-like villain (Tiruneh, Baye, Dubi, 2020). As is shown, few scholars will acknowledge their conclusions drawn from empirical cases can be applied to the whole world. This exactly reflects what Flyvberg (2001) stresses on the importance of context in qualitative research.

The present thesis is inspired by these case studies in terms of focusing on the background



where the media agencies and representations come from, also with an awareness of taking a closer look at the power-relations embedded in media representation. However, it has been noticed at the same time these studies show little interest in the trauma potentials in this pandemic and lack ambitions to connect the tragic event to wider construction of social reality and collective identity beyond the pandemic itself.

The present thesis has provided an overall evaluation of media representation of COVID-19 through the case of the first wave of the epidemic in Wuhan, China, the first place to report the case of the disease. It contributes to cultural trauma scholarship by providing a local perspective of discursive construction of a major public health emergency in Chinese media performance. Enlightened by the theory of trauma drama which usually points to a revival of social solidarity, and given China is widely recognized as a collectivistic country, this thesis has spared great effort to searching for the ideological attachment of togetherness or collectivism in discursive representations.

## **Methodology and Methods**

This chapter aims to bring theoretical frameworks down to the earth of practice. As the proposed research project cares much about the power-relations and ideology attached to media representation of COVID-19 which fits into the scope of critical discourse analysis, a textual analysis inspired by critical discourse analysis is applied to the empirical materials collected from mainstream Chinese media. The rest part of the chapter will offer more details of the method, along with an explanation of the samples and sampling after a general introduction of qualitative case study being applied to this research.

### **Qualitative case study**

Debates on qualitative approach versus quantitative and their cons and pros respectively may sound like a cliché, yet a choice of the paradigms or a combination of both is the starting point for most social researches that requires clarification. In this research project, qualitative approaches that lay stress on the depth instead of a general description of the materials being analyzed are prioritized, to reveal the complexity of meanings placed by media on major social events and lived experiences of COVID-19 (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2020). Compared to quantitative research, qualitative data analysis has an advantage in providing a holistic or comprehensive view of some events or units, with a rounded consideration of contextual information (King, Verba and Keohane, 1994). And because of the interest set mainly in “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973), qualitative researches hardly deal with a large amount of data but tend to focus on a small number of cases only and conduct case studies (King, Verba and Keohane, 1994). This proposed research is no exception.

Conventional sense-making that places cases at a subordinate status to large samples or treats case study as a pilot method is narrow minded, as cases can play an advantageous role in researches that emphasize more on depth than breadth of the situations being explored (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Regardless of the sophisticated tendency to statistical analysis in social science, case study is an (if not the) approach to gaining context-dependent knowledge which is primary in the process of learning and constructing epistemic theories (ibid). There is barely any sense in distinguishing which method or methodology is more “advanced”. The choice is

only a matter of feasibility and relevance (King, Verba and Keohane, 1994).

There are dual ways to understand the “signified” (Saussure, 1916) of the case for this research. Situated in the context of risk society or reflexive modernization, the case is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that embodies the characteristic of modern era full of risks. And this research explores how such risks are tackled by media institutions or power from above in Chinese society. But if we view the pandemic itself as the total background, then the representation of the first wave of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China will be the specific case. Apparently, the second understanding is nested in the first. Anyway, whatever one makes of the “case” in this case study, what remains unchangeable in this research is a concern of the meaning-construction and context-dependent knowledge centering around the media representation of COVID-19.

### **Textual analysis inspired by critical discourse analysis**

By way of definition, discourse can be summarized as “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” (Phillips and Hardy, 2020, refer to Parker, 1992). To put it in another way, discourse is often treated as socially constructed knowledge communicated by texts (Foucault, 1978, van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2000; Wodak, 2001), yet it is also deemed by some scholars closely interwoven with social practice (Martin, 1992; van Leeuwen, 1996). Discourse analysis is, therefore, an attempt to discovering how texts are made meaningful and how social practices make sense in constituting social reality (Phillips and Hardy, 2020; Hansen and Machin, 2013).

There are a variety of approaches to discourse analysis, though. Some approaches, such as social linguistic analysis, mainly focus on the individual texts of conversations, interviews, or stories themselves and adhere to the conventions from linguistics (e.g., Witten, 1993; Kleiner, 1998; Mauws, 2000; Dunford and Jones, 2000), whereas others, such as interpretive structuralism, are more appealed to the pictures of society on macrolevel and focus more on the societal or organizational contexts as foremost data (e.g., Hirsch, 1986; Ellingson, 1995; Wodak, 1996; O’Conner, 2000). Texts or contexts aside, Phillips and Ravasi (1998) sort out

another dimension that categorizes the approaches into being whether more social-construction-focused or more power-dynamics-centered. Although almost all discourse theorists, in general sense, are social constructivists, some of them are extraordinarily critical. The approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) which studies how language is used for particular purposes, for example, attaches great importance to the questions of power and ideology (e.g., Kress, 1989; van Dijk, 1991; Fairclough, 1989; Wodak, 1989; van Leeuwen, 1996).

This thesis takes interest in the discourse of “togetherness” in video works created by contemporary Chinese mainstream media. Using CDA to systematically break down the language used in these works and analyze lexicon, overlexicalization, participants and so on may yield insights on how dominant social values and ideas are projected across institutional practices (Hansen and Machin, 2013). However, if we restrict ourselves excessively to the framework of CDA, we may end up chasing political identification of social inequality with linguistic analysis to the neglect of sociocultural influences of media performances. Thus, the present thesis uses CDA in a relatively loose sense, or more precisely, a textual analysis inspired by CDA. It learns from CDA in terms of its strong constructivist view, emphasis on the considerations of broader social context, and critical and reflexive lens, and borrows several analytical tools such as *naming and reference* (Kress, 1989; Fairclough, 2003), *social actors* (van Leeuwen, 1996), *process types* (Halliday, 1978), and *metaphors* (Fairclough, 1992:194), while at the same time incorporates other multimodal methods, such as critical visual analysis (Rose, 2016), semiotics (Barthes, 1977), and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2005; Parcell and Baker, 2018; Ignatow and Mihalcea, 2021) in an integrated manner.

To make a clarification, it is not the details of any specific video that is the focus here, but the basic structures and underlying logics, namely discourse(s), spread across or contradicted within these media materials. Therefore, in this case little attention has been paid to the aesthetical values of these works. Meanwhile, extra attention is given to the social context where some news events once creating public sensation are for some reasons invisible in the present materials. In sum, what is expected from an integrated discourse analysis for this case, as the aim of most media text analysis, is not to just describe textual materials, but to connect

media representations with broader reality of the social world being meaningfully constructed (Hansen and Machin, 2013).

## **Sampling and coding**

Discourse analysis intrinsically demands bodies of texts being examined as it presupposes texts do not exist independently in discourses but interrelate with one another, and that meanings must be understood through intertextuality (Phillips and Hardy, 2020; Rose, 2016). In practice, however, what determines the end of sampling process in discourse studies is usually “the richness of textual detail rather than the number of texts analyzed” (Tonkiss, 1998:253). In a word, what matters is the quality of texts instead of the quantity. On the other hand, qualitative research that seeks to provide well-grounded, in-depth descriptions and interpretations that reveal the complexity of social world is usually conducted in the form of case studies with comparatively small samples (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2020). Thus, to take account of both intertextuality and practicability, the sampling process for this thesis takes the advice from Flyvbjerg (2001:79) who recommends information-oriented selection being the strategy to maximize the utility of information from relatively small samples.

The empirical materials for the present project comprise 12 video series from 14 Chinese media agencies<sup>6</sup> which can be roughly divided into three categories<sup>7</sup>: official media institutions for the CPC affairs (e.g., Xinhua, PDCPC), local satellite TV stations (e.g., SMG, BTV), and market-oriented commercial media agencies (e.g., Bilibili, iQiyi, Figure). Nevertheless, there is no distinct genre or intergeneric space in these videos except for the same reference to the first wave of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China. These videos are divergent in length, content, and style, varying from science documentary to fictional stories based on actual events, and from user generated short video to professional generated long series. Detailed information of the video series is displayed in the table below (Table 1).

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<sup>6</sup> The 14 agencies involved in this case are China Media Group (CMG), Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua), China Global Television Network (CGTN), China News Service (CNS), Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (PDCPC), Beijing Radio & Television Station (BTV), Shanghai Media Group (SMG), SMG Pictures, Shanghai Youhug Media Co.Ltd (Youhug), Bilibili, iQiyi, FIGURE, Beijing Legend Media Co.Ltd (Legend), Health News. Given the long names of the agencies, the text of the present thesis has used abbreviations of the names for the sake of succinctness.

<sup>7</sup> The division of the categories is according to the pattern of Chinese media system. For more information of Chinese media system, please refer to the chapter of introduction in this thesis.

Title	Agency	Category	Genre	Length <sup>8</sup> (min)
<b>With You</b>	SMG, Youhug, SMG Pictures	Local media	Drama	20*40
<b>Heroes in Harm's Way</b>	CMG	Party-owned Media	Drama	14*45
<b>A City of Heroes</b>	Xinhua	Party-owned Media	Documentary	1*45
<b>Life Matters</b>	SMG	Local media	Documentary	6*45
<b>In Wuhan</b>	Bilibili, FIGURE	Commercial media	Documentary	7*20
<b>Together against COVID-19</b>	PDCPC, CMG	Party-owned Media	Documentary	6*55
<b>The Frontline</b>	CGTN	Party-owned Media	Documentary	2*45
<b>The Chinese Doctor</b>	iQiyi, Legend, Health News	Commercial media	Documentary	5*40
<b>2020 Spring Chronicle</b>	CMG	Party-owned Media	Documentary	4*50
<b>China's Fight Against COVID-19</b>	CNS	Party-owned Media	Documentary	5*9
<b>Wuhan: My Diary of Combating Coronavirus</b>	CMG	Party-owned Media	Vlog	32*5
<b>Doctors 2020</b>	BTV	Local media	Documentary	5*45

Table 1 Samples

The choice of maximum variation samples (Flyvbjerg, 2001:79) in this case study is for the purpose of obtaining the knowledge whether there is a universal discourse of “togetherness” employed by Chinese media agencies in representing and treating social risks, or there exist different discourses and understandings towards COVID-19 in China, and how. Besides, the chosen samples are the representatives of Chinese media works representing COVID-19 and the epidemic/pandemic which have circulated on multifarious Chinese media platforms and received extensive feedbacks. Take the TV play *With You*, for example. The drama mainly produced and distributed by Shanghai Media Group has been broadcast by at least four provincial satellite television channels in China and three largest Chinese video streaming websites<sup>9</sup>. Although the main target audience of the series are Chinese people, considering

<sup>8</sup> The length of time is presented in the form A\*B. A stands for the number of episodes of each video series, and B stands for the average length of time of each episode of the series. The product of A and B refers to the total length of time of the video series (e.g., the TV play *With You* consists of twenty episodes and the length of each episode is around 40 minutes. So the total length of *With You* is around 20\*40=800 minutes.) The aggregated time length of all the videos being analyzed in this case study adds up to around 52 hours and 15 minutes.

