Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times:

A Study of Disaster Culture and Citizen-making in Contemporary China

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

09 2025

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the construction and governance of ordinary people in disasters in contemporary China. The mobilisation and stabilisation of ordinary people play pivotal roles in disaster relief. While disasters are destructive and traumatic events, they can also be normalised as expected aspects of ordinary lives, necessitating the development of 'resilience' (Lorenz, 2013). As such they have often played a critical role in the re-imagination the nation and, in some cases, the (re-)construction of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). In the Chinese context, disaster culture is intimately linked to neo-socialist governmentality (Foucault, 2007b), which shapes public perceptions and behaviours through rituals and creative activities rooted in banal nationalism (Billig, 1995).

Despite its significance, ordinary people and the ways it is shaped and negotiated through popular discourse remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, this project takes a critical discourse analysis ('discourse-historical') approach to analyse four works of Chinese nonfiction covering recent national disasters: the SARS pandemic (*The Battle of Beijing*), the Wenchuan Earthquake (*People First*), and the COVID-19 pandemic (*Wuhan Diary of Fighting the Pandemic* and *Day 76*).

The analysis reveals how these texts construct 'the Chinese People' – as individuals, as a collective, as citizens – in times of disaster, and seeks to determine

what this process can tell us about Chinese disaster culture more generally (including its significance in relation to nation-building and constructing ideal citizens). The findings demonstrate the refashioning of historical discourses that invoke narratives of weakness, passivity and selfishness, of Chinese people whose lack of active positive engagement prevents them from taking the necessary actions to save the country from collapse and ruin – a dominant theme in China's 'history of humiliation', while simultaneously celebrating Chinese heroism, tradition and good citizenship, collective suffering and resilience, and selfless sacrifice. Ultimately, these works construct a 'precarious positive' notion of the Chinese citizen as one embodying all the good and desirable qualities but perpetually at risk of falling into negative behaviours.

This thesis contributes to broader theories of disaster, citizenship and ordinariness by elucidating how disaster culture reinforces and reimagines national character. Furthermore, as 'permitted' works, these texts also function to reinforce the legitimacy and authority of the Party and the government. The project thus offers a specific contribution to understanding 'cultural citizenship' in China, as explored in recent times by C. Wang (2016); Wang (2024) and others, revealing the complex mechanisms through which ideal citizens are constructed in times of crisis.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisors, Sarah Dauncey and Aimie Purser, for their steadfast guidance, without which I would not have been able to complete this thesis. I am also indebted to Dmitris Papadopoulos for his insightful feedback and encouragement. In the vast sea of academia, you are my beacons.

I am eternally grateful to my parents for their unconditional support. This accomplishment is as much theirs as it is mine.

To my dear husband, thank you for your endless love, patience and encouragement. You are the love of my life, and this thesis stands as a digital memento of this claim.

To my beloved daughter, thank you for your love and for forgiving my occasional absences. I hope that even when you become a mother someday, you will achieve greater things in your own way.

I also wish to acknowledge the work of the proofreader for his careful review of this thesis.

Finally, my thanks to all of those mentioned in this thesis whose work to make the world a better place provided the inspiration for this thesis. Even if the world is not perfect, the efforts of those who have hope can still ensure it has a future worth looking forward to.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Mao Zedong famously asserted that 'the people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history' (Mao, 1990, p. 118). This thesis takes Mao's axiom as a foundational premise, investigating *how* and *why* 'the people', and specifically the people of China, constitute such a critical force. Through an exploration of contemporary Chinese disaster culture, this project examines the mechanisms through which representations of ordinary people and ordinary lives are mobilised to construct national narratives, shape citizen identity and reinforce political legitimacy.

In the months following the outbreak of COVID-19 in China in 2019, the pandemic spread around the world, prompting people, governments and international organisations to give serious and careful thought to such disasters and the most appropriate ways to respond to them. How should people act and react in such extreme situations? What should their rights and responsibilities be? As the COVID-19 pandemic clearly showed us, people's understandings of and responses to disasters, along with the narratives constructed through the communication of the government with the ordinary people in the hopes of influencing its people's understandings of and responses to disasters, have become more socially and politically significant today than ever before.

In this introduction, I establish the key framework for this thesis by explaining its three central elements: the research subject of ordinary people and ordinary lives, the research context of disaster, and the research perspective of duality and opposition.

1.1 Ordinary People and Ordinary Lives

In his discussion of governmentality, which he defines as 'the conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2007a, p. 389), Foucault argues that 'one never governs a state, a territory, or a political structure. Those whom one governs are people, individuals, or groups' (Foucault, 2007a, p. 122). In recent decades, this focus on human subjects has manifested in a global tendency to 'put people first' in governance (Axworthy, 2001), making ordinary people the target of innovative governing strategies (Clarke, 2010). Despite this heightened focus, a definitive understanding of 'ordinary people' and their 'ordinary lives', even the very nature of their 'ordinariness', remains elusive. Academic and literary attention consistently prioritises the abnormal, significant and extraordinary, often neglecting the normal, insignificant and ordinary. This persistent oversight necessitates a preliminary question before proceeding to the literature review: why is it so challenging to study ordinary people and ordinary lives?

1.1.1 Taken for Granted

To begin with, the ordinary and insignificant are less likely to be registered by our mind even when we have observed them. Things that stand out catch our attention, making it easier for us to treat them as subjects of description, explanation and interpretation. In contrast, things we take for granted often escape our scrutiny, even though we do see them and experience them, sometimes quite repetitively; as a result, we tend to overlook them when we get to the point of theorising. As Alexander says when he describes the everyday, 'precisely because the events of everyday life happen every day, they become routine, familiar, part of the background rather than the foreground' (Alexander, 2013, p. 721). Ordinary people and ordinary lives, therefore, tend to escape the researcher's attention.

1.1.2 A Challenge to Describe

Secondly, when we want to describe certain subjects, we tend to focus on their most distinctive features; subjects that do not possess distinctive features tend not to attract our attention precisely because we see nothing of particular note in them to define or, potentially, explicate. Therefore, even if we can overcome the first difficulty and direct our attention to the 'ordinary', we may still find it difficult to describe something that appears 'run-of-the-mill'.

Although a consensus exists that the ordinary is difficult to define, scholarly

opinions diverge on the reasons for this difficulty. For some scholars, the reason lies in the inherent nature of ordinariness itself: the ordinary is a realm of mundane repetition that inherently resists description. According to Holmes, for example:

> Biography finds it difficult to deal imaginatively with the mundane. And where the mundane, in its richest sense, is central to a life – as in a happy marriage, or a long and constant friendship – it is often peculiarly impotent, both in its sources (what house companions write letters to each other?) and in its narrative invention (how to describe twenty years of tender, ruminative breakfast?) (Holmes, 1995, p. 19).

From this perspective, ordinary lives are defined by a lack of significant features, and it is this lack that makes them immune to description, since it is difficult even to record the repetition of the tedious and trivial, let alone make something creative out of it. Of course, the challenge of describing ordinary lives extends to describing the people living such lives.

A second perspective posits that the reason the ordinary is hard to define is not that it lacks features, but that it comprises an overabundance of oppositions. In simple terms, life is a collection of happiness and sadness, good times and bad times. A thing as seemingly insignificant as water becomes critically significant during a drought; the most ordinary people are capable of extraordinary actions – both individual and collective – as seen in revolutions and pandemic responses. Rather than absence of features, then, the challenge is complexity. Ordinary

people and ordinary lives comprise a wealth of contradictory features that are difficult to categorise or summarise simultaneously.

In Chinese cultural terms, this second perspective finds strong resonance with the notion of *yin* and *yang*, a dynamic unity of contradictions and oppositions which will be elaborated on in Section 1.3. Through this perspective, ordinary lives can be reconceptualised as not merely collections of tedious, insignificant repetition but as inevitably punctuated with disturbance and contradiction. This is not to deny the notion of mundane repetition; rather, such repetition can be understood as an imagined standard or normative baseline. However, lives do not necessarily stick to presumed norms, and it is precisely the moments when ordinary lives diverge from the standard that reveal the dynamic and contradictory nature of the ordinary. This sets up an interesting avenue for exploration.

Commenting on philosopher of everyday life Maurice Blanchot's remark that the ordinary 'belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification' (Blanchot, 1992, pp. 239-240), literary scholar Neal Alexander claims that the everyday 'escapes' definition by definition: 'Once again, everyday life reveals its capacity to deconstruct polarized oppositions, comprehending significance and insignificance, the ordinary and the extraordinary at once' (Alexander, 2013, p. 722). This view contrasts sharply with that of Holmes, cited earlier. For Alexander, everyday life is not simply insignificant and tedious repetition but a site of irreconcilable contradictions: it is a vast collection of insignificance whose very

scale constitutes its significance. This presents a problem: we should not ignore the ordinary, but how can we study it without – by the very act of focusing on it – elevating its features to the status of the extraordinary, thereby destroying their essential ordinariness? In other words, the challenge of description lies not in the lack of features in ordinary people and ordinary lives, but in their combination of contradictory features and the inherent self-negating paradox of describing the ordinary.

Moreover, not only does describing the ordinary present difficulties, but the very concept of 'the ordinary' is problematic and should be questioned. Even when there appears to be no disturbance, life is very much like a quiet lake with currents swirling under the surface. No matter how mundane ordinary lives may seem to be, in fact they are very much filled with accidents and suffering. In reality, the imagined peace of ordinary lives does not exist. What is more, as philosopher and scholar of everyday life Henri Lefebvre argues, 'superior, differentiated and highly specialized activities have never been separate from everyday practice, they have only appeared to be so' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 93). This implies that everyday life is constantly shaped by broader, complex activities such as culture building. Just as it is difficult to define ordinary lives, it is equally difficult to define 'ordinary people'. The term attempts to generalise a vast and highly differentiated group, including a multitude of professions, financial conditions and social statuses.

To conclude, this section has outlined the inherent difficulties in defining 'ordinary people', 'ordinary lives' and 'ordinariness', beginning with the difficulty

of noticing the ordinary, proceeding to the difficulty of describing it, and culminating with the problem these issues pose to making the ordinary a viable subject of research. The dual nature of ordinary lives has also been discussed, as both a collection of repetitions of the mundane and a site of oppositions and complexity – both aspects valuable and difficult to theorise. The second difficulty proceeds directly to the third of how to study ordinary people and ordinary lives, as well as to the question of whether the generalisation itself is sustainable, since both terms refer to highly complex and differentiated subjects. One possible solution is to study the ordinary through specific conditions, such as disasters, which disrupt routine, making insignificant things appear significant and revealing hidden oppositions. This approach aligns with cultural theorist Ben Highmore's suggestion that transferring the everyday into surprising contexts may illuminate its form and substance, countering its tendency to appear 'massive and fragmentary' and to 'drop below the level of visibility' (Highmore, 2001, p. 46).

1.2 Disaster

Following Highmore's suggestion, this thesis treats 'disaster' as the 'surprising context' through which to illuminate the ordinary. But what is disaster? A comprehensive definition of disaster will help to delineate the phenomenon's causes, conditions and consequences, and to facilitate its systematic research (Perry, 2017, p. 3). However, in his discussion of disaster as a social construct,

environmental disaster specialist J. C. Gaillard argues that a consensus definition of disaster has not been reached because all existing definitions 'reflect disciplinary assumptions and objectives that researchers carry with them when engaging with the concept of disaster' (Gaillard, 2021, p. 1). Social scientists who study disaster, for example, have tended to focus on 'etiology, physical damages, disaster phases, post-disaster processes, vulnerability, community reactions, individual reactions' (Gill & Ritchie, 2017, p. 40), while cultural theorists such as Eric Cazdyn tend to hold that disaster can only be defined within its wider context:

> Disaster is everywhere and touches everything. Currencies plummet, greenhouse gases rise, cells overproduce, levees break, individuals spiral, nation states collapse, populations explode, art distracts, thought seizes up – all causing and all causes of disaster (Cazdyn, 2007, p. 647).

Crucially, Cazdyn argues that the effects of disaster are not natural but social – 'products of human choices, political systems, even cultural assumptions' – and to a certain extent logical and predictable (Cazdyn, 2007, p. 648).

Although they are complicated and destructive events, disasters should not be excluded from social theory. Robert Stallings (1988) challenges the widely held image of disasters as scenes of 'chaos and disorganization encompassing all manner of antisocial behavior' (Stallings, 1988, p. 569), yet he refutes the idea that disasters are exogenous to social theory, arguing that the consequences of

disaster must be understood through pre-existing social arrangements. Stallings proposes a conflict theory perspective to analyse disasters as 'both an independent variable responsible for triggering various types of citizen and government responses and as a dependent variable directly influenced by both pre-interruption social patterns and by what government does or does not do before impact' (Stallings, 1988, pp. 579-580). In short, disaster both is shaped by and shapes its social context.

Opinions differ as to whether disaster can be considered a part of ordinary lives. Some philosophers such as Edith Wyschogrod believe that disasters fissure everyday existence (Wyschogrod, 1998, p. 6). Some sociologists hold that people are 'beings without any everyday understanding of natural hazards' (Capeloa Gil & Wulf, 2015, p. 145) – that people do not live their lives expecting disasters to occur. Most scholarly literature assigns disaster the role of 'trigger' – causing people to depart from normal conditions and later return to them through the process of recovery (Islam & Lim, 2015, p. 59). Some observe that disaster 'by definition is conceived of as a rupture or inversion of the normal order of things' (Anderson, 2011, p. 1), others that disasters should be defined as 'events in which societies "incur physical damages and losses and/or disruption of their routine functioning"' (Kreps, 1989, p. 32) – meaning that the breach of collective expectations in institutions and practices of everyday life is inherent to the definition (Curato & Ong, 2015, p. 4).

Yet other sociologists, such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), believe that

risk of catastrophic events is, in fact, already incorporated into everyday life. On the basis of Sorokin and Horowitz's argument that society inevitably alternates between well-being and calamity (Sorokin & Horowitz, 2017), Mangone and Zyuzev assert that disasters are normal moments in ordinary lives:

> The crisis caused by disasters is not to be considered *sui generis*: it represents a normal moment in the life-flow that allows for the recognition of the characteristics of social systems that might not otherwise remain clouded, since the calamity generates social change and consequences on both life and the socio-psychological regulatory mechanisms (Mangone & Zyuzev, 2020, p. 176).

Similarly, in their discussion of sociology after COVID-19, Hagen and Elliott argue:

> While disasters are disruptive, they are not purely so; as they unfold, they enfold continuities such that they are best understood as a part of social reality rather than apart from it. Second, disasters are not pathological deviations from 'normal' so much as they are the most salient manifestations of the ways that the normal is in fact pathological (Hagen & Elliott, 2021, p. 1).

It follows from these arguments that we should not treat disaster as an asocial and abnormal phenomenon; rather, we must regard it as deeply grounded in social context and therefore seek to understand it in relation to the continuity of ordinary lives.

The view that disasters are not aberrant occurrences but actually serve to reveal pre-existing underlying circumstances is often absent from existing studies, where the focus tends to be on abnormal or exceptional events. Nicole Curato and Jonathan Ong (2015) argue that disaster is significantly influenced by social conditions, and that this provides an opportunity for social scientists to examine disaster as an exception that allows better understanding of the ordinary in society. This view aligns with Stallings's argument that disasters can reveal social structures, processes and behaviours that tend to remain hidden in the ordinariness of everyday life (Stallings, 2002, p. 283), as well as with Barnshaw and Trainor's view that disaster provides a 'quasi-experimental context for understanding human behaviour' (Barnshaw & Trainor, 2010, p. 104). Or, in the words of Steven Lukes, 'disasters can lift veils' (Lukes 2005, quoted in Curato & Ong, 2015, p. 5).

Since designing controlled social experiments is often unethical or impossible, disasters can serve as a powerful, if contingent, substitute. Their rupturing of everyday life allows researchers to gain insight from them into social mechanisms that are normally hidden. Furthermore, because the effects of disasters are not instantaneous but unfold over time, shaped by ecological, historical and political contexts (Mika, 2014, p. 4), disasters therefore provide a unique opportunity to study these underlying social mechanisms not as static entities, but in all their dynamic complexity.

To sum up, from a sociological perspective, a disaster is not simply a geographical, climatical or epidemical incident, but a complicated social

phenomenon with deep connections to its ecological, political, cultural and social contexts. The disruptive effects of disaster can reveal social systems, structures and mechanisms that are normally concealed, and it is just this power to reveal that also makes disaster a good lens through which to study ordinary people and ordinary lives.

1.3 *Yin* and *Yang* and Ordinary People

In general, this thesis is motivated by my strong interest in ordinary people and ordinary lives. As it is difficult to understand the ordinary in ordinary contexts, I propose to study ordinary people in the context of disasters. Further, to understand the contradictions in ordinary people and ordinary lives, I propose to examine them in the cultural context of China through the lens of *yin* and *yang*, the unity of opposites.

1.3.1 The Chinese Context and Culture of *Yin* and *Yang*

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a country that is relatively young but was founded on the basis of a long history full of difficult battles, some of which continue to have resonance today as the Chinese state draws on its history to justify particular policies and decisions. China is a vast country with many different regions, and its huge population is made up of many different ethnic and religious groups, but certain theories, such as the theory of citizenship, can help us

understand how and why the Chinese state leans away from ethno-religious complexity and ideological heterogeneity to construct a culturally homogeneous Chinese people (Zhao et al., 2023, pp. 626-627). The dominance of this construct, I will argue, makes it possible to regard the ordinary people of China, especially those represented within the permitted discourses of the state, as stemming from a relatively unified cultural background.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to understand certain characteristics of Chinese culture. Chinese culture is often explained in terms of a unity of opposites, the *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳) of Chinese philosophy. The logic of this unity of opposites is reinforced by a localised form of Marxism, or socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The theory of *yin* and *yang* is one of the most important accomplishments of Chinese philosophy. Originating in the *Zhouyi* (周易 – the ancient Chinese divination text also known in English as the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*) (Lu, 2020), it was developed in the writings of Daoist philosopher Laozi (Wu, 2020), as well as by the philosopher Confucius and further with the evolution of Confucianism (Lu, 2020). As Wu (2020, p. 4) argues, the *yin* and *yang* framework rejects binary oppositions in favour of 'separation, equivalence and unity.' This means that Chinese culture, informed by this philosophy, does not conceive of relationships – whether between humans and nature or between different cultures – in terms of conflictual dichotomies like 'progress and backwardness' or 'centre and edge'. Instead, it seeks a harmonious 'implicit creation' or 'potential creation'

within the whole. Thinking from a *yin* and *yang* perspective leads to two important ideas. First, it fosters a collectivist orientation rather than 'individual supremacy' – as can be seen in Chinese culture's leaning less toward individualism and more toward collectivism, seeking 'creation in the whole'. Second, it promotes the idea that all subjects possess complementary *yin* and *yang* qualities, meaning the relationship between humans and nature is not one of binary opposition but one of *yin* and *yang* in dynamic unity and harmony.

