RESEARCH NOTE

SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH & ILLNESS

Media framing of fighting COVID-19 in China

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Abstract

This study focuses on media framings of COVID-19 in Chinese social and cultural contexts. After analysing nine weeks' news reports of *Xinwen Lianbo*, one of China's mainstream media, we discovered that the metaphorical war frame dominated throughout the corpus but it did not remain the same. Some of its semantic concepts like the type of war evolved over time. There are also several minor metaphors such as race, challenge, chess and combination blow metaphors, which are not as dominant as the war metaphor but should by no means be neglected. The race and challenge metaphors are complementary with the war metaphor to frame COVID-19, while the chess and combination blow metaphors are culturally loaded. What's more, literal frames like responsibility and collaboration were also found in the corpus. All frames, whether metaphorical or literal, work together to shape what COVID-19 was, what roles people should play and what people could do. In this study, we intend to explore how media framings of COVID-19 were related to media and government's responses as well as how they might have contributed to the public's responses. The media is an important source of information, whose role in public health emergencies deserves our attention.

KEYWORDS
China, COVID-19, framing, media, metaphor

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has been a global health crisis in 2020, affecting many countries and people. The outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, China, coinciding with Chinese Chunyun (the annual largest-scale travel rush) from 10 January to 18 February 2020. Frequent flow of people could have made it extremely difficult to contain the disease from spreading. However, after 2 months, at the end of March, the daily number of newly confirmed cases across China declined dramatically.[1] According to data released by the Ministry of Transport of People's Republic of China, the domestic airline passenger volume and the rail transit passenger volume in February decreased 84.8 and 87.2 per cent, respectively, compared to the same periods of 2019.[2] Chinese people seem to have been aware of the seriousness of the epidemic and been motivated to take preventive actions.

The public's responses might have been attributed to factors like government management, doctors and virologists' suggestions and media dissemination of information. During the COVID-19 outbreak, media was a major source of information. Our research interest lies in how COVID-19 was framed, whether consciously or unconsciously, in China's mainstream media and how the framings were related to media and governmental responses to this illness and how they might have contributed to the public's responses. Many disciplines such as communication studies, linguistics, psychology and sociology have investigated media framings of illness. We believe that sociology is a very important approach as emerging infectious diseases like COVID-19 are not just medical issues but social issues. Scheufele (1999) argues that framing could function as constructing social reality. A news report is not recurrence of facts, but reproduction of reality. Many sociologists of health and illness (Sherlaw & Raude, 2013; Staniland & Smith, 2013; Wallis & Nerlich, 2005; Washer, 2004) have argued that framings of illness are embedded in certain social and cultural contexts. We focus our study on social framings of COVID-19 in the media as we consider that framings might influence people's perception of certain illness as well as their social roles or identities in fighting illness, thus possibly evoking certain actions. This study intends to complement work on the media framings as well as on the sociology of emerging infectious diseases.

Scholars have made distinction between various framings, one of which is figurative framing. Burgers et al. (2016) argue that metaphor, hyperbole and irony contain both linguistic and cognitive content and they can individually or 'collaboratively' function as figurative framing devices in discourses. Metaphorical framing is a subcategory of figurative framing, and its possible effect on recipients has been supported by several empirical studies (Jia & Smith, 2013; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; Van Stee, 2018). The essence of a metaphor is to understand target domain (usually abstract or unfamiliar) in terms of source domain (usually concrete or familiar) by cross-domain mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The concept 'domain' is similar to 'frame' as both contain a set of semantic concepts (Lakoff, 2006). A 'frame' can be equal to a 'domain' or 'subordinate' of a 'domain'. Take metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR as an example. The source domain WAR can be understood as a *war* frame containing such semantic concepts as soldiers, weapon(s), battlefield(s) and enemy(ies), which could be further classified into an *offensive war* frame or a *defensive war* frame when some semantic concepts are distinct based on contexts. When the target domain ARGUMENT is understood in terms of WAR, there are statements like 'He attacked every weak point in my argument'. Also, this metaphor pervades thoughts and actions. We regard 'the person we are arguing with as an opponent', try to 'attack his positions' and 'defend our own', and consequently, we may win or lose (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 4). In contrast to metaphorical frames, we suppose there are also non-metaphorical frames or literal frames. Burger et al. (2016) referred to 'literal frames' as a contrast to 'figurative frames' but did not give detailed explanations. What we have called 'literal frames', we suppose, is similar to the term used by Burger and his colleagues. Literal frames only convey their literal messages. For example, if

there are semantic concepts such as soldiers, battlefield(s) and enemy(ies) in a discourse which just contain their literal meanings and involve neither cross-domain/cross-frame mappings nor any other figurative use, we say the discourse contains a literal *war* frame.

In previous studies, war metaphors have been found to predominate in framing efforts against diseases including foot-and-mouth disease (Nerlich et al., 2002), SARS (Chiang & Duann, 2007), avian flu (Nerlich & Halliday, 2007) and cancer (Reisfield & Wilson, 2004). The study accompanying this note attempts to explore whether war metaphors exist in the corpus and whether there might be other frames. We collected scripts of nine weeks' news reports ($N = 63$) of *Xinwen Lianbo* from 20 January 2020, when the COVID-19 was confirmed to be an infectious disease, to 22 March 2020, when the domestic epidemic situation in China was generally under control. *Xinwen Lianbo* is a daily television news programme produced by CCTV (China's state broadcaster) and has been broadcast for more than three decades, aimed at publicizing government messages and reporting domestic and foreign affairs. Every day, it is rebroadcast simultaneously by most terrestrial television channels in mainland China, making it one of the most watched television programmes. By investigating how COVID-19 was framed in news reports of *Xinwen Lianbo*, we could explore how China's mainstream media responded to the epidemic outbreak and how media framings were related to government's as well as the public's responses.

Though our corpus is not very large-sized, it is enough for this study as these nine weeks witnessed the number of newly confirmed cases reaching the peak and decreasing to a stable level after a few weeks. By using corpus analysis software AntConc, we extracted keywords[3] with reference to another larger-sized self-established corpus.[4] To identify frames, we analysed each keyword and their collocations, and concluded sets of semantic concepts. Then, we adopted Stefanowitsch's (2004) methodology of 'metaphorical pattern analysis' to investigate whether the frames identified were metaphorical. Not surprisingly, war metaphor has been discovered to be dominant as keywords like '战斗' (battle), '一线' (frontline), '武器' (weapon) and '胜利' (victory) permeate throughout the corpus. War metaphors are very common in Chinese culture, possibly due to China's war history. Strikingly, the war metaphor in the corpus did not remain the same but evolved over time. Some semantic concepts of the source domain WAR or the *war* frame such as type of war, soldiers and weapon(s) experienced dynamic changes in different stages. For instance, the type of war was initially framed as *preventative war* with the goal of preventing and controlling the spread of the epidemic. From the third week (3 February to 9 February), the news reports in our corpus quoted words from Chinese President Xi who declared in a working conference that the type of war expanded to include *people's war* and *total war*, which are both important ideas in Chairman Mao Zedong's military theories. The *people's war* frame makes clear the public's social identities, meaning that all Chinese people, regardless of occupation, location or gender, should serve as soldiers. It might have urged the public to make joint efforts to fight against their common enemy COVID-19, making them willing to sacrifice their rights and accept policies like travel bans and lockdown. The *total war* frame defines that the range of war is much more than military actions, implying that at this stage, apart from the prevention and control of the epidemic, it was also very important to maintain economic, political and social stability.

We also discovered several minor metaphors and literal frames. Usually, one target concept can be structured by more than one metaphor as each metaphor involves partial cross-domain mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). There are also race and challenge metaphors in the corpus. They are called 'minor metaphors' because they are not as dominant as the war metaphor, but should by no means be neglected as they complement the war metaphor to frame the efforts against COVID-19. Expressions related to the source domain RACE appear 84 times such as '同时间赛跑' (race against time) and '加快疑似病例检测速度' (speed up the detection of suspected case), indicating that speed is crucial

in fighting against COVID-19. The faster necessary actions were taken, the more people would be protected and the more likely we would win the war.

Expressions related to the source domain CHALLENGE appear 70 times such as '在大考中交出合格答卷' (hand in qualified test papers in the important test), implying that it is a challenge for people from all walks of life to fight against the unexpected epidemic outbreak and people should strive to meet the challenge in order to win the war. Moreover, we also discovered two culturally loaded metaphors, namely chess and combination blow metaphors. In the corpus, expressions like '一盘棋' (a chess game) and '先手棋' (offensive move in chess) appear 23 times. Here, chess refers particularly to Chinese Weiqi or called Go chess. Expressions like '组合拳' (combination blow) appear 16 times. Here, combination blow refers to a strategy of Chinese martial arts. These two metaphors share a common focus on the idea of totality in the sense that any wrong move in a chess game or any wrong blow in the martial arts competition might lead to failure.

We also found the literal frame of *responsibility* in such keywords as '责任' (responsibility), '确保' (ensure) and '支持' (support), and the literal frame of *collaboration* in keywords like '携手' (hand in hand), '鼎力' (make joint efforts) and '共同挑战' (common challenges). Previous studies usually put emphasis on either metaphorical or literal framing, and some scholars (Sopory & Dillard, 2002; Van Stee, 2018) argue that metaphorical framing is more persuasive than literal framing, but we discovered that these two types of framing were complementary with each other. For example, the *responsibility* and *collaboration* frames seem to have enriched the meanings of the metaphorical *war* frame, implying that all soldiers should shoulder their respective responsibilities and collaborate with one another to fight the epidemic together.

In our study, we have found that framings in the corpus clearly shaped what COVID-19 was, what roles people should play and what they could do. Based on current findings, we figure that further study could be conducted in three main dimensions. Firstly, it is necessary to delve into the values and ideologies hidden within media framings. Discourses including news reports, as part of social practice (Fairclough, 1992), cannot be totally understood if separated from certain social and cultural contexts. Frames in our corpus, whether metaphorical or literal, seemed to embody Chinese moral values like 'Community of Shared Future', which requires our further exploration into frames within social and cultural contexts. Secondly, we could expand our corpus and try comparative studies. Currently, we have focused on national televised news reports. In the further study, we could study framings in discourses like governmental documents, politicians' speeches, newspaper articles from both domestic and foreign sources and sound media, so as to find the distinction between different media outlets and between different languages. Thirdly, it is also important to evaluate framing effects. We may conduct interviews, focus groups, surveys or analyse social media discussions to probe into how media frames could influence people's perception, whether integrating metaphorical and literal frames could make framing effect stronger than either of them, and individual factors like self-relevant motive (Landau et al., 2009) and recipient's knowledge (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012) that might enhance or weaken framing effect. We think studies of media framings of illness are necessary and meaningful as they might provide insights into the role of discourses related to public health emergencies in certain social and cultural contexts.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION
Lili Gui: Conceptualization (lead); Formal analysis (lead); Methodology (lead); Resources (supporting); Writing-original draft (lead); Writing-review & editing (lead).

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ENDNOTES

[1] See website at http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/yqtb/list_gzbd.shtml.

[2] See website at http://www.mot.gov.cn/tongjishuju/.

[3] Keywords refer to words appearing more frequently in the current corpus compared with a reference corpus.

[4] The self-established corpus contains scripts of all news reports (*N* = 365) of *Xinwen Lianbo* in 2019.

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