<sup>9</sup> The four provincial satellite television channels are Dragon TV (Shanghai), Zhejiang Satellite TV Channel, Jiangsu Satellite TV Channel and Guangdong Satellite TV Channel. The three largest video streaming websites in China are respectively iQiyi, Tencent Video and Youku.

most of them are made only in Chinese, the TV series has also been shared on *YouTube* for the global audience. Before the submission of the present thesis, the series of *With You* has been played at least six-hundred-million times on *Tencent Video*. More than eighty thousand people have taken part in the discussion of the series on *douban.com* (a major and popular Chinese film portal with content generated by users) and marked 8.6 points for the drama<sup>10</sup>. Such phenomenon has provided further evidence for the theory that social reality is deeply entangled with mediatization (Couldry and Hepp, 2017).

The data collection stage is followed then by an iterative process of semi-grounded thematic analysis, with a series of coding strategies (i.e., attribute coding, structural coding, descriptive coding, dramaturgical coding, pattern coding, focused coding) being applied to scrutinize the elements that constitute the narrative (Saldana, 2009). What emerges finally after the two cycles of coding are the three significant themes – *COVID-19 as war, les miserables, and the great unity* – that will be expounded in the following chapters.

## **Reflection on methods**

Since critical discourse analysis is adopted as the main method in this case study, one may ask whether it is possible or reasonable to draw macro descriptions of ideology based merely on an analysis of text. Widdowson (1998:42) questions CDA with an observation that many academic works of CDA that claim the importance of social production turn out to have failed themselves with attention paid only to the textual materials. To avoid falling into the same trap of hypocrisy, the researcher has collected information about the politico-economic environment of Chinese media and the production processes of the sampled video series such as journalistic interviews with some directors or the reportage of the stories behind the scenes (e.g., *Xinhua*<sup>11</sup>, 2020-06-02). Notwithstanding, the perception of the contextual information can be still superficial without production studies being conducted. In addition, there are reasons to believe the stories told and written by news media may also implicate social performance and media representation (Alexander, Giesen and Mast, 2006).

On the other hand, to investigate the production processes and collect background information

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<sup>10</sup> The information and statistical data was updated on 14<sup>th</sup> May, 2021 and may vary.

<sup>11</sup> Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/ent/2020-06/02/c\\_1126060005.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/ent/2020-06/02/c_1126060005.htm) (in Chinese) (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

about these video series is also out of ethical concern, despite that this case study need not worry about ethical issues too much, considering the object of the research is mainly published video works circulating in public sphere, no person directly involved. Still, qualitative interpretations of media productions may yield indirect impact on the characters being represented as well as the producers. Gaining more information can help reduce researchers' bias and stereotypes to great extent, although bias can be hardly avoided in practices of knowledge production because scientific researches are scarcely value free (Mackieson, Shlonsky and Connolly, 2019).



## COVID-19 as War

On February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, when the whole China was still shadowed by the impact of COVID-19, Chinese president Xi Jinping, also the general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, visited a hospital in Beijing, where he extended his regards to the medic workers and spoke to them, “We must bravely fight this war of resistance, this total war and the people’s war. We must be confident that we will win.” This scene was recorded by the journalists present and included by China Global Television Network (CGTN) and China News Service (CNS) in their documentaries, *the Frontline*<sup>12</sup> and *China’s Fight against COVID-19*<sup>13</sup>, in a context that emphasizes the CPC Central Committee was taking COVID-19 seriously.

The quote of Xi’s speech that treats the spread of COVID-19 as a war, is one of the numerous examples of military metaphors being used by Chinese media for the representation of COVID-19. Metaphorical expressions like *war*, *fight*, or *battle*, can be found across all the empirical materials collected for this research. In representing the COVID-19 epidemic, Chinese media workers seem to have establish a prescriptive discourse system that is able to transform all aspects of the medical situation into military metaphors, where the virus is often described as the enemy, medic workers as soldiers and the epic center, Wuhan city, as the battlefield. Below are the extracts of some expressions from the empirical materials (Table 2).

Metaphors	Connotation	Expressions
War	The COVID-19 epidemic	War of resistance; Total war; People’s war; Rencounter; War without bullets; Human fight
Battlefield	Wuhan/hospital	Frontline; The main battleground; First line of defense; Shelter; Outpost; Fortress; A place for decisive victory
Battling	Treating and curing the patient	Show the sword; Confrontation; Ask for a battle assignment; Fight shoulder to shoulder; Fierce battle; Safeguard; Swing into action; Catch the virus; In close combat
Soldiers	Medical workers	White armor, incarnate warrior; Soldiers in white; Comrades; Fighter
Sacrifice	Die or get infected	Battle casualties; Fall; Die in the line of duty

<sup>12</sup> Episode 1, 39:03-39:37 (Link: <https://youtu.be/h4lfp3mvKAE>)

<sup>13</sup> Episode 2, 0:39-0:58 (Link: <https://youtu.be/YiKKmdwCnE8>)

Backup	Medical teams	Reinforcement; Heroic rescue; Dispatch; Large force
Enemy	Virus	Antagonist; Enemy in the dark; Rogue; Monster; Devil

Table 2 Military metaphors

To compare disease to wars or invasions is nothing new, nor is it unique to Chinese context (Sontag, 1989). However, what matters with these metaphors is not the actual system use but the latent ideology attached (Fairclough, 1989:119). Yet all the videos being analyzed have used military metaphors, official media institutions that are subordinate to the CPC stand out. Take the titles, for example. The videos adopting words like *fight*, *battle*, *heroes* in their titles, are all produced by the party-owned media. Comparatively, other media agencies prefer neutral expressions for titles, such as *in Wuhan* and *the Chinese doctors*. The titles also set the tones for the overall content. Those with “fight” or “heroes” tend to cram more voice-over into their videos with multiple military terms.

To explain this differentiation requires background information. In Chinese political system, to contain the epidemic is mainly a duty of Chinese government, yet by war-making activity, the CPC that claims to be the leader of Chinese army and guard of people’s interest is given the name to step in. This is probably why during the first wave, war metaphor was massively used by CPC central committee in all kinds of occasions and closely entangled with the party’s actions and leadership. As for media subordinate to the CPC, the heavy use of military metaphors is perhaps simply an operational need because as their duty, these media are obliged to propagate CPC’s theories and policies and guide public opinions (Zou and Xiao, 2016). Other media agencies in China, albeit with freer choices in media performances, are also subject to Chinese administrative regulations and system of censorship (Hassid, 2020), which explains why the actual use of military metaphors are so prevalent. The rest part of the chapter will take a closer look at how these metaphors are used as a linguistic strategy to persuade the audience into accepting one meaning over another in relation to broader social context (Lupton, 2012:57).

### **“Fighting on the frontline” – Wuhan as the battlefield**

COVID-19 once spreading across China hit many Chinese cities and rural areas, and Wuhan

is always endued with particular significance by way of narration, called the *first line of defense, the main battleground, the eye of the storm, the front*. The opening part of *the Frontline*<sup>14</sup> is rather representative for such metaphors: one gloomy evening, thundery and rainy, a man in a white coat trotted through an old and shabby alley and went upstairs into a building, his face covered with a pair of glasses and a medical mask (Figure 1). Against the strikes of heavy, slow, and low pianistic chords, a steady male voice-over enters:

A war against an unknown virus has just been waged in the city of Wuhan, and this man has been fighting on the frontline from the very start. Dr. Lyu Qingquan is the medical department head at Hankou Hospital. This office has turned out to be his temporary shelter. (Episode 1, 2:52-3:10)



Figure 1 Screenshot from *the Frontline*, Episode 1, 2:46

It can be immediately noticed in the extract, discursively, three military metaphors are used in providing background information and introducing the character, where containing “an unknown virus” is compared to waging a war, working in Wuhan as a doctor to “fighting on the frontline”, and Dr. Lyu’s office to a “temporary shelter”. Besides, the grayish yellow hues of the image, the dark lights and terrible weather presented, the funeral bell-like music altogether also create a scene metaphorically connotating misfortunes have visited this city.

How can we interpret these metaphorical expressions then? And in what ways is Wuhan

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<sup>14</sup> Episode 1, 2:45-3:10 (Link: <https://youtu.be/h4lfp3mvKAE>)

described as the frontline? Strictly speaking there is no sense in distinguishing the front or the back for an epidemic, as invisible virus, unlike real war enemies, has no sense of directions to attack. Theoretically infectious disease can be carried by anyone and transmitted to anyplace, but especially in those with high density of population, developed transportations, and high degree of openness. In videos being analyzed, Wuhan is constantly mentioned as “a city with a population of 11 million”<sup>15</sup>, “one of the largest transportation hubs in central China”<sup>16</sup> and “Nine Provinces Thoroughfare”<sup>17</sup>. All these descriptions are meant to warn, once Wuhan was out of control, the epidemic might evolve into a greater catastrophe not only for China, but the entire human race. Thus, to keep the virus within Wuhan, where the coronavirus was first identified, appears to be a necessity.

Such emphases offer a seemingly rational explanation for the lockdown. On January 22nd, Chinese President Xi Jinping issued an urgent order to suspend all public transportations in Wuhan from 10 am, January 23rd, 2020, and no one would be allowed to get in or out of the city. To demonstrate the severe consequences without lockdown, the worst-case scenario – the breakdown of medical system in Wuhan at the beginning of the epidemic – is thematically represented. Either in forms of witnesses’ footage or medic workers’ retrospection, the period is described as “the darkest time”<sup>18</sup>, when massive people flooded into hospitals and begged doctors to help them, hospital beds and personal protective equipment run out, medic workers got infected, patients died, and doctors cried.

To be fair, the lockdown cut off the transmission routes to a great extent and protected the rest areas of China from medical resource exhaustion. The cost, however, was the health and lives of Wuhan people, let alone the great economic loss of Hubei Province and the whole China (*BBC*<sup>19</sup>, 2020-04-16). The enforcement of the lockdown made the medical run in Wuhan become even worse, rather than the opposite, because those infected then could not leave Wuhan to seek treatment from other areas. As a result, Wuhan was rendered a designed “main battleground”, a forced “frontline” where the condition is the most critical in this epidemic.