This tradition of Chinese culture is further supported by localised Chinese Marxism. Materialist dialectics are an important part of Marxist philosophy. Inheriting certain ideas of Hegel, Marx and Engels established materialist dialectics with its first rule as the law of the unity of opposites:

> The thought of 'one *yin* and one *yang* is called Tao' links dialectics and materialism, emphasising the interaction between *yin* and *yang* on the basis of affirming that the world is matter, which coincides with the viewpoint expressed by Marxist materialist dialectics that matter and consciousness, change and stillness, absolute and relative are the unity of opposites (Xu, 2024, p. 98)[1].

In other words, both traditional and modern mainstream Chinese culture values the concept of a unity of opposites. This similarity between the theory of *yin* and *yang* and Marxist theory may partly explain why modern China embraced Marxism

[1] All quotes from Chinese-language sources are my translation.

(Carty et al., 2019, p. 286) and how Confucianism could form the philosophical foundation for the Sinicization of Marxism (Ding, 2023).

This philosophical convergence constitutes this thesis's foundational understanding: social phenomena are not of a singular nature. Disasters are not only destructive events but also opportunities for positive change, such as cultural renewal and the reinforcement of national identity and unity. Similarly, ordinary people are not viewed as inherently good or bad; rather, human nature is seen as dynamic, with the potential for moral improvement through civic education and the internalisation of ethical values.

1.3.2 The Ordinary People as the Bad, the Good, and the One Unity

The research and analysis on which this thesis is based identifies three discourses about ordinary people that stand out in the vast Chinese cultural context, which I believe can be generalised as: ordinary people as bad; ordinary people as good; ordinary people as one unity. The following overview of these discourses outlines the general context for this study and provides essential details that inform its analysis and arguments. A key contribution of this thesis is its application of a *yin* and *yang* perspective to understand ordinary Chinese people in times of crisis, an approach from which two significant, opposing discourses emerge: that of the 'one hundred years of humiliation' and that of 'heroism'. These discourses serve both as the discursive context of the thesis and as a primary example of the unity

of opposites the thesis identifies within Chinese culture. Ultimately, the two opposites come together in a constructed unity, portraying the ordinary people of China as a mobilised collective resilient to challenges and empowered to accomplish national goals.

The negative representations of contemporary Chinese people explored in this thesis – attributing to them such traits as ignorance and uncooperativeness – often originate from discourse surrounding the 'one hundred years of humiliation'. Given the thesis's focus on popular nonfiction, it is important to understand the significant and reoccurring portrayal of the 'spectator' (看客, *kanke*) and the associated theme of numbness in Chinese literary tradition. This tradition was pioneered by Lu Xun, followed by other influential writers such as Xu Jie, Zhang Tianyi, Shen Congwen, Yu Hua and Mo Yan (Li, 2019). In his often satirical and revolutionary works, Lu Xun developed the concept of 'national inferiority' (国民劣根性, *guomin liegenxing*), represented by his famous character Ah Q – a figure who embodies ignorance and consoles himself with psychological delusion rather than facing reality (Lai, 2007). Lu Xun generalised these deep-rooted habits of the Chinese as including: a lack of courage to face reality; a tendency to compromise or sink into depression; servility; being easily swayed; reluctance to step forward when at a disadvantage; finding it difficult to push for reform and revolution; mental numbness; a preference for being an onlooker, part of the crowd (Lai, 2007). This critique was further expanded by Liang Qichao, who categorised what he saw as the six inferiorities of the Chinese character: tendency to take chances

(侥幸性, *jiaoxingxing*); cruelty (残忍性, *canrenxing*); internal strife (倾轧性, *qingyaxing*); cunningness and hypocrisy (狡伪性, *jiaoweixing*); mercilessness (凉薄性, *liangboxing*), and a tendency to drag out existence and drift along (苟且性, *gouqiexing*) (Liang, 1994, p. 166-167). These historically rooted negative representations form an important part of the discursive context for understanding the image of ordinary Chinese people today.

Positive representations of ordinary Chinese people are, by contrast, often deeply connected with a discourse of heroism. Xiong (2022) observes that Chinese scholars tend to make a distinction between individual heroism and collective heroism. He characterises individual heroism as emphasising a noble, self-sacrificing saviour – a tradition strongly tied to US cultural transmission and US-centrism (*USA saves the world!*). In contrast, collective heroism derives its power from the masses: it is both *for* ordinary people and *of* them (Xiong, 2022). This framework, which posits that collective power is a powerful force to create the world, and individual power is only one part of it, sets the ground for conceptualising ordinary people as heroes. In Chinese culture, the most fundamental characteristic of heroes is their connection to the people: they come from the people and serve the people. The idea of people's heroes is not new and is even tied to significant monuments and rituals in China, such as the Monument to the People's Heroes in the centre of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, which was 'constructed to commemorate those who had sacrificed their lives for the building of a new Communist state' (Hung, 2010, p. 235) in 1952. Mao Zedong famously

declared that ‘the masses are the real heroes’ and heroes must act in the interests of the masses (Hu, 2022, p. 249), and this tradition of the ‘people’s hero’ (人民英雄, *renmin yingxiong*) continues today. It is reflected in current General Secretary Xi Jinping’s view that heroes come from the people and the most fundamental characteristics of heroes are the characteristics of the people (人民性, *renminxing*) (Ran, 2022), and has attracted attention more recently due to the series of Xi’s speeches made since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (hereafter, CPC) stressing the role ordinary people play in the regeneration of the country (Qin & Ji, 2021). Through the CPC’s continued criticism of elitist individualistic heroism, ordinary heroes have become the main representatives of heroes in mainstream culture (Hu, 2022). This discourse characterising ordinary people as heroes who helped found the nation and play an important role in the nation’s regeneration continues to profoundly inform the image of ordinary people in China today.

The construction of the Chinese people’s image is also fundamentally shaped by the ideals of unity and solidarity. Despite the nation’s vast geographical area, multi-ethnic population and diverse subcultures, its representations of Chinese people consistently emphasise collective cohesion. This solidarity is historically rooted in discourses representing the people as the main force in fighting invaders (Wu, 2025), establishing the new nation and guiding its development (Wang & Yang, 2024). In these discourses, the ordinary people of China are constructed as a collective – an imagined community that is resilient in the face of challenges and

instrumental in creating history and achieving national greatness.

It is therefore difficult to summarise Chinese culture in absolute terms; rather, it should be understood as a system defined by the unity of opposites – and these opposites and their balance are central to Chinese culture's character. Ordinary people, for example, are represented in two seemingly contradictory ways: as the numb and ignorant spectators blamed for the one hundred years of humiliation, and as the heroic masses who save the country from disaster. This thesis proposes that these two representations are a pair of opposites in unity, both of which can be understood as potentially applicable to all Chinese people. This unifying principle is reflected in key aspects of Chinese culture – on the difficult process of founding the nation, on the people, on the people's unity, on collective initiative in the face of disasters. From this discursive context emerge specific constructions of the responsibilities of Chinese citizens and a distinctive 'culture of disaster' centred on ordinary people, understood precisely as a unity. This framework is crucial to the thesis's construction and analysis.

1.4 Research Objectives

Thus, this thesis aims to better understand the frequently overlooked subject of 'ordinary people'. Given the inherent difficult of studying this group in everyday circumstances, I will use the lens of 'disaster', as times of crisis often reveal social dynamics that are normally concealed or ignored. Various discourses evolve

during disasters, and many of these prescribe how ordinary people are expected to think and behave. These discourses range from the official – representing the requirements of government, as seen in state-run media (Yang, 2024) – to the unofficial, which are more representative of the voices of the people themselves, as seen on social media (Yang, 2022). In states like China where there is more control over media, the intersection of these two ends of the spectrum creates a space of 'permitted discourse'. This space is a critical meeting point where mainstream culture is both created and contested. Here, official discourse may be reinterpreted and (re)presented, yet it may also be challenged when certain requirements prove inconvenient to articulate; at these moments, the voice of the ordinary people is revealed, albeit in a form that is consciously and unconsciously sifted and selected.

Taking China as a case study and using creative nonfiction as my primary source material (since this genre sits most comfortably within the band of 'permitted discourse' noted above), I seek to explore the role representations of ordinary people play in times of disaster. Crucially, if these representations are to be understood as behavioural perimeters, what does this tell us about the important relationship between ordinary people and the government, both during disaster and in its aftermath? Can we identify a distinct 'disaster culture'? If so, what are its characteristics in China specifically, and what does it tell us about the evolving relationship between the state and its citizens?

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

The next chapter is the **Literature Review**. To understand the desired response of ordinary people to disasters, I will review past research on governmentality and the culture of disaster. In the first section, I explore the concept of governmentality, ordinary people as the subject of governmentality, and the techniques of governmentality. The techniques of governmentality can include cultural and emotion discourses. For this thesis, citizenship theory is central to understanding these techniques, including the ways in which the discourse of the 'good citizen' and emotion discourses are employed as affective governance. In the second section, I look into studies of the cultural dimension of disasters. I further the discussion from the introduction on the relationship between disaster and ordinary lives, drawing insights from studies of festivals and concepts like the 'new man' and the 'real man' (Lefebvre, 2014) in studies of everyday life. I then review the body of work that centres on resilience and disaster tradition in China, especially the commonality of collective memory and comradeship. Rituals and symbols are cultural sources of resilience, significant within theorisations of imagined community and banal nationalism. I conclude the chapter by listing the research gaps that emerge from the review and the research questions that guide the study.

Chapter 3 – Methodology outlines the research methodology and the interest in examining the permitted discourses of ordinary people in disaster narratives. The chapter discusses the epistemological and ontological

underpinnings that inform the choice of – and the choices within – the qualitative approach. The research design begins with selection standards, including the disaster events chosen and the justification for using nonfiction books as research material. To investigate power relations within permitted discourse, I employ mixed methods: structuring content analysis (SCA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), specifically the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to unpack historical and sociopolitical contexts. Finally, I reflect on the influence of my positionality.

In **Chapter 4 – Pushing the Ordinary People**, the thesis studies negative representations of ordinary people and how these may elicit feelings of shame and humiliation, serving as a technique of affective governance that draws a bottom line for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and hence for governing people's behaviours. The chapter begins to answer the question of how ordinary people are represented in the chosen texts, including the implications of the naming of ordinary people and the absence of their naming, which is intended to construct ordinary people collectively. I then examine the negative attribute commonly assigned to ordinary people of being uncooperative. I argue that this negative representation is rooted in the discourse of the one hundred years of humiliation. The feelings of shame and humiliation elicited are part of affectual governance, yet this framing is also linked to the topic of civic education as a solution to negative behaviours. Information emerges as another important aspect of governmentality; ordinary people are also represented as less informed, and information control becomes significant as both a cause of negative

behaviours and a response to them. This involves consideration of the hierarchy of information and the depiction of its release through official channels as an important countermeasure to the challenges of information control today.

In contrast with Chapter 4, **Chapter 5 – Pulling the Ordinary People** investigates positive representations of ordinary people, the predication of ordinary people as heroes, and how these cultural discourses serve as techniques of governmentality. These further draw boundaries, in particular establishing high moral standards for the praiseworthy behaviours of ordinary people, functioning as an upper point for people to aspire to. The construction of the hero focuses on collective heroism and two models: extraordinary heroes and ordinary heroes. The discourses inspire, mobilise and govern ordinary people in times of disaster. I further examine the national identity of heroism, how it is sustained through geographical place to pass heroism down to as many people as possible. Finally, I look into the intensification and mitigation of the discourse of ordinary people as heroes, the emphasis on ordinary people as heroes and the denial of heroism. The cultural discourses of heroism serve as a significant technique of governmentality.

Chapter 6 – A Process of Citizen-Making explains the representation of ordinary people through the framework of citizenship, and the governance of ordinary people through the model of the good citizen. I argue that citizenship in China during disasters is situated in a homogenous group and stresses unity. The chosen works stress citizen responsibilities, the meanings of being a good citizen

which serves as a technique of governmentality, and trust in the government as a key requirement. The metaphor of war helps transform the content of good citizenship from the context of war to the context of disasters. The rights of citizens are presented as justifying their responsibilities. The government is represented as insisting the value of everything is for the people, protecting and serving them, which is a form of gratitude education and a form of affective governance, creating a moral debt that urges the people to fulfil their responsibilities. It is also noted that the representation of the government becomes more invisible in later works, reflecting a shift in focus from high-level government officials as moral representatives of the government to medical workers and soldiers as extensions of the government. This avoids revealing possible government misconduct and may also be a way to avoid discouraging people from fulfilling their responsibilities.

All of the chapters lead to **Chapter 7 – A Culture of Resilience**. This chapter is based on the congruence between cultural sources of resilience and the reinforcement of imagined community (Anderson, 2006), focusing on comradeship between ordinary people and the rituals and symbols that strengthen resilience and reinforce imagined community. Disaster is itself a cultural construction; regarding it as part of ordinary life can reduce its negative impact. In China, it may be represented as a chance to reinforce collectivism and a necessary stage leading to national revival. As mentioned, two overlapping points exist between the culture of resilience and imagined community

reinforcement. The first is the direct or indirect relationship formed between people on site, the general public, across time and space, and extending to the readers. This connection is a form of support during times of disaster, strengthens resilience and builds community through shared memories and values. The second point is significant rituals and symbols, including singing, mourning rituals and memorials, unlock and send-off ceremonies, and galas. These rituals and symbols tap into 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) that is embedded in everyday life, forming community and strengthening resilience by eliciting strong emotions. Essentially, disaster culture prepares people to cope through relationships and comforting rituals and symbols, contributing to the construction of an imagined community linked to nation-building.

Overall, through the revealing circumstances of disasters, the thesis argues that a specifically Chinese disaster culture can be identified, which is established on a close-looped, self-reinforcing logic. The culture has the *yin* and *yang* characteristics of Chinese culture, and regulates and mobilises ordinary people through criticism and praise. Disaster is culturally constructed as having positive effects, and ordinary people are constructed as ideally active participants, governed through emotional and cultural discourses to keep their thoughts and behaviours within a certain range. Relevant nationalism rituals, symbols and emotions embedded in everyday life are drawn out during disasters, and the shared memories, emotions, values and norms reinforce the imagined community of China. Through this process, the ideal community and the ideal individuals are

both reinforced, and the continuity and stability of the nation are protected.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

As established in the Introduction, ordinary people are central to disaster – both in terms of its impacts and its management. They are both the primary group deserving of protection and a source of great power when mobilised. Consequently, disasters pose a distinct challenge for governance: how to stabilise society through both the mobilisation and the control of the people. In this chapter, I review the various theoretical and empirical literature related to these dynamics, illustrating key ideas that form this study's framework of analysis and identifying the research gaps that the thesis aims to address.

My primary research interest lies in understanding ordinary people and how they are governed. The first section of this review establishes a framework of governmentality, beginning with the construction of ordinary people as its subjects before examining its techniques, particularly in relation to the theory of citizenship – specifically the discourse of the 'good citizen' – and affective governance. In the second section, I explore studies on disaster and culture, investigating how disasters are interpreted and mediated through cultural lenses. This includes insights from studies on everyday life, such as festivals and concepts like the 'new man' and the 'real man', alongside research on cultural resilience and disaster traditions in China. Based on this literature review, I identify gaps in

knowledge, methodology and theory, and subsequently outline the research questions guiding this study.

2.1 Governmentality

In most countries, the relationship between government and ordinary people is a primary concern. China is no different in this regard. The relationship is acutely exposed and intensified during disasters. This section explores the relevance of governmentality as a framework for governing this relationship. Specifically, it examines the techniques of governmentality operationalised through discourses related to citizenship and various modalities of affective governance.

'Society must be defended', argues Michel Foucault (Foucault, 2003), and disasters is one of the many things from which it must be defended. As noted in the introduction, disasters can reveal underlying social mechanisms, making power relations – particularly concerning ordinary people – a central focus. Foucault's study on power relations is often summarised as a three-fold schema, comprising sovereignty, discipline and governmentality (Walters & Tazzioli, 2023, p. 2). Of the three, governmentality is the most pertinent to this study, as it operates 'at the level of population' (Walters & Tazzioli, 2023, p. 2). From a cultural studies perspective, Bratich et al. define governmentality as follows:

> Governmentality refers to the arts and rationalities of governing, where the conduct of conduct is the key activity. It is an attempt to

> reformulate the governor-governed relationship, one that does not make the relation dependent upon administrative machines, juridical institutions, or other apparatuses that usually get grouped under the rubric of the State. Rather, … the conduct of conduct takes place at innumerable sites, through an array of techniques and programs that are usually defined as cultural (Bratich et al., 2003, p. 4).

The study of governmentality thus looks into the material practices that shape the behaviours of collectives and individuals, seeking to identify what Foucault calls the 'technologies', 'techniques' and 'mechanisms of security' of governmentalities at specific sites. In this thesis, I argue that nonfiction disaster narratives and the discourses they construct around disaster culture constitute one such site. These texts serve as a space where governance is enacted and the techniques of governmentality can be clearly identified and analysed.

It is worth noting that the Foucauldian model of governmentality was developed in a neo-liberal context, which may raise questions about its applicability to China's democratic dictatorship political system. However, scholars have convincingly argued for its relevance. Palmer and Winiger (2019), for example, argue that its application necessitates the decoupling of neo-liberalism and governmentality, asserting that governmentality can function within different social frameworks. Focusing on the Chinese context, they propose the concept of 'neo-socialist governmentality', which represents both a continuation of 'Mao-era revolutionary heritage' and 'the reinvention of socialism through discourses and

practices derived from global free-market capitalism' (Palmer & Winiger, 2019, p. 559). Dutton and Hindess believe that the concept of neo-socialist governmentality is particularly useful for understanding the Chinese context because of Mao's achievement in aligning governmentality in the PRC with certain European traditions such as frugal government. This approach combined concepts of self-reliance and 'produced an experimental mass-line mode of government policy and practice that mobilized the population to transform the state of things, while using the least possible material resources' (Dutton & Hindess, 2016). Over subsequent decades, the neo-socialist regime has shaped a multi-layered machine through various strategies, equipping itself with increasingly complex social engineering tools to project its will – both physically and intangibly – and to develop a system that shapes the people's subjectivity and guides their behaviour overtly and covertly (Palmer & Winiger, 2019, p. 560). Within this system, the Party and the government take the authoritative role in governing while encouraging the people to contribute to the collective. Therefore, the framework of governmentality, and particularly neo-socialist governmentality, is applicable to the context of China. However, the specific discourses that constitute neo-socialist governmentality *during disasters* remains a less explored field of research. In the following sections, I will address this gap by discussing neo-socialist governmentality, the ordinary people, and the various techniques of neo-socialist governmentality in the context of China.

