



Black humour as official slogan: The CDA from Chinese anti-epidemic discourse



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ABSTRACT

Black humour is associated with illness, death, and crisis and is frequently used as grassroots resistance to hegemonic power. However, black humour has received little attention concerning how it is appropriated by the state. Thus, this study contributes to reconceptualise black humour as the anti-epidemic slogans of the Chinese Communist Party by combining Bakhtin's carnivalesque and Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation strategies within Critical Discourse Analysis paradigm to investigate how inhumane slogans are legitimised. Our findings reveal that the CCP employs three legitimation strategies—authorisation, moral evaluation, and rationalisation—to maintain its power status through official slogans. This study offers a new perspective on how power relations are sustained and renegotiated through the official language in China.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was generally a global concern from 2020 up until before 2023. Given the rapid development of social media, the mandatory global quarantine and social distancing policies, the influx of humour (mainly in the form of memes) on social media in response to COVID-19 has become an increasingly prevalent coping strategy (Flecha Ortiz et al., 2021) and facilitated a new type of expression and reflection (Literat, 2021). COVID-19 humour reflects a popular participatory culture that is parodic, criticised, has fascinated the public, and uses an ultimately 'different discursive orientation' (Shifman, 2013, p. 40). Media reports are criticised as spreading contradicting beliefs and assumptions, impacting public opinion and inducing panic (Dyner, 2021). Due to the tensions between the government, the media and the public during the pandemic, some of the COVID-19 humour was offensive, defined as black humour due to its co-existence with death, illness, and even crisis and disaster (Bischett et al., 2021), which approximates other forms of black humour on a negative level of appreciation (Carretero-Dios and Ruch, 2010).

In this study, we take a unique angle to examine a particular type of COVID-19 humour, the Chinese official anti-epidemic slogans, as a form of black humour. Slogans have been a typical way of mobilisation in political campaigns in China since 1922 (Song and Gee, 2020). Anti-epidemic slogans (posts or banners) were used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a health campaign during COVID-19. The slogans often consist of two sentences, and the language style has been largely controversial as it contains severe threats and curses related to death. For example, '今天沾一口野味, 明天去地府相会' (Eating wild animals today may lead to meeting one's ancestors in the afterlife tomorrow), this slogan serves as an exhortatory warning by cursing

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those who violate the epidemic prevention regulations to death. As humour becomes a response to current sociopolitical events and popular participation in culture as a habitual form of grassroots resistance to power (Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013), few studies have addressed the use of black humour and the power relations it (re)constructs from the official perspective. Here, official perspectives refer to those of the CCP communicated through official statements or other official channels (e.g. slogans), which represent the official position or opinion of the entity (CCP) on a particular subject or issue (e.g. COVID-19).

Bakhtin's carnival humour, by integrating themes of excrement, death, and sexuality, echoes black humour. Therefore, this study draws on Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory (1984) aligned with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the discursive strategies employed in official anti-epidemic slogans disseminated by the CCP during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation strategies are employed to investigate how Chinese officials legitimise the use of violent and non-humanist slogans to the general public. This study aims to shed light on the discursive strategies used by the CCP in their public health communication efforts and will contribute to a deeper understanding of how official hegemonic power relations are employed and (re)constructed in China. In addition to its empirical contribution, the theoretical contribution of incorporating CDA and Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies into a conceptual understanding of Bakhtin can provide a rich and nuanced theoretical framework for analysing discourse, power relations and social ideology. Through this conceptualisation, the study provides insight into understanding the role of black humour within contemporary interpretations of Bakhtin's folk culture. It offers a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between humour, power, and official discourse in the context of CCP's health campaign slogans.

2. History of slogans in contemporary China

A slogan is a concise and well-crafted term, phrase or expression that effectively communicates a call to action, fosters loyalty, and inspires individuals to make decisions and actively pursue the achievement of a particular principle or significant matter (Shankel, 2012). The widespread distribution, large quantity, complex content, rich forms, and close relationship to social life make Chinese slogans a rarity in the history of world languages (Han, 2008). In China, official slogans are considered a crucial type of institutional language that serves as a tool to promote policies, values, or actions that the government advocates or disapproves of (Ning, 2020). As a form of public discourse, official slogans aim to foster specific shared civic values and actions (Song and Gee, 2020). Ideological indoctrination employed by ideographs in political discourse not only reflects but also shapes thought and culture, and political slogans have played a significant role in effecting change at both interpersonal and cultural levels in China (Lu, 1999).