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<sup>15</sup> *A City of Heroes*, Episode 1, 1:35-2:05 (Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>)

<sup>16</sup> *Doctors 2020*, Episode 2, 8:34-8:55 (Link: [https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6\\_aCk](https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6_aCk))

<sup>17</sup> China’s Fight against COVID-19, Episode 1, 4:28-4:36 (Link: <https://youtu.be/DhfprNJocBU>)

<sup>18</sup> Episode 1, 14:49-15:11 (Link: <https://youtu.be/h4lfp3mvKAE>)

<sup>19</sup> Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56768663> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

Eventually, in an overall description, Wuhan is portrayed as “a city of heroes” that made great sacrifice for the epidemic. The tense and war-like atmosphere after the lockdown is purposefully highlighted by video producers through the scenes of Wuhan’s hospitals. The TV play *With You*<sup>20</sup>, for instance, uses a sequence of long takes to represent the busyness and chaos in ICU of that time, where the oxygen provision is terribly in short, the vital signs monitors send alarms one after another, the patients alive share the room with the dead bodies that cannot be in time removed, and the doctors and nurses are short of hands giving emergent treatment to the critically ill patients.

The representation of the unsettling situations and the war-making activity may yield ontological insecurity as existentially threatening problem rises (Laing, 1965), yet it also paves the way for the CPC Central Committee and administrations to take drastic measures for the containment. After the lockdown, the government and party organizations of all levels organized hundreds of medical teams from other provinces to aid Wuhan (*Xinhua*<sup>21</sup>, 2020-03-17). Such a gesture is couched as “dispatch” or “reinforcement” in the videos to exemplify the entire nation is mobilized to “fight the war” regardless of personal loss and gains. Other sections of this thesis have also discussed how citizens of all trades are represented as a part of the collectivity, contributing themselves to help Wuhan people. In summary, with military metaphors, what was once medic workers’ duty to treat diseases and cure patients is now assigned to the whole society (Sontag, 1989:10-11), and Wuhan serves as a designated witness to the performance of social solidarity.

### **“White armor, incarnate warrior” – Medical workers as soldiers**

Medical workers are the first batch of people brought into sharp focus in this epidemic. In and across media representation, they are regularly described as *soldiers*, *fighters*, *heroes*, *warriors in white* who sacrifice their own safety and family reunion during the Spring Festival to save lives. One example of applying military metaphors to medical workers is found in *A Fight for Life*<sup>22</sup>, an episode from *Together against COVID-19*, where a first-aid intubation

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<sup>20</sup> Episode 7, 3:45-8:34 (Link: <https://youtu.be/b9PLvwn4sbA>)

<sup>21</sup> Available at: [https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/17/c\\_138888538/htm](https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/17/c_138888538/htm) (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

<sup>22</sup> Episode 2, 17:10-18:01 (Link: <https://youtu.be/UT9xVz6l78g>)

team of Wuhan's Tongji Hospital is given another name – “the expendables<sup>23</sup>”. The metaphor implies operating intubation surgeries for patients of COVID-19 has high risks of infection, while the expression “expendable” also suggests members of the team have prepared to give full dedication to their actions.

Noteworthy, not only normal medical workers, but real military medical corps from People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) are massively represented in these videos. *A city of heroes*<sup>24</sup>, for instance, captures the image of soldiers in military uniforms lining up to take instructions from their commander. *The frontline*<sup>25</sup> even presents a military transport plane in representing “reinforcement”. Given the fact that in Chinese political context, PLA is tightly associated with the communist party, and President Xi Jinping is both the general secretary of the CPC Central Committee and Chairman of Central Military Commission, the depiction of soldiers and military facilities may contribute to ideological attachment showing the power of CPC while also advertising the party cares about people. Furthermore, the image of the real military doctors may also enhance the impression of the connection between the epidemic and the notion of war, creating a sense as if a real war was coming, in which the medical workers are depicted as the “rescuers”.

Consequently, a solemn and stirring sentiment is attached to the epidemic with rhetorical use and visual presentation of military elements. When medical workers get infected, or in the worst case, die of the disease, they “fall”. In fact, there is a huge difference in representing the death of medical workers from the normal patients. While the latter is helpless and pitiful, the former is tragic and noble. In the same episode of *A Fight for Life*<sup>26</sup>, for example, six doctors who passed away during the epidemic are tributed in the following way: in low and deep music a bouquet of flowers symbolizing condolences appearing; the photos of the dead fading in and out one after another, matched with voices from families and friends narrating their grieves (Figure 2); a common expression in Chinese memorial speech – “this man lost, the life goes on” – is tributed to them in a similar way – “lives were being lost, but the fight went on”. All these performative elements can reinforce the naturalization of the discourse that

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<sup>23</sup> The original Chinese subtitles is “敢死队”, which can be directly translated into “dare-to-die troops”

<sup>24</sup> Episode 1, 10:19-10:55 (Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>)

<sup>25</sup> Episode 1, 40:38-41:00 (Link: <https://youtu.be/h4lfp3mvKAE>)

<sup>26</sup> Episode 2, 7:41-8:26 (Link: <https://youtu.be/UT9xVz6l78g>)

links a public health emergency to a national war. As sacrifice implies someone bears the loss for others' good, the individual suffering is thus converted to the pain of the whole society.

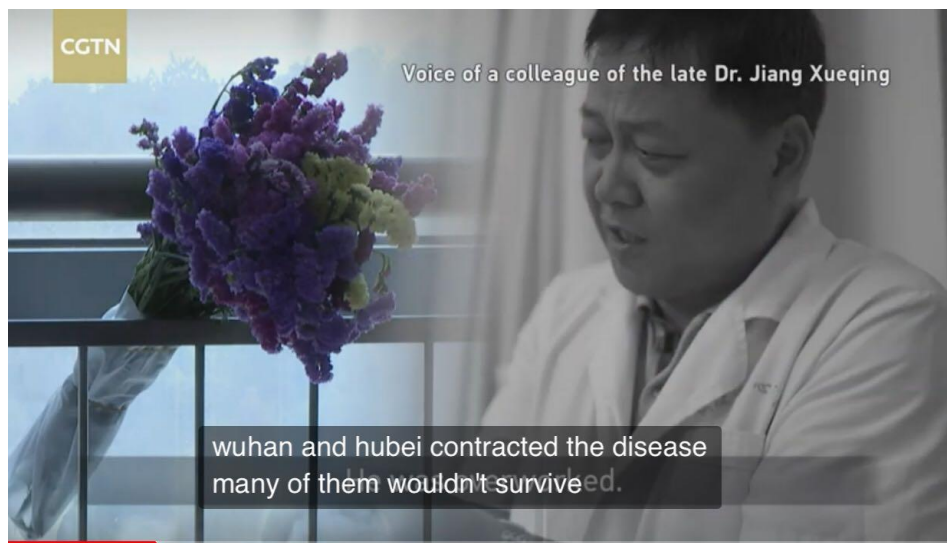


Figure 2 Screenshot from *Together against COVID-19*, Episode 2, 7:58

Such military thinking is opposed by Sontag (1989: 11-13) for reasons that diseases as enemies may cause stigmatization and discrimination of those who contract them, this also reflected in the epidemic in China. During the first wave, the fear of the viral disease in the crowds has led to evident discrimination<sup>27</sup> against COVID-19 patients, and even those who are healthy but resides in risky areas. On the other, patients themselves are also metaphorized. People with severe diseases are sometimes regarded as fighters with their bodies envisaged as the battlefields. This means once patients die, they lose the war (Wiggins, 2012). On other occasions, including in this case study, patients are depicted as the victims of the disease, silent and helpless, waiting for doctors to save them.

Here, being silent does not mean the patients never speak – even though some critically ill patients are indeed not able to – but the patients always function as “tool man” indicating the terribleness of the disease or reflecting the expertise or nobleness of medical workers. As an example, in *Leishenshan: the Past*, an episode of the documentary *Life Matters*<sup>28</sup>, two patients in Leishenshan Hospital are treated by a medical team from Shanghai city. Both of the

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<sup>27</sup> The documentary 2020 Spring Chronicle presents the discrimination in Episode 4, 29:40-31:25 (Link: <https://youtu.be/XA234nZe71c>)

<sup>28</sup> Episode 3 (Link: [https://youtu.be/GJBnBV\\_Zfy8](https://youtu.be/GJBnBV_Zfy8))

patients' conditions are extremely severe so that doctors have no choice but use Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) system to support their lives. After a long-term struggle, one patient unfortunately died, and the other survived. This course of the treatment is recorded in the episode with most part depicting medical workers discussing the patients' conditions and operating the ECMO machines for surgeries, whereas little space is given to the background information of the patients and patients' personal feelings and opinions except for their gratitude towards the doctors and nurses.

The silence can be also perceived from the way the videos name the patients. The two in Leishenshan<sup>29</sup> are respectively called Bed 5 and Bed 15, no specific names given. In *a city of heroes*<sup>30</sup>, a man lying on the hospital bed is introduced as "an 87-year-old critically ill patient". Kress (1989) and Fairclough (2003) argue the way people are named reveals the way they are viewed. As we can see COVID-19 patients in the videos are treated as members of the infected group, rather than individuals. Without further information, their images are blurred and their voice silenced. The reasons for such silence can be probably attributed to the major concern of patients' privacy, while the absence of patients' voice should also indicate that they are not really important in constructing the social reality of the epidemic.

By contrast, the names of doctors and medical scientists are constantly mentioned in the videos, with their titles being emphasized by captions and voice-over. Why? In its very essence, COVID-19 and 2019-nCoV belongs to the research scope of life sciences. In a discursively constructed war against a virus, science is believed to be the ultimate weapon, so the doctors as soldiers need appearing expert and professional to convince the audience they have the strength to contain the disease, namely win the war. The names and titles serve as a symbol of expertise and authoritativeness, which is also embodied in medical workers dressing in suits, white coats, or surgical gowns with caps and masks when appearing on the screen to make an impression of reliability. That is to say, the expertise and the authoritativeness performed on the screen are also metaphorical, which reveal the "deeper societal anxieties about the control and health of the body politic as well as that of the body corporeal" (Lupton, 2012:78). In a risk society, people tend to rely on institutions to assess

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<sup>29</sup> Episode 3, 2:33-3:00 (Link: [https://youtu.be/GJBnBV\\_Zfy8](https://youtu.be/GJBnBV_Zfy8))

<sup>30</sup> Episode 1, 39:00-39:15 (Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>)



and manage possible risks so that anxious feelings can be lessened, while expertise itself is also in question (Giddens, 1992).