Studying neo-socialist governmentality during disasters in China may also

deepen the understanding of governmentality in non-Western and non-liberal contexts. With socioeconomic shifts such as reform and opening up and China's political and economic rise, governmentality has gone through a series of changes, moving from 'government' to 'governance' (Sigley, 2006). The breakdown of past systems of job assignment and institutional control has made choice and autonomy into important new techniques of governmentality (Hoffman, 2006), while community building and community governance have become central (Bray, 2006). The overarching intention remains to guide and control people's thoughts and behaviours. These behaviours are shaped, guided, corrected and modified by the methodological and rational conduct of government bodies (Burchell, 1996, p. 19). This process is encapsulated by Foucault's concept of 'conduct':

> Conduct is the activity of conducting (*conduire*), of conduction (*la conduction*) if you like, but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself (*se conduit*), lets oneself be conducted (*se laisse conduire*), is conducted (*est conduit*), and finally, in which one behaves (*se comporter*) as an effect of a form of conduct (*une conduite*) as the action of conducting or of conduction (*conduction*) (Foucault, 2007a, p. 193).

This suggests that rather than regulate behaviours of individuals directly – a difficult and uneconomical task – techniques of governmentality operate by encouraging people to internalise cultural norms. This process leads people to take responsibility for regulating their own behaviours to conform. As Chen and

Wang Chen and Wang (2019) argue, the tension between mobilisation and control is central to Chinese ideological works. This highlights the importance of ordinary people as the primary subject of neo-socialist governmentality.

2.1.1 Subject of Neo-socialist Governmentality: Ordinary People

As established in the introduction, the subject of governmentality is not a state, territory or political structure, but rather ordinary people, both individuals and groups (Foucault, 2007a, p. 122). Given that ordinary people are a complex, contradictory subject difficult to describe, a more productive approach may be to begin by delineating what they are *not*.

A significant other to the ordinary people is the government. While ordinary people can be said to reside in everyday life, government bodies, it seems, 'do not inhabit everyday worlds' (Crook, 1998, p. 536). Of course, this is not to say that the government is in conflict with the ordinary people. Rather, in the context of China, the Party and the government take the role of leading the people – a role that has been stressed since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Believed to be inherited from Engels and Lenin, the Party and the government's leading role was affirmed by Mao in the report on the 7th National Congress of CPC in 1945 (Zhao, 2023, p. 93) and Deng Xiaoping and the 1982 Constitution (Liu, 2014), as well as by numerous scholars (Liu, 2014; Zhao, 2023), including scholars of the current era (B. Chen, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2019). Many, such as Yang (2014, 2022), Wang

(2016), and Chen and Wang (2019), prefer the term *party-state*, which affirms the special relationship between the Party, the government and the people. There is widespread consensus that this relatively unique political system has a rare continuity that has allowed the Party to develop and effectively promulgate a narrative about itself. Crucially, the inseparable relationship between the Party and the government further accentuates boundaries between the state and society. For example, low-level government officials such as officials in communes and villages, though still ordinary people themselves to an extent, are set apart from the general public. The authority they exercise and their function as representatives of the state's administrative machinery distinguishes them from ordinary citizens (Jing, 2005).

The 'people' (人民, *renmin*) is an important concept in the context of China due to the influence of Marxism. In the early twentieth century, Soviet Marxism was influential, but this was gradually localised under the influence of Mao Zedong (Chan, 2003, p. 4). In simplest terms, Marx argued that in capitalist societies, wealth is produced by labour – not by capital, as was commonly believed at the time (Cohen, 1972). He termed this misconception a 'false consciousness', which enabled capitalists to oppress the working class. However, the desire to alleviate suffering would lead to enlightenment of the oppressed, prompting Marx to call for them to unite and change the social arrangements (Fay, 1987, pp. 27-28). It is clear that Marx assigned great importance to the proletariat, the class of ordinary people. He revealed the power they possessed and mapped out how they should

exert it to take their rightful place as leaders of society.

The popularity of Marxism in China is underpinned by historical, cultural and public foundations. Even in the feudal society of imperial China (pre-1911), the ruling elite recognised the importance of attending to the welfare of ordinary people. This principle was deeply embedded in Confucian culture, the dominant political and social ideology of the time, which fundamentally shaped the relationship between ordinary people and the ruling elite. A central tenet of Confucianism is its people-oriented thought (民本思想, *minben sixiang*), a concept that has been inherited and surpassed by the CPC through a renewed emphasis on the status of ordinary people (Zhao & Li, 2025). As a synthesis of Marxist and Confucian principles, localised Chinese Marxism accords crucial importance to the people – a tenet consistently stressed through generations of state leaders and their innovations in people-centred thought. During the New Democratic Revolution and the Socialist Revolution in the early twentieth century, Mao Zedong localised Marxism and created the 'people's view' (人民观, *renminguan*) of the CPC (Dai, 2019; Dong, 2020). Generations of CPC leaders inherited and developed this 'people's view' (Dong, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2021). In the new era of reform and opening up post-1978, Premier Deng Xiaoping proposed that the Party must insist that everything proceed from the interests of the people, and adhere to the protection and maintenance of the people's livelihood, the people's hearts and the people's interests – the 'Three Beneficial Criteria' (三个有利于, *sange youliyu*). With the improvement of the people's

material and cultural life at their core, the Three Beneficial Criteria set the degree of improvement of the people's material and cultural life as the measurement standard of socialist construction (Dong, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2021). In the 1990s, Premier Jiang Zemin proposed the Theory of Three Represents (三个代表, *sange daibiao*), which requires that the metaphorical flesh-and-blood ties between the Party and the people be upheld to 'represent the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people,' to promote the people's principal strength, and to achieve all-round human development (Dong, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2021). At the start of the new millennium, Premier Hu Jintao proposed that a 'scientific outlook on development' (科学发展观, *kexue fazhanguan*) be established on the basis of the Party's Marxist understanding of humans and the Party's fundamental purpose, insisting that there is no trivial matter in regard to the interests of the people, taking the fundamental interests of the broad masses of the people as the core, focusing on realistic and specific people, paying attention to the respect and satisfaction of individual interests, and proposing to properly handle the relationship between the economy, society and man and nature (Dong, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2021). In short, the value of the people has been reinforced and the understanding of the importance of the people has been further developed with each generation of national leaders.

Most recently, General Secretary Xi Jinping's view of the people upholds the principal position of the people, practicing and developing the fundamental purpose of the CPC to serve the people wholeheartedly, put the people first, and

make the people's happiness and well-being the core goal of economic and social development, so as to make the Chinese nation 'strong' (Dong, 2020, p. 77). In this view, close relations between the Party and the people are seen as vital to the improvement of development capacity, the consolidation of the foundation of governance, and the safeguarding of social fairness and justice as the basic requirements for being 'people-centred' (Dong, 2020, p. 77). Xi Jinping further emphasised the importance of adopting new measures to ensure and improve people's well-being, ensuring that the people are the masters of the country, working for the new goal of a better life for the people and fulfilling the people's new aspirations for national revival (Dong, 2020, pp. 77-78). It is clear that the CPC carries on the tradition of valuing the people's principal position, putting the people first and insisting on the people-centred approach. People's interests, including their life and properties, are put first, and their ability to create history and reform the society is valued.

In the current era, in the report of the 20th National Congress of the CPC, Xi proposed 'The Second Integration' (第二个结合, *dierge jiehe*), advocating the integration of the basic principles of Marxism with China's specific realities and its fine traditional culture (Xu, 2025; Zhao & Li, 2025; Zhong, 2025). This integration unfolds across four aspects: a cosmic outlook centred on the unity of self and nature; a worldview that the world belongs to all people; a social outlook of people as the foundation of the state; and a moral outlook that prioritises governing with virtue (Xu, 2025; Zhong, 2025). Consequently, by synthesising historical traditions

with current reality, this framework places the people and their governance at the very core of the Chinese political context.

To sum up, the valuing of ordinary people in China has come about as the result of a synthesis of Confucian and Marxist thought, progressively developed by successive Chinese governments. As mentioned, neo-socialist governmentality focuses on mobilising and stabilising the people, especially in times of crisis. This process of mobilisation and control operates by defining what people should do and should not do, what behaviours are encouraged and what behaviours are discouraged. This framework is powerfully illuminated through the lens of citizenship theory.

2.1.2 Techniques of Neo-socialist Governmentality: Citizenship

The concept of citizenship is fundamental to everyday life, as identifying as a citizen of a nation organises a person's perceptions and worldviews (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017, p. 1889). This capacity to influence people's thought and behaviour makes citizenship a critical instrument of governmentality. Historically, the concept of 'citizen' (公民, *gongmin*) has been less prominent in China than the collective concept of 'the people' (人民, *renmin*), with the former often subsumed by the latter in translation (being translated to *renmin* rather than *gongmin*) and political discourse (Chen & Zhu, 2018, p. 144; Mitter, 2005, pp. 162-165). Examining citizenship is therefore crucial to understanding the state-driven

disaster culture that centres around ordinary people, revealing the techniques of neo-socialist governmentality in action.

Many scholars such as Lister (1998b) trace the origin of citizenship to ancient Greece and Rome. Fu (2021), drawing on Bellamy (2008) and Pocock (1995) outlines its evolution: a political and participatory concept in ancient Greece that transformed into a more contractual and legal relationship between the individual and the state under the Roman Empire. By the eighteenth century, the establishment of the modern nation-state began to balance these participatory factors with the formal entitlement of citizenship status (Fu, 2021, p. 6). This long-standing concept was revived to address the complexities of modern society, with contemporary discussions emerging in the late 1800s. During this period of global transformation, as societies around the world (including China) gave way to modern states, the notion of the 'ideal citizen' came into view (Dauncey, 2020; Mitter, 2005), leading to a flourishing of research on the topic.

Definitions of citizenship vary greatly. While some definitions assume a static status, others stress its dynamic nature as act, process and goal. Oldfield argues that citizenship combines status, which prioritises the citizen and allows them to enjoy rights, with practice, which prioritises the community and requires the citizens to accept duties and responsibilities (Oldfield, 1990). This dualism is supported by Lister (1998a, 1998b), who argues that citizenship is both a status and a practice linked through human agency in political participation. Similarly, Faulks (2000) contends that citizenship must encompass not only rights and

benefits but also duties and obligations. Fu argues that citizenship 'is not only solely defined by the rights and duties stipulated in the legal documents of a state, but also constructed by the acts of undocumented or underprivileged actors in reshaping their positions by "acting like citizens"' (Fu, 2021, p. 8).

This perspective shifts the focus from citizenship as legal status to acts that fulfil the requirements of citizenship. Isin and Nielsen identify three types of citizenship: 1) *status*, which is legal membership in a state; 2) *habitus*, which emphasises how citizenship is contested and enacted through everyday routines, rituals, customs and norms, especially under globalisation; and 3) *acts*, which they emphasise as a crucial standard that actively produces citizens and their others (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). Thus, citizenship must be understood as a multi-layered concept. Beyond the literal and practical question of legal membership, it involves the political, social and cultural dimensions of *what kind of citizen* is preferred by a state. This emphasis on responsibilities and 'acting like a citizen' can thus be interpreted not simply in terms of what individual citizens hope to do for themselves, but also as a collective expectation of what citizens can and should do for society.

The specific rights and responsibilities constituting citizenship vary widely from country to country (Butenschon, 2000). This variation is often a product of what Ong (1996) identifies as an 'othering' process, where social gatekeepers define the proximity of individuals or groups to an idealised model of citizenship. In essence, communities delineate an 'ideal' citizen based on specific behaviours,

thereby shifting citizenship theory into a cultural dimension.

There are two general understandings of what has been described as 'cultural citizenship'. The first, articulated by Nick Stevenson (2001), positions culture as central to citizenship. It focuses on the ways in which individuals negotiate their cultural identities and participate in the cultural life of their communities, a process that can either challenge or reinforce existing norms. The second perspective, associated with Kymlicka and Norman (2000), views cultural citizenship as a bridge to diversity – a means of integrating marginalised or excluded groups into the existing societal framework (Delanty, 2002). This thesis aligns more closely with Stevenson's understanding. In this view, culture encompasses the 'cultural resources, identities and the cultural presuppositions of the polity' (Delanty, 2002, p. 64). Frosh (2001) further relates culture to the emotional investments individuals make in collective identities, a necessity for coping with the challenges of cultural privatisation and economic globalisation. Historically, constructing this emotional investment in collective identity has relied on civic education, empowerment and cultural homogeneity, though these mechanisms are increasingly contested in the digital age (Turner, 2001). It is precisely the tension from competing cultural claims that makes the construction and promotion of a dominant culture so crucial.

In the specific context of China, citizenship and cultural citizenship hold distinct significance, as modernity and its attendant concept of citizenship are not exclusively Western imports (Woodman & Guo, 2017, p. 737). Chinese citizenship is influenced by three discourses: traditional Chinese culture; official discourse of

the Chinese government, covering topics such as patriotism, moral cultivation and political ideology; and Western-inspired concepts of citizenship (Zhao & Wang, 2023, p. 77). Tilly (1995) classifies citizens into 'thin citizens' who seek to defend their rights and minimalise responsibilities, and 'thick citizens' who combine personal responsibilities and morals with public affairs. Wang adapts this distinction to the Chinese context, juxtaposing the modern 'citizen' with the Confucian ideal of the *junzi* (君子), arguing that these two subjects are 'both congruent and divergent, as well as homogeneous and heterogeneous', synthesised through 'politico-legal or moral-ethical dimensions' (Wang, 2024, p. 104). Extending the model of 'thin' and 'thick' citizens, he makes the classification of 'civic *junzi*' and '*junzi*-style citizens', the former as a state-promoted ideal while the latter is individual's personal ideal (Wang, 2024). Wang argues that Chinese citizenship must be considered in relation to indigenous resources such as Confucianism and the party-state system (C. Wang, 2016, p. 436). Turning to the cultural dimension, he emphasises the predominant influence of Confucianism (Janoski, 2014; C. Wang, 2016). Wang defines cultural citizenship as 'a process of socio-symbolic practices to reflexively interpret one's social, cultural and political conditions by creating symbolic and social boundaries and constructively act to generate an identity or position and a reflexive understanding of it' (C. Wang, 2016, p. 437).

Zhao and Xu (2015) summarise the challenges to promoting a strong sense of cultural citizenship in China as stemming from globalisation, digitalisation,

multiculturalism and the postmodern dissolution of meta-narratives. They propose a solution involving a three-fold integration: unifying ethnic identity and citizenship, merging national identity with national consciousness, and aligning cultural identity with political identity. This project aims to study the reinforcement of the political legitimacy of the nation-state, the harmonisation of multicultural relations within the nation-state, and the reformation of the cultural identity of the national community. This process of identification, as Ma (2015) argues, entails constructing values for community stability and development based on a shared civilisational foundation. For Ma, cultural citizenship in China means:

> uniting the internal members of the community, consolidating healthy and harmonious relationships, uniting the ethnic groups, reaching consensus through dialogue, communication and exchange methods, eliminating individual and social contradictions, enhancing political stability as a whole, and removing the obstacles that prevent minority groups from wholeheartedly accepting the political system. This means that while the community is strengthening its centripetal force and cohesion, it is also attempting to reduce its risks of instability and insecurity accordingly (Ma, 2015, p. 29).

Thus, cultural citizenship is fundamentally geared toward strengthening the community. This raises the critical question of what specific kind of identification is being constructed. Li and Tan argue that the concept of Chinese citizenship has been re-emphasised in civic education to meet the national needs of the new era,

according to the guidelines of the Chinese Ministry of Education (Li & Tan, 2017, p. 34). This construction of citizenship aims to forge a culturally homogeneous Chinese entity that consciously leans away from ethno-religious complexities and ideological heterogeneities (Zhao et al., 2023, pp. 626-627). Since the 1980s, the precise content of the 'good citizen' has been through a series of changes, though moral education has consistently remained a central part of civic education curriculums (Li & Tan, 2017, pp. 35-37). Li and Tan summarise the main themes of these curriculums as patriotism, good behavioural habits, and virtues – effectively outlining an individual's responsibilities to the country, the community and other people (Li & Tan, 2017, pp. 38-41).

Within this educational process, Zeng (2008) stresses the importance of models as a means to evoke collective memory and identity recognition among cultural citizens, positioning national cultural values as a treasure to summon citizens to action. As will be seen later, this entire framework has direct relevance to the representation of ordinary people in disasters. In short, in the face of the challenges of globalisation, digitalisation, multiculturalism and fragmentation, building a cultural consensus through education may be a crucial mechanism for strengthening the community and the nation.

Consequently, citizenship is closely linked to emotions and national sentiment, effectively mapping out the civic virtues – moral behaviours, social practices and cultural beliefs – that constitute the 'good citizen' (Turner, 2001, p. 26). In the following section, I will proceed to discuss the influence of this notion

of the ‘good citizen’.

2.1.2.1 The Good Citizen

In contrast to Western citizenship models that often emphasise rights, Chinese citizenship is frequently characterised by a focus on obligations and responsibilities deemed essential to nation-state building (Guo, 2014, p. 358; Yan, 2017, p. 13). This aligns with broader civic culture theories that also posit responsibilities rather than rights as the foundational element of citizenship (Selbourne, 1994). In this sense, what makes a ‘good’ citizen is heavily context-dependent. Dalton’s definition of citizenship as ‘a set of norms of what people think they should do as a good citizen’ (Dalton, 2009, p. 21) is pertinent here. This perspective connects with Pykett et al.’s argument that the ‘good citizen’ emerges when citizenship is understood through acts rather than status (Pykett et al., 2010, pp. 525-526). At the very least, the concept of good citizenship plays a key role in political discourse, as it maps out encouraged and discouraged behaviours, even if the specific content of these behaviours varies across different political contexts (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 524).

Building on the view of Isin and Nielson (2008) that ‘acts *produce* subjects’, Pykett et al. focus on ‘ordinary acts-in-context’ and their framing as virtuous to avoid the dichotomy that frames extraordinary acts as virtuous and everyday acts as passive and apolitical (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 526). This theoretical lens helps to

understand positive interpretations of ordinary people's actions. Furthermore, the linkage between the concept of the good citizen and education inevitably raises questions about the authority of whoever sets the standard (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 529), positioning the discourse of the good citizen as a potential technique of governmentality.

Citizenship stresses the contexts in which citizens act, while the moral traits and values demonstrated through these acts of citizens can in turn reshape those very contexts (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 532). This suggests that the fundamental requirement for citizens is to be active participants in society (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 532). This shift from a static and institutional view of citizenship to a dynamic and action-based one is also evident in the Chinese context, where scholarship increasingly focuses on the 'act of citizenship' (Zhao & Wang, 2023, p. 75). However, this performative requirement can also be coercive. Scholars like Ian Hunter and Denise Meredyth (Hunter & Meredyth, 2001) suggest that civic education functions to construct and compel conformity to models of good citizenship. Pykett et al. extend this idea using Goffman's concept of 'staging and scriptwriting for the good citizen which presents a figure of the good citizen to be enacted' (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 532). Extending Butler's theory of performativity (1997), they argue that:

> 'Ordinary' citizens need a repertoire to act out, in order to constitute themselves performatively as (good) citizens. This repertoire comes from the framing of a domain and the use of an approach for invoking

> the good citizen. As such, a 'prior' or 'primary' stage of performativity is necessary, referring to the construction of a domain in which the performance of particular social roles is made possible (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 533).