During major, political, and economic stages in China's history, widespread official slogans served as government policy statements, conveying expectations and suggestions to the public (Ning, 2020). The representative slogan, such as '以前是牛马, 现在要做人' (Once a cow and horse, now a man) (1922) was a highly influential phrase during the first workers' movement led by the CCP. Through vivid animal-to-human metaphors, it effectively conveyed the dire living conditions of the Chinese working class and their ardent aspiration to attain human dignity and be the 'master' of their lives. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China shifted towards economic pragmatism, initiating economic reform and 'open-door' policies in the early 1980s to promote regional development and attract foreign investment. Slogans during this period were used to emphasise the liberation of the mind to achieve the goal of '四个现代化' (The Four Modernisations) (Lu, 1999). For example, the term '下海' (To go to sea) is a metaphor for urging individuals to enter the 'sea' of the commodity economy and market competition to earn a living freely (Song and Gee, 2020). How the slogan, which is also the ancient Chinese idiom '韬光养晦;' (1991) was recontextualised in Deng's discourse, provides another example. The original meaning of '韬光养晦' refers to maintaining a low profile and restraint in unfavorable or premature circumstances, preserving strength and accumulating power in preparation for future action. However, here it was introduced by Deng in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a diplomatic strategy to guide China's stance and approach in international affairs. These phrases gained popularity and spread quickly throughout the bureaucracy and publicity system due to their appealing and easy composite structure (Link, 2013).

In the context of modern consumerism and globalisation, the Chinese people have become suspicious of, and even opposed the CCP and the ideology of Marxism (Ci, 1994). To address this issue, the CCP has refocused its slogans towards constructing politics and ideology. The slogan '中国梦' (Chinese Dream), introduced in 2012 by Present Xi Jinping, reflects the CCP's more forceful and active stance on ideological issues (Song and Gee, 2020). The 'Chinese Dream' symbolises the Chinese people's collective aspirations for the nation's future prosperity and a happy life, reflecting a sense of collective mission. It is a response to the ongoing debate regarding the moral crisis identified by groups such as the New Left, traditionalists, militarists, and liberals China encounters after three decades of economic reform and opening (Callahan, 2017). Xi's emphasis on the 'Chinese Dream' is accompanied by another vital slogan, '人民有信仰, 民族有希望, 国家有力量' (People have faith, nation has hope, country has power). This slogan employs the rhetorical device of parallelism and highlights the significance of a solid and optimistic national identity.

3. Correctness of slogan language

The dissemination of political information through language symbols allows slogans to influence people's values, leading them to digest and absorb them to shape their behaviours selectively. Therefore, the language employed in policy discussions holds significant practical implications for shaping public understanding and driving policy development (Marcuse, 2015). Government power creates a particular reality through 'rituals of truth' that generate certain knowledge systems (Foucault,

1991, p. 102). In China's historical tradition, the correctness of language has always been regarded as a basis of 'moral authority, official legitimacy, and political stability', and the intrinsic, instrumental value of political language is the most effective way to communicate and sustain the official state ideology (Marinelli, 2012, p. 16). Perry Link (2013) provides a detailed analysis of how linguistic features of slogans help the government to propagate its ideas/ideologies to the public. Rhythm, metaphor, and political rhetoric have fashioned it consciously in propaganda work. Link states that government slogans often make use of *wuyan* (五言) and *qiyān* (七言) patterns, in which each line is five or seven syllables long. Contemporary Chinese official language asserts moral rectitude by using specific words, grammatical patterns, and rhythms that convey a strong sense of correctness. Rhythm and repetition enhance the impact of the message by rendering it pleasurable, memorable, natural, authoritative, and elevated. However, the emphasis on form rather than content in the official language hinders practicality. Modern official Chinese has a distinctive flavour that is simultaneously austere, vacuous, intimidating, and elusive, resulting in a stuffy and pompous tone (Link, 2013).

The correctness of China's slogans and its unilateral agenda has been questioned. On the one hand, for example, the positive aspect of nationalist rhetoric is exemplified by the optimistic message of Xi's 'Chinese Dream' slogan, a vague but attractive call for patriotism that promotes political solidarity (Song and Gee, 2020). They envisage a digital age in which competition for people's attention, loyalty, affinities, and identities will intensify (Singer and Brooking, 2018). On the other hand, the 'authors' of the slogans, which are signals of shared citizenship and shared objectives at the state level, can be seen as patronising, deceptive, or well-intentioned by different groups of citizens (Song and Gee, 2020). Geall and Ely (2018) point out that, rather than being encoded into an implementable narrative, the slogan initially served as a site for negotiation among various actors, institutions, and discourses. However, under President Xi Jinping, the slogan has been encoded into a specific narrative. This process of concluding discussions and negotiations to transform slogans into implementable narratives provides a new perspective on China's environmental decision-making and governance process (Geall and Ely, 2018).

4. Anti-epidemic slogans and black humour

As a form of governance, slogans are one of the routine methods for publicity and governance employed by the CCP and are a crucial tool in preventing and managing the spread of COVID-19 (Hou et al., 2022). The inclusion of negative terms in slogans is not uncommon. This trend is particularly evident in political election campaigns, where negative language often highlights opponents' perceived immorality and inhumanity (Ross and Caldwell, 2020). In China, verbal violence in rural family planning slogans had already emerged as early as the 1990s, reflecting the violent tendencies of rural grassroots government movements in implementing this policy (Wang, 2018). For example, representative slogans included '宁可血流成河, 不准超生一个' (Better to have blood flowing like a river than to allow one extra child to be born) and '引下来, 流下来, 就是不能生下来' (Induced abortion, miscarriage are permitted, but childbirth is not). Similarly, the current anti-epidemic slogans in rural areas have been characterised as 'hardcore' and blunt (Han, 2021, p. 32; Mo and Heng, 2022). Using threatening language or impoliteness in blunt slogans may be a deliberate rhetorical strategy the government employs to optimise its effectiveness in carrying out its health prevention function. Despite their seeming impoliteness, anti-pandemic slogans exhibit distinct linguistic features such as conciseness, poetic patterns, rhyming and metaphors (Han, 2021; Sun and Zhou, 2020).