Considering such performances and discursive representation raises question about the role of science in this epidemic. In a context of war, virus is envisaged as an aliened “Other” and science is regarded as the weapon to eliminate enemies. What comes after is scientific research becoming an act of battling endued with political implications. Science being a part of war discourse means any progress made in research or obstacles encountered are either treated as fruits of victory or defeat. Such examples can be found across the videos being analyzed where the revealing of gene sequencing of the virus is highly praised<sup>31</sup>, and failures of rescuing patient arouse strong negative emotions<sup>32</sup>. As a result, objectivity and neutrality which are most valued qualities of modern science collapse. With military metaphors what is unknown or unfamiliar is now turned into the obvious.

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<sup>31</sup> E.g., *2020 Spring Chronicle*, Episode 1, 01:29-12:44 (Link: [https://youtu.be/Mkvlo\\_zsZPE](https://youtu.be/Mkvlo_zsZPE))

<sup>32</sup> E.g., *A City of Heroes*, Episode 1, 13:15-13:46 (Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>)

## **Les Miserables<sup>33</sup>**

Wuhan Red Cross Hospital is one of the nearest hospitals of Huanan Seafood Market. The latter was once believed the origin of the new coronavirus. At the early stage of the epidemic, the hospital was severely impacted by the medical run in Wuhan city. Feng Mei is a nurse of the medical team from Sichuan Province who is designated to help Red Cross Hospital. One day when she is changing a bed in an isolation ward, a patient interrupted her. The patient wants Feng to change her bed also and Feng asks the patient to wait a moment. Feng explains that all supplies are in short at the moment so they cannot change beds right away for every patient, but she will try to find one and take care of the patient to the best of her ability. The patient suddenly loses her temper, pointing at her bed and yells she cannot endure anymore. Feng also loses patience and raises her voice, and cries.

At first glance, this is no more than a plain story in ward where an emotional nurse encounters an unreasonable patient. In the end, the patient apologizes to Feng and the two calms down. When the scene is placed in the specific context of psychological intervention in disastrous event by *2020 Spring Chronicle*,<sup>34</sup> however, the focus of the story is suddenly changed and casted on the pains suffered by people from the COVID-19 epidemic. How can we understand this focus? What is the nature of these pains? Why are the pains displayed on the representation of the epidemic? And How are they represented? Apart from highlighting the cruelty of the virus and justifying the interference of CPC in containment as the previous chapter elaborates, can we find another explanation? The series of questions are to be explored in this chapter through the lens of cultural trauma theory, with a discussion on how COVID-19 epidemic, a public health emergency, is shaped into a cultural trauma through representing pains and attribute corresponding responsibility.

### **“This is not what I have in my memory” – The nature of the pain**

Demertzis and Eyerman (2020) describes COVID-19 as “a situation full of traumatic potential”, this also embodied in the videos being analyzed with repeated depictions of

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<sup>33</sup> Les Miserables is borrowed from the name of a French literature by Victor Hugo, to characterize the thematic representations in the sampled video series of agonies and tragedies caused by the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan.

<sup>34</sup> Episode 4, 7:12-8:12 (Link: <https://youtu.be/XA234nZe71c>)

“breakdown”, “despair”, and extreme behaviors. Thematically, the sufferings represented from the epidemic can be at least classified into eight categories as shown below:

- a. Physical pain
- b. Fear of death and disease
- c. Sudden loss of loved ones
- d. Separation from families and friends
- e. Isolation and immobility
- f. Overloaded work (no time to rest)
- g. Frustration of not being able to help
- h. Financial stress

Most of the pains categorized characterize a sudden disruption of taken-for-granted daily lives. In *A City of Heroes*<sup>35</sup> produced by Xinhua News Agency, Lin Chen, a vlogger based in Wuhan, summarizes the painful feelings by stating,

Every time I think of infection, death, work coming to a halt, my heart aches. *This is not what I have in my memory*. This city has too much to endure. People are under great stress. But we are trying to do whatever is right. (Episode 1, 2:36-2:56)

His general description – “this is not what I have in my memory” – here exactly points out the common nature of most pains depicted in these materials. To enhance this statement, contrast is used as a rhetorical device in presenting the images of Wuhan in normal run and lockdown. While the former is always in brighter hues with crowds and gatherings and vivid scenes<sup>36</sup> being represented, the latter for most part is veiled in a gray tone with distinct display of emptiness and silence<sup>37</sup>, such as shopping malls shut down, few cars and people on the street, and airports and railway stations being deserted. Pensive and lyrical pieces of music are also used in the background to deepen the impression. In the meantime, the empty visuals of the city landscape are notably contrasted with the busyness and chaos in Wuhan’s hospitals crowded with COVID-19 patients<sup>38</sup>, together with masks, disinfectant sprays and protective suits constantly represented in and out of the hospitals<sup>39</sup>. These all suggest a sense of

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<sup>35</sup> Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>

<sup>36</sup> E.g., *A City of Heroes*, Episode 1, 44:29-45:00 (Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>)

<sup>37</sup> E.g., *Doctors 2020*, Episode 2, 12:25-12:44 (Link: [https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6\\_aCk](https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6_aCk))

<sup>38</sup> E.g., *The Frontline*, Episode 1, 13:07-13:47 (Link: <https://youtu.be/h4lfp3mvKAE>)

<sup>39</sup> E.g., *Doctors 2020*, Episode 2, 11:16-11:18 (Link: [https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6\\_aCk](https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6_aCk))

unusualness and abnormality of the time and the environment.

As for discursive representations, common words and expressions including *shock, impact, underestimate, do not expect, cannot imagine, no experience, not certain, have no idea* are used to describe such unfamiliarity and disruption, followed by the performances of *tearing, crying, choke with sobs, silence, sighs, daze, hands clasped*, and abundant expressions of negative feelings and emotions which are briefly extracted as follows:

depression, pressure, anxiety, give-up, helplessness, exhaustion, dread, breakdown, sense of loss, trauma, broken, scared, frustrated, painful, uncomfortable, lonely, monotonous, tears ran out, ship in the storm, a plane to crash, plastic bag on the head, the end of the world, freak out, sick at heart, terribly fatigued, unable to endure, dare not to recall, not able to sleep, want to die, loser, tragic beautiful, cannot utter a word, cave in on top.

Giddens (1991) argues the disruption and discontinuity of daily routines may result in ontological insecurity for individuals. In risk society where human indeterminacy and the tendency to objectify institutional and cultural products are inevitably contradicted, social members are always threatened to face the kind of insecurity from time to time (Beck, 1992). Yet ontological security is often viewed as essential to individuals' self-identity, the mass representation of pains in and across films, TV plays and news articles, together with carefully orchestrated social narratives, may force individual sufferings to be collective ones with an acute uncomfortable feeling that threatens the essence of collective identity infused and shared by the whole society (Alexander, 2004). This means the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan has potential to be a cultural trauma if the epidemic is constantly narrated and represented as a horrible event that creates a lot of pains and sufferings challenging the identity of all social members.

In this process, medical workers including doctors, nurses, and experts from scientific research institutions who are mostly represented in these videos and other mass media constitute the main body of the carrier group, namely people who speak of trauma (Alexander, 2004). In competitions of narrating the history of the first wave, the stories told by medical workers are most likely to be materially sustained as they are usually welcomed by the most effective media platforms in China. According to Bingdi Wang, director of *A City of Heroes*, medical workers did not only passively accept requests for interviews from journalists. They

also offered source materials voluntarily to the production unit in a difficult time for journalists to draw materials because of isolation and the lockdown<sup>40</sup>. Medical workers' personal experience in Wuhan and background knowledge of coronavirus empowers them to construct traumatic meanings around the epidemic and make the epidemic biomediatized (Briggs and Hallin, 2016).

To describe pains and sufferings itself is not problematic, but the judgement that follows – “we are trying to do whatever is right”. The same sentence is emphasized again by the voice-over in *A City of Heroes*<sup>41</sup> which indicates all sacrifices are worth it because they are the right things to do. However, it is not the media or the institutional power behind that can draw such conclusions. As Keightley and Pickering (2012:172-173) underlines, intrinsically, individual trauma is not located in terrible events themselves, but in various affairs in lives which will haunt the survivors later on. To ascribe individual sufferings to sacrifices for the collectivity surely offers the premise for cultural trauma construction and serves the purpose of integrating the COVID-19 epidemic into the broader discourse of social solidarity, yet it also simplifies the consequences of pains and deprives the sufferings of other meanings that could have been constructed around them. And eventually, it is the survivors themselves who need to confront the direct consequences of the pains rather than the collectivity.

### **“Because no one took seriously the disease” – Attribution of responsibility**

Mondragon, Montes and Valencia (2018) summarize there are two frames widely used by mass media in representing infectious disease. One provides emotional charge of epidemics called the “human interest frame”, and the other seeks for explanations or the cause of the disease from authorities and hence, the “responsibility frame”. In the video works being analyzed the two frames are both reflected and interwoven with each other. Since great pains and sufferings are elaborated, it is natural to answer the question who should take the responsibility for such pains and sufferings. Significantly, attribution of responsibility that establishes the identity of the perpetrator is also the most critical part in determining whether ontological insecurity can develop into a cultural trauma (Zhukova, 2016).

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<sup>40</sup> The original report is available at: [http://www.cflac.org.cn/xw/bwyc/202004/t20200401\\_476852.html](http://www.cflac.org.cn/xw/bwyc/202004/t20200401_476852.html) (in Chinese) (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

<sup>41</sup> Episode 1, 2:58-3:04 (Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>)

In searching for the cause of the epidemic, the virus, 2019-nCoV, is taken for granted the first to bear the blame. As represented, references of the virus constantly emerge in informal discussions between medical workers, voice-overs for explanations and children's fairytales as the evil, depriving the innocent of lives. The frequent use of military metaphors makes the virus synonymous with *a rogue, a devil, a monster, the god of Death* hidden in the dark and motivated to kill people. Yet these metaphors also imply the virus is powerful, with presentations of how patients with mild symptoms can evolve into severe cases in short time. Besides, 2019-nCoV is often characterized as something new of human society whose symptoms are very much like influenza and SARS, but that people know little of as the source of the virus has not been found and pathogenesis not discerned.

Such representation underlines the subtext that what the government was confronting was an evil and formidable antagonist. That also implies any mistakes made during the early stage of the epidemic should be deemed extenuating. Blaming the virus in the context of a war, therefore, has done nothing but absolved the government and regulators of responsibility for the epidemic. In addition, as the virus is shaped as the one to blame for bringing pains to the society, the fear and stigmatization of the virus and the disease is intensified, so is the discrimination against those who suffer from the disease.