It can be argued that nonfiction provides this essential cultural stage, framing and interpreting the model of the good citizen. In other words, good citizens need models to follow. It can also be argued that the cultural stage itself implies the repertoire of action available for citizens to perform.

In the digital age, the concept of citizenship is adapting to new challenges. New media can be seen as an important factor influencing the construction of citizenship and the good citizen, often challenging the traditional model of the informed or dutiful citizen. Digital media is rather a double-edged sword: while it provides a rich source of information, its abundance can itself be problematic, especially for young people (Thorson, 2012). Fu (2021) examines the influence of digital media on citizenship, especially on the younger generation, and proposes that for any model of the good citizen to be effective, young people must be convinced by it. However, the choices offered by digital media may increase gaps in political knowledge, as personal interest becomes the primary driver for information-seeking and participation; it is difficult to become informed when one is not interested (Prior, 2005, p. 577). On the other hand, Bennett's model of the self-actualising citizen frames new media as both a tool for expressing personal conceptions of citizenship and a new space for civic education (Kligler-Vilenchik,

2017, p. 1900). In other words, new media possesses a fundamental duality: it creates new spaces for political participation yet risks increasing inequalities in political information and knowledge and hence disengagement; it functions as a new space existing alongside traditional forms of education where citizens can both express changes in their conceptions and be educated.

2.1.2.2 Affective Governance

Affective governance also plays an essential role in delineating encouraged and discouraged behaviours. As noted above, collective identity can be built through discursive constructions of values, culture and affective stances (Tilly, 2005). The concept 'addresses the normative construction of the good citizen through social discourses and relies on a Foucaultian foundation' (Gregorio & Merolli, 2016, Isin, 2004, cited in de Blasio & Selva, 2020, p. 68). Such affective discourses are integral to the tactics of governmentality (Law, 2014, p. 168). For example, de Blasio and Selva (2020) analyse how emotions such as anger, care and confidence served as tools of affective governance during COVID-19 to build leadership, trust and good citizens. Studies on affective governance usually adopt either a state-centric lens, which assumes citizen subjectivity is completely controlled by the government, or a bottom-up perspective, which focuses on how emotions are used to incite the public (Wu & Chen, 2023, p. 230). Less research has been carried out on the interactive space in which the state and ordinary people engage.

Affective governance is a relatively new concept in Chinese scholarship, appearing first in 2016 in a conference on new social mentalities and affective governance in the digital age (He et al., 2023, p. 74), but it is now seen as increasingly crucial for understanding contemporary governmentality. It is considered a technique of flexible governance (Fan, 2022; He et al., 2023; He, 2016; Liu & Xiang, 2023), serving as a necessary complement to rigid governance, reaching the grassroot level and reduces governance costs (He et al., 2023, p. 75). Liu and Xiang argue that the ultimate objective of public governance is the management of human behaviour, achieved through the cultivation of people's social needs and affect or by changing people's perceptions of the value of different needs (Liu & Xiang, 2023, p. 113). The conscious application of affective governance in China is rooted in specific cultural and historic contexts. He et al. propose four inner logics for its application: first, a *historical-cultural logic* that places 'emotions' (情, *qing*) first, before 'reason' (理, *li*) and 'law' (法, *fa*); second, a *theoretical logic* based on Asian philosophies like Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism; third, a *practical logic* derived from the Chinese pattern of differential mode of association; and fourth, a *healing logic* aimed at addressing trauma accumulated through rapid social transformation (He et al., 2023, pp. 75-77). In practice, affective governance involves the government exerting affective reproduction through consensus-building, reputation management, the creation of communal spaces (for example, around festivals), and mutual benefit schemes (Lan & Lin, 2020; Lu & Chen, 2018). However, few studies have focused on the

practice of affective governance in disaster contexts.

From an interactive perspective, the Chinese government's ideal state–society relationship is a trade-off where care and service for the people are provided in exchange for their gratitude and cooperation (Wu & Chen, 2023, p. 231). Again this dynamic can be traced back to Confucianism, where governing authority is derived from benevolent, responsible and compassionate action towards the people – a tenet inherited by the CPC and vital to its public support and regime continuity (Wu & Chen, 2023, p. 231). A symbiotic relationship is thus created between the government and the ordinary people, requiring constant emotional coordination and internalisation to maintain (Wu & Chen, 2023, p. 233). Yet, research in this area is still in its infancy, and there is a need for detailed studies on the interactive construction of affective governance and its role in the shaping of good citizens.

2.1.3 Summary

Governmentality, with its focus on the subject of people, provides a suitable theoretical framework for the research interests of this thesis. Although the concept originated in a Western context, scholars have convincingly argued for its applicability to the neo-socialist context of China. The focus on ordinary people is deeply rooted in both the Chinese Confucianism tradition and its Marxist inheritance, positioning ordinary people as the central subject to be both

mobilised and stabilised, particularly in times of crisis. To this end, non-coercive techniques of governmentality such as cultural discourse, behavioural policing and emotional guidance are applied to influence people's thoughts and behaviours. In the context of China, this process is intimately associated with theories of citizenship. Citizenship – especially the model of the 'good citizen' – maps out the desired and undesired behaviours of ordinary people, a framework that is put into practice through affective governance, which seeks to influence people's behaviours by mobilising emotions.

As noted in the introduction, disaster reveals social mechanisms that are usually hidden. The revealing circumstances of a disaster provide a critical opportunity to explore key questions: What model of the good citizen is constructed? By what techniques of governmentality are ordinary people influenced? Specifically, which cultural and emotion discourses are stressed to govern the ordinary people?

2.2 Disaster Culture

Building upon the preceding discussion of ordinary people in the context of disasters and the role of cultural discourse as a technique of governmentality, I argue that a specific *disaster culture* is formed through these discourses and, in turn, works as a mechanism of governmentality. It is widely accepted that a society's resilience and its people reactions to disaster are shaped by its

underlying social systems. This suggests that the culture constructed around disaster may be influential on a community's ability to cope with disasters.

Studies of disaster's profound impact on society and life date back to Sorokin (1942/1968), who analysed calamities in their complex interactions. He argued that social causes, such as ignorance, matter as much as biological causes in epidemics, and considered the effects of such events on human minds, behaviour, social organisation and cultural life. Sorokin's work shows that humanity's greatest creations, both in social mechanisms and art, often happen during times of great crisis (Sorokin & Horowitz, 2017). Echoing Sorokin, Huet (2012) argues that history (and specifically European history) has been shaped by disasters, and that modernity itself is a project of responding to and thinking through disaster (Clark, 2015, p. 120). This suggests that disasters should be considered to be not just destructive events but also potential points of profound social transformation and creativity.

The cultural perspective has become increasingly important to the study of disaster (Rodríguez et al., 2017, p. 109). As Mark Anderson argues, a culture of disaster is a necessity for both individuals and nations:

> On the one hand, individuals and nations require potent cultural discourses to mediate the psychological trauma that natural disasters inflict by forcing a jarring realization of the frailty of the collective human project to dominate nature. On the other hand, natural

> disasters make inescapable the axiom that culture is never apolitical; rather, politics represents the process by which cultural trends are formalized and institutionalized as political power. Political power is at a premium during the recovery process, and this power is also channeled or refuted through cultural mediation (Anderson, 2011, p. 2).

It can be argued that culture is where individuals and nations come together, where trauma and resilience are mediated, and power and politics play out. However, as Webb notes, culture can be both a source of resilience and a source of vulnerability, depending on how it influences a community's capacity to deal with extreme circumstances (Webb, 2017, p. 114).

2.2.1 Disaster and Ordinary Lives

2.2.1.1 Disaster and Everyday Lives

As established in the Introduction, disasters should be regarded as part of, rather than an exception to, ordinary life. The 'revealing' nature of disaster exposes social structures that typically remain hidden within the everyday. A discussion of this everyday context is therefore essential. In sociological research, 'everyday life' is the most common synonym for 'ordinary lives', constituting a vast and important field of research. Lefebvre is often regarded as the principal theorist of everyday life, a mantle later inherited by Blanchot. Indeed, Blanchot's work on the subject,

such as *Everyday Speech* (1987), is deeply inspired by Lefebvre's foundational *Critique of Everyday Life* (1988) (Sheringham, 2000, p. 189).

Lefebvre's Marxist perspective is central to his study of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1980), His critique is derived from Marx's concept of alienation (Schilling, 2003, p. 23), and examines everyday life in a socialist context, applying the dialectical method to make the ordinary a legitimate object of Marxist analysis (Merrifield & Muschamp, 2006, pp. 4-5). This socialist orientation suggests that Lefebvre's approach may be useful for studying everyday life in contemporary China.

For Lefebvre, everyday life is a totality composed of differences and contradictions. Its study begins with the small and mundane to reflect the whole social structure (Merrifield & Muschamp, 2006, p. 5). Lefebvre's interpretation of the everyday focuses on the part and the microstructure of life to understand the whole and the macrostructure. By singling out and excluding all 'distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities', the everyday can be understood as the 'residual' that is left over, defined as a totality (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 101). Although defined by negation, the focus lands on totality. As Hoa summarises, everyday life 'relates all distinct components of life together into an organic totality, a system of hardships and compensations, of alienations and initiatives, to overcome alienation' (Hoa, 2014, p. 57). Thus, while Lefebvre's residual definition conceptually excludes significant events such as disasters, it crucially frames everyday life as a site where people overcome alienation. This aligns with the earlier discussion of cultural citizenship and the concept of 'banal nationalism' (discussed in Section 2.2.3.2),

showing how consensus is built through the repetition of ordinary practices.

Blanchot and Lefebvre's views of the everyday differ in terms of theoretical perspective.

> Blanchot's investigation of the everyday takes place on a different register from Lefebvre's; Lefebvre seeks to represent historical facts in the world, while Blanchot is concerned with the question of representation as such, of the world as such (Hoa, 2014, p. 60).

In short, Blanchot shifts the focus from facts to their representation, advancing Lefebvre's understanding of everyday life into the realm of constructivism. This focus on discourse aligns perfectly with this thesis's interest in nonfiction and cultural narratives.

In terms of politics and governmentality, Lefebvre and Blanchot converge on seeing the everyday as a site of resistance, a private sphere resilient to ideology (Hoa, 2014, p. 69). However, Blanchot's view on its politicisation differ from Lefebvre's significantly:

> Because the only model of social relation Blanchot considers is that between individual and repressive authority, turning everyday experience into discourse means accepting the intrusion of state power into private life. Conversely, Lefebvre envisions a collective organized around the analysis of common experiences and shared critiques of power (Hoa, 2014, p. 69).

Rather than view these perspectives as oppositional, I believe it is more productive to see Blanchot as supplementing Lefebvre. Lefebvre proposes a healthier, more evolvable relationship among ordinary people and between ordinary people and power, while Blanchot points to the inevitable infiltration of authority into private life. This tension is directly related to the forthcoming discussion on governmentality and banal nationalism.

How ordinary lives engage with political and cultural discourses remains a vital area for exploration. Past studies provide this thesis with two valuable frameworks to refer to: first, disasters can be analysed similarly to festivals in terms of rituals and symbols; second, the construction of the 'ordinary people' in discourse may be usefully compared to the image-making projects of the 'real man' and the 'new man'.

2.2.1.2 Festival and Rituals

The study of festivals, as a part of studies on everyday life, offers a productive analogy for the study of disaster. As Michel Trebitsch notes, 'the idea that festival, like revolution, marks both a break in everyday life and a rehabilitation of the everyday' (Trebitsch, preface to Lefebvre, 2014, p. 24). Given the relative absence of a direct focus on disasters in Lefebvre's work, his analysis of festivals can be used as a useful theoretical reference point.

Similar to disasters, festivals stand out from the everyday while remaining an

essential part of the everyday. For Lefebvre, festivals are not a separate realm but an intensified version of daily existence:

> Certainly, right from the start, festivals contrasted violently with everyday life, but they were not separate from it. They were like everyday life, but more intense; and the moments of that life – the practical community, food, the relation with nature – in other words, work – were reunited, amplified, magnified in the festival. Man, still immersed in an immediate natural life, lived, mimed, sang, danced his relation with nature and the cosmic order as his elementary and confused thoughts 'represented' it (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 187).

This passage suggests that the power of the festival stems from its amplification of the sense of community, ceremony and collective emotion. Building on this, Li (2020) argues that ordinary lives are fragile but also resilient, with people often drawing on their experience of life before disasters to deal with them . Thus, the communal practices and strong positive emotions of festivals may contribute to a community's resilience precisely because they are essentially *intensifications* of the ordinary, not detachments from ordinary life.

This concept of intensification is further elaborated by Walter, who argues that festivals provide a reflective framework that informs everyday life:

> What happens during a festival informs our thinking and understanding of ourselves as human beings 'in time', that will inform

> our everyday life as well: we might, after a festival, have a stronger sense of perspective and purpose, one that might be refreshed, as it were, in regular intervals whenever it is again time for festivity. Similarly, the regular intervals of festive time allow participants to trace their own lifetime, from childhood over adolescence to old age, as well as the developments of nations or communities, even while the continuity of certain traditions, values, or beliefs is reaffirmed (Walter, 2024, p. 5).

Extending this understanding of festivals, it is possible to argue that disasters likewise function as intensifications of ordinary life, profound moments where perspective and purpose are violently refreshed, critical junctures where the continuity of traditions, values and beliefs are both reaffirmed and tested.

2.2.1.3 The New Man and the Real Man

The concept of 'the total man' is regarded as a foundational goal in Lefebvre's work, derived from Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Schilling, 2003, p. 30). Lefebvre himself acknowledges the difficulty of defining the concept, stating that 'no amount of theorizing will permit us to attain the total man, or even to define him' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 148). Nevertheless, he provides key characteristics: the 'total man' embodies 'man's unity with himself, in particular the unity of the individual and the social' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 82), and represents a

synthesis of 'nature and consciousness, instinct and lucidity, power over things and over his own products' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 203). Importantly, this ideal of the total man is not a static state but is 'made real through action and in practice, i.e. in everyday life' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 148). Therefore, the concept of the total man is deeply rooted in everyday life, representing Lefebvre's vision of a human autonomy less subject to capitalist manipulation.

In his analysis of literature, Lefebvre further distinguishes between 'the new man' and 'the real man'. He describes the 'new man' – or the socialist or communist man – as 'entirely positive, heroic, fearless and blameless in work, war or love … defined by his wholehearted devotion to (socialist) society and by the way he discovered the meaning of his individuality in dedication and self-sacrifice' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 61). As Lynteris (2012) notes, this concept of a 'new man' was adopted by the CPC as a kind of 'social medicine', a strategy rooted in Confucianism. This depiction is prevalent in Chinese literature, especially in literature representing the time of China's Resistance War against Japanese Aggression, the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (or the Korean War) and the early years of development of the new China. Fictional and nonfictional characters like Gao Daquan in *The Golden Road* (*Jinguang Dadao*, 金光大道) (Haoran, 1972) and the real-life model Jiao Yulu in *Jiao Yulu* (焦裕禄) (Wang, 1990) exemplify this ideal.

However, Lefebvre argues that such idealised images are inherently limited to extraordinary circumstances of struggle, production or war. In more everyday

contexts, they give way to the 'real man': 'diverse, individual, complete with his conflicts and contradictions, and exemplified in his different types' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 61). Contemporary Chinese literature has also moved on from perfect characters, criticised unrealistic tendencies and turned to more authentic and humanised portrayals. Being closer to ordinary experience – ourselves – these 'real' figures generate greater reader sympathy and interest (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 61).

In other words, Lefebvre identifies a dialectical pattern in literary depictions of ordinary people: during special times, representations lean towards the heroic 'new man', who serves as an ideal to look up to, someone to give us faith in difficult times; while at the same time, the 'real man' offers a more possible and relatable model, thereby adding to the believability of the literary works themselves.

2.2.1.4 Disaster and Ordinary Lives

Although studies on everyday life provide a valuable reference, the Lefebvrian framework excludes significant catastrophic events. As established in the introduction, ordinary life is essentially a totality of differences and contradictions, and while it is difficult to clearly define, its relevance to this thesis is that disaster must be studied in relation to its situation within ordinary lives.

A central problem in this field, as proposed by Curato and Ong, is whether disasters mark change or continuity in ordinary lives (Curato & Ong, 2015, p. 4).

Curato and Ong (2015) outline contrasting perspectives: a functionalist view, represented by Barnshaw and Trainor (2010), focuses on how communities respond, reorganise and return to normalcy, while a critical perspective, represented by Turkel (2002), examines how disruption shatters old structures of dominance and facilitates the establishment of *new* order. Mangone and Zyuzev argue that thinking about the future in relation to disaster is intrinsically related to the community identity reconstruction and the formation of new systems of needs and values; they also contend that for any community that has suffered, there is always a 'before' and an 'after' (Mangone & Zyuzev, 2020, pp. 176-177).

In her study of ordinary life and earthquakes, drawing on the idea of moral breakdown proposed by Zigon (2007), Ibañez-Tirado finds that disaster survivors attempt to return to an imagined normality, yet the event inevitably shakes – if not fully erodes – existing knowledge, resulting in a renewal and recrafting of ordinary life rather than a simple return (Ibañez-Tirado, 2015, p. 522). As Samuels observes, 'the logic of "like it used to be" and "already normal again" indeed reveals how the post-disaster everyday is at once normal and never the same' (Samuels, 2019, p. 4). This is not a new lifestyle suddenly set into place after disaster, but a constant process of remaking everyday life (Samuels, 2019). However, this must be balanced against what Hoffman (2019) identifies as the persistence and perpetuation of culture and society in the context of disaster. In other words, disaster both reveal underlying social mechanisms – identities, the community characteristics, structures of dominance – and actively reshape them.

Disaster must be considered in the broader context of ordinary life, while ordinary life is shaped by disastrous events. Changes occur alongside significant continuity.

2.2.2 Culture of Resilience

Resilience is often seen as a key aspect of disaster culture, with the subjective initiative of people as a collective often regarded as its most important element. The US National Research Council defines resilience as 'the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, or more successfully adapt to actual or potential adverse events' (National Research Council, 2012, p. 16, quoted in Webb, 2017, p. 115). Other researchers have proposed that 'the political focus of disaster narratives restores faith in the collective project of human dominance over nature' (Anderson, 2011, p. 192).

