

Fostering Solidarity and Encouraging Shared Commitment: *Chongqing Daily's* Narratives about the Front-line Workers and the Role of these Narratives in Containing Covid-19

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This article analyses *Chongqing Daily's* narratives about the front-line workers during the pandemic outbreak and their role in containing the Covid-19. These narratives foreground the disruption of filial connections and family life of those on the front lines as well as the physical toll their work takes on the bodies of these workers. By highlighting the suffering of front-line workers through familiar experiences relating to the body and family connections, this article argues that these narratives enabled inter-subjective connections between the front-line workers and the rest of the population and, therefore, helped foster a feeling of solidarity among the population in controlling the virus. The descriptions about the practices of front-line workers in the quarantined areas and their social moral meaning also functioned as action models and explanatory frameworks for the public to rationalize and assign meaning to the behaviour required of them during the lockdown period, and thus encouraged a shared commitment to combating the virus. Thus, the *Chongqing Daily* narratives strengthened the social cohesion in Chongqing and helped unite the population for a total war against the pandemic.

Introduction

The early days of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak saw the emergence of a large number of narratives about the front-line workers in Chongqing's newspapers. Yet, the characteristics of these narratives and their role in Chongqing's approach to contain the pandemic, to my knowledge, have not been examined. In this article,

I analyse the features of the narratives about the plight of the front-line workers published in *Chongqing Daily*, the most widely circulated newspaper in Chongqing, and the function of these narratives in helping to manage the pandemic. Thus, I aim to explore the ways in which the newspaper participated in public health management. Special attention will be paid to how the journalistic pandemic narratives worked with the public consciousness.

The Situation of Covid-19 in Chongqing and *Chongqing Daily*'s Narrative Response

Before analysing *Chongqing Daily*'s narrative about the front-line workers, I will briefly outline the situation of Covid-19 in Chongqing. Situated in the southwest part of China, Chongqing is one of the four Chinese municipalities directly governed by China's central government. (The other three are Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin.) The municipality has a population of about 30 million and is to the west of Hubei Province, the hotspot of the coronavirus in China. The local government of Hubei's provincial capital city, Wuhan, was late in identifying the strongly infectious nature of Covid-19 between human beings and thus failed to take decisive measures to quarantine suspected cases and their close contacts at the beginning of the outbreak. Because of the intense traffic between the two cities, Covid-19 quickly spread to the densely populated municipality of Chongqing after its emergence in Wuhan in December 2019. By 21 January 2020, five confirmed cases had been reported in Chongqing, all of them imported from Wuhan (Five Imported Confirmed Cases of Covid-19 Reported in Chongqing, 2020). Within a month, the overall number of confirmed cases reported in Chongqing soared to 576, including six deaths on 25 January 2020 (Situation Report of Covid-19 in Chongqing on 25 February 2020).

Faced with this situation, the Chongqing government, learning from Wuhan government's failing approach to the epidemic and the severe consequences, took the following measures to contain the disease.

- (1) Reduce the imported potential virus carriers from Wuhan by imposing travel bans. The Chongqing government suspended all coach and air travel between Wuhan and Chongqing, and greatly reduced the number of trains to and from Hubei province (Shangyou News 2020). Chongqing migrant workers and visitors to Hubei province were not allowed to return to Chongqing during the Lunar New Year holiday (Notification: the People Who Went to Hubei Province during the Lunar New Year Holiday Should not Return to Chongqing at This Moment 2020).
- (2) Identify and quarantine suspected cases of the virus by stringent screening of residents. The government tracked each individual's travel history and contacts with persons suspected of carrying the virus and shared tips with every household in Chongqing about ways to prevent infection (Notifications: Employing Appropriate Strategies to Contain the Covid-19 According to the Individual Situation of Different Districts in Chongqing 2020).

- (3) Reduce transmission of the virus in communities by issuing shutdown and stay-at-home orders. Schools, workplaces and recreational facilities were closed, and people were required to stay at home. Only one person per household was allowed to venture out to shop for necessities.

These government policies worked as an anti-epidemic mechanism in the critical time span available to impose a new code of conduct upon the population so as to stop the spread of the pandemic. At the same time, these measures restricted people's freedom and disrupted their normal lives. In such cases, shared commitment and solidarity in the population are necessary to assure that the measures are effectively implemented. To this purpose, Chongqing newspapers, such as *Chongqing Daily*, as information conduits for the general population, opened their pages to stories about the front-line workers, aiming to use these people's practices and experiences to educate the public and organize the population for a total war against the pandemic. To meet this goal, *Chongqing Daily* instituted a pandemic column entitled 'Determined to Win the People's War against the New Corona-virus Disease' depicting the realities of the lives of front-line workers. These narratives highlighted the physical and emotional pain the front-line workers endured and how their work alienated them from their families and communities. In contrast, there was little critical reflection of Chongqing government's policies and strategies.

Disruption to Filial Connections, Pain and *Chongqing Daily's* Narratives about the Front-line Workers

In China, the Party newspaper, as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party and the government, must play the role of official medium to spread 'positive energy'. As the local Party and government organ, *Chongqing Daily* should play the same role in the municipality. Its narratives about the plight of front-line workers during the pandemic outbreak first focused on the disruption of filial connections and family life. On 9 February 2020, *Chongqing Daily* published an article entitled 'Sending Video Wishes to the Medical Staff from Their Kids: Defeat the Virus Faster and Get Home Earlier'. This article described the experiences of medical personnel from Chongqing who were volunteering in Wuhan. Rather than emphasizing the daily work of these individuals, the article highlighted their experiences as parents and grandparents isolated from their children and grandchildren. This identification of the workers as family members ensured that every reader would find a point of connection to one or more of these workers. The workers' stories centred on their intense desire to be reunited with their loved ones during the traditional Chinese Lantern Festival. However, because of their responsibilities to those they serve and their duty to society, they accepted the reality that such a reunion was impossible. Instead, they found some solace in video clips they shared with their families. The sense of alienation was intensified by presenting first-person narratives from the workers and their family members. Chen Wei, the head of the Infection Control Department at Chongqing Xinqiao hospital, wrote to his two children: 'My two darling babies, I

didn't have a chance to speak a word to you when I left. I am good in Wuhan but I miss you very much . . . ' (Li 2020). The first-person structure of the narrative solicits empathy. Chen Wei's loss would affect any father in his situation in much the same way. The title 'Defeat the Virus Faster and Get Home Earlier' presents the pain of alienation from a child's point of view. Placing 'get home earlier' after 'defeat the virus' constructs a causal relationship: defeating the virus as early as possible is the goal because it means family members can be reunited sooner. This emphasis on universal human emotions is made more culturally poignant to the reader because the separation must be endured during a holiday period of great cultural significance.

In tune with the narrative about the disruption to filial connections in the article in question, the newspaper printed four photographs in which the children sent wishes to their parents and encouraged them in their attempt to contain the virus. Standing next to posters featuring messages in support of their parents' work in Wuhan, the eyes of the five children in the four close-up pictures look directly at the camera, inviting the readers to contemplate the children's sacrifice and commitment in their decision to repress their desire to meet their parents. The children's support for their parents working in the front-line and their strong desire for family reunion evoke a tension that intensifies the suffering and pain caused by their physical separation. Like their parents, by repressing their natural desires, they work for the greater good of society.

These photographs and narratives about the front-line staff's suffering in *Chongqing Daily* recall Susan Sontag's argument about the effect of different ways of representing pain. She notes that the depiction of suffering through photographs makes the audience remember, while narratives make the audience understand (Sontag 2003, 89). In line with this insight, by using the mixed-method of visual and verbal articulation to explain the alienation of the filial relations, the *Chongqing Daily* article not only enabled the Chongqing public to conceptualize the suffering of the front-line staff but also pinned these memories about the front-line to the public consciousness. Similar experiences feature in other articles in the series. The article 'Fighting! Anqi' featured Anqi, a 26-year-old military veteran who worked as a support staffer in the quarantined areas of a public health centre, cleaning the toilets and the trash bins. In his effort to help contain the virus, he had to resist his desire to see his six-month-old daughter during the Chinese Lantern Festival (Chen and Li 2020). Another article, 'Different Versions of Lantern Festival Reunion for Two Community Workers: They Meet Their Family Members with a Door Between', focused upon two female community workers, Luo Min and Yu Xia. Luo Min's mother was ill with Leukocythemia. Because Luo Min's work included identifying suspected cases of the coronavirus disease, and she thus could easily contract the virus herself, she was forced to talk to her mother through a closed window. Yu Xia, in order to work in the front-line containing the virus, had to wean her nine-month-old baby boy early and could only see him through a closed door.

Describing the pain exacted on the bodies of these workers by the physical toll of their front-line work is the other method *Chongqing Daily* used to represent the reality of front-line life. Representing physical pain and bodily suffering in a text is challenging. Elaine Scarry notes: 'when one hears about another person's physical

pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth' (Scarry 1985, 3). Scarry argues that physical pain as a form of consciousness bears the property of inexpressibility; it can be only 'partially' articulated through its comparison with 'all our other interior states', such as love, fear and ambivalence, because these states of consciousness, unlike pain, have referential content in the external world and thus can be objectified in language (Scarry 1985, 5). It is helpful to use Scarry's sense of the difficulty inherent in representing physical pain to examine the strategies *Chongqing Daily's* journalists employed in their attempts to depict the physical sufferings of front-line workers.

In these newspaper articles, the journalists managed to render the pain of the front-line workers in terms of its connection to other interior feelings, such as the feeling of discomfort when the physical body is overtaxed and damaged and its excretion processes are disrupted. In the article 'Thirteen Male Nurses Fighting at Xiaogan', the writer describes the daily life of these nurses in the quarantine wards. These men must work continuously for 6 to 12 hours, and cannot risk the danger of a rest-room break, so they wear diaper pads. One nurse, Zhang Biao, explains that urine regularly leaks out of his diaper pad, wetting his clothes many times over during his 12-hour shifts. His clothes are often wet through, and he cannot tell whether his trousers are dampened by sweat or urine (Chen 2020). In this narrative, the narrator communicates Zhang Biao's suffering by representing what Scarry calls another 'interior state' of consciousness, focusing on Zhang Biao's feeling of fatigue after long working hours and his sense of discomfort when his body is stained by bodily waste. Similar transactions between the representation of pain and these negative feelings caused by the disruption of normal excretion and overtaxing of the body are found in many other articles in *Chongqing Daily* – for instance in 'Fainting in the Front-Line after More Than 20 Days of Continuous Fighting: She Returned Back Working in the ICU 4 Days Later' (Peng 2020) and in 'We Will Not Retreat If the Virus Has Not Been Eliminated' (Li 2020).

The narrators also detail the workers' physical sufferings by describing PPE (personal protective equipment) damage on their bodies. Because most PPE are made from fabrics that do not breathe, many front-line workers show symptoms of hypoxia and extreme physical weakness after working for 6 to 12 hours without a break (Zhu and Chen, 2020; Li 2020; Peng 2020; He 2020). Wearing goggles and masks for long hours can cause damage to the eyes and the face. Huang Xia is a doctor in the emergency department in Sanxia central hospital in Chongqing. She was required to remain on the ward for six hours each day wearing goggles, masks, and three layers of shoe covering. At the end of her shift, two shiny red imprints from the masks were left in the flesh between her eyes and her cheekbone (Peng 2020). One journalist also mentions that medical equipment even leaves bleeding marks on the faces of the medical staff (Chen 2020). Although Huang Xia does not describe her physical pain as such, the scars left by her experience tell her story.

Fostering Solidarity, Encouraging Shared Commitment and *Chongqing Daily's* Role in Containing the Virus

These narrative depictions of emotional suffering, of disruptions of filial connections, and of bodily pain, helped to foster solidarity and encouraged shared commitment among the Chongqing community in containing the virus. In considering how these narrative descriptions contributed to promoting solidarity among Chongqing's population, Ann Jurecic's interpretation of the philosopher Stanley Cavell's claim about 'certainty' is useful. According to Jurecic, Cavell believed that the search for accurate knowledge about the minds of others and about the environment will inevitably lead one to uncertainty as 'human insight into the world and others is inevitably uncertain and incomplete'; and for Cavell this uncertainty gives rise to 'avoidance, indifference, or insensitivity' (Jurecic 2012, 62–63) in social connections, suggesting that a divide tends to emerge between social groups that do not have appropriate knowledge of one another. Cavell goes on to point out, however, that in 'ordinary social encounters' people do not need 'all knowledge to be confirmed or to know beforehand what the outcome of an encounter will be' and that the knowledge about the unknown group 'situates the listener in relationship to the speaker' (Jurecic 2012, 63). Implicit in this argument is a suggestion that providing appropriate forms of knowledge about unknown groups to others will enable connections across the social divide caused by 'avoidance, indifference, or insensitivity'. As this allows overcoming the corresponding feelings between the social groups, these inter-subjective connections will thus help foster a feeling of solidarity among them.

During the early days of the pandemic outbreak, two worlds existed alongside one another in Chongqing, the world of those in the quarantined infected areas and the world of the rest of the city's population living under lockdown orders from the government. While the huge number of people who worked in the infected areas contributed a lot to containing the virus, by providing medical treatment and support services to patients, their lives and experiences were almost invisible to those closed up in their homes because contact with quarantined patients and their caretakers was not permitted. The lack of knowledge about the condition of the front-line workers, according to Cavell's argument, led to speculation and thus uncertainty and to 'avoidance, indifference and insensitivity' with people of other social groups, causing a social divide between them. The narratives about the plight of front-line workers published in *Chongqing Daily* articulated the pain of the front-line staff to the public through familiar everyday experiences concerning bodily and family connections and thus made it possible for readers to draw on their personal experiences of pain and loss to understand the conditions of those that cared for the sick. Through emphasizing the suffering and sacrifice of the front-line workers, these narratives, rather than discourage the public, encouraged it to recognize and respect the front-line workers' contribution in helping contain the disease. In line with Cavell's argument on how to overcome the social divide caused by uncertainty about other groups, readily graspable knowledge about the front-line workers was able to remove the psychological borders caused by 'avoidance, indifference, and insensitivity' between

people working in quarantined areas and the rest of the population, and fostered a favourable relationship. As a consequence, by fostering favourable inter-subjective connections between the two social groups and at the same time focusing the public's attention on the contribution of those working on the front-line, these narratives were able to unite the Chongqing population as a whole and promote a feeling of solidarity in containing the virus.

These narratives also fostered a shared commitment in containing the virus in the Chongqing community by educating readers about how they should behave during the pandemic and about the meaning of their sacrifice. Jerome Bruner notes that successful narratives comprise two aspects: the actions of the characters and the consciousness of the characters when performing these actions (Garro and Mattingly 2000, 2). In depicting the front-line landscape, the *Chongqing Daily* pandemic narratives feature both aspects. They describe the actions of these workers and they explore the metaphysical, moral, and social impulses that give rise to their actions. The latter, at the same time, show the social moral meaning of these actions. Research about the perlocutionary function of a narrative shows how the two aspects of these journalistic narratives about the suffering of the front-line workers served as a framework to explain and assign meaning to the suffering of ordinary people during the lockdown period. Carruthers notes that, in comprehending a story, every reader will 'have some notion of the changes in an inner landscape of thought in the participants as well as the outer landscape, the events' (Garro and Mattingly 2000, 3) and this acquired knowledge can 'generate a message to an individual's conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind' and alter one's ego by building up her/his understanding of the world (Berger 1997, 9). During the pandemic, many people complained about and resisted the implementation of the lockdown measures as the requirements were stringent and freedom of movement was severely curtailed. In line with the findings about the perlocutionary function of narrative, the practice of the front-line workers in these stories, such as leaving their families to work in high risk areas, faithfully following the strict rules in the quarantine districts, wearing uncomfortable protection equipment and working long hours, were able to convey a message to the readers' consciousness and educate them to follow the unpleasant lockdown rules on a par with what these front-line workers were doing in the quarantined areas.

At the same time, the other aspects of the narrative, the metaphysical, moral and social impulses, which gave rise to the front-line workers doing service in quarantined areas, simultaneously associate their practices with the collective interests and the social and moral values extolled by the Chinese authorities, such as 'selfless dedication', 'care for others', 'serving the people' and 'collectivism' (Lu 2020). Thus, they offer an explanatory framework for people to construct the meaning of their own sacrifice of freedom for stopping the spread of the epidemic. Garro and Mattingly (2000, 1) argue that 'in both telling and interpreting experiences, narrative mediates between an inner world of thought-feeling and an outer world of observable actions and states of affairs'. By providing action models and an explanatory framework for the meaning of these actions in the newly emergent situation of the corona pandemic, these journalistic narratives

readjust the readers' inner psyche to the requirement of containing the pandemic and thus help invoke a shared commitment to controlling the virus.

Conclusion

On 28 January 2020, Chongqing's news media delivered a message from the central government to the Chongqing people that China would wage 'a people's war against Covid-19' and overcome all difficulties to protect the life and health of the population (Unify the Majority of the People, Implement the Policies of the Central Committee of CCP and Rely on the People to Win the War against Covid-19 2020). This suggested that, apart from the official policies and orders on containing the virus, Chongqing attempted to unite the population and organize society for a total war against the pandemic. Uniquely focusing on the efforts of those on the front lines, *Chongqing Daily* might be accused of being dominated by the need to combat the virus and avoid representing the other side of the picture, such as, for instance, the great damage the lockdown caused to people's daily life, the community crisis during the epidemic, the local government's failure in delivering the policy of providing adequate living necessities for the people during the lockdown, and the people's complaints about sending their family members to the dangerous quarantined areas.¹ Nevertheless, the practice of offering comprehensive knowledge about the plight of those on the front lines and an explanatory framework for people's behaviour during the lockdown period, according to our analysis, were useful in helping mediate between people's consciousness and the new situation of the pandemic, and in promoting a feeling of solidarity in the society and a shared commitment among the Chongqing population. This outcome of the narrative in *Chongqing Daily* has obviously strengthened the social cohesion and hence helped achieve the goal of waging a people's war against the pandemic. Notably, the shared commitment and the feeling of solidarity in the population also promoted the people's cooperation in implementing the lockdown order and other government policies, and thus assured the success of the government measures. With these combined efforts, Chongqing effectively brought the pandemic under control. Since 26 February 2020, Chongqing has reported no new confirmed Covid-19 cases and, on 16 March 2020, all of the 570 hospitalized confirmed cases had recovered (Situation Report of the Covid-19 in Chongqing on 16 March 2020), indicating that Chongqing had finally completely contained the Covid-19 pandemic. On 9 February 2020, Chongqing reopened its economy and universities and high schools started to reopen in May 2020.

From the above, one may conclude that the state media can play a guiding role in emergency situations in China. As the 'mouthpiece' of the Party and the government,

1. Only bringing positive information about combating the virus might have undermined *Chongqing Daily's* credibility in the readers. However, research shows that the exposure to the negative information of the pandemic, such as the community crisis, disturbing images and negative statistics of the real situation, could increase the anxiety and fear of the public (see Garfin *et al.* 2020, 356). With this in mind, media during the pandemic need be careful in reporting information that might do harm to people's psychological wellbeing.

Chongqing Daily cannot issue any orders or administrative regulations directly, but it can express both the voices of the government and the people and coordinate them. This may be a characteristic of Chinese-style supervision for public opinion, which functions effectively at a critical moment.

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