On the other hand, the responsibility for the epidemic by and large points to the people who did not take the disease seriously. In the first episode of *China's fight against COVID-19*<sup>42</sup>, for instance, the reason how the epidemic came into being is explained by Ye Qing, deputy director of Hubei Provincial Bureau of Statistics,

*Because no one took seriously the disease, and because everyone knew there was no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission, perhaps the disease is just the flu or pneumonia. everyone thought "this is none of my business". (Episode 1, 4:47-4:54)*

The point of view – “no one took seriously the disease” – is stressed in the video by a sequence of news video clips interviewing passengers at Wuhan Tianhe International Airport<sup>43</sup> and sellers of Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market<sup>44</sup> who do not believe the virus is real. For

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<sup>42</sup> Link: <https://youtu.be/DhfprNJocBU>

<sup>43</sup> Episode 1, 2:14-2:35 (Link: <https://youtu.be/DhfprNJocBU>)

<sup>44</sup> Episode 1, 4:38-4:46 (Link: <https://youtu.be/DhfprNJocBU>)

another example, the TV play, *Heroes in Harm's Way*<sup>45</sup>, portrays a character not willing to wear masks being judged and criticized by his neighbors. Such negative depiction of people who do not respect medical experts' judgement and instructions leaves the impression that they are the reason why the scale of the epidemic was enlarged. Meanwhile it also suggests the coping responsibility with infectious diseases should belong to individuals instead of the government or the experts only, and people who do not comply with authorities be deemed benighted and irresponsible.

Such attribution is certainly problematic, as the cognitive distance between the authorities and COVID-19 is completely unequal to COVID-19 and lay people. In overall the former knows and gathers much more information than the latter, hence there is an obvious symbolic power relation between the two (Constantinou, 2021). Theoretically, it is authorities who are supposed to take the responsibility of not containing the disease at an earlier stage of the epidemic, but with these discursive representations, the responsibility is now shifted to lay people. What remains even more questionable is the void of reference to government's responsibility for this epidemic. As portrayed, Chinese government is positively taking measures to contain the epidemic with a universal discourse schema being used:

Notice the abnormality → Report to Health Commission → National Health commission step in → Expert Team arrives in Wuhan → Confirm human-to-human transmission → Announce the discovery → The virus continues spreading → Medical system breaks down → The Spring Festival travel rush arrives → Issue a lockdown → Send medical teams from other provinces → Issue the instruction to build or transform hospitals → Contain the spread

The schema including many behavioral and material processes makes the government appear busy with noticing the situation and giving instructions. In broader social context, however, many assume the government of Wuhan and Hubei Province should take the responsibility for why people did not take the virus seriously at the beginning. Critics condemn the government did not warn the citizens and publish true information of the epidemic early enough and therefore accelerate the spread. This information is surely not mentioned in the empirical materials, as Chinese media in most cases, are not allowed to make public comments that

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<sup>45</sup> Episode 7, 3:50-4:39 (Link: <https://youtu.be/ttmwU8mYYac>)

criticize government's policies or decisions (*BBC*<sup>46</sup>, 2020-12-29).

To summarize, as shown in the videos, the responsibility for causing the pains and sufferings from the epidemic is primarily attributed to the virus and lay people who lack sense of risk. Problematical though, it provides a frame for a collective trauma, a cultural trauma to be constructed. The elements that compose the trauma claim are visibly presented: (a) a disruption of daily lives that causes ontological insecurity defines the pain of the epidemic. (b) People in Wuhan during the lockdown are the direct sufferers of the pains. (c) medical workers and mass media who narrate the “darkest time” are carrier groups of the trauma (d) Chinese people are forced to face an existentially threatening crisis because of an unexpected epidemic (e) the virus and people who do not comply with the instructions given by medical experts are blamed.

The trauma drama performed in Chinese context has provided one of the most peculiar situations in trauma studies where the past and the future are not only entangled but also conflated. At first glance, the epidemic is a retrospective trauma (Schmidt, 2014), given the first wave of COVID-19 in China has already passed and the blame attribution has been established. Stepping back and taking a glimpse of the global landscape, however, the pandemic seems to be far from over. So long as China remains to be member of the global society, Chinese collectivity will have been constantly threatened by the recurrence of tragedies. The future is yet unknown, but if cultural trauma is constructed without a defense mechanism being provided, traumatic events will highly probably develop into continuous traumas that harass members of the collectivity forever (Schmidt, 2014; Zhukova, 2016). In this dilemma, how the cultural agents reply to the trauma they construct is crucial.

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<sup>46</sup> Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55355401> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)



## The Great Unity

When a trauma is located inside of cultural structure and perpetrators identified, the task that usually follows is to respond to the trauma so that a new collective identity can be sustained (Alexander and Breese, 2011). The aim to construct a trauma in a collective sense, as the theory suggests, is to expand the circle of “we” and revive social solidarity (Alexander et al., 2004). In this case, moreover, social solidarity is not only an end but also a means. In and across the videos being analyzed, the theme of togetherness recurs as a way resisting traumatic events and the aftermath. The words and expressions extracted as follows are illustrations of this display:

Victory is assured when people stand together. (*Together against COVID-19*, Episode 4, 47:44-48:06)

With the help of other regions across the country, Wuhan can win the battle against COVID-19. (*China’s fight against COVID-19*, Episode 4, 3:35-3:42)

No winter lasts forever, every spring is sure to follow. With everyone working hand in hand, a promising and vibrant season is coming. (*City of Heroes*, Episode 1, 44:32-44:45)

Let’s stay together, and be each other’s family. (*With You*, Episode 2, 43:12-43:43)

These macroscopical expressions imply the epidemic will be contained so long as members of the collectivity stay together and help each other, which is further demonstrated with a great many models displayed and heroic deeds performed to construct a social discourse of togetherness. This chapter will delve into this process, coupled to a general evaluation of possible social consequences.

### “Our society is made up of many sectors” – Organic solidarity

On the micro level, togetherness is interwoven into the mainstream narrative of COVID-19 through the representation of moral examples of all trades. In scenario after scenario, individuals join the “war” against epidemic by way of volunteering or sticking to their posts. Take *Wuhan, My Diary of Combating Coronavirus*, for example. This vlog-based short-video collection produced by Chinese Media Group (CMG) characterizes the daily lives of ordinary people from different industries and domains during the epidemic. One of the episodes, *4 am in Wuhan*<sup>47</sup>, presents 15 people in turn doing different jobs in the small hours. The social

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<sup>47</sup> Episode 22 (Link: <https://youtu.be/kBkTZ2Ljg1E>)

actors in this video are placed into a table as follows (Table 3).

Name of a person	Occupation	Pronoun	Family	Others
Yan Jianfeng	Loading and Unloading Supervisor	I	Dad	Little baby
Zhou Jie	Volunteer of Hospital	You	Mom	Patient
Liu Sheng	Traffic Police	We	Grandma	Customer
Lyu Mengting	Staff of Convenience Store	She	Son	Partner
Hu Jianbin	Volunteer driver		Daughter	The disabled
Liu Yong	Security Guard		His family	Wuhan People
Zhang Cheng	Delivery man			People
Chen Lei	Medical Emergency Operator			
Wang Ke	Emergency Physician			
Liu Lei	Manager of Hotel			
Shen Feiteng	Volunteer Chef			
Hu Haibing	Sanitation Worker			
Wang Hua	Product Sorter			
Liu Lang	Soldier			
Yan Xing	Volunteer			
	Medical worker			
	Psychology teacher			

Table 3 Social Actors

Noticeably, it is the names of people and occupations that play a major part in this table. From an analytical angle, people’s real names indicate the speakers are specific and trustworthy individuals, and occupations imply the speakers are treated as a functional part of the society. Together, social actors as specific individuals and functionalized participants connote that the speakers are presented as legitimate, decent and respectable people (Hansen and Machin, 2013). This consists with the video that claims to be dedicated to those going through a difficult time with Wuhan. And apparently, the speakers are regarded as the representatives or role models of those people.

Furthermore, the long list of names and occupations also creates a sense that a lot of people are doing their part for Wuhan city. Although people are doing different jobs, they work in the same place at the same time and for the same goal. The similar discourse also emerges in the documentary, *A City of heroes*<sup>48</sup>, where Zhai Chenfei, a pilot and volunteer says,

Our society is made up of many sectors. In normal times, people of every sector stick to their own jobs and work to fulfill duties. When Wuhan is battling the epidemic, our society also shows cohesion. (Episode 1, 30:34-30:46)

<sup>48</sup> Link: <https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38>

This is exactly the retelling of what Durkheim (1933) term as “organic solidarity” or Westen (1985:267) as “individuated collectivism”, where individuals work like organs of the “body politic” and social cohesion is based on the division of labor in society. Unlike macroscopical expressions where togetherness is vaguely described as an existential process (Halliday, 1978), the same discourse in these examples is obviously more vivid and specific.

It is a bit odd to see individuals are highlighted in representing collectivism, though, as individual or individuality is often deemed the opposite of collectivistic or collectivity. The seeming contradiction is also embodied in the frequent use of the word “heroes” which is often brought up in cultures that prioritize individualism. In this case not only medical workers are couched as “heroes in white” but also normal Wuhan people, and even the whole Wuhan city are veiled in a certain kind of heroism. What accompanies these overall compliments is the mass presentation of heroic deeds. Zhong Nanshan, for instance, is described as someone who “calls on people to avoid going to Wuhan, but he himself went there once again”<sup>49</sup>. The description shapes the image of a hero in harm’s way who puts personal health and safety aside.

How can we understand this seeming contradiction? Primarily, giving prominence to individuals is not equal to individualism which place personal rights and interests in a prior position (Minkov et al., 2017). Also heroism that is highly praised in China is not an individualistic one that highlights personal strength or power in accomplishing social tasks. On the contrary, the tradition of Confucianism and socialism theory that profoundly influence today’s Chinese culture both think highly of the role of individuals in societies, but in a way that they make contributions to their family or society (Lai and Lam, 1986). And the heroism propagandized by the power from above in China is one termed “revolutionary heroism”, by which people dare to fight against the evil and the dead hand for the collectivity and by means of the collectivity (*CPC News*<sup>50</sup>, 2020-03-03).