To examine disaster culture through the lens of resilience, Anderson's modern grammar of disaster – comprising the key concepts of *risk*, *vulnerability*, *trauma* and *normalisation* (Anderson, 2011, p. 20) – provides a useful framework. Anderson argues that vulnerability is a constant, foundational concept:

> Vulnerability … underpins the entire system of assessment; it defines risk and the potential for trauma, as well as inscribing the boundaries between normality (as security) and the normalization of insecurity – that is to say, which perennial threats are unacceptable socially according to local parameters as well as the modern discourse of

> human rights. And in any case of risk assessment, defining vulnerability is a highly politicized process, one that is most often undertaken retrospectively, after the fact of disaster (Anderson, 2011, p. 20).

It can be inferred that vulnerability, and subsequently risk, trauma, normality and the normalisation of insecurity are socially constructed in the aftermath of disaster through political processes. How they are constructed directly influences a society's resilience.

Trauma can reinforce resilience. Ataria believes that 'the very notion of culture emerges from trauma' (Ataria, 2017, p. xv), as traumatic events consolidate heterogeneous individuals into a group. This shared trauma, vital for keeping a collective together, alive and functioning, allows a resilient culture to be built upon it, a process deeply connected to affective governance through the strong emotions elicited.

Normalisation of insecurity can also reinforce resilience. Lorenz (2013) describes the coping capacity that shapes social resilience as 'comprehensive coping with meaning' within a 'historico-philosophical narrative' where the continuity and identity of the system are assured, and disaster is construed as meaningful as well as calamitous. The primary method of this coping is integrating disaster into 'the expectation structure' (Lorenz, 2013, p. 16) – that is, the normalisation of insecurity. By regarding disaster as an intrinsic part of ordinary

life rather than an external anomaly, communities build resilience.

Webb synthesises these ideas by listing three cultural sources of resilience: first, the emergence of new values and norms, such as altruistic values and helping behaviours, leading to the formation of therapeutic communities; second, the development of subcultures of disaster and safe cultures in organisations – for example, people living in places prone to certain disasters while aware of the threat and possessing the knowledge to minimise harm; and third, the use of rituals such as memorials and techniques such as humour and singing (Webb, 2017). In short, resilience is reinforced through the active cultural construction of community through new social norms, rituals and symbols.

2.2.2.1 Collective Memory and Comradeship

A central question in the study of nationalism is how imagined communities are created on the scale of a nation. Benedict Anderson's seminal work suggests the answer lies in shared memories and comradeship (Anderson, 2006). Anderson traces the roots of modern nationalism to Marxist movements, arguing that nations are fundamentally imagined communities based on shared memories (Anderson, 2006). These shared memories are often forged in times of crisis. As Wang and Goh elaborate:

> At the same time, despite or because of the traces of external forces in its making, the nation imagines itself into being through an

> inclusive, sacrificial, serial logic, calling those before and after us to join, share, and become one with it across space and time even at, or precisely for, the threat of death (Wang & Goh, 2017, p. viii).

This underscores the value of studying disasters in the construction of nationalism and imagined communities; it is the threat of death, whether natural or unnatural, that creates the need to imagine a unified community.

Regarding comradeship, Anderson posits that concepts like the nation and citizenship belong to the category of 'unbound serialities' of everyday universals – abstract, universal categories in modern social thought:

> Unbound serialities are typically imagined and narrated by means of the classic instruments of print-capitalism, namely, the newspaper and the novel. They afford the opportunity for individuals to imagine themselves as members of larger than face-to-face solidarities, of choosing to act on behalf of those solidarities, of transcending by an act of political imagination the limits imposed by traditional practices (Chatterjee, 1999, p. 128).

In other words, unbound serialities such as nations and citizens are able to transcend physical limitations and form imagined communities through mediated relationships. A personal sense of national identity and belonging thus focuses on the imagined quality of the nation, based on these indirect social ties (Phillips, 2002, Calhoun, 1991, cited in Putri et al., 2018, p. 567). This imagined community

is made possible through the construction of kinship (Breuilly, 2016, p. 5). This theoretical framework supports the analysis of national character and disaster culture through nonfiction narratives.

2.2.2.2 Rituals and Symbols

Rituals and symbols are essential to the construction and reinforcement of communities. Anderson argues that:

> nationalism operates through language, census, map, museum, memory, and history to demarcate oneself from its neighboring others even when these differences are actively imagined or colonially imposed rather than innate and natural (Wang & Goh, 2017, p. viii).

Ritual can be defined as 'symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive' (Kertzer, 1988, p. 9). Both content and form of rituals are significant (Jarman, 1997, p. 20), and they are inherently performative, demanding active involvement from participants (Jarman, 1997, p. 22). Through rituals, members of a society are socialised into its values and expectations, often through the elicitation of primary emotions. This process is crucial to the strength and cohesion of the collective (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, p. 132), linking it directly to techniques of governmentality – specifically, through the 'good citizen' discourses and affective governance discussed above.

Symbols are significant because they allow groups to assign meaning and

comprehend their world (Kertzer, 1988, p. 4). They signify the uniqueness of a collective (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, p. 134), and potent national symbols such as a national anthem elicit strong emotions that help internalise national identity (Hummel, 2017). The pervasive power of symbols is a central concern of 'banal nationalism', which I will discuss in 2.2.3.2.

2.2.3 Disaster Tradition in China

China provides a particularly rich context for research about ordinary people and disaster culture. Historical Chinese writings about disaster often represented ordinary people as actively fighting against disasters, with literary recordings dating back to *The Book of Songs* (Spring and Autumn) (诗经, *shijing*) (Zhang, 2011, p. 148). Recent Chinese disaster history research has increasingly emphasised the importance of culture and its social dimensions. Xia (2004) summarises Chinese disaster history while criticising the tendency to ignore the social attributes of disasters. Subsequently, Zhou proposes a turn towards culture (Q. Zhou, 2021), aligning with the broader cultural shift in disaster studies internationally. Accordingly, in the following sections, I will first discuss the construction of a homogeneous understanding of Chinese culture and the reinforcement of an imagined community as central to Chinese disaster culture.

2.2.3.1 Homogeneous Understanding of Chinese Culture in Times of Disaster

As a vast nation with 56 ethnicity groups, Chinese culture is diverse and difficult to define. Even for the Han majority, whose identity is central to unifying the multi-ethnic state, powerful local identities rooted in native place, occupation and family histories persist (Joniak-LÜThi, 2013). Consequently, people in different areas and cultural contexts may have their own understandings of disaster. However, as previous sections have established, official discourses around ordinary people and citizenship often prioritise homogeneity. It is therefore possible to define a *dominant* Chinese disaster culture by tracing a path from popular ancient myths and influential historical records like *The Records of the Great Historian* (91 BC) (*史记, shiji*) through the dominant tradition of Confucianism and into the culture actively promoted by the government since the twentieth century.

Among early Chinese myths, the story of the great flood features prominently (Lewis, 2006, p. 1). Taking an ethnographical point of view, Liu also identifies this myth as a foundational element of Chinese disaster culture; it is a common myth shared by many cultures around the world, but what is unique about the Chinese version is that the flood was not meekly accepted as divine punishment but was successfully fought (Liu, 2019, pp. 39-40). This myth is important for two reasons: first, it frames disaster as a result of natural causes; second, it stresses the imperative for people to unite and fight the disaster collectively rather than wait for salvation from God or a single hero.

As Webb argues, a culture's role as a source of vulnerability or resilience

depends partly on whether it regards disasters as divine intervention or natural phenomena (Webb, 2017, p. 116). Unlike the biblical story of Noah's Ark, where people accept the great flood as God's punishment and build an arc to survive (Genesis 6-9), the Chinese myth *Yu the Great Controls the Flood* presents a different paradigm. The disaster occurs naturally and is fought against twice: first, unsuccessfully, by Yu's father Gun, who is killed for the crime of stealing God's self-renewing soil to dam the floodwaters; and then successfully by Yu, who leads the people to dig canals and disperse the floodwaters (Christie, 1968, p. 83). Whether disaster should be defined by solidarity or anomie is one of the five questions Curato and Ong propose for sociological disaster studies (Curato & Ong, 2015, p. 4). From its very origins, Chinese disaster culture, as reflected in its foundational myths, emphasises solidarity, indicating the necessity of considering people in disasters as active participants in a collective struggle.

2.2.3.2 Imagined Community as Central to Chinese Disaster Culture

Disaster culture as a concept was introduced to China by Japanese scholar Tanaka Shigeyoshi (J. Wang, 2020, p. 50). Localising the concept, Fang identifies three levels of disaster culture that regulate different aspects of society: first, spiritual beliefs, including myths and legends, religions, national cultures, philosophical thoughts and political beliefs, which regulate people's spiritual activities and form the foundation of disaster culture; second, social norms of behaviour, including political systems, hierarchies, laws and regulations, which restrict people's

behaviour and maintain social order; and third, personal concepts, constrained by social norms of behaviour yet possessing group commonality, representing the most intuitive manifestation of local disaster culture in a given region (Fang, 2021, p. 11). The latter two levels are directly related to the governance of ordinary people through citizenship, as discussed previously. The first level, spiritual beliefs, necessitates a discussion of nationalism and patriotism. In simplest terms, nationalism denotes 'loyalty to the nation', while patriotism signifies 'love of country' (Viroli, 1995, p. 1). Though often used synonymously, Viroli proposes a crucial distinction based on the linguistic terms used to express them, their purposes and their enemies:

> The language of patriotism has been used over the centuries to strengthen or invoke love of the political institutions and the way of life that sustain the common liberty of a people, that is love of the republic; the language of nationalism was forged in late eighteenth-century Europe to defend or reinforce the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic oneness and homogeneity of a people. Whereas the enemies of republican patriotism are tyranny, despotism, oppression, and corruption, the enemies of nationalism are cultural contamination, heterogeneity, racial impurity, and social, political, and intellectual disunion (Viroli, 1995, pp. 1-2).

Viroli clarifies that patriotism does value culture, ethnic background, language and traditions (Viroli, 1995, p. 2), but, he distinguishes it as defensive and rooted in

political institutions, whereas nationalism is associated with power and sinks individuality (Viroli, 1995, p. 3). He cites Deutsch's formulation that 'patriotism appeals to all residents of an ethnic group, regardless of their ethnic background. Nationalism appeals to all members of an ethnic group, regardless of their country of residence' (Deutsch, 1953, p. 232, quoted in Viroli, 1995, p. 4). Based on this demarcation, Viroli contends that Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, though ostensibly about nationalism, actually studies love, especially self-sacrificing love, which is closer to Viroli's understanding of patriotism (Viroli, 1995, p. 5-6). Essentially, Viroli frames patriotism as an inward-looking concern with what happens within the borders of a country, while nationalism is an outward-facing ideology with a relatively negative connotation, necessarily considered in a global context.

In the context of China, the terminology acquires further nuance. Because China has 56 ethnic nationalities, the concept of nationalism is often substituted with 'patriotism' or 'state nationalism' (Yahuda, 2000, p. 33). Guo, as cited by Harris, avoids viewing nationalism as purely negative, arguing that 'in China today cultural nationalism overlaps with state nationalism, but is in conflict with it to the extent that state nationalism reflects the ideology of the Communist Party' (Harris, 2006, p. 150). Guo argues that cultural nationalism is hardly discernible from state nationalism, the main difference being that cultural nationalism, constructed around history, identity and language, is more vigorous and can sometimes go against Party norms (Harris, 2006, p. 152). Both cultural nationalism and state

nationalism, however, favour the construction of a single, overarching national identity – the 'Pan-Chinese nation' (中华民族, *zhonghua minzu*) – a concept constructed by early twentieth-century reformers such as Liang Qichao and Sun Zhongshan, though Guo notes the emphasis on Han culture can be problematic for minorities and postmodernists (Harris, 2006, p. 151). In short, within China, 'state nationalism' and 'cultural nationalism' are the more suitable terms, and both tend toward the construction of the Chinese people as a singular entity.

Following Anderson, Xiao and Huang posit collective memory as the fundamental premise for nation formation, attributing particular importance to the memory of disaster as a determinant of a nation's prospects (Xiao & Huang, 2021). They argue that the more difficult the collective action taken, the stronger the resultant collective memory; the intense emotions generated during the process, whether positive or negative, act as a social glue that ties people more closely together (Xiao & Huang, 2021, p. 17). This aligns with the discussed concepts of affective governance and the role of trauma in reinforcing imagined community. The emphasis on memory of disaster in the formation of community and nation is deeply linked with modern Chinese history, from the start of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) through the difficult founding of the PRC (1949).

The fall of the Ming dynasty and the establishment of the Qing dynasty in 1644 forced Chinese culture to confront the problem of self and other, as the Qing dynasty was established and ruled by Manchu (满族, *Manzu*) rather than Han people (汉族, *Hanzu*). This violent transition was accompanied by war and other

forms of violence. Ying Zhang (2010) examines the political struggles of literati-officials, who used literary works to expose and challenge 'the grand narrative of Ming-Qing transition', focusing on themes of loyalty and morality. An important point that can be inferred from Zhang's work is that Chinese culture tends to associate morality with times of crisis and transition. Grace Fong (2011) further explores this through the genres of poetry and diary (that is, autobiography), examining them as redemptive strategies to respond to war and chaos. She argues that these genres served to record the experiences of everyday life and disorder, describe agency and identity, and remember, manage, control and rise above traumatic experiences. The findings of Zhang and Fong can be differentiated into two levels: on the micro level of the literati's lives, the Ming-Qing transition established a tradition where literature became a method of recording everyday life and making sense of the experience; on the macro level, it cemented morality and loyalty to the government as central cultural themes.

This difficult negotiation of self and other intensified during the late Qing dynasty, especially from the 1840s to the 1940s – a period labelled the 'one hundred years of humiliation' by both Republican and PRC governments (Wu, 2021, p. 87). Callahan proposes that the observation of 'humiliation days' produces the nation as a sacred political community through a radically different approach than medieval European solutions (Callahan, 2006). A significant part of Chinese nationalism is built on this foundation of humiliation, which should not be understood as a psychological irrationality to be cured, but rather as a social

practice vital to Chinese political and historical narratives (Callahan, 2004). Because national humiliation is integrated into Chinese nationalism, Chinese culture constructs itself as possessing the ability of self-reflection, recovery from great hits, a tradition of memorialising traumatic events, and, most importantly, deriving solidarity from such collective events and memorials. Official publicity has been relatively consistent in reinforcing nationalism by uniting people through the shared pressure of traumatic events.

This focus on traumatic events extends from foreign invasion to natural disasters. Research on emergency slogans suggests that they play a crucial role in mobilisation, propaganda and encouragement (Bai & Wu, 2015, p. 155), making them an essential component of Chinese disaster culture. Perhaps the most iconic is Premier Wen Jiabao's slogan 'Much distress regenerates a nation' (多难兴邦, *duo nan xing bang*), which he wrote on a blackboard at a school devastated by the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake just days after the disaster (Qi & Tan, 2008). The full phrase, 'United volition forms cities, much distress regenerates a nation', is known by everyone who paid attention to the earthquake and became a classic statement of the core tenet of Chinese disaster culture. Other slogans, such as 'Natural disasters are merciless but people are not, help from all directions warms all hearts (天灾无情人有情八方支援暖人心, *Tianzai wuqing ren youqing bafang zhiyuan nuan renxin*)' and 'Mobilise all social forces to unite in the fight against SARS (广泛动员全社会力量，团结一心共抗非典, *Guangfan dongyuan quan shehui liliang, tuanjie yixin gong kang feidian*)', reinforce two important aspects of

Chinese disaster culture: first, the stress on people uniting as one to fight against disaster; second, the clear, though often implicit, role of the government in leading, regulating, and allocating resources.

Such representation is also seen in literary works. Deng (2021) argues that writing about pandemic experiences is a way of transforming memory into culture, and proposes that such writing should focus on ordinary people and their destinies rather than just praise heroes and the government. The importance of representing ordinary people exceeds the importance of representing the roles of government and heroes. Essentially, the culture centres on both regulating ordinary people and helping them.

Furthermore, complementing the grand nationalism shaped by history and culture, the concept of *banal nationalism* directly intersects with theories of everyday life. In *Banal Nationalism*, Billig (1995) argues that national identity is continually reinforced in daily life through mundane habits of language and routine symbols stressed by the media. This approach incorporate the masses into the analysis of nationalism, overcoming some of the shortcomings in contemporary constructivist work by focusing on the majority, legitimacy, mobilisation and the stability of national identities (Goode & Stroup, 2015). The study of banal nationalism in disaster contexts is well-established. For example, Goode et al. examine how the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the ordinary, unnoticed routines of everyday life that help maintain or recreate normalcy in China, Russia, the UK and the United States (Goode et al., 2022). The banal

nationalism embedded in ordinary lives before disaster provides an important foundation for disaster culture, furnishing the consensus upon which people are encouraged – via state propaganda and mass media – to build unity. This is closely connected to the reinforcing power of rituals discussed previously.

A distinct feature of Chinese disaster culture, however, remains its emphasis on a high reliance on the government. It is a tradition that goes as far back as Confucius's *Spring and Autumn Annals*; where measures to deal with disasters were not only a reflection of a dynasty's governing ability but also a primary source of its legitimacy (Xia, 2021a, p. 16). Yu explores traditional Chinese narratives about epidemics, specifically about the plague, and finds that the display of good governance and reflection on bad governance are central themes (Yu, 2021, p. 21). Reflecting on Yu Xinzhong's *Plague and Man: Historical Implications*, Xia Mingfang identifies differences in how Chinese and European societies dealt with pandemics and their connections to modernity (Xia, 2021b). In modern China, socialism plays a decisive role in reinforcing this reliance on government and collectivism (Zhao et al., 2008, p. 127). As a modern nation founded on revolution spurred by shared trauma from invasion, war and natural disasters, China's experiences of collectively fighting disasters strengthened the country when it was still young and weak, and the government gained authority through effective disaster response. This high reliance on the government is intrinsically linked with the state's moral performance, which explains the cultural construction of narratives of response and rescue, mourning rituals for ordinary

people, and the public display of compassion and sorrow by state leaders (Xu, 2016). In essence, the government manages its image in exchange for the appreciation and cooperation of its citizens, the ordinary people.

2.2.4 Summary

Disaster studies are turning towards the dimension of culture. For this thesis, I take the view that disaster should be regarded as a part of – rather than an exception to – ordinary lives, and that it can serve as a revealing circumstance through which ordinary lives can be understood.

The study of everyday life facilitates the understanding of ordinary lives. Defined as residual, complex, and shaped by political discourses and resistance, the everyday is a key site of governmentality. Previous studies offer two valuable frameworks: first, the study of festivals as a parallel to disasters, conceptualising both as intensifications of ordinary life that reinforce community values, norms and cultural identity; second, the models of the 'new man' and the 'real man' to understand representations of ordinary people in disasters.