Humour is found to be used by public health professionals to improve health communication and community engagement with health promotion campaigns (Miller et al., 2021). Messages that are highly threatening and humorous are more persuasive than those that are less threatening or lack a sense of humour (Mukherjee and Dubé, 2012). This compelling robustness is increasingly used in health communication (Hendriks and Janssen, 2018). However, in the Chinese context, Han (2021) suggests that the combination of threat and humour in these communications is viewed as highly formal and serious with minimal room for humour, as these hardcore banners are displayed on long red cloths on the sides of roads or in public areas, frequently with the signature of the local government in the bottom right corner (Han, 2021).

Our research challenges the notion that forms of humour can only be restricted by their official/unofficial nature and that an official slogan cannot also be humorous (Han, 2021; Hou et al., 2022) simply because it bears official signatures or is released by governments. On the contrary, we propose that official language can take a specific humour form, namely black humour, which combines humour with threatening language strategies. Black humour, also known as gallows humour or dark humour, is characterised by treating disturbing subjects such as death, disease, deformity, disability, or war in a painfully entertaining way (Willinger et al., 2017). Likewise, Levine (1978) characterises black humour as a type of ironic, exaggerated, and modified speech that is critical and insulting, particularly concerning race, sex, current affairs, and politics.

Black humour elicits laughter because it aligns with the humour mechanism explained by both the Incongruity Theory and the Relief Theory. The incongruity can be between the real and the unreal (absurd humour), between the taboo and the non-taboo (sexual humour, toilet humour, offensive humour), and between the gruesome and the innocent, the banal or the gleeful (sick humour) (Kuipers, 2011). Moreover, the Relief Theory suggests that humour serves as a psychological mechanism for releasing tension and stress (Freud, 1960). The 'censor' in brain cognition allows individuals to avoid thinking about forbidden things and violating common sense and morality. On the other hand, the 'strings' suppressed by the subconscious mind outside the principle will be released by taboos, resulting in humour (Minsky, 1981).

Our study broadly defines black humour as humour that emerges from traumatic events, incidents, and crises (Dyner and Poppi, 2018; Lenggogeni et al., 2022). The classification mentioned above is founded upon two observations. Firstly, it is widely accepted that official Chinese health campaigns employ language that is simultaneously threatening and relates to taboo subjects, such as death, disease, and sex, strikingly reminiscent of the scope of black humour. Secondly, as black humour

is frequently associated with crisis events, the global COVID-19 pandemic presents a compelling rationale for using black humour in this context.

5. Methodology/data collection: understanding CDA through carnivalesque voices

Bakhtin's (1984) analysis of *Rabelais and his world* shows that the carnivalesque represents a unique form of marketplace expression deeply rooted in folk culture. This type of humour encompasses a wide range of images, including cursing, swearing, jokes, parodies, abusive language, and mischievous antics typically forbidden by officials (Sultana and Dovchin, 2017). During the Medieval carnival depicted in Rabelais' work, social hierarchies are temporarily subverted and disrupted, allowing for a distinct form of communication not usually permitted outside the carnival. The grotesque body, a vital theme in the carnival, is closely linked to material bodily principles and represents the cyclical nature of life and death. Elements including eating, drinking, defecation, copulation, and death provide a rich lens to investigate the populace's bottom-up resistance against the orthodoxy and seriousness of church and government (Bakhtin, 1984).

A carnivalesque text is identified as that 'which has taken the carnival spirit into itself and thus reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies and discrowns of carnival proper' (Dentith, 1995, p. 65). The unprecedented social conditions that have emerged with the advent of the Internet age and the proliferation of humour require reevaluating traditional conceptual approaches to examining power relations (Kan, 2020). In response, the carnivalesque, a theoretical and empirical framework that has long been relevant in the humour study, provides both symbolic and metaphorical lenses to analyse the power dynamics embedded in humour.