The purpose of setting moral examples points to a promotion of a set of personal qualities as well as social values such as selflessness, devotion, bravery, and kindness. Besides, the

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<sup>49</sup> *China’s Fight against COVID-19*, Episode 4, 3:21-3:35 (Link: <https://youtu.be/Hzm2uP5M7nA>)

<sup>50</sup> Available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0303/c40531-31613699.html> (in Chinese) (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

discursive representation of the examples is often integrated into the structure of macroscopical narratives as mentioned above, where people are conceived as generic and collectivized social actors. This is certainly ideological work where moral examples are considered as means to convince the audience what are the right things to do as part of a collective. It is noteworthy there is an overlexicalization (Hansen and Machin, 2013) of age and gender in this work such as emphasizing Zhong Nanshan is an “eight-four years old SARS fighter”<sup>51</sup>, or “among them two thirds are female workers”<sup>52</sup>. Surely gender and age can be expected as basic information of reporting, but such terms are excessively used like evidence of some ideological contention that implies the senior and women are not expected or should not have played an important part in this containment. On the other hand, it can be also understood as a way to evoke sympathy, but the subtext may enhance gender inequality and ageism which always puts the female and the senior in a weaker or secondary place.

### **With the help, we can win – Three-step collectivism**

An emergency surgery must be operated. Respirators are in need but exhausted. The surgeon searches the storeroom and finds a life-support machine barely available with incomplete parts. Knowing the patient is still waiting, this is surely a painful moment. Another doctor then rushes to the equipment management office and appeals to other medical teams to help get the parts needed. Right away all medical teams in the hospital swing into action. Soon enough all the parts missing are gathered and the story wraps up with a happy ending that the machine works and the surgery succeeds.

This scene from the TV play, *With You*<sup>53</sup>, embodies a typical discursive structure, a three-step collectivism which often emerges in Chinese narration of difficulties or challenges: a problem occurs (a machine with incomplete parts) – people work together (gather the parts) – the problem is solved (the machine works). The discursive structure foregrounds the significance of collectivity and togetherness in tackling all sorts of difficult situations, which is as well applied to the narrative of the COVID-19 epidemic as a whole to deal with the pains that enters the core of Chinese collective identity. In the end of most videos being analyzed, the

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<sup>51</sup> *China's Fight against COVID-19*, Episode 4, 3:21-3:35 (Link: <https://youtu.be/Hzm2uP5M7nA>)

<sup>52</sup> *China's Fight against COVID-19*, Episode 4, 5:20-5:30 (Link: <https://youtu.be/Hzm2uP5M7nA>)

<sup>53</sup> Episode 8, 20:29-28:59 (Link: [https://youtu.be/F32\\_RTm2b9o](https://youtu.be/F32_RTm2b9o))

fact that Wuhan reopened on April 8<sup>th</sup> and the images of Wuhan residents go outside and medical teams leave Wuhan are thematically represented<sup>54</sup>, suggesting the epidemic is finally and successfully contained in Wuhan and in China. Combined with the depictions of people's pains and sufferings, and sacrifice and devotions, the whole story can be drawn the outline in a way of three – step collectivism: a new coronavirus emerges – people stick to their jobs and help each other – the epidemic is contained.

There is an implicit logic in this outline, that the construction of the epidemic as a cultural trauma serves as the prerequisite for constructing the discourse of togetherness. Moreover, the more frightening and difficult the epidemic is, the more significant the action of containment, and further, the more magnificent the image of CPC and Chinese government who lead the containment. This is probably one of the reasons why pains and sufferings are overtly depicted in the videos and the epidemic itself is compared to a fierce war. In the meantime, to enhance the positive image of the government and social solidarity, the materials drawn within the videos are carefully scrutinized. Those might be disadvantageous to the government are purposefully ruled out. This explains why a lot of conspicuous events of the epidemic, such as Dr. Li Wenliang's death, are barely mentioned in these materials.

To elaborate, Dr. Li Wenliang was a physician who worked at Wuhan Central Hospital and was one of the first group of people who realized the existence of the new coronavirus. On 30th December, 2019, he sent out a message in a private online group chat that warns his fellow medics there might be SARS, a disease whose symptoms are similar to COVID-19, in Wuhan. The message was later investigated by the local police for “making false comments” and “spreading rumors”, but soon enough the epidemic broke out and Li himself also contracted COVID-19 while treating patients. Unfortunately, Li died of the disease eventually in early February. His death sparked an outburst of anger and sorrow on Chinese social media and provoked fierce public debates on free speech and government's transparency in China (*BBC*<sup>55</sup>, 2020-02-06).

The image of Dr. Li Wenliang flashes twice in the videos being analyzed. Once as a

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<sup>54</sup> E.g., 2020 Spring Chronicle, Episode 4, 41:53-42:31 (Link: <https://youtu.be/XA234nZe71c>)

<sup>55</sup> Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51364382> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

representative of those who sacrificed their lives for the epidemic, the other shortly brought up in the voice-over for the introduction of the numbers of medics being infected in Wuhan's hospitals, no comments given in both<sup>56</sup>. This shows a typical way for Chinese media to deal with controversial news figures – either being silent or giving a minimal touch. As a result, in the videos and in social context, Li is shaped as an official martyr of this epidemic. What is covered and turned a blind eye to, however, is the essence of the debate – the issue of free speech in China.

For another, “martyr” is also a word containing military metaphors with political and official overtones. Martyr is usually a title awarded by the government on behalf of the state. To give the title of martyr can integrate the image of Dr. Li Wenliang into the same discourse of collectivism and togetherness and break down the foundation of the opposition. This corroborates the argument in culture trauma theory that “trauma dramas are performed, not described” (Alexander and Breese, 2011: xxvii). Culture traumas are not reflections of actual events but simply a symbolic construction. What is true is not defined by the descriptive accuracy of the reality, if it exists, but the enactment of power (ibid). In this sense, if people want to understand what was going on in Wuhan during the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic through the videos being analyzed, they will probably only see what the producers and the power from above want them to see.

As social consequences, Chinese audience accept the discourse of togetherness well in a way that most of these videos are given relatively high grades and comments that eulogize social solidarity on *douban.com* and other video websites. Some of the comments are extracted and translated as follows for examples<sup>57</sup>:

...Being together, nothing is undefeated... (嘻嘻啊, for *City of Heroes*)

...The victory of the fight against the COVID-19 is a fruit of common will. Really want to something, but being far away I can only donate money... (minjingchen\_0, for *Wuhan: my diary of combating coronavirus*)

...Hope the future generations can learn our true pains, see our shiny humanity, feel our great solidarity, experience the connotation of every sentence in national anthem, and comprehend the pride of being a Chinese... (WH 的大眼睛, for *With You*)

...Hope in China after the epidemic, people can break the walls of their heart and tightly

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<sup>56</sup> Episode 2, 7:41-8:26 (Link: <https://youtu.be/UT9xVz6l78g>)

<sup>57</sup> The comments are extracted from *douban.com* which were originally in Chinese and translated into English.

unite. No regret to be born in China... (金属党 SHINJI, for *Life matters*)

Seemingly, these comments suggest the construction of culture trauma of the COVID-19 epidemic and the three-step collectivism by media representations have truly affected the audience and made contributions to collective unity. However, comments are just one aspect of the social influences, while Alexander and Breese (2011) argue cultural traumas may have “material” repercussions which can lead the society either to reconciliation or polarization. To fully understand the consequences of using the discourse of togetherness, one is supposed to not only cling to the empirical materials being analyzed but also pay closer attention to larger social context.

## **Conclusion and Discussion: the Boundaries of the “We”**

Building on theoretical perspectives of risk society, ontological insecurity and cultural trauma, the thesis explores whether there exists a universal discourse in Chinese mainstream media responding to social risks like the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, China. From the case study a general discourse schema characterized as “a three-step collectivism” has been identified, where the epidemic is depicted as a war-like situation that causes a lot of pains and sufferings to Wuhan people. And to contain the epidemic, people of all trades in Chinese society are mobilized by the government and CPC to help a part in small ways. Finally with the strength of unity the epidemic is successfully contained and life in Wuhan is back to normal.

To articulate the significance of the containment and the greatness of CPC and the government who led the containment, military metaphors are frequently used to highlight the terror of the disease, where the city of Wuhan is conceived as the battlefield and medical workers as soldiers or warriors in white. While market-oriented media tend to use military metaphors less than media for CPC affairs, in general, all Chinese media share the same discourse of togetherness. There is no apparent differentiation and resistance in comparing videos produced by different agencies. The metaphorical thinking to a great extent implies all Chinese citizens are involved as members of the collectivity in this war, which justifies the intervention of the CPC that claims to represent people’s interest.

For similar reasons, the epidemic overall is shaped as a cultural trauma. In this trauma drama, medical workers consist of a major part of the carrier group who speak of “the darkest time” in Wuhan, coupled to the retelling of a few Wuhan residents. Through media framework, the pains and sufferings of Wuhan people are constructed as the pains of all by a discursive representation of existentially threatening situations that impact the collective conscious of their identities of being Chinese. The nature of the pain, as empirical materials hint, is an abrupt disruption of daily lives which causes conditions of ontological insecurity. And the responsibility of the pains is attributed to the virus and those who discount the disease.

Through the reception of media framing, some serious matters and social events occurred in



the epidemic against the positive image of Chinese government are evaded, such as Dr. Li Wenliang's death. This is certainly a process of selection and construction, deciding whose voices can be heard and what stories can be reproduced and diffused. The ideal interest of building such cultural trauma and the discourse of togetherness is to enhance the social solidarity of Chinese people under the regulation of Chinese government and the leadership of CPC. For now it has been well received by some Chinese netizens as reflected in their comments. The question remains, however, is the nature of the collectivity, namely who are the people of the collectivity and where are the boundaries of the "we"?

The answer cannot be directly found in media representation, although phrases like "the Chinese nation", "the Chinese people" or "the human society" and "the world" recur in the text. To examine the concept of "we" as the consequence or the effect of the discourse of "togetherness", we can turn to a train of social events which happened beyond the epidemic in Wuhan. In mid-March, 2020, for example, when the COVID-19 has evolved into a pandemic and the situation outside Wuhan in China became much more stable, a Chinese Australian came to Beijing, China for work. She was asked to stay in her home for a fortnight quarantine but disobeyed the regulation and left home for morning exercises. When this was exposed online, countless Chinese netizens were whipped into an outrage. The Australian was criticized hard and dismissed by her employer, asked to leave China once her visa expired (CNN<sup>58</sup>, 2020-03-20).

Almost in the same period when many universities and schools worldwide shut down and Chinese students studying abroad came back home, news of students who got infected in foreign countries sabotaging the fruits of the containment in China were massively reported by local media<sup>59</sup>. A group of people online argue Chinese government should suspend the international flights and close the borders for the safety of the majority. Although the argument did not become a reality, many innocent Chinese citizens studying, working or living abroad are tagged as someone who has no patriotism and traitors in this epidemic.