A key aspect of disaster culture is resilience. Resilience is constructed through the formation of community, rituals and symbols. This process corresponds with the construction and reinforcement of imagined communities, through collective memory, comradeship, and banal nationalism. In the Chinese context, a homogenous disaster tradition can be traced from ancient myths through

Confucianism to modern narratives, consistently focusing on the reinforcement of imagined community. The leadership and moral performance of the government is a significant characteristic of this tradition.

Research on imagined community is seldom combined with the specific circumstances of disasters. It is therefore a potentially valuable contribution to explore *how* cultural discourses surrounding disasters serve as a technique of governmentality and a source of resilience. This exploration will reveal how these discourses both reflect and construct cultural citizenship and national identity.

2.3 Research Gaps and Questions

I have structured this literature review in two parts to address my interest in the governance of ordinary people: first, by establishing a framework of governmentality and its techniques, and second by exploring how disasters are mediated through culture. On governmentality, I have reviewed its application in a neo-socialist context, the positioning of ordinary people as the central subject of neo-socialist governmentality, and the theories of citizenship – especially the 'good citizen' and affective governance – as techniques of governmentality. On disaster culture, I have explored disaster's interaction with ordinary lives, the culture of resilience, and China's specific disaster culture tradition, focusing on the construction of imagined community through collective memory and banal nationalism. From this review, I have identified significant empirical and theoretical

gaps.

Empirically, the study of ordinary people in disasters remains underdeveloped in the Chinese context. There is a lack of analysis of the ways in which disaster cultures have been constructed in China beyond wartime. We know even less about the relationship between disaster culture and nationalism.

Theoretically, the governance of ordinary people during disasters has not been systematically studied on a global scale. Scant academic attention has been paid to how the context of disasters reveals techniques of governmentality that may be unique to particular socio-cultural contexts or may possess universal traits. Regarding the various governing techniques that have been identified, studies tend to focus on single, isolated forces influencing people's behaviours. A more comprehensive and holistic framework is needed to make the interconnected techniques of governmentality that delineate desired behaviours of ordinary people, particularly in times of crisis. Finally, research on the governance of ordinary people has yet to be fully situated within wider debates on patriotism, (banal) nationalism and the role of imagined communities.

To address these gaps, this thesis will utilise the contemporary Chinese experience to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the complex relations between disaster, governance of ordinary people, national identity and culture. This will be first and foremost grounded in theories of citizenship, with a specific focus on the concept of the 'good citizen' and its role in moulding

behaviours in times of national crisis.

This project investigates the culture of disaster as constructed through the lens of ordinary people and ordinary lives in China. As I justify in the following Methodology chapter, my research employs an analysis of nonfiction texts about recent national-level disasters. These texts are situated at the intersection of official state narratives and narratives representing ordinary people, making them prime evidence of China's permitted discourses on disaster. They will be used to analyse the images of ordinary people being constructed and to understand how these images contribute to the construction of the 'good citizen' and disaster culture more broadly.

The research questions guiding this study are therefore as follows:

1. How are 'ordinary people' represented in cultural depictions of disaster permitted in contemporary China? What attributes are they given?
2. What do these representations tell us about the imagined role of ordinary people in China during times of disaster and beyond? How is the relationship between ordinary people, the state and the nation represented in this discourse?
3. How can we understand these representations as part of a strategy of governing ordinary people in China during times of disaster and beyond?
4. What kind of disaster culture is constructed in contemporary China? Is this disaster culture identifiably 'Chinese' and, if so, in what ways?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This thesis employs an inductive approach to explore how state-permitted narratives about China's disaster culture reflect and contribute to a shared understanding of the significance of ordinary people in national disaster response. It investigates these depictions through the theoretical lenses of ordinary life and governmentality, while also examining how these discourses have changed over time.

Within disaster research, many scholars argue that objectivism and its search for a single 'truth' are inadequate (Chipangura et al., 2016; Seddiky et al., 2021). Instead, this thesis aligns with social constructivism, which posits that multiple, competing narratives may be constructed around events. Rather than seeking to uncover the 'truth' about disasters – what actually happened, how people actually felt, and so on – this thesis takes a constructivist viewpoint that people's behaviours are influenced by interpreted social constructs such as norms, values and identities (Parsons, 2010, p. 80). The aim is to map out the depictions of ordinary people within these narratives and study how they work to govern people's behaviours and shape a distinct culture of disaster.

Moreover, this thesis leans towards a postmodern constructivist stance, which contends that sociology is far more about the study of 'a political, power-focused

clash of interpretive agendas than anything that can relate to remotely “true” claims about a “real” world’ (Parsons, 2010, p. 90). Postmodernism suggests that there are no absolute truths, and that knowledge and beliefs are intellectual and cultural constructions (Gergen, 2012). This leads to a central research question: how people ‘come to “know” what they “know” about ourselves and the world’ (D'Andrea, 2000, p. 3). Consequently, in this thesis I am not concerned with validating any discourse as representative of the ‘real world’. Rather, I am interested in the *constructed culture of disaster*: how disasters are represented, what events are highlighted, and how people are portrayed during these events.

Discourses on disaster culture are constructed on various levels. For example, existing studies have analysed official narratives from government documents and newspapers (Yang, 2024), as well as grassroot narratives such as those constructed through posts on social media (Yang, 2022). This thesis, however, focuses on a permitted discourse about disaster that represent neither the direct voice of the state nor that of the grassroots, but rather what emerges *between* the people and the state. This is where official and public voices come into dialogue and integrate into a broader, sanctioned understanding, while still engaging, communicating and discussing elements of tension, complexity and nuance.

Dominant discourse with Chinese characteristics refers to the discourse created, supported and promoted by the party-state and possesses the practical influence in explaining, guiding and regulating social ideological concepts, and thereby leading the direction of social development (Shi & Xia, 2022). And counter

discourse, proposed by Foucault, is generated when 'those who were usually spoken for and about by others begin to speak for themselves' (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977, p. 209, cited in Moussa & Scapp, 1996, p. 89), which is 'a form of resistance to the authority of the hegemonic discourse, and it harbors the prospect to compete with or even transform the dominance of the mainstream discourse' (Wang & Ouyang, 2023, p. 322). Between these discourses lie various discourses that support or counter them to various extents. Among which, the complicit discourse, not necessarily conscious but facilitate in sustaining the dominant discourse (Mackenzie et al., 2017, p. 1225). The permitted discourse is constituted by a set of discourses with complicit elements, it operates within the existing hegemonic structure, reinforcing it rather than challenging it directly. Some of the voices are represented as emerging from the people (particularly those that came from posts on social media). However, these too have gone through processes of censorship and self-censorship. As such, we should understand that these are the voices that are allowed into the permitted discourse.

The central rationale for studying this permitted discourse stems from the nature of neo-socialist governmentality, which focuses on influence people's conduct through a complex, multi-layered system combining political and non-political authorities, communities and individuals (Barry et al., 1996, p. 2; Palmer & Winiger, 2019, p. 560). Within this system, the influence of the government cannot be ignored, while permitted discourse may come through as a strong source of representations of the governance of ordinary people.

3.1 Research Design

To study this 'permitted' discourse of disaster, I take a qualitative research strategy centred on discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is deeply rooted in postmodern constructivism (Chompalov & Popov, 2014, p. 63). Scholars have effectively employed this method to study the construction of national identities (De Cillia et al., 1999), including through the use of nonfiction as primary source material (McDermid, 2020). In the following sections, I justify my selection of creative nonfiction as source material and detail the specific method of data analysis of content analysis and discourse analysis.

3.1.1 Creative Nonfiction

There are of course many forms of media that may serve as carriers of cultural discourses; books are just one of them. In the context of China, however, historical tradition gives published texts a particular authority. The perceived power of the published word became especially prominent around the time of the May Fourth Movement in the early twentieth century, when the importance of mass mobilisation and support was realised through the popularisation of certain books. The book as a medium thus became deeply connected with patriotism (Chen, 1970), cementing its relevance as a source for the study of discourses.

As mentioned, this thesis is specifically interested in *permitted* discourses. The

mobilising power of books has made them a perennial subject of information control and censorship. The censorship of books in China dates back to the Qin dynasty (221-207 BC), its focus on protecting centralised political authority (Zhang, 1990). The enduring goal and justification of censorship is social stability (Hladíková, 2021). While its mechanisms have evolved, a key continuity in China's censorship is the stress on 'political capital', linked to a writer's 'ability to deal with the concept of people' (Hladíková, 2021, p. 506). Censorship in the PRC centres around the concept of 'the people', both on the official level – as 'serving the people' has been a repeatedly stressed imperative from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping – and in the everyday reality of the literary field (Hladíková, 2021, p. 506). Since the 1980s, censorship has shifted from hard to soft after decades of ideological education. Books that comply with state requirements can gain significant publicity and be awarded important prizes (Hladíková, 2021, pp. 509-510). Thus, in contemporary China, books become part of the permitted discourse through publication, especially in terms of narratives about 'the people'.

It is generally accepted that literature exists on a spectrum from fiction to nonfiction. However, the term 'nonfiction' is inherently complicated, since all literary works combine fiction and facts. It is impossible to create something not based on some reality, and any reality recorded is inevitably described and organised by the author, thus becoming fictionalised (Li, 2017, p. 4). This leads to the complex paradox where 'fiction may be more real than nonfiction and nonfiction may be more made-up than fiction' (Dawkins, 1977, p. 127).

Since this thesis explores constructed discourses from a postmodern constructivist perspective, the actual truthfulness of a text is not of concern. Rather, the focus is on how the *genre* of nonfiction represents itself and generates meaning. Amores Fúster provides a crucial distinction:

> A theoretical structural difference between fiction and non-fiction is that in each case meaning is created following different signification logics. Whereas in non-fictional texts the signification link is governed by predetermined norms that arise from a series of real social and cultural interactions, in texts of literary fiction, which have no obligatory commitment to real world, this signification link is managed as if it were a potential in a virtually unlimited way. (Amores Fúster, 2019, p. 142)

Therefore, nonfiction does not guarantee truth but offers a *constructed truthfulness*. Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact – where the author declares they are telling the truth, thereby determining how readers read and understand their work (Lejeune, 1982; Missinne, 2019) – is applicable here. Nonfiction enters into the same pact with its readers, presenting itself as an account of the real course of events. This is not necessarily the case, but it is where nonfiction gains its authority and, potentially, explains its important role in influencing people's thoughts and behaviours.

Broadly speaking, the genre of nonfiction includes subgenres such as reports

and essays (Root, 2003, p. 255). This thesis, however, focuses on the more specific category of *creative nonfiction*, which generally refers to works that employ literary techniques to represent reality. For this thesis, creative nonfiction is defined as works intended to represent observed, perceived or recollected experiences – whether by the author or someone else – as an honest reflection or interpretation of reality (Root, 2003).

Arguing for the value of literature and narrative as sociological resources, cultural sociologist Mariano Longo identifies three main functions of narratives: 1. they serve as carriers of information; 2. they reinforce values and provide behavioural models to be followed or avoided; and 3. they use narrative strategies to negotiate cultural values that justify the past and prefigure the future (Longo, 2016, p. 3). As Cynthia Levine-Rasky argues, these functions are directly relevant to creative nonfiction (Levine-Rasky, 2019, p. 357). Consequently, scholars justify the use of creative nonfiction as a source for *sociological* research, especially for analysing power relations. The topics emerging from these functions – information control, governmentality and culture construction – are all relevant to the research focus of this thesis. Therefore, creative nonfiction offers itself up as a suitable source material for studying the intersection of official discourse and the voices of the people where understanding and communication happen.

Another reason for this choice is the specific historical importance of nonfiction in the Chinese context. One of the earliest known modern forms of this genre is *reportage literature* (报告文学, *baogao wenxue*), a genre deeply linked

to the communication of 'truths'. As Laughlin explains:

> *Baogao wenxue*, a translation of the French word reportage as adopted by the German proletarian literary movement, refers to consciously literary texts that narrate 'real people and real events' (*zhenren zhenshi*) with a view to documenting social problems and momentous historical changes. Since the 1920s, reportage played a role in the international proletarian literary movement as a means of bringing intellectuals and the masses together through the investigation and documentary depiction of poverty and industrial working conditions. Reportage was thus introduced into China around 1930 via Japanese promoters of proletarian literature. (Laughlin, 1998, pp. 26-27)

For these reasons, the CPC 'embraced *baogao wenxue* as a useful and exciting new literary form and a mode of training and indoctrinating aspiring young revolutionary writers' (Laughlin & Guo, 2019, p. v). The genre then went through a series of changes, from being valued for its revolutionary role to extolling the achievements of the new China and depicting the struggles of feudal society, though its critical, resistant potential was often subdued (Laughlin & Guo, 2019, p. vi). It reached its peak of popularity in the 1980s with the support of Premier Deng Xiaoping, resuming its responsibility to 'unmask reality' before its legitimacy was later undermined when commercial enterprises began to use it to promote themselves (Laughlin & Guo, 2019, p. vii).

The decline of classical reportage led to the emergence of other forms of critical literary nonfiction, such as 'documentary literature' (纪实文学, *jishi wenxue*), 'documentary fiction' (纪实小说, *jishi xiaoshuo*), 'biographical literature' (传记文学, *zhuanji wenxue*) and the new term 'nonfiction' (非虚构, *feixugou*) (Laughlin & Guo, 2019, p. vii). Although the terminology is affected by politics and cultural trends (Laughlin & Guo, 2019, p. viii), the genres are genetically connected. Therefore, while I use the term *creative nonfiction*, the research that I refer to often focuses on reportage.

Studies of Chinese reportage literature suggest three reasons for choosing creative nonfiction as the research material of this thesis. First, these studies show that it is a genre closely related to ordinary people, with a long history of dealing with the proletariat and collectivism (Laughlin, 1998). Second, it has been identified as an important genre in disaster reporting. The approach most reportage in China takes is to represent disaster through 'in-depth interviews, meticulous tracing, literary records of people and things they know, construct the memory of different individuals to the disaster event' (Chen & Yuan, 2022a, p. 56). Third, the genre is deeply linked to several topics central to this thesis. Some studies of Chinese reportage, for example, focus on memory (Chen & Yuan, 2022a, 2022b). They reveal that memory is an important aspect of discussions of imagined community, national identity and disaster culture, and that moral guidance is essential to disaster culture. Others explore the value of ethical implications, including the tension between grand narratives and private

narratives in the genre (Z. Zhang, 2022), and the challenges and adaptions reportage meets in the digital age (Q. Chen, 2021; Wang, 2021). In short, Chinese scholars have identified reportage as a classic genre for the representation of disasters. It draws on memory as a base material and employs various narrative structures to serve the author's intended thematic purposes. A common technique in this genre is the creation of exemplars to provide moral guidance to readers (Pykett et al., 2010). This function further justifies the use of Chinese creative nonfiction as a primary source for this research.

In the following sections, I outline the standards by which I have chosen creative nonfiction for this study and the methods I use to analyse the texts.

3.1.2 Standards of Selection

Emmel (2013) summarises three methods of sampling for qualitative research: theoretical, purposeful, theoretical or purposeful. This research employs *purposeful sampling*, which aims to identity samples with rich information that best answer the research questions and provide compelling insights (Emmel, 2013, p. 33). This method of sampling is driven more by pragmatic research goals than by theoretical demands (Emmel, 2013, p. 35).

Patton recommends 15+1 strategies for purposeful sampling: extreme or deviant case sampling; intensity sampling; maximum variation; homogeneous; typical case sampling; critical case sampling; snowball; criterion; theory-based or

operational construct sampling; confirming and disconfirming cases; stratified purposeful sampling; opportunistic; purposeful random sampling; politically important cases; convenience sampling; and a combination of any of these 15 strategies (Patton, 2002, pp. 182-183). The +1 refers to free combination of the 15, which I will adopt here – namely, a combination of the following four: *critical case sampling*, *typical case sampling*, *theory-based sampling*, and *politically important case sampling*. I will apply these strategies in choosing both disasters and nonfiction texts, sampling disasters and within that sampling literature about each one.

3.1.2.1 Disasters Chosen

Many works of nonfiction have been written about disasters in China, historically and more recently. Starting most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic is of course highly significant. However, as this research aims to analyse the permitted discourses constructed about disasters, including previous disasters in the study helps to identify consistencies across time and chronological changes. To best answer the research questions, therefore, this project focuses on three critical disasters: the *SARS outbreak* (2003), the *Wenchuan Earthquake* (2008) and the *COVID-19 pandemic* (2020-2022). My selection logic combines several purposeful sampling strategies, as the severity of the disasters marks them as critical cases, popular consensus as typical cases, and academic considerations as theory-based cases.

The severity of a disaster – as a standard that determines how many people are influenced by it, the extent of the shock it causes other people, the attention it attracts, and the degree of difficulty of response and relief – is an important standard of consideration. Severe, large-scale disasters become nationally significant and thus enter the general popular imagination. While small-scale localised disasters may still be severe both in their immediate and long-term impact, their potential for entering the popular imagination is typically not as strong as an event that has a more long-lasting presence in national news or history books. I would like to refer to the standard for measuring severity proposed by Li et al.:

> Major natural disasters are defined as causing more than 50,000 deaths or more than $10 billion in economic damage. The criteria for critical disease selection are a regional outbreak of a Category A infectious disease, a Category B infectious disease affecting more than 10 countries, or a WHO recognized International Public Health Emergency (PHEIC). (Li et al., 2020)

The standard considers the number of deaths, the amount of economic damage and the regions affected, as well as man-made standards such as China's categories of infectious diseases and the WHO's formal PHEIC declaration. Accordingly, I choose to focus on disasters that meet at least one of the following standards: 1. Causing more than 50, 000 deaths; 2. Causing more than $10 billion in economic damage; 3. An outbreak of a Category A infectious disease; 4. An

outbreak of a Category B infectious disease that was regulated as a Category A infectious disease; 5. A WHO-recognised International Public Health Emergency (PHEIC). Disasters that meet these standards capture significant public attention and are therefore highly influential in shaping national discourse.

It is also important to take into account what other researchers have already recognised as important to disaster studies. Previous research provides the theoretical foundations for this thesis, and therefore my choice of the three disasters is theory-based. For example, Shi and Shao (2020) study disaster relief through the lens of language, also focusing on the 21st century and the three major disasters of the SARS outbreak, the Wenchuan Earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the study of Bao (2021) on the model actions of the Chinese government's countermeasures to major disasters, also focuses on the SARS outbreak, the Wenchuan Earthquake and COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, in his recent book *The Wuhan Lockdown*, Yang Guobin also finds that the Wenchuan Earthquake, the SARS outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic all reached the level of *national* disaster in recent Chinese history (Yang, 2022, pp. xii-xiii). Yang bases this conclusion on both his perspective as a researcher and public perceptions. Furthermore, scholar Hui Zhou periodises modern Chinese disaster literature into a 'post-SARS age', a 'post-Earthquake age' and a 'post-COVID-19 age', with the last being the most influential (H. Zhou, 2021, p. 211). In other words, researchers agree that the SARS outbreak, the Wenchuan Earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic all had a profound influence on modern

Chinese society and literature. Hence, these three national disasters are selected as case studies for this thesis. Previous disasters are not ignored but are considered part of the broader cultural and historical context that informs the analysis.

3.1.2.2 Works Chosen

As noted earlier, this thesis explores *permitted* discourses about disaster culture. By this, I mean discourses generated unofficially, engaging with voices from the people, under the influence of official discourses and civic education, which are later permitted by the government through publication and promotion. By extension, this excludes certain notable nonfiction works such as *Wuhan Diary* (Fang & Berry, 2020), which though about the COVID-19 pandemic, is not part of the 'permitted' mainstream discourse, as it was forbidden from domestic publication. Such publications also play a role in the creation of a disaster culture but fall beyond the remit of my research focus and line of enquiry. This thesis studies specifically what is permitted to be published – what is encouraged and legitimised in the mainstream.

Still, many creative nonfiction works have been written about these disasters. To narrow the range and to answer the research questions more representatively, I have selected the most influential and widespread examples. Nonfiction that is less accessible, less read and less popular is excluded. This popularity is, of course,

related to publication, but internet popularity is also important. As mentioned, publicity and awards may serve as proxies for a work's admittance into mainstream discourse. Thus, the standards for measuring 'popularity' include: books promoted by prominent platforms (digital or physical), and books written by awarded or prominent authors. Political importance is also a valid criterion.

Furthermore, the content of the nonfiction must serve the purpose of the thesis. Therefore, the focus is not on works centred around particular individuals, which are less representative of ordinary people's lives in general. Instead, I have chosen nonfiction that centres broadly on ordinary people to answer the research questions. This excludes autobiographical works focused on individuals lives, such as *Diary of the Head Nurse* (Zhang, 2003). Of course, even with these criteria, it is impossible to include all nonfiction that meets the standards, which is beyond the scope of the thesis. A small, well-fitting sample is sufficient for a descriptive answer to the research questions.

By these standards, I chose *The Battle of Beijing: On the Frontline Against SARS* (2013) *(非典十年祭·北京保卫战, Feidian shinianji Beijing Baoweizhan)* for the SARS outbreak, *People First: A Documentary of the Wenchuan Earthquake* (2008) *(人民至上——汶川大地震纪实, Renmin zhishang——wenchuan dadizhan jishi)* for the Wenchuan Earthquake, and *Day 76* (2020) *(第 76 天, Di 76 tian)* and *Wuhan Diary of Fighting the Pandemic* (2020) *(武汉抗疫日记, Wuhan kangyi riji)* for the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following sections, I will detail the reasons for these selections.

The Battle of Beijing: On the Frontline Against SARS (*TBB*)

There are three key reasons for selecting this book. Firstly, the author of the book, He Jianming, is a famous and important contemporary Chinese author who mainly focuses on reportage. He is described as follows in the translated version by David East:

> He Jianming, a well-known author of reportage literature, has been awarded the Lu Xun Literature Prize three times, the National Excellent Reportage Prize seven times, and the Xu Chi Reportage Prize four times. His main works include *The Country*, *Fidelity and Betrayal*, *Fundamental Interests*, and *Falling Tears are Gold*. He is additionally the author of the filmscripts *Westbound Convict Train* and *Folksong Xintianyou*, and the TV series *Founders and National Action*. He has published over 50 works of literature, including over 30 works of literary reportage, which have been translated into dozens of languages. He is vice president of the China Writers' Association. (He, 2017, flyleaf)

He is also the president of Chinese Society of Reportage. Both theoretically and practically, He has contributed greatly to the practice of Chinese reportage. Secondly, though the book was published ten years after the disaster, it was serialised in *Wenhui Daily* (May-June, 2003) at the time. He stated in his original

work that:

> My interview was the only opportunity and condition, because at that time, only I had the conditions to enter the disaster area to interview and be in contact with the top leaders and decision-making meetings of Beijing SARS Prevention and Preparation headquarters. I had interviewed for nearly two months, made dozens of tapes, and was ready to write a full-length piece, but then gave up[2]. (He, 2013, pp. 5-6)

According to He's 2013 foreword, his reputation granted him privileged access to information. While not particularly unusual for nonfiction about important events, this reinforces the work's status as part of the permitted discourse. Thirdly, the book was translated into English, which speaks to its degree of recognition and popularity. However, the book's translated subtitle, 'On the Frontline Against SARS', is not a direct translation of the original '非典十年祭, *Feidian shi nian ji*', meaning 'Ten-year SARS Memorial', which stresses the importance of mourning rituals. Ten-year anniversaries of such disasters are socially constructed as important times for commemorative ceremonies and follow-up works; for example, both SARS and the Wenchuan Earthquake inspired special documentaries on their ten-year anniversaries (Gao et al., 2018; Lan & Hu, 2013; Sun, 2022). Though not necessarily marking significant recovery or social changes, it is a psychologically important point for review. Published ten years after the

[2] The translated book does not include this section.

disaster, the book's content endured the test of time and included new reflections that emerged with time, reflecting thoughts during the pandemic while remaining part of the relatively recent permitted discourse.

***People First: A Documentary of the Wenchuan Earthquake* (*PF*)**

According to its abstract, this book is a documentary nonfiction comprising text and photos (Wu, 2008, abstract). The research for the book was organised by the newspaper *Youth Daily*, hosted by the Shanghai Committee of the Communist Youth League of China and carried out by professional journalists immediately after the disaster, suggesting political support of the government.

The book holds significance in both literature and politics, evidenced by backing from the Chinese Writers Association and its use of the mottos of government officials as its title. In terms of its literary value, it is one of many multi-perspective records of the early stage of the Wenchuan Earthquake and is considered to have high historical value (Li, 2008). Ye Xin, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Writers Association, praised it as a timely book that gives people great encouragement when they need it most (Li, 2008). He gave a comprehensive affirmation of *People First*'s words, pictures and editing methods, noting that the book effectively captures the disaster people suffered and their struggle, thus showcasing the nation's indomitable backbone and heroic spirit (Li, 2008).

Politically, the book stresses the 'people first' principle proposed by the

government. The title is taken from words by Li Ruihuan, former Member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee. In August 2008, an entrepreneur donated a silk scroll, *Boundless Love*, to commemorate the Wenchuan Earthquake and promote the book, making it a star at the Shanghai Book Exhibition, where more than ten thousand people visited on the first day. This high level of support reflects the book's political significance.

Day 76 (*D76*)

D76 is a *changpian baogao wenxue* (长篇报告文学) or 'long-style reportage literature' by Xiong Yuqun, who has won prestigious Chinese prizes such as the Lu Xun Literary Prize, Baihua Literary Prize and Bingxin Literary Prize. The majority of his more prominent works are nonfiction, and *D76* is another reportage based on interviews and field investigation.

In the postscript, Xiong details how he conducted his research, including who he interviewed, the difficulties he met while doing interviews and how he dealt with them, and the places where he did field research. Xiong started his research for the book in Beijing with experts like Gao Fu, Director of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and Zeng Guang, a member of the high-level Expert Group of the National Health Commission and the ex-Chief Epidemiology

Expert at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Academician Huang Luqi, President of China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences, and National Health Commission ombudsman Jiao Yahui. When he went to Wuhan, the former patients he intended to interview did not trust him at first, until he showed up in only a mask with no intention of discriminating against them. Later, with help from the Hubei Writers Association, he interviewed dozens of representatives from various lines of work (Xiong, 2020, pp. 576-577):

> The Hubei Writers Association found dozens of representatives of various groups, including doctors, nurses, patients, Huoshenshan and Leishenshan hospital builders, donors, volunteers, police officers, sanitation workers, community workers, higher ranking cadres assigned base-level jobs, foreign friends and so on, and convened them in a conference room for discussion and exchange. Li Xiuwen, chairman of the Provincial Writers' Association, presided over the forum. I had an in-depth exchange with everyone and sent each interview outline to ask them to reply to the common problems in writing. Meetings of this size were intense at the time and required approval. Hubei Provincial Party Committee propaganda department gave strong support. The symposium was very successful and more than 10 candidates were confirmed. Then I conducted in-depth interviews one by one. (Xiong, 2020, p. 577)

Xiong interviewed nearly 100 people (Lu, 2021, p. 12). As for his field research:

> I also visited South China Seafood Wholesale Market, Jinyintan Hospital, Wuhan Central Hospital, Huoshenshan Hospital, Leishenshan Hospital, Baibuting Community, the address of the central steering group and experts from the National Health Commission. I conducted field interviews and investigations from hospital beds to the operation of ECMO, CRRT and ventilator, from patient's medical records to diagnosis and treatment photos... (Xiong, 2020, pp. 577-578)

It is apparent from this quote that Xiong's work was carried out with relatively high-level official support. The book was produced in one month of investigation and three months of writing (Xiong, 2020, p. 576, 578), possible only with high-level support, underscoring its political importance and status as part of state-permitted discourse. The work also presents itself as channelling authentic voices through abundant field research.

Xiong admitted that it was 'a huge challenge to write a comprehensive narrative of fighting the epidemic in such a short time' (Xiong, 2020, p. 580), that it was difficult to cover everything and, because he conducted the interviews after the incident, his raw material inevitably fails to capture certain views – not only of those not interviewed, but also of those who died in the pandemic. Nonetheless, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Writers Association Li Jingze stated:

> *Day 76* is an iconic work, a very powerful work about this great fight

> against the pandemic. As a writer, Xiong Yuqun showed us the spirit of the Chinese people. It is with this spirit that our country and our nation survived the test and won the stage victory in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic. (Lu, 2021, p. 12)

This stress on national spirit and historical traditions connects the book to Chinese national identity. Focusing on Wuhan's 76-day quarantine, the book uses a timeline as its main logic and macro structure, weaving in the experiences of ordinary people to tell the story of the event and highlight the fight against the pandemic and the contributions of medical workers, volunteers and ordinary people.

Wuhan Diary of Fighting the Pandemic (*WDFP*)

I chose *WDFP* as an additional book about the COVID-19 pandemic because it represents a new form of creative nonfiction that emerged only after the pandemic and best illustrates the influence of the digital age. It is a unique book, as it is a collection of posts by doctors, nurses and volunteers on SinaWeibo, one of China's largest social media platforms. This book is particularly interesting because it compiles real-time posts that these individuals shared online while consciously interacting with their followers and viewers. The posts were published with a certain level of immediacy, as the pandemic progressed.

What makes this work different from the other three chosen works is that it

was not written by professional writers, nor was it originally intended to be published. The content was initially posted on Weibo and later compiled and published by the platform itself. It became one of the most well-known nonfiction accounts of the pandemic, making it a fitting example of popular media capable of contributing to the shaping of a disaster culture.

Unlike traditional nonfiction and the other works under study here, posts on social media do not go through the standard process of gathering raw material, careful organisation, and writing. They are based on the bloggers' personal experiences, but due to their brevity and the need for immediacy, they do not go through the normal reflective process. Although the individual posts did not go through a traditional selection process, the book itself did. Many more medical workers who fought the pandemic held Weibo accounts, so the inclusion of only 29 bloggers (including Li Wenliang) clearly involved some process of selection, though the criteria are not disclosed. Furthermore, the content also underwent some adaption – for example, Zhang Shuang's post on February 6 reads: 'The patient in my yesterday's diary is transported to ICU…' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 49), but her February 5 post is not included in the book. This suggests that the publication underwent a process of censorship to become part of the permitted discourse.

Another important point is that the 'author' of the book is not the bloggers, but SinaWeibo and SinaRead. According to the Weibo User Service Usage Agreement, original posts published on the platform belong to the platform and

cannot be used for publishing unless authorised by SinaWeibo. This gives SinaWeibo the legal right to publish the book and list itself as the author. Although SinaWeibo is different from state-run newspapers like *People's Daily* (人民日报, *renminribao*), which publish official narratives, it still conforms to government censorship regulations.

3.2 Data Analysis

As this thesis looks into how permitted discourse about ordinary people is constructed in times of disaster using nonfiction texts as its primary source, the research method chosen should satisfy the following aspects:

a. It focuses on the texts themselves: the contract their genre implies, the internal mechanisms that generate meaning, the themes they present, the representations they construct;
b. It looks into the context of the texts' production: the social background from which they drew content, the hidden social mechanisms they reveal, and the social influence they exert;
c. It supports interpretation from a cultural perspective: examining how the subjects of 'ordinary people' and 'disaster' are constructed, through what processes, and with what power structures at play.

To explore how ordinary people are represented in permitted discourse and analyse how the various discourses act as techniques of governmentality, I employ

a two-step method of analysis: structuring content analysis (SCA), and the discourse-historical approach (DHA) within critical discourse analysis (CDA). SCA identifies where and under what conditions ordinary people are discussed in the texts, how these discussions form structural patterns, and through which narrative devices these structural patterns are represented. This provides the foundation for a deeper analysis using DHA.

3.2.1 Content Analysis: Structuring Content Analysis (SCA)

Structuring content analysis, developed by Kuckartz and Radiker (2023), is a form of qualitative content analysis used to identify structures in existing textual material and extract them using a pre-defined system of categories. The method begins with research questions and involves the following seven phases:

1. Initial work with the text: Read, write memos and case summaries
2. Develop main categories
3. First coding cycle: Code data with main categories
4. Develop sub-categories inductively
5. Second coding cycle: Code data with sub-categories
6. Simple and complex analyses
7. Write up results, document process

(Kuckartz & Radiker, 2023, p. 102)

Based on this framework, and with a focus on the structural representations of ordinary people, I carried out SCA of the chosen works in the following way:

1. Carefully read the chosen works, created memos on themes that were repetitive, interesting or important;
2. Developed main categories of representations of ordinary people – these were very quickly identified as negative representations and positive representations;
3. Coded the chosen works with the main categories identified;
4. Developed sub-categories inductively – these emerged as follows:
5. Coded the chosen works with the sub-categories identified;

Table 1: Relevant themes and categories in the four works

Themes	Sub-categories	Main Categories
Shopping frenzy	Uncooperative behaviours	Negative Representations of Ordinary People
Demand for medicine		
Patients run away from hospitals		
Patients not respecting quarantine requirements		
Patients not doing cleaning		
Patients wasting materials		
Patients not cooperating		

Themes	Sub-categories	Main Categories
People unaware of government efforts	Limited access to information	
Information restricted to high-ranking government officials		
The Epidemiological Survey Team as heroes	Collective Heroism	Positive Representations of Ordinary People
Whole country/entire nation as heroes		
Medical workers as heroes		
Everyone		
Medical workers who risked their lives	Extraordinary heroes	
Paratroopers parachuting blindly		
Mothers sacrificing themselves		
Teachers sacrificing themselves		
Volunteers who saved many people		
Student who saved many people		
People who cared about disasters	Ordinary heroes	
People who cooperated with government policy		
People who provide support: cook, hairdresser, driver, worker, cleaner, donor, etc.		
People of the whole country	Place-based Heroism	
People of Beichuan County		
People of Wuhan City		
People of Hubei Province		

Themes	Sub-categories	Main Categories
Liaoning Province		
No one is born a hero	Denial of Heroism	
Do not need heroes		
Just did what others did/would do		
Just did their jobs		
Trust	Responsibilities of the good citizen	The relationship between the government and ordinary people
Gratitude		
War/battle	Metaphors of War	
People's War		
Warrior		
High-ranking government officials	Representations of the government	
Base-level government officials		
Extensions of the government: medics, soldiers, etc.		
Everything is for the people	Government protecting rights of the people	
Practical actions: Protect basic ways of life of ordinary people		
Relationship between the affected people	People directly impacted by the disaster or involved in supporting	Comradeship
Relationship between the affected people and the soldiers		
Relationship between the affected people and the volunteers		
Relationship between the affected people and the government officials		

Themes	Sub-categories	Main Categories
People who are concerned and follow news	The general public	
People from previous disaster-hit areas	Across space and time	
People who witnessed other fight disasters		
Readers of the book	Audiences	
Followers of the bloggers		
National anthem	Singing	Rituals and Symbols
Songs related to patriotism		
Pop songs and children's songs		
National Mourning	Mourning rituals and memorials	
Mourning online		
Memorials		
Qingming Festival		
Unlock ceremony	Unlock ceremony and send-off ceremony	
Lining the street		
Banners expressing gratitude		
Expressing gratitude face-to-face		
Television Gala		

6. Analysed the coding, including that of the main categories, the pairwise relationships between the main categories, the relationship between the main

categories and the sub-categories, and in-depth interpretation of selected cases;

7. Documented the process.

This SCA process enabled me to identify and understand the various ways in which 'ordinary people' are represented, as well as the key structuring devices these representations form within the chosen texts. However, content analysis alone cannot explain *why* ordinary people are represented in these particular ways, nor can it uncover the relationships between representations. This limitation sets the foundation for applying the DHA within CDA in the next section.

3.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The choice of CDA is based on the essential position discourse holds in this thesis, the focus on the internal power structure of discourses, and the crucial influence of historical and cultural context.

3.2.2.1 Discourse

In his study of the invention of disaster, Gaillard (2021) proposes that power and knowledge are important elements that any study of disaster needs to consider. He takes Foucault's view that power is about 'unequal relationships that allow certain institutions or individuals to guide and control the behaviours of others' (Foucault, 1976, 1982, cited in Gaillard, 2021, p. 2), embedded in time and space,

including everyday life. The exercise of power is closely related to knowledge, and the two come together through discourses (Gaillard, 2021, pp. 2-3). Mapping out the general discourse of Chinese disaster culture, and the intertwined discourses of negative and positive representations of ordinary people and citizenship, is the research focus of this thesis.

The Foucauldian notion of discourse is 'the most widely used and intended' (Fook, 2002, cited in Garrity, 2010, p. 196), as 'a relatively rule-bound set of statements that imposes limits on what gives meaning' (Allen, 2017, p. 392). Discourse cannot be easily defined, but it can be argued that it is a concept that may include but cannot be reduced to language. It is comparable neither to a framework as discourse is understood in dispersion and redistribution, nor to narrative, as it 'focuses not on personal experience but on the structural processes that enable someone to take up a particular "subject position"' (Garrity, 2010, pp. 196-197). Foucault defines discourse as 'the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation' (Foucault, 2013, p. 121). Link defines discourse as 'an institutionally consolidated concept of speech inasmuch as it determines and consolidates action and thus already exercises power' (Link, 1983, p. 60, quoted in Jäger, 2001, p. 34). This means discourse is essentially the accumulated and reconstructed knowledge that influences the actions and behaviours of people and collectives, thus exercising its power. Power and knowledge, and the relationships behind power and knowledge that allow them to continue and subsequently guide and control people's behaviours, are central to the analysis of

the discourses of disaster culture.

