

7 ‘Telling China’s anti-pandemic stories well’: Documentaries for public diplomacy and the paradox of China’s soft power

In December 2019, the first novel coronavirus (COVID-19) case was reported in Wuhan, China. The rapid spread of the virus soon made Wuhan the first epicentre of the pandemic and caused the lockdown of the city in late January 2020. Wuhan’s lockdown initiated China’s ongoing nationwide anti-pandemic campaign. At the time of writing (August 2021), COVID-19 had caused the death of over four million people across the world (Worldometer 2021) and has significantly impacted almost every aspect of human life, society and economy, making it one of the most disruptive pandemics in human history.

Though China was one of the very few countries to successfully halt the spread of COVID-19 within a short period of time, while also proactively providing humanitarian aid to fight against COVID-19 globally, China’s global image has been negatively impacted by anti-Chinese sentiment arising from the pandemic (He 2020). The former president of the US, Donald Trump, repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese Virus’ in his public speeches and social media posts (Viala-Gaufrey and Lindaman 2021). Some Western media also accused the Chinese government of mishandling the pandemic at the very early stages (Walsh 2020) and even claimed that COVID-19 was likely leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (Campbell 2021). The stigmatisation of China as the origin of COVID-19 has led to a rise of Sinophobia in parts of the ‘West’ (Horton 2020). A fourteen-country survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre across advanced economies, including the US, UK, Australia, Canada, Germany and Netherlands, among others, shows that negative views of China have reached a historic high during the pandemic (Silver, Devlin

and Huang 2020). For the Chinese government, controlling the spread of COVID-19 at home and pursuing public diplomacy abroad have become the dual imperatives during the pandemic. The former aims to ensure people's health and safety and the regime's stability. Equally importantly, the latter aims to challenge the anti-China discourse and sentiment by proactively promoting Chinese voices and boosting a positive global image of China.

In addition to a series of public diplomacy activities through humanitarian aid, such as the resource-sharing efforts of 'mask diplomacy' and 'vaccine diplomacy' (Wong 2020a; Zhao 2021), China's state-led external communication (*duiwai chuanbo*)¹ system has also played a pivotal role in producing a counter-discourse to the anti-Chinese discourse of the pandemic and promoting China's national image and soft power. As President Xi Jinping emphasised in his internal speech given to the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) about tackling the coronavirus outbreak on February 3, 2020, the state media have to 'take the initiative to lead and effectively influence international public opinion' by 'proactively responding to the international concerns', and 'telling China's anti-pandemic stories well' in order to 'seek understanding and support from the international society' (Xi 2020). Following this order, the China's national external communications team, including *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, China Radio International, China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Xinhua News, which produce news and programmes in multiple foreign languages and have global audiences, all actively pursued the campaign of 'telling China's anti-pandemic stories well'.

These developments are part of recent transformations in Chinese diplomacy, where using state media for external communication to build a national image and enhance soft power is frequently emphasised. Since the

1 'External communication (publicity)' is an equivalent term for 'international (global) communication' in China's media and communication academia. It is a neutral expression for the usually negatively perceived term 'external propaganda' (*duiwai xuanchuan*) in the West. It refers to all communicative activities led by the Chinese state media and relevant governmental organisations targeting global audiences for the purpose of promoting China's positive global image and soft power (Guo 2009).

2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government has put the 'going global' policy on top of the government's agenda and has significantly increased investment in state media to boost their global influence and China's soft power (Sun 2014a; Thussu, de Burgh and Shi 2018). The outward facing, or 'going out', state media have been playing the most crucial role in challenging the discourse monopoly of the US-centred Western media on covering controversial issues about China (e.g. environmental protection, ethnic minority issues, corruption and human rights), to actively defend China's positions and make Chinese voices heard globally (Zhang 2010). The role of the state media in doing public diplomacy has been unprecedentedly emphasised under the leadership of Xi Jinping. With public diplomacy as a key priority in China's national promotional strategy, Xi proposed the notion of 'telling China's stories well' (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) at a high-level internal meeting on propaganda and ideology in August 2013 (Bandurski 2020). The notion has become a central tenet of the external communication practice of the Party-led media, encouraging them to win the minds and hearts of global audiences by innovatively narrating China's stories and expressing China's views on global issues.