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<sup>58</sup> Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/20/asia/beijing-coronavirus-woman-fired-intl-hnk/index.html> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

<sup>59</sup> For example, *News China* reported a student who studied abroad and came back to China was the source of the Haerbin epidemic on 28<sup>th</sup>, April. (Link: <https://m.weibo.cn/1642512402/4498794576423322>) (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

One year later during the 2021 Spring Festival against a background of the rise of another wave of COVID-19 in rural areas of Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, the Chinese government issued another emergent notice. Those who planned to go to rural areas for the festival needed to do nucleic acid tests and prove negative seven days before they arrived the place (*China Daily*<sup>60</sup>, 2021-01-21). The notice shocked the whole society and received tons of criticism as the Spring Festival is deemed a most important moment for Chinese to reunite with their families and friends, and the notice was like adding a barrier for people to go home. However, quite a few people also stepped forward against the critics arguing the notice made sense as the scale of the Spring Festival rush is too large, and China could not afford another situation like Wuhan.

To enumerate these events is of course not for redundancy, but to reflect different dimensions of the consequences of the trauma drama based on the discourse of togetherness. The first event indicates those who do not comply with experts' instructions and government's regulations in China are excluded from the circle of the "we". The second shows how Chinese people hate and fear the virus, and those who did not experience the same epidemic in China are not considered a part of the collectivity. And the recent case of the 2021 Spring Festival rush in China denotes a sign of division in the collectivity and a rise of double-standard attitude towards the containment.

There may be other explanations for these social practices, but the responsibility attributed to the virus and those who lack sense of risks for this epidemic is probably a critical reason. In the end, people disgust the virus and discriminate those who may possibly transmit it. This means the percussion of the cultural trauma of the epidemic and the discourse of togetherness did not necessarily enhance the solidarity of all Chinese people but lead to polarization. Or to put it another way, the boundaries of the "we" are redefined. Only those who place interests of the collectivity ahead of their own are acknowledged as members of the collectivity. And the ideological attachment behind this discourse and redefinition is an emphasis of individuated collectivism and revolutionary heroism always advocated by the power from above in China.

Certainly, if we take a glimpse outside of the box of collective identity itself, as Anderson

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<sup>60</sup> Available at: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202101/21/WS6008d0fca31024ad0baa4080.html> (Accessed: 3 May 2021)

(1991) and Bauman (2000) should agree, almost all the descriptions of community and collectivity may just be imaginations or illusions. Particularly in this era of deep individualization and mediatization, people are less entangled with one another and most of the case we only share momentary empathy like in “cloakrooms” (Bauman, 2000:199). In this sense, to build a conceptual community or collectivity is probably just one way, and sometimes an efficient way, to cope with the reality of risk society and the contradiction generating from reflexive modernization – on the one hand we pursue human liberation relying on science and technology, while on the other we have basic need of sense of security which often rooted in the collectivity, such as nation-states, we belong. This process of construction of the social reality is where the mass media plays an indispensable part, and where the effects of media representations should always be taken into account.

On second thought, although the target audience of the video series are mainly Chinese, the series themselves are not confined to Chinese media sphere. Videos tend to move away from where they are produced. They circulate on diverse media sites on a global scale (Rose, 2016: 34-38). With the series of COVID-19 being shared on *YouTube* and other video websites, added with English subtitles, the discourse of togetherness has been brought into the vision of the global audience. Does that mean Chinese media is aiming to create a global imaginary that something happened elsewhere is relevant to “us”, so that they can construct a global cultural trauma that incorporates people living the pandemic into a cosmopolitan community (Silverstone, 2007)? Or is it simply an export of ideology that attempts to convince the global audience into accepting the values of collectivism and socialism? With the pandemic carrying forward, we can expect there will be more in-depth discussions and investigations on these questions.

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## Video Resources

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5. China BeijingTV Life Channel [Online]. Available at <https://youtube.com/user/btvenjoylife> [accessed 17 May 2021]
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12. Xinhuanet [Online]. Available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/video/> [accessed 17 May 2021]
13. Youhug Media Official Channel [Online]. Available at <https://youtube.com/channel/UCjVzBodPWE3BOwHifzTkirA> [accessed 17 May 2021]

# Appendices

## Part one: video links

	Video Series	Video Links
1	With You	1-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/8bWxRp4XGFY">https://youtu.be/8bWxRp4XGFY</a>
		1-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/a9CvIQDZNvk">https://youtu.be/a9CvIQDZNvk</a>
		1-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/ZSO1hUwo_MY">https://youtu.be/ZSO1hUwo_MY</a>
		1-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/bZ6DE_ZU5xg">https://youtu.be/bZ6DE_ZU5xg</a>
		1-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/l38G8wiHay4">https://youtu.be/l38G8wiHay4</a>
		1-6 <a href="https://youtu.be/4wZODP5tffg">https://youtu.be/4wZODP5tffg</a>
		<a href="https://youtu.be/b9PLvwn4sbA">1-7 https://youtu.be/b9PLvwn4sbA</a>
		1-8 <a href="https://youtu.be/F32_RTm2b9o">https://youtu.be/F32_RTm2b9o</a>
		1-9 <a href="https://youtu.be/C5mEttnoxt4">https://youtu.be/C5mEttnoxt4</a>
		1-10 <a href="https://youtu.be/vaB-4Jlx-y8">https://youtu.be/vaB-4Jlx-y8</a>
		1-11 <a href="https://youtu.be/5zFidwy-bUs">https://youtu.be/5zFidwy-bUs</a>
		1-12 <a href="https://youtu.be/9A-JEsGJy84">https://youtu.be/9A-JEsGJy84</a>
		1-13 <a href="https://youtu.be/AHIHeQOomvk">https://youtu.be/AHIHeQOomvk</a>
		1-14 <a href="https://youtu.be/7gDsoHgg7X4">https://youtu.be/7gDsoHgg7X4</a>
		1-15 <a href="https://youtu.be/1td-kYz_ZvE">https://youtu.be/1td-kYz_ZvE</a>
		1-16 <a href="https://youtu.be/JsYvCkVvevs">https://youtu.be/JsYvCkVvevs</a>
		1-17 <a href="https://youtu.be/bJy2pN4Tmog">https://youtu.be/bJy2pN4Tmog</a>
		1-18 <a href="https://youtu.be/qnF_-5y05T0">https://youtu.be/qnF_-5y05T0</a>
		1-19 <a href="https://youtu.be/Y4DBYxCbZ_c">https://youtu.be/Y4DBYxCbZ_c</a>
		1-20 <a href="https://youtu.be/AEKznqLLOLI">https://youtu.be/AEKznqLLOLI</a>
2	Heroes in Harm's Way	2-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/JrkdBhBjsM">https://youtu.be/JrkdBhBjsM</a>
		2-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/d_bHv6Lf-j8">https://youtu.be/d_bHv6Lf-j8</a>
		2-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/A8_AWQF-Bfc">https://youtu.be/A8_AWQF-Bfc</a>
		2-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/LYed2fsI-O4">https://youtu.be/LYed2fsI-O4</a>
		2-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/Xw_AoZvWxEU">https://youtu.be/Xw_AoZvWxEU</a>
		2-6 <a href="https://youtu.be/8wwLbzTOb-E">https://youtu.be/8wwLbzTOb-E</a>
		2-7 <a href="https://youtu.be/ttmwU8mYYac">https://youtu.be/ttmwU8mYYac</a>
		2-8 <a href="https://youtu.be/jC_1ErkEaVY">https://youtu.be/jC_1ErkEaVY</a>
		2-9 <a href="https://youtu.be/ZiBQyf_M9iE">https://youtu.be/ZiBQyf_M9iE</a>
		2-10 <a href="https://youtu.be/g9x89eAG5ys">https://youtu.be/g9x89eAG5ys</a>
		2-11 <a href="https://youtu.be/5hBxXtrJeQA">https://youtu.be/5hBxXtrJeQA</a>
		2-12 <a href="https://youtu.be/NS-pCUXBeDI">https://youtu.be/NS-pCUXBeDI</a>
		2-13 <a href="https://youtu.be/bvmn0bcKNI8">https://youtu.be/bvmn0bcKNI8</a>
		2-14 <a href="https://youtu.be/zGIBFSAYzQo">https://youtu.be/zGIBFSAYzQo</a>
3	A City of Heroes	<a href="https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38">3-1 https://youtu.be/TBu7cWXaR38</a>
4	Life Matters	4-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/sLwjl2a14vY">https://youtu.be/sLwjl2a14vY</a>
		4-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/2OKKNEORIL8">https://youtu.be/2OKKNEORIL8</a>