Both the carnivalesque framework and CDA provide a power-oriented perspective for approaching discourse analysis, emphasising the interactive aspects of unequal power relations. The CDA focuses on examining the (re)construction of ideology and power relations within texts and discourses. Ideologies are representations of the world that establish and maintain power, dominance, and exploitative relationships (Dovchin et al., 2017; Fairclough, 2003). Therefore, CDA primarily aims to investigate how text and talk reproduce, legitimise, and resist social power abuse and inequality (Van Dijk, 2015). According to Fairclough (2003), discourse plays a pivotal role in social practice in three distinct ways: genres, discourses, and styles. Genres refer to ways of acting, discourses to ways of representing, and styles to ways of being. In this regard, the representation of social events can be seen as a form of recontextualisation (Fairclough, 2003). 'Recontextualisation' in this context refers to the sociolinguistic process where signs (broadly defined) are removed from their original context and appear in new contexts of use (Bauman and Briggs, 1990). Different fields, social practices, networks, and genres employ specific recontextualising principles when including and representing social events, leading to differences in how these events are portrayed (Fairclough, 2003). Intertextuality is a crucial aspect of recontextualisation, which involves shifting elements from a given context to a new one and underscores the dialogical nature of a text, including the interaction between the author's perspective and other voices (Fairclough, 2003).

Moreover, Van Leeuwen (2007) highlights the importance of legitimisation in recontextualisation, which takes four primary forms: authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. These forms of legitimisation can be employed to legitimise and de-legitimise the discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Legitimation involves using specific discursive strategies to lend credibility to the representation of social events (Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999; Van Leeuwen, 2007; Vaara, 2014).

In this study, we attempt to reconceptualise Bakhtin's carnival humour, with its grotesque images, abusive language and close association with death, as the modernisation of black humour. Even though the bloody, morbid and disturbing images are vividly presented in Bakhtin's humour, his research does not associate these elements with the modern concept of black humour. Besides, the resistance in Medieval carnival was mutually fluid across the official and unofficial, interchanging between top-down and bottom-up (Bakhtin, 1984). However, extant research has been dedicated to defining the core connotation of modern carnivalesque as a bottom-up grassroots liberation (e.g. Kan, 2020). Especially in China, where space for freedom of expression is limited, humour's subversive intent and grassroots resistance manifest themselves in online satire and parody, providing an alternative site of power that allows for disrupting existing social and cultural hierarchies (Gong and Yang, 2010). Therefore, our study expands the concept of Bakhtin's in the Chinese context because there is a need to transcend characterising carnival spirit as a static and monolithic undercurrent of resistance, i.e., the assumption that the official must be a relatively solemn representation devoid of humour and rebellion. While acknowledging that the power dynamics between the Chinese government and its citizens do not fundamentally alter as a result of the government's use of black humour, our investigation adopts Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimisation strategy as a way of examining why these violent, dehumanising and insulting slogans were promoted for public display and sanctioned. Since black humour appears incompatible with the traditional official culture, we argue that the official anti-epidemic slogans of the CCP possess subversive characteristics that align with the carnivalesque paradigm. However, the power relationships they present require a more nuanced perspective to interpret.

As the preeminent and publicly accessible social media platform in China, Weibo has been identified as a vital source of online communication and provides an important source for searching for humour related to COVID-19. We first utilised keyword search terms '标语' (slogan), '抗疫标语' (anti-epidemic slogan), '口号' (slogans), '幽默的口号' (humorous slogans) to collect related slogans on Weibo during the initial two months of 2020, which saw the highest severity of the outbreak and the strictest government control measures in China (Han, 2021). It is noted that slogans from different local governments were photographed and shared as images on Weibo by anonymous users, resulting in numerous retweets with no traceable source. Due to the public accessibility of Weibo, we believe that the content of the slogans is publicly available. Subsequently,

these slogans were selected based on their relation to black humour, including whether they contained taboo topics (e.g., death, defecation and copulation) and abusive language (e.g., cursing, swearing, and language suggesting unequal power relations). After eliminating duplicated slogans, a total of 74 official slogans were collected for analysis.

6. Legitimising official slogans: authorisation, moral evaluation and rationalisation

In this section, we identify three discursive strategies related to the process of legitimisation in the data. [Extract \(1\)](#) shows how anti-traditional discourses are employed in the authorisation strategy to legitimise slogans. Representative examples in [extract \(2\)](#) illustrate how moral evaluation is used to legitimise CCP's health campaign, often through negative curses and insults related to grotesque images. In [extract \(3\)](#), rationalisation emerges as a discursive strategy to legitimise state slogans by assigning them absolute 'truth' and 'correctness' in the context of collectivist ideology.

6.1. Legitimation through de-legitimising the tradition

'Authorisation' is the process of legitimising an action or behaviour by referring to the authority of tradition, custom, law, and personal/impersonal individuals who possess some form of institutional authority ([Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999](#); [Van Leeuwen, 2007](#); [Vaara, 2014](#)). However, the legitimisation of these anti-epidemic slogans is achieved through the de-legitimation of traditional authority. In other words, they aim to subvert some long-standing historical and cultural traditions in order to legitimise the discourse.

Extract (1)

Legitimation through the de-legitimising the authority of tradition.

Translations	Chinese Slogans
1. The prohibition of sea worship as a part of epidemic prevention. Your devoutness will still be acknowledged by the Four Sea Dragon King.	疫情防控禁止祭海, 四海龙王都能理解
2. Eating a proper diet and avoiding wild animals will double your fortune in the coming year.	老实吃饭莫沾野味, 来年运势立马翻倍
3. Staying at home to prevent infection is a must, even if it means having to chase away the father-in-law who comes to visit.	老实在家防感染, 丈人来了也得撵
4. Heed the good advice of the younger generation, as not wearing a mask will earn the disapproval of the whole family.	要听晚辈好言劝, 不戴口罩全家嫌

Lines 1 and 2 in [Extract \(1\)](#) de-legitimise traditional Chinese religious and eating traditions to legitimise the anti-epidemic campaign. For example, line 1 subverts the tradition of worshipping the Dragon King in some rural areas of China. Sea worship is a thriving folk religious practice, and the mythical dragon is believed to be in charge of the local rivers, lakes, and seas. Rituals to the Dragon King were often accompanied by rich food and lively ceremonies that would bring abundant rainfall for the coming year, thus nourishing and irrigating farmland and promoting regional prosperity ([Hu, 2011](#)). This anti-traditional discourse is represented by the ban on collective religious gatherings due to COVID-19. While such discourse has been legitimised by the CCP as a superstition that endangers the health of villagers (because of the gatherings), it also reinforces the CCP's ideology that these supernatural, anti-scientific beliefs should be discarded in the pursuit of Marx's truth ([Hu, 2011](#), p. 87). However, it is important to justify the point that the ban on religious gatherings was part of a broader set of restrictions applied to various public events and activities, an indication that the primary concern was public health. The CCP's focus on limiting large gatherings was driven more by pragmatic efforts to control the spread of the virus, with the intention to protect the population rather than to engage in an ideological campaign against superstition or to suppress specific beliefs.

The discourse in line 2 also resists traditional Chinese medicine and food culture. With the development of the consumer economy, the demand for wildlife products has increased dramatically, and the use of wildlife as medicines, health supplements and food has become a fashionable lifestyle pursued by some people ([Nooren and Claridge, 2001](#)). Because traditional Chinese medicine believes that rare musk, tiger bones, bear bile or antler as medicinal herbs can nourish the human body ([Zhang and Yin, 2014](#)), consuming wild animals is considered beneficial and even fortunate to have a life-extending effect. However, line 2 imposes a light curse on people for consuming wild animals, i.e. the only way to gain luck is not to eat them. On the one hand, the discourse resists traditional Chinese medicine and attempts to advocate that people stop eating wild animals; on the other hand, they constitute a 'curse' on the masses. 'Avoid wild animals will double your fortune' in line 2, which appears to be a blessing on one's fate, is, in fact, a conditional curse. Such a curse is legitimised in the COVID-19 context through the de-legitimation of traditional Chinese medicine.

Lines 3 and 4 use language that more vehemently refutes traditional Chinese filial piety to legitimise the CCP's anti-epidemic prevention requirements. Line 3 urges the unwelcome against the father-in-law (in this case, the wife's father), while line 4 advocates that the elderly should listen to their children and wear masks to avoid being despised by their families. In traditional Confucian culture, the father and the eldest member of the family hold a high position of power and need to be respected and honoured by the younger generation. These slogans reverse the power relations between parents and children, the elderly and the young, with the elders no longer in a position of dominance. The elders should even consider adopting a

submissive and obedient subordinate role to prevent being disliked. Yet such a loss of power results from external non-compliance with the CCP's preventive measures rather than spontaneous resistance within the family.

In summary, the above slogans use the de-legitimation of traditional Chinese medicine and food culture, as well as traditional filial piety and family culture, to legitimise the CCP's anti-epidemic measures. In terms of humour strategies, these subversions can be seen as deliberately creating incongruities in rhetoric, using contradictions to produce humour. Whether it is the incongruity between language and fact, such as 'your devoutness will still be acknowledged by Four Seas Dragon King', which creates incongruity with the reality of the absence of Dragon Kings, or the incongruity between negative attitudes towards older people in the family and traditional Confucian culture, these strategies of black humour have to some extent subverted tradition. As a result, these discursive strategies prioritise CCP power over tradition, family, and society, legitimising the CCP's abandonment of traditional beliefs and practices.

6.2. Legitimation through moral evaluation

Moral evaluation is a common legitimation strategy in Chinese anti-epidemic slogans. Moral evaluation refers to discursive strategies through legitimation by reference to value systems, including evaluation with positive, negative or neutral adjectives; naturalisation (a form that denies morality and replaces moral and cultural systems with the natural order); abstraction (describing practices in abstract terms that imbue them with a moral quality, connecting them to discourses of moral values), and analogies (positive or negative comparisons that always have a legitimatory or de-legitimatory function in the discourse) (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Ross, 2018).

In *extract (2)*, slogans represent a disturbing, curse-laden language style related to Bakhtin's grotesque body (e.g. elements of death, defecation, and copulation). First, most slogans employ traditional Chinese rhetorical devices such as rhyme and parallelism. Parallelism and rhythm often complement each other, and they can produce a sense of naturalness, authority or appropriateness (Link, 2003). As with rhythm, the success of parallelism in producing meaning in Chinese seems to be partly due to the flexibility of the single-syllable morphemes that compose the language (Link, 2003). The sense of authority and appropriateness in the discourse can reinforce the process of legitimation and the authority of the state's slogans.

Extract (2)

Legitimation through moral evaluation.

Translations	Chinese Slogans
5. Visiting each other's houses is equivalent to mutual slaughter, and gathering together is akin to seeking one's own doom.	串门就是互相残杀, 聚会就是自寻短见
6. People who return to Hubei and fail to report their COVID-19 status are like ticking time bombs.	湖北回乡不报告人员, 都是定时炸弹
7. Anyone who goes out without wearing a mask is a bastard.	不戴口罩就出门, 这个杂种不是人。
8. Those who gather at the party are shameless people, and those who play mahjong together are desperate outlaws.	出来聚会的是无耻之辈, 一起打麻将的是亡命之徒
9. Returning to your hometown while being sick is unfilial; infecting your parents and causing them harm is morally reprehensible.	带病回乡, 不孝儿郎; 传染爹娘, 丧尽天良
10. People who have a fever but do not report it are the class enemies lurking among the people.	发烧不说的人, 都是潜伏在人民群众中的阶级敌人

Second, these slogans emphasise that individuals have a compulsory moral obligation to comply with pandemic prevention. Failure to do so is considered morally corrupt, 'bad' or 'evil'. These moral accusations are often associated with abusive language related to the grotesque body (e.g. death, defecation and copulation). For example, those who do not comply are listed in line 5 as 'bad' people who are suicidal or destabilise society by slaughtering others. Line 6 uses the rhetorical device of metaphor, comparing the offending person to a bomb that threatens society. Line 7 uses the sexually insulting word 'bastard', referring that those who do not follow the rules are of shameful origin. In lines 8 and 9, '无耻之辈' (shameless people), '亡命之徒' (desperate outlaws), '不孝儿郎' (unfilial sons), '丧尽天良' (devoid of conscience), these Chinese proverbs possess a potent negative moral censure, characterising an individual as lacking in filial piety, conscience, and moral rectitude. Through hyperbole and cautionary rhetoric, the discursive strategy reinforces a sense of social order and obedience while also acting as a means of control by manipulating public opinion and stigmatising non-compliance with the rules. By provoking public antagonism with an uneasy sense of morality, they create a sense of urgency and establish clear moral boundaries between those who follow the rules and those who do not.

On the other hand, the 'class enemy' in line 10 has been recontextualised. The term 'class enemy' originally referred to the ideology that the CCP had thoroughly indoctrinated the Chinese people with during the revolution, i.e. the Chinese people were divided ideologically into the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie was harmful to the revolutionary masses. 'Class enemy' is synonymous with ghosts, snakes and demonic animals, and once people are labelled as 'class enemies', abuse becomes legitimate (Lu, 1999). Intertextuality is used in this context to characterise people who conceal a fever (intentionally or unintentionally) as 'class enemies'.

Another strategy to achieve legitimation through moral evaluation is by analogies. This strategy responds to the question ‘Why must I do this’ with the answer ‘because it resembles/does not resemble a different activity that is linked to positive/negative values’ (Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Such implicit or explicit comparisons refer to an activity part of another social practice, with positive or negative values associated with other activities in a given socio-cultural context, which are then transferred to the original activity.

Extract (3)

Legitimation through moral evaluation (analogies).

Translations	Chinese slogans
11. If you wander around recklessly today, your grave will grow grass by next year.	今天到处乱跑, 明年坟头长草
12. Wearing a mask is better than wearing a ventilator, and lying at home is better than lying in the ICU.	戴口罩总比戴呼吸机好, 躺家里总比躺ICU强
13. Not wearing a mask while walking around is like swimming freely in a septic tank.	不戴口罩到处走, 胜似在化粪池自由泳
14. Going out (I) will break your legs, and talking back (I) will knock your teeth out.	出门打断腿, 还嘴打掉牙

The discursive strategies of the slogans (lines 11–13) in [extract \(3\)](#) demonstrate a pronounced comparison in the two sentences of each slogan. On the rhetorical basis of antithesis, the former sentence is usually a description of behaviours that violate epidemic prevention regulations, while the latter employs a comparative rhetorical technique typically involving a strong curse of death to achieve a negative comparison with the behaviour described in the former sentence. These slogans often focus on the unpleasant and offensive associations evoked by the strong rhetoric of the latter sentence. For example, line 11 draws an analogy between quarantine violations and death; line 12 analogises not wearing a mask to wearing a ventilator and not sleeping at home to sleeping in an ICU; line 13 makes an analogy between going out without a mask and swimming in a septic tank. Explicitly mentioning death and illness during the Chinese New Year, a significant festival in a culture that is often reluctant to discuss such taboo topics, makes using these blunt slogans highly abnormal (Han, 2021). However, we contend that it is precisely the awareness of the taboo surrounding death (grave, ventilator, ICU), defecation (septic tanks), and even copulation (bastards), particularly during the Chinese New Year, that prompted the CCP to intentionally utilise these threatening intimidating analogies with negative implications as a means of legitimising prevention measures.

Line 14 presents an intriguing discursive strategy for moral evaluation, in which the power relation is somewhat subtle, as it uses a crude yet colloquial style of ‘for your own good’ to legitimise CCP’s propaganda. In this case, the CCP assumes the role of a parental figure responsible for the family’s well-being, while those who ignore prevention measures become the ‘disobedient child’, as their act of defiance is akin to ‘talking back’ to parents. In Chinese society, it is a legitimate responsibility of parents to discipline their children firmly, and the blame for mistakes typically falls on the child rather than the parents’ severity. By adopting a parental perspective, the CCP justifies its seemingly harsh (break your legs and knock your teeth off) but ‘sincere’ approach to fulfilling its duty as a caretaker, where the management of the child, or in this case, the residents, is both reasonable and understandable. One important aspect to note is that traditional moral and ethical norms are freely employed by the CCP, and these ethics can be either resisted (as shown in [extract 1](#)) or appropriately utilised.

6.3. Legitimation through rationalisation

Rationalisation is legitimation through reference to the objectives and uses of institutionalised social action and the knowledge constructed by society to give them cognitive validity (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Extract (4)

Legitimation through rationalisation.

Translations	Chinese slogans
15. I stay at home, I am proud, and I save masks for the nation.	我宅家, 我骄傲, 我为国家省口罩
16. One person sleeping is a family honour; the whole family sleeping is loyal to the country.	一人睡觉全家光荣, 全家睡觉精忠报国
17. During the pandemic, staying at home and with the relaxation of the second child policy, having a second child can also contribute to the country.	疫情时期在家待, 二胎政策已放开。造个二孩也能为国家做贡献

The rationalisation of slogans is firmly linked to the state (or CCP) as the only institution that provides truth and ‘correctness’, and the collectivist patriotic ideology inculcated. The loyalty to the nation and positive response to the national population policy, as advocated in lines 15 to 17 in [extract \(4\)](#), need to be expressed through support for the home quarantine. This linguistic formula can be expressed as ‘I do x in order to do y’ (Leeuwen, 2007, p. 102). Thus, in line 15, to stay home is to save the state masks, in which the supremacy of state power obscures the state’s obligation to guarantee the mask supply to the population. The ideology of individualism encouraged by the CCP to sacrifice for collective honour is implied. In line 16, a humorous jocular link the two otherwise unrelated matters of the ‘whole family sleeping’ to serve the country with

fidelity. In line 17, there is an implicit reference to sexual behaviour. The slogan presented the official policy of ‘having a second child’ in a vulgar and inappropriate way, using a joke that encouraged people to engage in sexual activity while staying at home during the quarantine period. However, advocating for active sex life as a part of the discursive strategy is not for personal happiness but rather a utilitarian approach to contribute to the country’s population growth. The legitimisation of the state’s discourse serves as a form of theoretical rationalisation (Van Leeuwen, 2007), which undermines the pursuit of individual happiness in the face of the state’s perceived ‘truthiness’.

6.4. Understanding official resistance

Black humour is interweaving themes of illness, death and cursing and conformity with Bakhtin’s concept of humour, as it exists beyond the realm of official orthodox and solemn discourse, where the “verbal norms of official and literary language, or ‘correct’ language”, prohibit all that is linked with the familiar speech in the marketplace (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 320). Given the anti-elitist and anti-authoritarian nature of black humour, it is worth considering whether the slogans used by the CCP, which are predominantly abusive language, also imply resistance. The role of humour as a means of expressing resistance is emphasised in both grassroots and official discourse, albeit in different ways. This suggests a complex interplay between the state and the masses, where the latter co-opt the former’s tools to assert their own ideologies and values. Since abusive language has been incorporated into official slogans as a means of legitimising pandemic prevention propaganda, it can be argued that the spirit of carnivalesque, as articulated by Bakhtin, in China is not a ‘bottom-up’ resistance initiated by the people against official authority but rather a means of serving official ideology that permeates the public spheres.

On the one hand, the highly carnivalesque nature of rejecting tradition is quite evident, given the constant suggestion in the slogans to overthrow established customs. This approach to officially incorporating vulgar terms challenges the tradition of understanding carnival as a subversive force against dominant power structures. In a one-sided authoritative tone, the official presents itself as an attempt to rebel against traditional cultural essences such as the pursuit of filial piety, family harmony and traditional medicine.

On the other hand, these unconcerned, blunt, obligatory and even intimidating slogans, which rationalise violent language under the shelter of black humour, show an unofficial yet irresponsible side. However, this ‘unofficiality’ is only linguistic, not a fundamental inversion of power. Communication between grassroots organisations and other sectors of society is fraught with resistance and even hostility. This suggests unilateral communication between advantaged and disadvantaged social groups, reflecting a top-down structure (Wang, 2018). The official vicious death curses, with their excremental and sexually suggestive jokes, were able to be widely disseminated for several specific reasons.

First, political slogans serve the primary purpose of conveying messages and exhorting action. When Chinese leaders promote a slogan, they expect supportive responses and corresponding action from localities and participants. The effectiveness of these slogans in motivating action is influenced by their popularity and the authority of the propagandist promoting them (Zeng, 2020). This top-down communication comes from the legitimacy of the CCP regime, founded on two main pillars: patriotism and ‘performance-based legitimacy’ (Roskin, 2009, p. 426). With the continued inculcation of nationalism and the reality of economic growth (Holbig & Gilley, 2010), an ever-increasing legitimacy of the regime has been encapsulated in the notion that only the CCP could ensure economic growth, provide social stability and defend national sovereignty (Laliberté and Lanteigne, 2007). For decades, the CCP has embedded nationalist myths into its collective memory, which can be easily mobilised in times of COVID-19 crisis. While the use of nationalism as a source of regime legitimacy is an inherently problematic strategy, and the CCP is aware of this (Zeng, 2020), it is also an extremely effective means of containing COVID-19 for a short period of time without causing a massive contagion (Hou et al., 2022).

Second, rural audiences were generally more receptive to slogans and understood their political significance (Hou et al., 2022). This is because the use of slogans has a long history in CCP’s political culture and its complex relationship with folk culture. During the Yan’an period, mass mobilisation became a decisive characteristic of Mao Zedong’s revolutionary strategy (Selden, 1971). In its early days, the CCP saw itself as a Party of the mass, by the mass and for the mass. Therefore, CCP paid huge attention to the adoption and appropriation of grassroots culture for persuasion and policy implementation. CCP also resorts to the ‘Campaign Style’ of governance (Perry, 2011) to develop socialist construction in economic, ideological and struggle campaigns (Cell, 1977). COVID-19 is a global crisis and can easily incentivise the local government to adopt this ‘campaign-style’ political culture.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on data collected from Weibo during the initial two months of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study conceptualises Bakhtin’s carnivalesque as a type of black humour, approaching it through the symbolic and metaphorical lens to examine power relations in the modern context. We define the uncivilised, violent, yet humorous CCP’s official slogans as a manifestation of black humour. Under the CDA framework, the study utilises Van Leeuwen’s (2007) notion of legitimisation to examine how the CCP’s official slogans use three discursive strategies such as authorisation, moral evaluation, and rationalisation to legitimise the use of abusive language and help to reinforce the CCP’s ideology.

Firstly, the de-legitimation of authorisation employing anti-traditional discourses is a ‘superficial’ rejection of tradition. The rebellious linguistic style is a kind of wordplay employed to achieve humour through rhetorical incongruity. However, it is important to note that this linguistic playfulness does not serve as a valid justification for the CCP’s rejection of traditional

values in reality. Rather, the anti-traditional slogans merely reflect a specific period during which the CCP employed linguistic rebellion to attract public attention.

Secondly, through the strategy of moral evaluation, the brutal death curse, the implicit sexual references, and the use of defecation as a swearing language of humiliation for those who do not comply with the rules of epidemic prevention exemplify a highly carnivalesque subversive discourse. Elements of the grotesque body are represented by negative analogies in the official slogans, which demean the masses by constructing dichotomous moral rules for legitimising CCP propaganda. CCP also legitimises the violent discipline of its 'children' using the parental narrative.

Finally, the CCP reinforces its legitimacy as the supreme authority by incorporating patriotic ideology and collectivist sentiments into its slogans. These slogans serve as powerful tools for the CCP to maintain and consolidate its claim to 'correctness' and 'truth'. By employing the discursive strategy of rationalisation, the party strategically aligns itself with the values and aspirations of the nation.

Overall, we argue that CCP's black humour is only subversive in its linguistic style but is still essentially a political symbol to maintain dominance and ideology and does not reverse the power hierarchy of top-down, official dominance to grassroots subordination. The reasons for the widespread dissemination of violent slogans are two-fold: one is the long-standing regime legitimacy of the CCP; the other is the tolerance of the widespread dissemination of violent slogans caused by the rural population's unaffected self-interest and habituation to the slogans, as well as their concern about the complex epidemiological situation.

Our study seeks to contribute to a deep understanding of CCP's slogan through the discursive analysis of how violent slogans are legitimised in a power-oriented context, given that few studies have focused on how CCP slogans maintained their legitimacy in COVID-19. In doing so, we combined carnivalesque, black humour and CDA to provide a complex perspective on the official position of slogans and the political implications they imply. The official de-legitimation of traditional values and the use of abusive language to subvert its own official seriousness and responsibility do present some illusory resistance to power by the otherwise superior official culture. However, from the intolerance of vulgarity on the internet (Gong and Yang, 2010), to its current status as a perpetrator of violent language, the shift in the official's own attitude implies that the CCP is constantly negotiating its own identity and maintaining its power by means of a more sophisticated, even mimetic approach to grassroots discourse.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Yifan Chen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Qian Gong:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Sender Dovchin:** Writing – review & editing.

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