Scholars in international communications are particularly interested in examining the effectiveness of the news content produced by the Chinese state media targeting global audiences. Studies have included examining the prime time news programme *China 24* on CGTN (Zhou and Zhao 2013), the official Twitter accounts of Xinhua News, *People's Daily* and CGTN (Nip and Sun 2018) and coverage of China's smog pollution on *People's Daily* (English version) (Li, Xiao and Zhang 2016). Yet, little attention has been paid to state-media-produced documentaries which have been created for the purpose of external communication and public diplomacy.

During the pandemic, anti-pandemic documentaries produced by Chinese state media for external communication have constituted an important part of the public diplomacy campaign of 'telling China's anti-pandemic stories well'. 'Anti-pandemic documentary' is the literal translation of the Chinese term '抗疫纪录片' (*kangyi jilupian*). The term refers to documentaries about the initiatives and actions of the Chinese government and people to fight against the pandemic. There are also 'anti-pandemic' films, TV dramas and songs, which aim to mobilise the public and unite

people to participate in the anti-pandemic campaign. Our search on Baidu, China's most popular search engine, in early 2021 using the Chinese term '抗疫纪录片' allowed us to identify ten anti-pandemic documentaries produced by China's state media in 2020, including CGTN, Xinhua News, *People's Daily*, and China International Television Corporation,² that mainly target international audiences through external propaganda (see Table 7.1). For the first time in history, Chinese state media collectively produced foreign-language documentaries for the purpose of public diplomacy and crisis management. This phenomenon provides a valuable moment to examine the roles and politics of documentaries in post-socialist China.

This chapter examines China's state-media-produced anti-pandemic documentaries in order to understand the roles documentaries play in the ongoing public diplomacy campaign of 'telling China stories well'. We first conduct a review of the history of Chinese documentary films since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 to identify the continuities and changes in Chinese documentary culture in the socialist and post-socialist eras. We will then critically examine the mode of representation, narrative strategies and global distribution of selected anti-pandemic documentaries to understand the characteristics of this type of documentary. Last, we consider the future of Chinese documentaries for external communication in the post-pandemic era and address the paradox of China's state-led soft power initiatives.

- 2 China International Television Corporation (CITVC) is a state-owned enterprise fully funded by China Media Group (also known as 'Voice of China') under the direct control of the Publicity Department of the CCP. CITVC specialises in marketing, publishing and distributing films, TV programmes and other video/audio products on a global scale produced by China Media Group consisting of China Central Television, China National Radio and China Radio International.

Table 7.1: Anti-pandemic documentaries produced by Chinese state media for external communication and public diplomacy in 2020

Documentary name (Chinese)	Documentary name (English)	Language	Produced by
《武汉战疫记》	<i>The Lockdown</i>	English	CGTN
《中国战疫记》	<i>The Frontline: China's Fight against COVID-19</i>	English	CGTN
《武汉24小时》	<i>24 Hours in Wuhan</i>	English	CGTN
《生死金银潭》	<i>Life and Death at Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital</i>	Chinese with English subtitles	<i>People's Daily</i>
《灭亡还是战斗？我们必胜！—疫情时期的英雄主义》	<i>Perish or Win? We Must Win! — Heroism in the Pandemic</i> (translated by authors)	Spanish (targeting Cuba)	Xinhua News
《协力同心 守护希望》	<i>Work Together with One Heart, Protect Hopes</i> (translated by authors)	Portuguese (targeting Brazil)	Xinhua News
《疫情时期的守望相助》	<i>Help and Support Each Other in the Pandemic</i> (translated by authors)	Spanish (targeting Mexico)	Xinhua News
《兄弟之道 团结同心》	<i>Unite like Brothers</i> (translated by authors)	Spanish (targeting Argentina)	Xinhua News
《直到永远的胜利》	<i>Victory till Forever</i> (translated by authors)	Spanish (targeting Venezuela)	Xinhua News
《我们在一起》	We are Together	Italian (targeting Italy)	China International Television Corp

Chinese documentaries: From propaganda to public diplomacy

Documentaries, with a history of more than a century, provide a valuable prism to understand China's history, society, culture and politics. Since 1949, Chinese documentaries have evolved with the transformation of China's economy, society and politics, especially in relation to the changing media market, policies and technologies. They constitute an important component of China's contemporary media industry as, for example, the total length of documentary films produced in China in 2018 was 24,000 hours. In 2019, total capital investment in documentary production was 5.036 billion Yuan (about US\$787 million), and the total output value in the same year reached 6.66 billion Yuan (about US\$1 billion) (China Documentary Industry Research Report 2020).

In her book *Chinese Documentaries*, Chinese documentary film scholar Yingchi Chu (2008) used the term 'from dogma to polyphony' to succinctly describe the transformation of Chinese documentaries since 1949. She argues that documentaries have played a crucial role in government propaganda in both the Mao and the post-Mao era. However, with China's deepening economic reform, media marketisation and increased awareness of people's rights since 1978, documentaries have been used as an effective medium by intellectuals, artists, social activists and the public to express concerns and alternative voices beyond Party propaganda. This diversity demonstrates what Chu (2008) calls the 'polyphonic heterogeneity' of the documentary's function, subject matter, presentation mode and style in the current landscape of Chinese documentaries.

Cao (2015) divides the history of PRC's documentaries into four phases, namely the 'political phase' (1958–1977), 'humanistic phase' (1978–1992), 'popular phase' (1993–1998) and 'plural phase' (1999–present). In the political phase, Chinese documentary filmmakers adopted documentary theories and practices from the Soviet Union (Qian 2013). Documentary films in this period functioned as a political instrument for socialist state building and external propaganda (Cao 2015). Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up policy in 1978 led to the second phase of Chinese documentaries. In this period, the relaxation of the Party control over economy,

mass media and society created a relatively freer environment for documentary production, and also diversified the topics of documentary films, including natural scenery, cultural traditions and national identity (Cao 2015). At the same time, the rise of television as the most popular mass media among urban Chinese people had made documentary a popular genre amongst TV programmes – popularly called '*dianshi zhuantipian*' in Chinese (Chu 2007).

The popular phase is characterised by the rise of 'social-life-based documentaries' as well as the marketisation of documentary production, arguably as a result of the commercialisation of Chinese media that required documentary production to cater to the growing needs of audiences and the market (Cao 2015). This period also witnessed the emergence of the so-called New Documentary Movement (*xin jilupian yundong*). According to Lu (2003), documentary filmmakers in this Movement would cast their eyes on ordinary people and marginalised social groups and tell their stories from a bottom-up perspective, thus highlighting the changes in Chinese society by documenting the impacts of economic reforms on mundane social spaces.

The plural phase is characterised by the rise of social-change-oriented independent documentaries that operated outside the highly censored television platform, and the normalisation of big-budget documentary series broadcast on CCTV (Cao 2015). This phase, initiated in the twenty-first century, marks the beginning of the industrialisation of Chinese documentaries (China Documentary Industry Research Report 2020). In this phase, the industry chain of documentary film from creativity, production and promotion to broadcasting was formed. New media companies, such as major online video streaming platforms (e.g. Youku, iQiyi, Tencent Video), have participated in the production of documentaries and have become very important documentary broadcasting channels (ibid 2020).

Another prominent feature of the phase that has been largely ignored by Chinese documentary film studies scholars is the government's unprecedented support of the development of China's documentary industry for the purpose of soft power building. In 2010, the State Council released *Guidance on Promoting the Prosperity and Development of the Film Industry*. The guidance, for the first time, proposed the strategy of Chinese film

'going out' and stressed the importance of increasing the global influence of Chinese films to promote China's soft power (Gov.cn 2010). In 2012, The National Radio and Television Administration issued *Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Documentary Industry*. The official document formally acknowledges documentary as 'an important carrier and aspect for the going global of Chinese culture' and calls for implementing a strategy of 'home-made documentaries going out' to facilitate China's soft power initiatives (CNTV 2012).

Against this backdrop, CGTN established its bespoke documentary channel CGTN Documentary on 1 January 2011. It is China's first ever state-level documentary channel that mainly broadcasts Chinese documentaries dubbed in English or with English subtitles to global audiences, twenty-four hours a day. Sun (2014b) summarises the characteristics of its documentary programmes as 'Chinese stories, international expression, shared feeling for mankind'. Documentaries produced by CCTV and broadcast by CGTN Documentary are expected to function as external propaganda and conduct public diplomacy to enhance China's soft power strategies. One of the most successful documentaries of this kind is *A Bite of China* (舌尖上的中国), a TV documentary series on the history of Chinese food and cooking. It was first aired in May 2012 on CCTV and was later dubbed in English and broadcast on CGTN Documentary and CCTV's YouTube channel for global circulation. The first season of *A Bite of China* was translated into six languages and sold to seventy-five countries. The overseas sales revenue of the documentary reached US\$2.26 million, hitting a record for the sale of a Chinese documentary abroad (Sohu.com 2013). The documentary is widely seen by international communication scholars (Yin 2014) as an excellent example of telling China's stories well to the world and utilising documentaries to promote China's cultural attractiveness and international image.

Mapping the history of PRC's documentaries, Cao (2015: 362) argues that the 'documentary's functions have shifted from being a pure propaganda tool to a vehicle for political persuasion by political and intellectual elites and then to a mediator of social-political changes'. Acknowledging the transformation, we further argue that since 2010 there has been a trend of re-politicising documentaries as a carrier of external propaganda along

with China's mounting ambition of enhancing the nation's soft power through state media 'going out' initiatives. CGTN and other state media's production of anti-pandemic documentaries targeting overseas audiences can be used to demonstrate a timely and important trend for us to critically understand the roles and politics of these documentaries in conducting public diplomacy.

Analysing China's anti-pandemic documentaries

In this section, we analyse five anti-pandemic documentaries listed in Table 7.1. They are *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* (CGTN 2020a), *The Frontline: China's Fight against COVID 19* (CGTN 2020b), *24 Hours in Wuhan* (CGTN 2020c), *Life and Death at Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital* (People's Daily 2020), and *We Are Together* (China International Television Corp 2020). The five documentaries were selected for analysis because they are available on YouTube and Chinese streaming sites. The other five documentaries, co-produced by Xinhua News with Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Venezuela, are not available online. This is probably because the five documentaries were mainly broadcast on local TV channels in the target countries and are not circulated online. However, the five documentaries that are available accurately represent two types of anti-pandemic documentaries. *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan*, *The Frontline: China's Fight against COVID 19*, *24 Hours in Wuhan* and *Life and Death at Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital* represent the first type which focuses on telling China's domestic anti-pandemic stories, especially stories from Wuhan, to target international audiences. *We Are Together* represents the other type, which focuses on representing China's international collaboration with foreign countries in fighting the pandemic.

Through a close reading of the five documentaries, we identify their representational modes and narrative strategies for achieving what Xi calls 'telling China's anti-pandemic stories well'. In other words, we aim to demonstrate how documentary films have been strategically used by the Chinese

government as a public diplomacy tool to respond to the overwhelmingly negative coverage by Western media of China in the COVID-pandemic 19.

Hybrid mode of representation

The five selected documentaries are mostly expository, with a reportorial style voice-over commentary in English dubbed by native speakers. The expository mode is one of the six major representational modes in documentaries, the others being observational, poetic, participatory, reflexive and performative (Nichols 2017). In expository documentaries, the 'voice of God' commentary exerts control over the text to direct the viewers to a 'ready-made point of view', while at the same time giving the impression of objectivity and evidence-based judgment (Nichols 2017: 54). The mode was dominant in Chinese documentaries during the Mao era, when documentaries played a crucial role in propaganda, mass persuasion and mobilisation.

The anti-pandemic documentaries also adopt the expository mode as the main mode of representation due to their nature as external-oriented propaganda. However, multiple modes of representation, such as the observatory mode, which focuses on watching, listening and observing what occurs in a continuous time and space, and the participatory mode, marked by interviews and other forms of encounter between the documentary makers (Nichols 2017, 108–109), are also applied by the filmmakers in order to minimise the impression of propaganda and achieve optimal communicative effect to distinguish them from the earlier propaganda documentaries.

In these anti-pandemic documentaries, on-camera in-person interviews, synchronised sound, and long takes and tracking shots are frequently employed to enhance the impression of truthfulness of the stories and the events represented. For example, *Life and Death at Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital* only has English subtitles without any voice-over commentary, thus leaning more towards the observational style. There are minimum inserts and background music. Instead, the camera follows the doctors into the dimly lit wards, sometimes with unsteady shots. The despair hanging in the air during the early stage of the pandemic has been captured well, creating

a catastrophic atmosphere but one that also feels realistic, spontaneous and truthful. The desperate, suffering patients, as well as the hectic or sometimes helpless medical staff, are shown conveying a sense of unmediated access to what was in front of the camera, which is at the core of the observational mode (Nichols 2017: 108). This makes the film different from the traditional propaganda documentaries that usually exclusively represent uplifting and heroic deeds and inspirational achievements.

The participatory representational mode is also commonly adopted in the five documentaries, which is especially demonstrated through the widely used first-person narratives and interviews. For example, *The Lockdown* captures how the armed-to-the-teeth film crew had to negotiate to enter high-risk hospitals to interview patients and medical staff. The detailing of the reporters' difficulty accessing the scene, as well as the incorporation of their first-hand recorded footage, serves the purpose of authenticating the documentaries they produce. When international reports criticised China for covering up COVID in Wuhan at the initial stage (Walsh 2020), the camera-on-the-scene strategy and the handheld camera language was arguably used to portray an impression of what the pandemic situation in Wuhan actually looks like.

In general, these anti-pandemic documentaries aim to project a detached neutrality and objectivity by integrating multiple modes of representation. The hybrid mode can help dilute the propaganda flavour of the films with modern persuasion techniques, and strategically counteract the dominant Western framing of China in the pandemic using seemingly non-political visual language.

The war metaphor

The four documentaries focusing on Wuhan invariably narrate the pandemic through the metaphors of war and battle. In public discourse, the war metaphor has been frequently used to communicate crucial and urgent societal issues to the public, such as poverty, crime, cancer and climate change (Hartmann-Mahmud 2002; Flusberg, Matlock and Thibodeau 2018). In the COVID-19 pandemic, the war metaphor has

been ubiquitously used in media coverage globally. The purpose of using the metaphor is to help people understand and clarify complex situations, catch the attention of the public and mobilise people to take actions (Musu 2020; Seixas 2021). Yet it also has negative outcomes, such as reducing ethical complexities, providing justification for authoritarianism and giving rise to nationalism (Musu 2020).

At the time of production of the anti-pandemic documentaries, parts of the international community were blaming China for its sluggish response in containing the spread of the virus in the early stage of the pandemic, as well as for their violation of human rights through the imposition of stringent measures in the course of the lockdown (e.g. ABC Television 2020; Argoon and McArthur 2020). To counteract these representations, the war metaphor was explicitly used in these documentaries to foreground state efficiency in mobilising resources to fight against the pandemic, to justify the strict and long lockdown in Wuhan, and to stress the need for individual sacrifices.

In addition to the war metaphor, these documentaries also adopt a war film dramaturgy in the narrative. They usually start by showing the initial chaos, confusion and fear generated by the pandemic with a heightened sense of uncertainty, anxiety and anticipation. Next, they shift to depicting how individuals, such as patients, doctors, volunteers and the government, responded to the crisis, including their suffering, sacrifice, commitment and actions. The documentaries usually end with the achievement and success of the people's fight against the pandemic. Moreover, war genre themes (Dirks n.d.), such as 'survival' or 'escape' (patients' personal survival stories), 'tough trenches' (community workers guarding the barracked gates and streets), 'combat scene' (rescuing patients in the emergency room) and 'camaraderie' (doctors working together closely and friendship formed between doctors and patients in hospital), have been carefully scripted into the documentaries. The bird's eye view and continuous panoramic shots of a construction site housing portable hospital rooms highlight the state's efforts to mobilise resources and its organisational capacity to manage the epidemic. Implicitly, this poses a contrast to the inertia of some Western governments, including the US, in dealing with the pandemic and the attendant chaos.

Empathy

Apart from the use of war metaphors and narrative devices, these films also employ methods to invite empathy. During the pandemic, the Chinese government has suffered a landslide loss of trust among the international community (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2020; Wintour and Thomas 2020). Under such antagonistic circumstances, anti-pandemic documentaries are used to deflect blame and attempt to gain the approval of the general public outside China by eliciting empathy from international audiences. For some, the power to elicit empathy in viewers is the greatest strength of the documentary film genre (Curtis 2014), even though it might be difficult due to the gap between authorial intentions and audience perceptions (Nåls 2018). Scholars such as Bondebjerg (2014) lay special emphasis on the documentary's capacity to elicit emotions in relation to moral and ideological values.

A key method adopted to take the edge off the propagandistic taste of these documentaries is to restore the humanity of the subjects so that the viewers can identify with those depicted. Since 'identification is known to psycho-analysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person' (Freud 1989:46), it can be considered effective in eliciting emotional responses from viewers. In the documentaries we study, one of the most prominent strategies to elicit empathy is to focus on the characterisation of heroic 'commoners' by recording their humanistic, heart-warming and, importantly, mundane stories. For example, in *The Frontline: China's Fight against COVID-19*, the director follows a community worker, Feng Feng, to record his routine tasks purchasing and delivering medications to community residents in quarantine and to show how he conducts this mundane job with creativity and optimism. In *The Lockdown*, the crew interview Xie Jingjing, a frontline nurse. Distinguishing the depiction from the routine state media portrayal of medical professionals as 'brave' and 'fearless' heroes, Jingjing is represented as a real person with fear, anxiety and inner struggle, like anyone else trapped in the pandemic. She speaks to the camera, saying, 'I'd be lying if I say I'm not scared ... We have to cheer up. If we don't cheer ourselves up, how can we face it? If you get depressed, you are doomed.'

These ordinary but emphatic stories of humanity aim to evoke emotional responses from audiences regardless of their nationality, language, or culture, and could potentially lend the documentaries more credibility due to their focus on the ordinary circumstances of real people.

Engaging foreigners in storytelling

The pandemic has not only jeopardised China's international image, but has also given rise to Sinophobia in many Western countries (Wong 2020b). It is therefore urgently important to showcase an impression of Western recognition of achievements by the Chinese Government in dealing with the pandemic as well as highlight friendship between Chinese and Westerners to contest the anti-Chinese sentiment in Western media and societies. The documentaries we examined use a strategy to engage foreigners to speak on behalf of the Chinese government and people. The strategy is literally referred to as '*jiechuan chuhai*' (*go overseas by boarding other people's ship*) or '*jiezui shuohuo*' (*talk with other people's mouth*). Engaging foreigners for persuasive purposes is not a new practice in the CCP's history. Brady (2003) argues that managing foreigners inside and outside China has been one of the most effective means of CCP political governance. For example, towards the end of the Second Sino–Japanese War in 1944, the CCP invited a press party group that included six journalists from the US, Great Britain and Soviet Union to the Yan'an headquarters of the CCP. The foreign journalists gave highly favourable reports based on their visit and helped to promote a positive image of the CCP internationally (Brady 2003: 58–59).

To justify the whole-nation lockdown, *The Frontline (Episode 2)* interviewed Mano Cavolo, an Italian American writer who has been living in Shenyang, a city in Northeast China, for two decades. He made a direct comment in support of the Chinese government's lockdown policy and highly praised the sacrifice of the Chinese people in fighting against the pandemic. He also criticised the slow reaction of Western governments in curbing the spread of the virus:

We're not dealing with policy decisions. We're not dealing with trade decisions. This is not just another day, another topic, another subject, another news headline. This is what is now a viral global pandemic. This is a humanitarian crisis. There is going to be pain, death, sacrifice. I feel like in the West, they are trying to avoid all that.

The strategy is more widely used in *We Are Together*, a documentary focusing on the friendship between Italy and China to collaboratively fight against the pandemic. A large number of interviewees in the documentary are Italian scholars, artists, diplomats and cultural organisation officials. They all speak of their appreciation of China's aid to Italy during the pandemic and make positive comments on the friendship between the two countries. Incorporating the views of 'insiders' thus aims to add authenticity and reliability to these films when they are consumed by international audiences. Engaging foreigners in representing China's pandemic stories is expected to help make up for any possible 'cultural discount' these documentaries face when distributed internationally, a concept often used to refer to the devaluation of cultural products such as TV drama and films in the context of international cultural trade due to the inaccessibility of their innate cultural elements to other cultures (Zhang 2012).

Broadcasting the documentaries

The CGTN Documentary channel plays a major role in enhancing external communication and public diplomacy and is usually the first platform on which these documentaries are broadcast. CGTN has 70 bureaus around the world and widely collaborates with other national and regional broadcasting networks. CGTN's own international channels, as well as its partner broadcasters overseas, provide the main broadcasting platforms for the anti-pandemic documentaries. In addition, streaming media platforms in the West have been harnessed to promote the circulation of these documentaries globally.

For example, *The Lockdown*, after its debut on 28 February 2020 on CGTN's English-language channel, was posted on CGTN's official website, mobile client application and official accounts on YouTube,

Twitter and Facebook. By 16 March 2020, it had received 16.89 million views and 458,000 online comments (Dong and Yu 2020). On Twitter, it was retweeted by the official account of the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, and those of the Chinese embassies in the UK, Germany and many other countries. It was broadcast by 165 overseas TV channels from 20 countries and regions, including the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Britain's Channel 4, French broadcaster TV5Monde and Japan's TV Asahi (CCTV News App 2020; Wang 2020). *Twenty-four Hours in Wuban* had 14.37 million hits and was viewed over six million times on CGTN's Facebook, YouTube and Twitter accounts. It was also broadcast on 182 TV channels and their streaming platforms in fifty-two countries, including France 2, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen in Germany, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Tokyo Broadcasting System, Inc, and Channel 9 MCOT HD in Thailand, among others (CCTV.com 2020).

While it is hard for us to evaluate the communication effect of the documentaries among international audiences without conducting a large-scale survey, some patterns can be observed. From the limited data we can find from the Chinese state media about the reception of and reaction to these documentaries overseas, they are believed to have largely achieved the goal of 'telling China's anti-pandemic stories well' (CCTV News App 2020; CCTV.com 2020). Our observation shows that one of the documentaries, *The Lockdown*, on CGTN's YouTube account, had garnered 193,000 'likes' and 98,000 'dislikes' by 27 July 2021 (CGTN 2020a). The 28,962 comments demonstrate a mixed reaction and contrasting attitude towards the documentary, with many praising the achievement of the Chinese government in fighting against the pandemic while others criticise China's cover-up and the propagandistic nature of the documentary for intentionally swaying foreign public opinion. The asymmetry between the desired (ideal) effect for the Chinese state media to produce these documentaries and the real communicative effect of these documentaries among international audiences demonstrates the paradoxes of the state-produced documentaries for public diplomacy as well as the state-led soft power initiative.

Conclusion: Understanding the paradox of China's soft power through documentaries

By examining the state-media-produced anti-pandemic documentaries for external communication, we argue that China's public diplomacy campaign in the Xi era which emphasises the role of the state media in 'telling China stories well', has given rise to the re-politicising of Chinese documentaries for external propaganda. These outgoing documentaries for public diplomacy are divorced from the dogmatic formula of the traditional propaganda documentaries, characterised by their top-down and monological voice of the official doctrine (Chu 2007). Instead, they have adopted multiple modes of representation and innovative narrative strategies, as well as using converged media platforms for distribution, telling China's stories from people-oriented micro perspectives and with universal values and emotions. The main political function of this type of documentary is to compete with the US-dominated media discourses about China and project a favourable image of China internationally.

Scholars have widely discussed the prominent role of screen cultural practices in generating China's soft power, especially film and TV shows (Keane and Liu 2013; Sun 2018; Voci and Luo 2018). As one of the most important screen cultural practices of China's 'going-out' state media, the role of externally oriented documentaries in fulfilling China's soft power initiatives should not be overlooked, particularly when China's international image is negatively impacted by a crisis. Documentaries complement the news coverage, editorials and commentary by China's foreign-language state media in times of crisis to articulate the state narratives in a softer, more attractive and seemingly less official way.

In the post-pandemic era, the existing geopolitical competition, especially the rivalry between the US and China, tends to exacerbate (The Economist 2020). The waves of propaganda and disinformation triggered by the coronavirus are likely to continue alongside the intensifying great power rivalry (von Hein and Welle 2020). Therefore, the role of China's state-media-produced documentaries in doing public diplomacy will arguably become more crucial than ever. The investment of the state media

in producing these kinds of documentaries, as well as the quantity and themes of such documentaries, are very likely to increase in line with China's ongoing 'tell China's stories well' campaign to cope with the discursive battle with the West. However, whether this kind of documentary could effectively counter the anti-China discourse, and to what degree they could help promote China's public diplomacy, national image and soft power remains a question.

China's billion-dollar state-led soft power project to improve the country's global image and status is often debated. It is often critically seen as China's 'charm offensive' (Kurlantzick 2007) or as a manifestation of 'sharp power' (Nye 2018), which is criticised for blurring the boundaries of soft power (through cultural attraction and influence) and economic hard power (through economic assistance or buy-up). Compared with the widely praised soft power of South Korea and Japan, mainly achieved through the influence of their popular culture, China's soft power initiatives have been less effective and even suffered a backlash. Criticism and even the shutdown of some of the Confucius Institutes, funded by the Chinese Government, in the West are a case in point (Green-Riley 2020). As an emerging screen cultural practice led by the state media to promote China's global image, the future of documentaries aimed at external communication is still full of uncertainty in terms of the reach of broadcasting, and their credibility and influence.

First, CGTN and overseas TV channels that have cooperation agreements with CGTN to air its programmes locally are the main platforms for broadcasting documentaries for external communication. However, the backlash against the global expansion of Chinese state media, as well as criticism of the Chinese Government's '*jiechuan chuhai*' strategy have made these broadcasting channels unstable. For example, in 2020, the US government designated 15 Chinese media outlets, including CGTN, Xinhua News and *People's Daily*, as foreign missions (Aljazeera 2020). Britain's communication regulator Ofcom revoked the license of CGTN to broadcast in the UK in early February 2021 on the grounds of it being a state-backed and political organisation, despite controversy (Tobitt 2020). In addition, the documentaries examined here rely on the state media's official accounts for wider distribution on Western social media platforms,

such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition, Twitter has begun to label these state media accounts as 'China state-affiliated media' since August 2020 to remind followers that posts are likely censored and advance a political agenda, which has led to a significant drop of likes and retweets of China's state media posts (Feng 2021). With potential broadcasting channels restrained, the reception and influence of external communication documentaries will likely be negatively impacted.

Second, the weakness of China's soft power, according to Joseph Nye (2012), is mainly caused by the government's limitation of freedom of speech and restrictions on civil society. In the meantime, the limited space for China's independent documentary-making has been shrinking over the past decade. Under tighter state scrutiny, many independent film festivals have been closed down and independent documentaries and their directors are increasingly prohibited from appearing at international film festivals (Rudolph 2019). Voci and Luo (2018: 4) suggest going beyond 'state narratives' to study China's soft power from 'both consonant and dissonant perspectives' by considering 'multiple and intersecting discourses'. This suggestion is not only conducive to scholars researching China's soft power, but also to the Chinese state, which desperately desires to enhance the reputation and effectiveness of its soft power initiatives. To harness documentary as an effective soft power tool, the government needs to open up the state-dominated storytelling space to allow civil society actors to participate in telling Chinese stories from the bottom up. Focusing exclusively on state narratives while downplaying the critical but authentic citizen narratives in documentary production will impair the credibility and influence of state-media-produced documentaries among global audiences in the long run.

Similar to other soft power initiatives, China's state-produced documentary for external communication and public diplomacy will unsurprisingly arouse debate post-pandemic around its authenticity, credibility, propagandist nature and political motives among its targeted nations and their audiences, making the global impact of the state-led screen cultural practice uncertain. China's state media, their documentary production teams and state-sponsored scholars will keep improving and experimenting with new strategies of telling Chinese stories well to win the minds and

hearts of global audiences. Yet, the often-irreconcilable conflict between the documentary producer and the audiences involved in the cross-cultural meaning-making process reflects in many ways the paradoxes of China's soft power initiatives.

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