		4-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/GJBnBV_Zfy8">https://youtu.be/GJBnBV_Zfy8</a>
		4-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/h8X-hueTLrE">https://youtu.be/h8X-hueTLrE</a>
		4-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/rqOHOqVMsXo">https://youtu.be/rqOHOqVMsXo</a>
		4-6 <a href="https://youtu.be/f4tprpK-QeQ">https://youtu.be/f4tprpK-QeQ</a>
5	In Wuhan	5-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/Fiwodinn7tA">https://youtu.be/Fiwodinn7tA</a>
		5-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/MIoh5LwSQj8">https://youtu.be/MIoh5LwSQj8</a>
		5-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/cOke3jsJvSw">https://youtu.be/cOke3jsJvSw</a>
		5-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/6au57S7WVM4">https://youtu.be/6au57S7WVM4</a>
		5-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/QwYe8x3E68U">https://youtu.be/QwYe8x3E68U</a>
		5-6 <a href="https://youtu.be/CczT-9aIfE8">https://youtu.be/CczT-9aIfE8</a>
		5-7 <a href="https://youtu.be/w5QOSAvlN_E">https://youtu.be/w5QOSAvlN_E</a>
6	Together against COVID-19	6-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/DEo3qk-4yx8">https://youtu.be/DEo3qk-4yx8</a>
		6-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/UT9xVz6l78g">https://youtu.be/UT9xVz6l78g</a>
		6-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/CYrBHlo3Vmk">https://youtu.be/CYrBHlo3Vmk</a>
		6-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/PrnQTW7Rw2Y">https://youtu.be/PrnQTW7Rw2Y</a>
		6-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/9C-53bzg9IE">https://youtu.be/9C-53bzg9IE</a>
		6-6 <a href="https://youtu.be/3cdtUoB-WxY">https://youtu.be/3cdtUoB-WxY</a>
7	The Frontline	7-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/h4lfp3mvKAE">https://youtu.be/h4lfp3mvKAE</a>
		7-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/yDYsrhxx9R4">https://youtu.be/yDYsrhxx9R4</a>
8	The Chinese Doctors	8-1 <a href="https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19ry8q7c2g.html">https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19ry8q7c2g.html</a>
		8-2 <a href="https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rxypj9l8.html">https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rxypj9l8.html</a>
		8-3 <a href="https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19ry2ba388.html">https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19ry2ba388.html</a>
		8-4 <a href="https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19ry08rje8.html">https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19ry08rje8.html</a>
		8-5 <a href="https://www.iqiyi.com/v_2ffkws27mlo.html">https://www.iqiyi.com/v_2ffkws27mlo.html</a>
9	2020 Spring Chronicle	9-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/MkvIo_zsZPE">https://youtu.be/MkvIo_zsZPE</a>
		9-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/6fngU7PKg7w">https://youtu.be/6fngU7PKg7w</a>
		9-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/t_FfRpsSk_Y">https://youtu.be/t_FfRpsSk_Y</a>
		9-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/XA234nZe71c">https://youtu.be/XA234nZe71c</a>
10	China's Fight Against COVID-19	10-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/DhfprNJocBU">https://youtu.be/DhfprNJocBU</a>
		10-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/YiKKmdwCnE8">https://youtu.be/YiKKmdwCnE8</a>
		10-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/NcL_fU3ayzg">https://youtu.be/NcL_fU3ayzg</a>
		10-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/Hzm2uP5M7nA">https://youtu.be/Hzm2uP5M7nA</a>
		10-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/zYkjW_aXe3g">https://youtu.be/zYkjW_aXe3g</a>
11	Wuhan My Diary of Combating Coronavirus	11-1 <a href="https://youtu.be/1ynIthIhnKI">https://youtu.be/1ynIthIhnKI</a>
		11-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/GPETEx2PQ00">https://youtu.be/GPETEx2PQ00</a>
		11-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/Gkapfw5r-co">https://youtu.be/Gkapfw5r-co</a>
		11-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/4aMUm2UXd6U">https://youtu.be/4aMUm2UXd6U</a>
		11-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/oo2P46PtrRg">https://youtu.be/oo2P46PtrRg</a>
		11-6 <a href="https://youtu.be/fHty5W5aHr4">https://youtu.be/fHty5W5aHr4</a>
		11-7 <a href="https://youtu.be/GlPalSswfRw">https://youtu.be/GlPalSswfRw</a>
		11-8 <a href="https://youtu.be/pgn9ZxZ_wPc">https://youtu.be/pgn9ZxZ_wPc</a>
		11-9 <a href="https://youtu.be/2KhdVOiIrcw">https://youtu.be/2KhdVOiIrcw</a>
		11-10 <a href="https://youtu.be/-61tv3Kv6Jo">https://youtu.be/-61tv3Kv6Jo</a>

		11-11 <a href="https://youtu.be/DOnJO3j72Y8">https://youtu.be/DOnJO3j72Y8</a>
		11-12 <a href="https://youtu.be/mPlsRPiLEDo">https://youtu.be/mPlsRPiLEDo</a>
		11-13 <a href="https://youtu.be/mnKmx1Dcl_8">https://youtu.be/mnKmx1Dcl_8</a>
		11-14 <a href="https://youtu.be/KNFwOp0_bSs">https://youtu.be/KNFwOp0_bSs</a>
		11-15 <a href="https://youtu.be/n_WIK5MZdrk">https://youtu.be/n_WIK5MZdrk</a>
		11-16 <a href="https://youtu.be/10YX436QG9k">https://youtu.be/10YX436QG9k</a>
		11-17 <a href="https://youtu.be/-hrW1HR78pQ">https://youtu.be/-hrW1HR78pQ</a>
		11-18 <a href="https://youtu.be/sytZGozJduA">https://youtu.be/sytZGozJduA</a>
		11-19 <a href="https://youtu.be/nHumigsMC-I">https://youtu.be/nHumigsMC-I</a>
		11-20 <a href="https://youtu.be/LtRj46dkgLo">https://youtu.be/LtRj46dkgLo</a>
		11-21 <a href="https://youtu.be/ZxrKliicFk">https://youtu.be/ZxrKliicFk</a>
		11-22 <a href="https://youtu.be/kBkTZ2Ljg1E">https://youtu.be/kBkTZ2Ljg1E</a>
		11-23 <a href="https://youtu.be/rzrsKkjB4eI">https://youtu.be/rzrsKkjB4eI</a>
		11-24 <a href="https://youtu.be/ZdHkxKVeIBM">https://youtu.be/ZdHkxKVeIBM</a>
		11-25 <a href="https://youtu.be/JduuZuaWAio">https://youtu.be/JduuZuaWAio</a>
		11-26 <a href="https://youtu.be/G9vc9D9qivw">https://youtu.be/G9vc9D9qivw</a>
		11-27 <a href="https://youtu.be/UrUJb0ukLns">https://youtu.be/UrUJb0ukLns</a>
		11-28 <a href="https://youtu.be/IWOGs1IfVaU">https://youtu.be/IWOGs1IfVaU</a>
		11-29 <a href="https://youtu.be/24MDXzRfoQU">https://youtu.be/24MDXzRfoQU</a>
		11-30 <a href="https://youtu.be/gwQCuVknGQM">https://youtu.be/gwQCuVknGQM</a>
		11-31 <a href="https://youtu.be/utCvEHr10jM">https://youtu.be/utCvEHr10jM</a>
		11-32 <a href="https://youtu.be/L9hrQjZkbwQ">https://youtu.be/L9hrQjZkbwQ</a>
12	Doctors 2020	<a href="https://youtu.be/1qMKJEHZnG0">12-1 https://youtu.be/1qMKJEHZnG0</a>
		12-2 <a href="https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6_aCk">https://youtu.be/gc3o3F6_aCk</a>
		12-3 <a href="https://youtu.be/b3tBOWwb6mM">https://youtu.be/b3tBOWwb6mM</a>
		12-4 <a href="https://youtu.be/0BCX-3SvcTs">https://youtu.be/0BCX-3SvcTs</a>
		12-5 <a href="https://youtu.be/cHptKdfFR7w">https://youtu.be/cHptKdfFR7w</a>

## Part two: Codebook

Code	Description	Example
<b>Military Metaphors</b>	The war-making discourse that compares containing the epidemic or curing the disease to waging a war	
war	The COVID-19 epidemic	8-1 06:23-06:37
battling	The act of treating or curing the patient	6-2 16:20-16:30
soldiers	Medical workers	10-4 00:22-00:36

Code	Description	Example
battlefield	Wuhan/Hospitals in Wuhan	7-103:10-03:30
sacrifice	Media workers get infected or die of the disease	6-2 07:43-07:59
enemy	Virus	6-2 01:49-02:03
backup	Medical teams from other regions in China	3-1 07:39-08:41
<b>Pains</b>	Sufferings represented of people in Wuhan during the first wave	
physical pain	mainly experienced by covid-19 patients and medical workers	8-2 21:16-21:29
fear of death and disease	Afraid of being infected by the virus or dying of the disease	1-7 15:25-15:50
sudden loss of loved ones	families, friends or colleagues pass away abruptly because of the disease	12-4 18:14-19:25
separation from families and friends	People cannot reunite or stay with their families and friends because of their or their families' work or isolation	4-1 9:47-10:16
isolation and immobility	People cannot go out but stay at home, experienced by almost all Chinese people during the epidemic, but especially by covid-19 patients and residents in Wuhan who cannot get out of their wards or houses	9-4 01:29-01:53
overloaded work	People need to work for a long time with high intensity, mainly experienced by medical workers and builders of hospitals in the early stage of the epidemic	6-2 12:30-12:41
frustration of not being able to help	See people suffer but have no capability to help, mainly experienced by medical workers	7-1 14:00-14:22
financial stress	People lose jobs or cannot earn money	5-403:53-04:40

Code	Description	Example
	because of quarantine or lockdown	
others	Pains with unidentified causes	3-1 36:36-37:15
<b>Social Actors</b>	Characters represented in videos being analyzed (mainly divided by their occupations or identities)	
medical workers	People who treat or take care of the patients	12-1 01:42-12:36
COVID-19 patients	People who get infected and isolated for treatment	4-3 02:37-03:02
investigator	People who conduct epidemiological investigation	1-10 0:12-01:30
researcher	People who study the virus or the disease in labs	9-1 01:29-12:44
delivery man	People who deliver food, medicine, commodity and other supplies or necessities to people in Wuhan during the first wave	1-320:11-23:10
social worker	People who work in communities	5-401:01-02:30
builders	People who help build or transform hospitals	3-1 17:18-19:36
police/security guard	People who are in charge of implementing the order of lockdown and isolation	3-1 25:42-27:15
journalist/media worker	People who report the epidemic	11-5 00:34-00:51
volunteer	People who help with the containment for free	3-1 29:30-32:07
real soldier	People who work in military organization despatched to help Wuhan	2-112:30-14:12

Code	Description	Example
staff of stores	People who work in supermarkets or convenience stores	11-22 0:56-01:17
staff of hotels	People who work in designated hotels for medical workers or for suspected cases of COVID-19	11-22 2:50-3:35
staff of restaurants	People who prepare meals for medical workers, patients and other people	1-3 18:56-19:30
driver	People who help medical workers commute during the epidemic	5-1 3:45-5:07
loading and uploading worker	People who transport donations and supplies from outside Wuhan	11-22 :22-0:35
barber	People who help cut medical workers' hair to lessen their probability of infection	5-25:32-10:20
locksmith	People who help unlock the doors and take care of the houses of those who cannot go back Wuhan because of the lockdown	5-2 1:00-3:05
sanitation worker	People who help clean the roads during the first wave	11-22 3:47-3:52
others/ordinary people	People who stay at home during the first wave	11-2 00:42-04:35
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	Recurring topics that cannot be simply categorized into any dimensions mentioned above	
lockdown	Scenes and descriptions of Wuhan city and the situation in Wuhan during the lockdown	12-2 11:43-13:37
medical run	Scenes and descriptions of medical system being crashed in Wuhan during the first wave	10-2 02:11-02:24

Code	Description	Example
togetherness	Scenes and descriptions of people stay together, work together, and help each other to overcome difficulties	1-722:04-25:58
responsibility	The representation or performance of attributing the responsibility of causing the epidemic and spreading the virus to something or someone	10-1 04:46-04:55
international reaction	Scenes or descriptions of people from foreign countries helping Wuhan or foreign scientists or international organizations making comments on the epidemic	7-1 41:32-42:03

### Part Three: Screenshots

Lockdown:







Normal run:





Medical run:





Masks, disinfectant sprays and protective suits:





Medical Workers:





COVID-19 patients:





Real soldiers:



