

# Reinvented Chinese state media: The discursive construction of journalistic identity on WeChat

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## Abstract

As China's news organizations continue partnering with social media, they must wrestle with new ways to best present themselves to meet the expectations of audiences. Based on a series of news reports on a fire accident released by the WeChat official accounts of eight state-run media organizations, this study explores how China's state news sectors reinvent their self-image in social media. The analysis of the communicative setting, content, linguistic and visual resources of the reports shows that the journalistic identity presented in the reports has changed gradually from news disseminator to news explicator juxtaposed with emotion conveyor, and to sentimental storyteller. The findings suggest while state media sectors try to maintain the image as authoritative news producer, they appeal to personalization to build a close tie with audiences. The study argues that China's traditional journalistic norms, the state media's political imperatives, and WeChat affordances converge to cause the shift of the journalistic identity. The study has enriched the analysis of journalistic practice in social media in the Chinese context and shed some light on the functions of multimedia settings to enact journalistic identity.

## Keywords

Journalistic identity, Chinese state media, WeChat official accounts, discourse analysis, disaster news

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## Introduction

The advent of social media and the internet has changed previous author-audience dichotomies to information co-producers (Seargeant and Tag, 2014). Such a media environment requires journalism to navigate the changing expectations of engagement from audiences and adopt new norms and practices. For instance, to grab audiences' attention and stay visible in the market, journalists often prefer to present in news reports "a 'human' face to the news through references to 'ordinary' people, their emotions, views, and experiences" (Bednarek and Caple, 2017: 61), and personal opinions and emotions are often added alongside news content (Cammaerts and Coudry, 2017). Nevertheless, journalism profession has imposed traditional norms in social media, and journalists work to monitor their professional and personal image (Brems et al., 2017; Molyneux and Holton, 2015). This raises questions about journalistic identity. Journalists might be expected to develop multiple digital selves as professionals and persona on social media platforms (Mellado and Alfaro, 2020).

Chinese news media, which works as a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (henceforth CCP), used to present an identity as an authoritative information producer and disseminator. Authority in journalism means that the news outlet is presented as a reliable story-teller (Clayman, 2002), who defines reality in a way that can be perceived as being true or credible so that it can convince, influence, and even dominate audiences. In traditional Chinese culture, keeping distance and showing official identity are ways of establishing authority, which are assumed to be effective to win trust from and achieve dominance over audiences. However, in the digital era, the state media is compelled to make itself flexible and multi-skilled in order to "live up to the preference of news consumers" (Burggraaff and Trilling, 2020: 115). It has begun to change its journalistic practices such as telling human stories, interacting with audiences, etc. (Lang and Shen, 2020; Wu et al., 2021). Then, what new identity is reconstructed by the state media in this new journalistic context? How does the state media reconstruct its identity discursively? What variables contribute to the reconstruction of the journalistic identity?

To answer these questions, this study -- taking eight WeChat official accounts' reports about a fire accident in a local area in Hangzhou as sample data -- aims to explore the reconstruction of journalistic identity of China's state media in this digital era. WeChat "is a mobile instant text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd in China on January 21, 2011 (Chen and Cao, 2014:104). We select WeChat official accounts as the study object for two main reasons. First, WeChat has become the most popular information and communication technology in Chinese people's lives (Pan, 2019) by offering a valuable affordance for information dissemination and writer-audience interaction. Various forms including text, image, video, voice, and Graphics Interchange Format (GIF), etc. are integrated for information broadcasting. In addition, a comments section is designed for audiences to post messages at the bottom of each piece of information and interact with news producers. The changed and changing context of mass communication undoubtedly stimulates audiences' motivation for browsing information on WeChat's official accounts. Second, WeChat, although a platform for self-media, is heavily regulated and censored by the Chinese government (Yang and Men,

2020). Therefore, WeChat official accounts offer a valuable research context for this study. We select the reports on a fire accident as the data for analysis for two main reasons too. First, disaster news is often more attention-catching than other types of news. More importantly, since disasters can have negative physical, psychosocial, socioeconomic, and political consequences, the way of reporting disasters plays a crucial role in influencing audiences' understanding, protecting an organization's image relative to the disaster (Houston et al., 2012), facilitating the government's disaster-relief work, and arousing people's sympathy towards victims (Zhang, 2015). In this sense, the way disasters are reported may contribute to the construction of journalistic identity.

The study can contribute to our understanding of how traditional journalistic norms and socio-cultural ideals in the Chinese context are discursively reinforced or challenged, and how journalistic identity is negotiated and reinvented in social media.

In the following sections, we first introduce the concept of journalistic identity, review recent research on journalistic identity construction in social media, and account for the development of Chinese journalism. After the introduction to data collection and analysis, discourse analysis is carried out. Based on the analysis, the manifestation of the journalistic identity of China's state media and the possible factors influencing the reconstruction of journalistic identity are discussed.

## Journalistic identity and social media

### *The concept of journalistic identity*

Identity is a multiple-faceted and dynamic concept determined by the network of social relations involving multiple complex levels (Bhatia, 2004; Ivanic, 1998). It is "a set of resources which people draw upon in presenting and expressing themselves via interaction with others" (Sergeant and Tag, 2014: 5).

The concept "journalistic authority", as one type of identity, refers to the professional presence of a journalist, including the status of the profession a journalist maintains and the individual reputation and cultural capital he/she establishes (Clayman, 2002; Mellado and Hermida, 2022). In the Chinese journalistic context, journalists are often required to speak for the news organization to which they are affiliated while their personal opinions and attitudes are refrained. This is especially true for journalists of the state media which represents CCP and the government. Therefore, journalistic identity here refers to the professional presence of the news organization.

As online interaction takes place in the virtual environment, language and other multimodal affordances like pictures, videos, etc. become the major tools for identity presentation. As Vásquez (2014: 68) puts it, "words, language, and discourse continue to serve as key resources in the presentation of self online and in the construction of identities in social media."

### *Research on journalistic identity in social media*

Along with the rapid digitalization of media, there is increasing academic discussion about the change of journalistic identity. Existing research mainly focuses on the shift of journalists' traditional identity, their attitudes and beliefs, and their promotional roles (Deuze, 2005; Hanusch and Bruns, 2016; Lough et al., 2018; Molyneux and Holton, 2015; Olausson, 2017; Papacharissi, 2012; Sacco and Bossio, 2016; Safori, 2018). For instance, Safori (2018) and Lough et al. (2018) suggest that the journalist's identity of social media is a blend of or balance between personal and professional identities. Some studies investigate specifically professional norms and ideas that journalists relate to (e.g. Gulyas, 2013; Hedman, 2015). The research results indicate that facing the challenge of engaging with audiences, social media journalists are inclined to add in a personal flair while conforming to professional norms. This is taken as a branding strategy to attract audiences.

While a large bevy of studies as mentioned above take branding as the point of departure of journalistic identity, some research has identified new types of journalistic identity of social media (Mellado and Hermida, 2022; Olausson, 2017). For instance, Mellado and Hermida (2022) propose the 4Ps identity spaces in social media -- professional, personal, publisher and product. As this study focuses on the public image established by China's state media in general, journalistic identity is limited to the publisher level. To be specific, this study focuses on how the self of news organizations is constructed and presented by means of discourse.

As regards research methods, prior research predominantly conducts content analysis (e.g. Hanusch and Bruns, 2016; Lough et al., 2018), discourse analysis (e.g. Olausson, 2017), or the combination of content analysis and discourse analysis (e.g. Papacharissi, 2012). Also, some carry out interviews or surveys (e.g. Sacco and Bossio, 2016). Visual resources like pictures in journalists' profiles are examined by some research (Lough et al., 2018). Nevertheless, how visual elements and linguistic resources contribute to identity presentation has not been touched upon.

Despite the growing scholarly attention to journalistic identity in social media, little critical attention has been paid to China's social media, especially the state media. The limited studies suggest that China's social media displays "Chinese style" characteristics because of the country's unique culture, history, and political-economic system (Jian and Liu, 2018; Wang, 2017), and that online self of China's state media is anchored to the offline self because of the country's political system, economic structure, media laws and policies, and history (Song and Chang, 2016). Existing studies have demonstrated that social media logic has integrated new media practices in news reporting, but how the journalistic identity of China's state media has been reconstructed is barely covered.

The present study adopts discourse analysis to explore how China's state media re-invents the self in social media by means of multi-modal discourse resources. Hopefully, the analysis can provide an explanation for how the changing media environment affects journalistic identity of the state media.

## *China's state media in transition*

China's state media was an integral part of China's political administrative system and remained its identity as an authoritative producer and disseminator of information until the 1980s when economic, social and cultural reforms gave rise to non-party and commercial journalism. With the changing media landscape, the state media's role of authoritative information producer and disseminator became decentralized (Tong, 2014: 124). In the 1990s, due largely to spaces created by media commercialization and "a prominent rise of populist discourse of journalism" (Tong, 2014: 130), multiple new genres of news reports came into existence, ordinary people's experiences and stories were reported, and a sense of humanity could be seen in news reports. With the booming of social media and more interaction with the western world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, discussions and contestations take place in wider media outlets (Cao, 2014a). While media diversity brings great opportunities to non-government media, it brings huge challenges to the state media. Driven by the motive for advertising and simple enjoyment, non-government media, especially commercial media, tends to build a connection between the author and audience by creating a space for direct author-audience interaction and emotional audience engagement, thereby attracting and sustaining audience attention (Wang and Wu, 2020). However, the journalistic practice of the state media is often suppressed by political restraints owing to the media's close affiliation with the CCP and its responsibility of gaining political legitimacy. In news reporting, the state media tries to foreground the news values of the event by following the traditional journalistic norms, namely, authenticity, objectivity and authority (Wang and Wu, 2020).

Yet to enhance internet governance, state media begins to change its style to attract audience attention. Research has found that state media "assumes an increasingly proactive role in soliciting public opinions, interacting with audiences, and responding to popular sentiments" (Guo, 2018:19). To put it briefly, in social media sphere, China's state media, both at central and local levels, displays both party-oriented and market-oriented features.

As regards disaster news, before the 1980s, China's news media focused on positive publication of the achievements attained in struggling against disasters to highlight the moral significance of news. From the 1980s to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, news values of timeliness and objectivity became the focus of reporting. Since the enactment of "people-oriented" principle in 2002, transparency of information has been a goal pursued by news reporting. It is obvious that journalistic identity cannot stay intact from the change of media tools and social ideology.

## **Research method**

### *Data collection*

The data for analysis were composed of a series of news reports on a fire accident that happened in Linping District of Hangzhou City on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Altogether 22 news reports during June 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> were collected from eight WeChat official accounts,

including three central news agencies, namely *People's Daily*, CNR (China National Radio) News, and *China Youth Daily*, two local news agencies, namely *Hangzhou Daily* and *Qianjiang Evening News*, and three official WeChat accounts of local governments, namely Hangzhou Fabu (Hangzhou Information Release), Linping Fabu (Liping Information Release), and Hangzhou Fire Brigade. *People's Daily* is a CCP news media, CNR News is affiliated to China's National Radio and Television Administration, a branch of the State Council, and *China Youth Daily* is affiliated to the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League. *Hangzhou Daily* is under the direct administration of Hangzhou Municipal Party Committee, and *Qianjiang Evening News* is under the direct administration of Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee. Hangzhou Fabu is affiliated to the Hangzhou Municipal Administrative Bureau, Linping Fabu is affiliated to a lower-level district government in Hangzhou, and Hangzhou Fire Brigade is a branch of Hangzhou Municipal Government. All the official accounts are the mouthpieces of the governments of CCP committees in China because they are fully subsidized by government budgets, and their daily practice is supervised by the CCP's Bureau of Publicity.

We divided the 22 reports into three phases following the happening, development and ending of the accident. Six reports on the happening of the accident (the initial phase), eight on the development of the accident (the ongoing phase), and another eight on the ending of the accident (the ending phase) were collected. Detailed information is provided in [Table 1](#). The three phases are not exclusive to the state media, but comparatively speaking, the state media offers live updates as the event takes place while commercial media usually selects and reports stories that are likely to elicit a strong emotional response. In this sense, the state media follows a more disciplined format.

### Data analysis

Discourse analysis was adopted to examine the reconstruction of journalistic identity. Based on the analytical model proposed by [Landert \(2014\)](#), three levels of news reporting, namely content, communicative setting, and linguistic realization are analyzed. In terms of content, what the reports are about, who the participants of the event are, and what the images and short videos focus on were analyzed. In terms of the communicative setting, the topics of audiences' comments, the journalistic-audience interaction, etc. were analysed. Because of the multimodal affordance of WeChat official accounts, linguistic realization covers both verbal and visual-centric items (e.g. photos, videos, GIFs). The analysis of verbal resources focused on the referring expressions, citations, evaluative markers, and narrative styles. The headline, body text of each news report, and comments

**Table 1.** Information of the news reports.

Phase	No. of reports	No. of visual resources	No. of comments
Initial phase	6	16 images, 2 videos	46
Ongoing phase	8	18 images, 2 videos	122
Ending phase	8	37 images, 3 videos	278

left by the audience were analyzed. The analysis of visual-centric items examined the image composition, technical affordance and represented participants. Despite the limited data about a single news event, discourse analysis pursued to expand validity and reliability by providing a detailed and in-depth examination of how the networked self of China's state media is performed via social media.

## Results

Our analysis shows that journalistic identity of China's state media underwent a gradual change in the reports of the three phases, ranging from news disseminator, news explicator and emotion conveyor, to sentimental storyteller.

### *A news disseminator in reports of the initial phase*

The analysis of news content and the communicative setting reveals several tendencies characterizing journalistic identity. As regards the content, the six reports mainly presented a non-biased account of the event, including the time and place of the accident, casualties, and measures taken to extinguish the fire. The two videos showed what the firefighters were doing to extinguish the flames. Similarly, the 16 images mainly revealed information relevant with the fire, including a great cloud of smoke, fire engines, ambulances, water hoses, a group of firefighters, and the site of the accident. Most items are depersonalized ones, indicating that the journalists want to objectify the report, and hence present a non-biased journalistic identity.

As regards the communicative setting, the audiences' comments cover two major topics, namely good wishes to those involved in the accident and gratitude to the firefighters. No feedback was given to the comments. Lack of interaction with the audience suggests that the journalists prefer to distance themselves from the reports and audiences. As mentioned before, keeping distance is one of the ways to indicate authority, so authoritative journalistic identity is presented.

Analysis of the linguistic resources reveals a similar journalistic identity. Three linguistic features are identified. First, no personalization is manifested. The videos showed the scene that the firefighters tried to extinguish the flames. In one of the videos, what was foregrounded was water hosing the burning building. A firefighter holding the hose was displayed as a very small figure in the lower left-hand corner. Similarly, in the images where the firefighters were visible, small figures were presented. Audiences can only identify their identity from their uniform, actions, and the equipment, whereas no details like facial expressions of the firefighters can be seen clearly (Figure 1). Several reasons may explain this way of presentation. To begin with, the report hopes to highlight the most important thing at that right moment, that is, the water hosing the building. Besides, it may give audiences a feeling as if they were directly witnessing the process at the scene of fire. Furthermore, depersonalization can objectify the report and hence bring reliability of the news.

Second, non-human entity is used when participants of the accident were mentioned. As shown in Example (1), the names of some organizations were used as the social actors.



**Figure 1.** An image in the report released by the official account of *Hangzhou Daily* (June 9).

- (1) 接警后, 临平区消防、公安、卫健等部门第一时间到场救援处置。(《杭州日报》公众号,7月9日)

*The Fire Brigade, the Public Security Bureau, and the Health Commission, etc. of Linping District* arrived to work at the fire scene in earliest response to the emergency call. (The official account of *Hangzhou Daily*, June 9)

As shown in Example (1), organizations instead of the officials or staff were mentioned as the social actors of handling the accident. This could strongly remind audiences of the seriousness of the accident because Chinese audiences are well aware of the duties of these organizations. Also, mentioning these government organizations foregrounds the official identity of the social actors, and suggests to audiences that the government complied with its duty properly and timely in this case, which is highly expected by the general public.

Third, indefinite descriptive labels were used to refer to actors. For instance, when casualties were reported, all the reports merely said that “five injured people had been sent to hospital” without providing any personal information like their ages, genders, or professions, let alone their names. These attitudinally neutral statements of fact have an obvious power to conceal emotions, indicating that the journalists intended to present themselves as onlookers who held an objective attitude toward the accident and people involved.

All in all, the content, the communicative setting, and the linguistic realization in these six reports suggest that the news organizations use the distancing strategy to assert their official identity. They take on the role of collector and disseminator of news to the public. This matches the very identity assumed by journalists in the traditional Chinese journalistic context.

### *A news explicator juxtaposed with emotion conveyor in reports of the ongoing phase*

Eight reports on the development of the accident were released on the second day, that is, June 10<sup>th</sup>. The analysis suggests that the journalists primarily play the role of explicating information, but appealing to sentiments to some extent simultaneously.

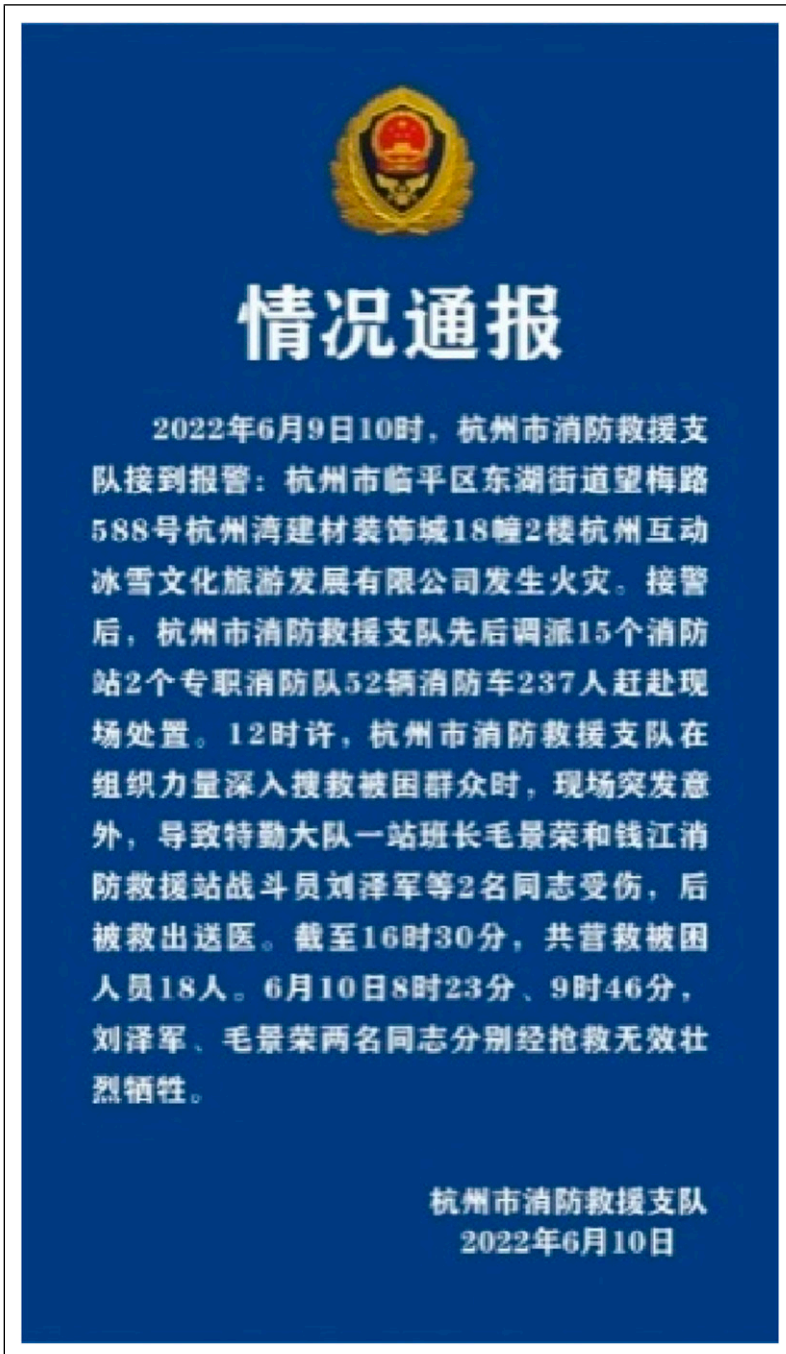
The ongoing of the rescue work and casualties were the main content covered in the reports, which declared that the rescue work had ended, four people had been killed and those injured had been in hospital, and two firefighters were killed. What is worth pointing out is that the information about the progress of the rescue work was displayed in the form of a photo (Figure 2).

Figure 2 is a photo of a notice released by Hangzhou Fire Brigade. The use of this photo to disseminate information is out of two probable reasons. First, to show authenticity of the news. The fact that words in photos cannot be falsified indicates that the information is true. Here, the journalists implicitly told the audience that the news was officially announced and thus reliable. This is of particular significance in the We-Media era when fake news is rampant. Second, to show solemnity of the news. As can be seen in Figure 2, white words against the dark blue background together with the police badge at the top, typical tints and shades of China's police, give the impression of authority, seriousness and solemnity.

In the four reports which focused on the death of two firefighters, two ID photos of the firefighters were inserted. Compared with life photos, ID photos look more serious and formal. The official or institutional identity of the firefighters is thus highlighted.

All the 122 comments in the comments sections expressed the audiences' regret about the death of the two firefighters and showed respect to them. Still, no feedback was given to these comments. No sign of author-audience interaction again indicates the journalists' attempt to distance themselves from audiences. To sum up, the analysis of the news content and communicative setting indicates similar journalistic identity to that in the first phase. An authoritative self-image is built in the reports.

However, the analysis of the linguistic realization reveals that the identity of an emotion conveyor is visible. First, instead of colourful pictures as are favored by social media, black-and-white ID photos were presented. The plain colors are more likely to create a feeling of solemnity and arouse grief among the public. Besides, despite being a close shot showing only the head and shoulders of the actors, the ID photos had a strong focus on people; that is, the two firefighters were central and clearly visible elements in the photos, so that an intimate or personal distance was expressed. The bloom of youth would undoubtedly strike the chord of target audiences who are more inclined to feel painful and sorry for their death.



**Figure 2.** An image in the reports released by the official accounts of *Hangzhou Daily* and *People's Daily* (June 10).

Apart from the images, the reports employ attitude markers to convey information in a sympathetic tone.

- (2) 悲痛!杭州2名消防员在火灾扑救中牺牲>牺! (《钱江>晚晚报》公众号、《杭州日报》公众号、《人民日报》公众号,6月10日)

*Distressful!* 2 firefighters in Hangzhou lost their lives in an attempt to extinguish the fire. (The official accounts of *Qianjiang Evening News*, *Hangzhou Daily* and *People's Daily*, June 10<sup>th</sup>)

The affect marker 悲痛(*distressful*) (Martin and White, 2005), which passed emotions on the death of the two young men, was put in the initial position of the headline. This sets in advance the emotional tone of the report, and thereby influences public opinion. Audiences may notice that the report is of human interest and thus become more inclined to read it, and their attention is directed to the very point that the journalists wish to initiate.

More attitude markers, namely judgmental markers (Martin and White, 2005), were used in the news story to introduce the two heroes' lives, including 英勇(*heroic*), 兢兢业业(*conscientious and dutiful*), 敬业(*dedicated*), 无私奉献(*devoted*), etc. These markers carry a strong positive sense of evaluation on part of the authorial voice, thus signaling a high degree of commitment of the journalists to the two young men's deeds and personalities.

To sum up, in the case of reporting the two firefighters, attitudinal meanings are conveyed via the affect markers and judgmental markers so as to align audiences into a community of shared values that grieve for the death of the two young firefighters and eulogize them as heroes. This suggests that the journalists at this stage prioritize value-laden expressions in reports, which have the potential to evoke a sense of grief and sympathy among the readership. Therefore, a compassionate journalistic identity is presented.

Particular addressing terms were used to refer to the two firefighters in the four reports, including 班>奉长(*the monitor*), 英雄(*heroes*), and 同志(*comrades*), all of which have positive connotation in Chinese culture, and hence hold the two young men in high esteem. Such addressing terms can evoke audiences' respect for the firefighters, thus allowing them to identify more easily with the two men's deeds and the journalists' emotions. However, similar to the first three reports, non-human entities were used as social actors who handled the accident, such as 消防大队(*the Fire Brigade*), 公安部门(*the Public Security Bureau*), 工作领导小组(*the leading group*), etc. Such referring terms stress the professional identity of the social actors, the severity of the event, and also present an objective and impartial self of the journalists.

On all accounts, the content, the interactive setting, and the linguistic realization of the reports in this phase suggest that news reporting adheres to the core values of objectivity, positivity and personalization. Thus, the journalists take on the role of information explicator juxtaposed with emotion conveyor, deviating slightly from the identity in the first phase.

### *A sentimental storyteller in reports of the ending phase*

The reports during this phase deviated from the templates of disaster news coverage which focus on the acute impact of the disaster (Houston et al., 2012; Pantti et al., 2012). Except for one report which is about the causes of the fire, most reports were about the two firefighters' memorial service. The choice of content indicates, to certain degree, the journalists' intention to alleviate the public's concern about the negative effect of the event. It was reported that people from near and far attended the service, expressing their mournful feelings and respect for the two firefighters. Much more images and videos were embedded in the reports than in the previous reports. Among the 37 images, six were the photos of the two firefighters, one ID photo and two life photos of each one. All the rest 31 images displayed the scenes of the memorial service. The three videos, taken at one setting, covered two topics, one about the action scene of the memorial service and the other about a woman who was weeping. They provided audiences with a direct access to the mournful scene. Compared with the images of the damaged building or injured victims, etc., these images can arouse more sympathetic feeling from audiences.

The 278 comments from the audiences suggest that more audiences were touched by the reports. All the comments expressed the audiences' deep grief about the death of these two young men. Although no feedback was given to the comments, two comments made by the journalists were placed at the top of the comments section of one report. These two comments told audiences what award the two young men would get for bravery and how their ashes would be preserved. The journalists' comments can be regarded as interactions with audiences because the information was undoubtedly in response to audiences who were concerned about the two heroes.

In short, the content and communicative setting reflects that the journalists tried to lay a stronger emphasis on emotions than the impact of the accident. The news value of personalization may allow audiences to identify more easily with the event being reported and the journalists as well.

The visual and linguistic resources show a similar tendency. First, the majority of images contribute to personalization of the news by depicting ordinary people. Except for an ID photo, two life photos of each hero were colourful pictures which vividly showed the daily activities that the heroes used to be engaged in. They were either doing physical exercise or running errands. A positive feeling was transmitted to audiences. Also, the vigorous image of the young men forms a sharp contrast with their death, stirring in audiences a sympathetic and regretful feeling. The other images displayed the mournful service. Different from the images in the previous reports, many of them showed the details of people on the scene, like their facial expressions and gestures, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 showed a close-up of a soldier's eyes, red with tears. The soldier is supposed to be a member who worked in the same brigade with the two heroes. His sad facial expression gave a lively reflection of his mournful mood, and was contagious at that moment.

Second, social actors were mostly nominated, such as 一位罗大姐(*a lady whose surname is Luo*), 指导员金哲彬(*Director Zhebin Jin*), and 毛景荣、刘泽军同



**Figure 3.** An image in the reports released by the official accounts of *Hangzhou Daily* and *Hangzhou Fabu* (June 13).

志(*Comrades Jingrong Mao and Zejun Liu*). Nomination can present social actors in a more personal and more sympathetic way (Chovanec, 2000: 223). In a few cases when actors were not nominated, kinship terms or terms suggesting intimate relations were used to refer to them, such as 兄弟(*brothers*), 战友(*comrades in arms*), and so on. Using kinship terms to refer to non-kin people can show intimate relationships in the Chinese culture. The use of such addressing terms as referring expressions, therefore, indicates that the journalists intend to create a sense of closeness to the heroes, and a journalistic identity of being close to people is presented.

A third linguistic strategy employed in these three reports is reported speech, which also helps to convey personalization because the views and thoughts of ordinary people were cited. Six instances of reported speech have been found in the eight reports, which serve to engage audiences. For example,

- (3) 她(一位商户)远远望着,就忍不住哭了。“刘泽军年纪比我儿子还小,真的太可怜了……他们是英雄,是我们的,也是所有人的。”(《杭州日报》微信公众号,6月13日)

She (a shop owner), looking from afar, failed to keep back her tears. “*Zejun Liu is even younger than my son. Poor young men...They are heroes, our heroes, and also all people's heroes.*” (the official account of *Hangzhou Daily*, June 13)

The shop owner was only an ordinary person, whose words were not supposed to hold high news values, but her identity as a shop owner in the building where the fire had happened made her remarks meaningful. Audiences would feel that her feelings could

represent all those shop owners in the complex on the spot or even all the citizens. In addition, the direct quotes can help audiences feel vicariously the grief of those who attended the memorial service; thus, the emotions of being touched and admiration towards the heroes are more manifest to audiences. Furthermore, citing the words of an ordinary citizen instead of an elite may have a wider appeal among audiences. The appraisal theory (Martin and White, 2005) suggests that citation is dialogical in nature because the author's voice is engaged interactively with voices external to the text. In this light, citing other voices indicates that the journalists hope to interact with audiences. Thus, a role of interlocuter with audiences is made visible.

The fourth distinct discourse feature is the narrative style of reporting. Half of the reports follow the traditional news structure, that is, the inverted pyramid structure, which requires that the main idea of news be abstracted in the beginning, while the other half follow the narrative structure, that is, literary techniques often found in fiction writing. Comparatively speaking, story-telling can direct audiences more easily to experience the narrativized world through the actions and feelings of some characters, and hence to empathize with these characters.

In summary, the analysis of the four reports on the ending of the accident tellingly demonstrates that the journalists tend to foreground personalization by evoking a private and emotional context. A sentimental storyteller is presented to audiences, which is significantly different from the journalistic identity presented in the first two phases. By arousing their sympathetic feeling toward the two heroes, the state media, to some extent, tried to divert audiences' attention to the damaging impact of the accident, which might give rise to negative public opinion.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The exploration of the content, communicative setting, and linguistic resources demonstrates the reconstruction of media-shaped journalistic identity of state media in contemporary Chinese journalistic context. As introduced before, journalistic identity in this study refers to the impression China's state media gives to the public. It is constructed discursively in the specific Chinese historical and cultural context, under the mixed influence of China's traditional journalistic norms, political imperatives, and WeChat affordances in the digital age. First, as a major means of culture, news reporting inevitably reflects traditional Chinese culture. In a Confucian tradition, words are invalid without legitimacy, and in turn, legitimacy derives from words (Cao, 2014b). In order to entitle themselves with power, the journalists would have certain discourse practices to legitimate authority. In news reports, it is natural for the government, which is considered as authority on whom the citizen relies, to keep certain distance from the audience. For instance, instead of interacting fervently with audiences as those citizen media, they tend to keep their distance from the general public. It is expected that legitimacy can be obtained through presenting journalism as an authoritative story-teller. As Chinese discourse respects hierarchical authority and takes "rites" as the core norm in interpersonal communication (Shi, 2013), Chinese audiences believe that truth is largely

produced through authoritative texts. Out of this consideration, the official accounts maintain its traditional journalistic identity.

In addition, as a core party and government organ, the state media must stick to the “Party principle”, which requires that journalism should promote the Party’s policies. So a major responsibility of the state media is to guide public opinion in a way that legitimizes the party through discursive practices (Shue, 2004: 31–34). Furthermore, unlike commercial media, the state media has the duty to work for the government and the CCP. Whatever is reported and however the event is reported would “avoid deviation from government positions or communications that might compromise its authoritative image” (Pan, 2019: 8). In the reports of the fire accident, a reliable profile of the government is built up. For example, the news reports foregrounded the behaviour of some government departments in the hope of displaying to the public that the government is efficient and responsible in handling the accident and thus trustful.

However, with the change of audiences’ reading habits and expectations along with the development of social media, the state media is forced to adopt new discourse strategies in reporting to compete for audience attention. They come to realize that the image of authority and gravitas plays little role to channel and guide public opinion, and hence of little use to spread core values advocated by the government and the party. Only when audiences identify with the emotions expressed by the reports can opinion guidance take effect. Therefore, personalization, which is “created through the use of personal content and personalizing language” (Landert, 2014: 28), has become an important journalistic strategy taken by the news media. News reports which contain private content such as a person’s experiences and emotions, or the linguistic resources that stimulate closeness or interaction with audiences are likely to resonate with audiences. This differs substantially from traditional reporting in the pre-digital age. Also, the news media would choose the reporting perspective to give audiences a positive impression. China has a long implemented journalistic principle of advocating positive news reports while avoiding negative information. In disaster news reports which contain negative impact, journalists would often choose to report the heroic deeds of soldiers or ordinary citizens. The purpose is just to win audiences’ trust and promote dominant social values. In addition, the journalistic practices exploit WeChat’s visualization capacity to bring the reports close to audiences. Even though there is no visible author-reader interaction in the comments sections, the affordances of WeChat enable an interpersonal tie to be created to influence public opinion.

In conclusion, this study shows that China’s state media on the WeChat platform intends to maintain its authoritative identity because of its affiliation and traditional journalistic norms, but at the same time, it, to some extent, deviates from this traditional identity because of the communicative purpose and affordances of WeChat. A dynamic self-image is thus forged. With the development of social media, it seems a fashion for news media to change from the cold-hard-facts-only standard of objectivity to an approach that provokes emotion (Bas and Grabe, 2015). However, this shift is extremely difficult for Chinese state media, considering its affiliation and political tasks. To maintain its social impact in the digital age, the state media must draw itself closer to the public. However, changing the journalistic style to personalize issues and elicit emotion might

downgrade the seriousness of the state media as information sources, and be confused with commercial or citizen media. Therefore, the state media must, to an increasing degree, make itself flexible and multi-skilled to reach a balance between diversified identities. Actualizing its potential for personalization and emotionality while maintaining its authority to some degree is probably the balance that the state media seeks.

This study enriches the analysis of journalistic practice in social media in the Chinese context. Although it is limited to news reporting on one accident, the study can shed some light on the multimedia setting in which journalistic identity is reinvented, because the news resources are comprehensive, including news agencies of central and local levels, and government WeChat accounts (Fabu in Chinese). The media from various levels can represent routinized discourse practices of WeChat-based news reporting in the Chinese context. The study can provide us with a perspective to see how Chinese government tries to guide public opinion through social media. As official accounts of governments at all levels are booming in China, this study can give some implications for government official accounts to write and edit news reports to guide public opinion effectively. Nonetheless, the construction of China's journalistic identity in social media is an ongoing and unpredictable process with the further development of digital technology, China's journalistic policies, and the ideology of Chinese society. This study has hopefully revealed some features of journalistic identity at a certain point in its course.

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