Social constructivists believe that, to a certain extent, social phenomena are created in social interaction, and 'all knowledge is a contingent, socially and historically specific, product of our ways of categorizing the world through meaning-making in language' (Allen, 2017, p. 392). Therefore, they propose a research method based on a 'contract' between authors and readers, wherein meanings, including authenticity, are constructed through language. What is also essential is that discourse analysis focuses on the representations created:

> Discourses create representations that are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality but, rather, constitute, or contribute to constituting, reality by ascribing meanings to the world that exclude alternative meanings. Discourses produce the subjects we are and the objects we can know about (including ourselves as subjects). (Allen, 2017, p. 393)

Thus, discourse analysis shows how creative nonfiction both reflects and shapes how disasters are understood in a cultural context.

3.2.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Siegfried Jäger argues that the questions of 'what knowledge (valid at a certain place at a certain time) consists of; how this valid knowledge evolves; how it is passed on; what function it has for the constitution of subjects and the shaping of

society and what impact this knowledge has on the overall development of society' (Jäger, 2001, p. 32) are central contributions of Foucauldian discourse theory to CDA. As a specific form of discourse analysis, CDA is often traced to Marxist or neo-Marxist tradition, such as Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School (Breeze, 2011, p. 496). The main difference between CDA and discourse analysis more broadly is that CDA pays close attention to the linguistic features of texts (Taylor, 2004, p. 435). Of course, the term has rather broad meanings, and a certain level of clarification is needed. Fairclough argues that:

> Critical discourse analysis (CDA) brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth). (Fairclough, 2012, p. 9)

In other words, CDA, as an approach to discourse analysis, regards language as a reliable source for the examination of hidden social mechanisms, especially those relating to power. CDA may also be situated in the everyday context:

> Critical analysis, also referred to as critical discourse analysis or critical discourse studies, investigates the relationship between language and power by examining how everyday 'texts' create and reinforce social inequality and hierarchy. The purpose of critical analysis is to expose and to challenge taken-for-granted power structures and to

> offer alternative perspectives to knowledge, theory-building, and social reality. (Allen, 2017, p. 295)

More specifically, Wodak proposes three concepts indispensable in all CDA: 'the concept of power, the concept of history, and the concept of ideology' (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 3) – all relevant in the study of ordinary people and disasters in the context of China. Again, CDA stresses language and power:

> CDA takes a particular interest in the relationship between language and power (…). This research specifically considers more or less overt relations of struggle and conflict. (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 12)

And it covers both microanalysis of linguistic analysis and macroanalysis of social mechanisms:

> CDA involves a principled and transparent shunting backwards and forth between the microanalysis of texts using varied tools of linguistic, semiotic and literary analysis, and the macroanalysis of social formations, institutions and power relations that these texts index and construct. (Luke, 2002, p. 100)

It is also worth noting that Wodak argues that CDA does not necessarily evaluate 'right' and 'wrong' (Wodak, 2001). The critical nature of the method focuses on revealing power relations.

3.2.2.3 The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

One major critique of CDA, proposed by van Dijk, is that it lacks theories about 'the norms and principals of its own critical activity' (Van Dijk, 2008, p. 823), which should not be based on the subjective opinions and moral standings of researchers. This can be compensated by the discourse-historical approach, which situates critical evaluation within the justifiable context of sociopolitical and historical context and emancipation processes. Wodak proposes this approach to better cope with the complexities of modern society, especially the relationships between politics, media and people (Wodak, 2001). The approach focuses on four dimensions of context: 1. The content and formulation of discourses; 2. The intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between the discourses; 3. Social factors and institutional frames; 4. Sociopolitical and historical context (Reisigl, 2017, pp. 87-88). What distinguishes DHA from broader CDA is that it situates the research within historical background and social and political context, and investigates its diachronic changes (Wodak, 2001). It 'attempts to integrate all available information on the historical background and the original sources in which discursive 'events' are embedded', and 'explores the ways in which particular types and genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change, as has been shown in a number of previous studies' (De Cillia et al., 1999, p. 156). In short, it fits with the research focus of this thesis to examine discourses constructed about disaster culture centring around ordinary people and ordinary lives, how they relate to each other, within what sociopolitical and historical contexts and

power structures they are situated, and what chronological changes can be traced.

The method has been applied to studies of nationalism and national identities, such as *The Discursive Construction of National identity* (Wodak, 2009), which serves as an example to which this thesis refers. In the work, Wodak proposes three dimensions of study: contents, strategies, means and forms of realisation (Wodak, 2009, p. 30). I find Wodak's works very inspiring; however, my research scope is rather different from hers. Rather than selecting materials that maps out full national identity, I select disaster nonfiction and study how ordinary people are constructed within it. I am interested in following Wodak's studies on strategies, specifically how the chosen texts construct relevant discourses. Wodak proposes the following four strategies:

a. *Construction*: attempt to construct and to establish a certain national identity by promoting unification, identification and solidarity, as well as differentiation;
b. *Perpetuation and justification*: strategies of perpetuation attempt to maintain and to reproduce a threatened national identity, and strategies of justification attempt to justify or relativise a societal status quo ante by emphasising the legitimacy of the past acts of the 'own' national 'we' group which have been put into question;
c. *Transformation*: aim to transform a relatively well-established national identity and its components into another identity the contours of which the speaker has already conceptualised;

d. *Destruction or dismantling*: aim at dismantling or disparaging parts of an existing national identity construct.

(Wodak, 2009, p. 33)

In her later studies on DHA and national identities, Wodak proposes five discursive strategies:

a. *Nomination*: discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/events and processes/actions;
b. *Predication*: discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events/processes and actions (more or less positively or negatively);
c. *Argumentation*: justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness;
d. *Perspectivation, framing or discourse representation*: positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance;
e. *Intensification, mitigation*: modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances.

(Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 95)

Not all discursive strategies appear in the genre of nonfiction or the content of the chosen texts. Referring to her work, and based on this thesis's focus on the subject of ordinary people in disasters, I combine their essence and divide the strategies into two groups. The first group includes strategies used in the texts to construct various discursive categories, such as the people or the nation:

a. *Nomination*

Relevant discursive constructions include the construction of in-groups and out-groups of ordinary people.

b. *Predication*

Wodak's understanding of predication strategy is discursive qualification that can be applied to 'social actors, objects, phenomena, events/processes and actions' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 95). Therefore, this strategy may be applied to both ordinary people and disasters: the negative and positive construction of ordinary people in disasters; the construction of disaster.

c. *Construction*

The construction of national identity and citizenship.

d. *Justification*

The justification strategy can be used to identify the historical roots of the negative and positive construction of ordinary people, justifying the current construction.

Wodak favours the concept of *topoi*, referring to required premises that are 'formal or content-related warrants or "conclusion rules" which connect the argument(s) with the conclusion, the claim' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 102). However, as this thesis focuses on the study of culture, I tend towards the concept of *cultural script*. Proposed by Wierzbicka (1998), it reveals how the 'ways of speaking characteristically of a given-speech community constitute a

manifestation of a tacit system of "cultural rules"' (Subtirelu & Baker, 2017, p. 173), offering a tool to study change, variation or continuity in social attitudes and cultural values (Subtirelu & Baker, 2017, p. 173). In other words, using cultural scripts within CDA requires detecting the cultural norms presented in the text and discussing whether these norms are changed by the disaster event or resumed after it. Wierzbicka places more importance on using cultural scripts to help outsiders understand the culture, but I believe the concept holds merit for the texts I analyse here. It is worth mentioning that some rules are explicit while others may be hidden, as the nonfiction was mostly written for cultural insiders. What is taken for granted, spoken in tacit understanding, can hold great value for the discourse analyst.

Proceeding from the strategies that construct discourses, the second group of strategies indicate the status of discourses – whether they are perpetuated, destroyed or dismantled, intensified or mitigated:

e. *Perpetuation*

   How existing constructions of ordinary people or national identity are maintained and reproduced, and by what means;

f. *Destruction or dismantling*

   How existing constructions of ordinary people or national identity are dismantled;

g. *Intensification*

   How certain positive or negative framings of ordinary people, national

identity or disaster are intensified;

h. Mitigation

How certain positive or negative framings of ordinary people, national identity or disaster are mitigated.

In addition to the previous strategies that map out 'what' and 'how', these strategies focus on changes and linguistic techniques used to stress or mitigate discourses. I mark changes while identifying discourses and constructions. Using DHA, this project places analysis of the selected nonfiction within China's ideological context, traces historical changes in the construction of disaster, examines the power structure behind both content and process of construction, and introduces the element of power into the study ordinary people and their lives.

3.3 Positionality

To conclude this Methodology chapter, I must state my positionality, as this is central to my approach to the project and its research design. Preferences, background, life-history, interests and expectations (Bryman, 2016), formed within a cultural context, influence the process of observation and interpretation (Bukamal, 2022). Positionality refers to the researcher's position within power relations relative to research participants (Bourke, 2014), and requires reflexivity. Reflexivity can be understood as continued critical self-assessment of positionality

while actively acknowledging that this position shapes the entire research process (Berger, 2015). As a Chinese person, my national identity provides me with a beneficial insider perspective on the topic of this research. As this research is qualitative and uses nonfiction as research material, my positionality relates not to research participants but to the texts and how my cultural upbringing influences my perspective. This gives me an insider positionality, as I examine texts relating to Chinese culture and events I have lived through. This refers to sharing common social attributes and connections (Tewolde, 2023), though here I am an insider to a cultural background rather than a participant group.

Chinese culture is difficult to understand, as it is a culture that values subtlety and believes that what cannot be clearly said is more important than what can; thus, long immersion in the culture provides a great advantage. From an early age, I was exposed to the mainstream representations in historical traditions. The story of Emperor Yu taming the flood is present in most early children's books, and most elementary schools and middle schools teach it or require reading of *The Records of the Great Historian* (91 BC) (*史记, shiji*), where it is recorded. Learning modern Chinese history (the last hundred years) weighs roughly the same as two thousand years of ancient Chinese history in the national college entrance examination and leans heavily on depictions of suffering, humiliation and disaster. I feel I have been exposed to China's disaster culture from an early age. It underwent selection through published books and compulsory education and was repetitively reinforced through activities organised by social institutions such as

schools and companies.

I have also personally witnessed these disasters unfold either on the news or in person. Among the three, the SARS pandemic occurred when I was in first grade, and I studied at home for a year. The Wenchuan Earthquake happened in my last year of primary school, and to this day I still remember the sadness everyone felt, watching TV daily for rescue updates and participating in donation and memorial activities. The more recent COVID-19 pandemic was the most significant event when it first broke out, followed closely online by myself and those around me, especially through SinaWeibo.

Of course, caution is required regarding insider positionality due to the risk of bias. I must constantly reflect on being under the influence of the permitted discourse I study. Also, like many, I am not ashamed of my nationality and am proud of my country, which risks partiality as I hope for its safety and prosperity. The subject of my research, representations of ordinary people in nonfiction, is part of what I was exposed to in my social and cultural life. The social mechanisms and culture I study, as disaster unveils them, are those I am accustomed to. In other words, being an insider presents certain challenges when researching what might be taken for granted.

However, this insider positionality does not prevent me from taking a reasonable, objective standpoint. Seven years of higher education abroad, in the United States and United Kingdom, made me aware of and challenged many of

my taken-for-granted assumptions. During academic training, I learned skills to preserve objectivity. I hope to take a critical stance, as no country or social decision can be perfect in devising or implementation, but also to acknowledge how representations of ordinary people fit into China's socio-historical background.

Chapter 4: Pushing the Ordinary People

Introduction

The first research question of this thesis aims to understand how ordinary people are constructed in permitted cultural representations of disaster in China. In this chapter, I begin to answer this question by revealing how, in the context of Chinese society, seemingly innocuous representations of ordinary people in times of disaster may function as part of a broader technique of neo-socialist governmentality.

In the Methodology chapter, I mentioned that through the second step of SCA and close reading, I have identified two main categories of representation: two seemingly opposite yet innately connected constructions of ordinary people – one in a relatively negative light, and one in a relatively positive light. In this chapter, I focus first on the negative representations. Using DHA, I reveal how this undercurrent of negative representation serves as an important premise for understanding how these books construct what I describe as a 'precarious positive' notion of the Chinese citizen – one that embodies desirable qualities but is also always at risk of falling into negative behaviours. I argue that these works of nonfiction tap into and reimagine for contemporary times this dualistic self-understanding, illustrating how disaster culture reinforces and reimagines particular understandings of national character and ideal behaviour.

The relatively negative representation of ordinary people can be traced to discourses about the ordinary and 'the masses'. The word 'ordinary' is often used in China and other cultural contexts to contrast with 'extraordinary', thus implicitly assigning it an inferior status. As discussed in the Literature Review, scholars have proposed that ordinary people are used as a foil to extraordinary individuals and heroes (Zimbardo et al., 2013). This contrast provides a useful starting point for analysing these representations. For example, writing in the early twentieth century, Vierkandt described the masses through several contrasts, some of which apply to ordinary people: they are followers as opposed to leaders; average as opposed to above average; lower educated as opposed to higher educated (Vierkandt, 1928: 438, cited in Jonsson, 2013, p. 8).

In this chapter, I present my analysis of the relatively negative representations of ordinary people in the four works. I examine depictions that relate to and expand on existing discourses about the negative attributes of the Chinese people and explain these through the theory of governmentality. The following chapter will examine positive representations as a comparative counterpart.

Through studying the application of DHA strategies, I analyse how and through what processes ordinary people are labelled negatively. Regarding the nomination/referential strategy, I identify specific strategies used to represent ordinary people and the implication of these terms – including the implications of the *lack* of nomination or referent. Concerning the strategy of predication, I identify the main negative representation of ordinary people as acting less than

nobly and uncooperatively during disasters. Further, I identify the underlying moral education rooted in the historical narrative constructed around the cultural script of the 'one hundred years of humiliation' and reflection on the Cultural Revolution. Also relevant to the negative representation of ordinary people and civic education is *information control*, which is both a consequence of negative representations of ordinary people and a force that perpetuates them. Central to this chapter is the demonstration of how neo-socialist governmentality operates by encouraging ordinary people to self-govern and avoid undesirable thoughts and behaviours.

4.1 Nomination/Referential Strategy: Naming the Ordinary People

The nomination/referential strategy refers to the discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/events and processes/actions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017), with the objective of constructing in-groups and out-groups (Wodak, 2001, p. 73). Regarding ordinary people, the most common referents are: *baixing (*百姓) – 'the common people'; *dajia* (大家) – 'everyone', or 'the general public'; *renmen* (人们) – 'the people', or 'ordinary people'; *women* (我们) – 'we'; and *renmin* (人民) – 'the people'. I will illustrate the use of these terms in the chosen books.

The direct translation of *baixing* (百姓) is 'people of a hundred family names'; free translation is 'the common people', 'ordinary people'. Sometimes it is used with the addition of the character 老 (*lao*) in front, which, rather than indicating

age, serves as a more colloquial expression conveying informality and intimacy. Historically, *baixing* referred to nobles of certain family names, but after the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), it came to denote ordinary people (Xia, 2002, p. 82). It is a term that rulers of ancient China used to refer to the people in order to distinguish the governed from the governing elite. Contemporarily, it is a word Chinese people often use to describe themselves, with conscious awareness of the power relationship. When used by the state, it similarly refers to ordinary people who are not part of the ruling elite. I argue that the word both represents membership categorisation and, in a certain sense, acts as a metaphor, as ordinary people are represented by their family names, implying diversity among them. The term aligns with Vierkandt's concept of 'average people' as opposed to the 'above average', and 'followers' as opposed to 'leaders' – indicating a clear power relationship. To a certain extent, the term is exonerating, suggesting that people are 'less' and therefore may act less than ideally.

The free translation of *dajia* (大家) is 'everyone', while its literal translation – 'big family' – implies intimacy, as the general public is referred to as an extended family. *Renmen* (人们) refers to the general public, or ordinary people, and *women* (我们), though it means 'we', also often refers to ordinary people – but including the author and the reader. *Renmin* (人民) refers to the people in a relatively political sense. I will further discuss *renmin*, *dajia* and *women* in Chapter 6. The occurrence of these words in the four books is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Occurrence of the 'ordinary people' nomination/referential in the four works

Work	百姓 *baixing*	大家 *dajia*	人们 *renmen*	我们 *women*	人民 *renmin*
TBB	22	19	22	233	45
PF	22	58	137	364	166
D76	5	270	63	236	59
WDFP	1	273	37	1247	68

My content analysis of the words shows that except for '人民' (*renmin*), which is used purely in a positive sense, the rest of the words are used in negative, positive and neutral senses. As the range of people the other four words refer to overlap with '人民', it can be argued that no demarcation within the ordinary people is made through the nomination/referential strategy, as there is no specific label used to demarcate an out-group or negatively characterised group. No one is definitively excluded from the negative representations of ordinary people, and at the same time, no one is definitively positioned within them. I will further study the definitively positive referential of ordinary people as '人民' in Chapter 6.

4.1.1 Lack of Nomination/Referential Strategy

The construction of negatively represented ordinary people is two-fold. On one hand, a separation exists between people represented negatively and the rest of the crowd who are not represented negatively. Through this separation, the two categories of good and bad are constructed. One obvious example from *WDFP* shows separation between 'bad' and 'good' COVID-19 patients:

> Today, there was an old man in the nurse's station flying off the handle, keep saying that we are not good, gasping emotionally. I said: 'Don't be so excited, you might not be able to breathe later.'
>
> So he turned to me and shouted at me very loudly. A middle-aged man came over and said to me: 'Don't pay attention to him, we all know it's difficult for you, the more attention you pay to him the more vigorous he will be, he won't stop.' After a while, a middle-aged woman came and whispered to me, 'It's not easy for you, and he is still angry with you, why do you bother?' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 85)

Similar representations are seen across all four works. What is significant is that no specific nomination/referential strategy is employed for people represented negatively. In the above quote, negative characteristics are assigned to an out-group not distinguished from the in-group at the level of nomination. This provides the ground for potential slippage between the in-group and the out-

group. Specific ordinary people are singled out for their 'bad' behaviour, but they are only a minority, outnumbered by the 'we' represented by the 'good' patient who comforts the medical worker.

On the other hand, the separation is not absolute. Ordinary people may be shown to act in less than noble ways, but it may also be implied that they can be educated, as the following quotes reveal. In *WDFP*, we read:

> There are too many images that reflect human nature to be written in my mind, good and evil, touching and ugly.
>
> As I write this, I am reminded of Dr. Tao Yong, who was tragically attacked by a patient. In the aftermath of the incident, his first words were: 'If one day I can see him again, I want him to know that this society is not as dark as he thinks.'
>
> Society is inherently complex, not all stories can be easily judged in terms of good or evil, but we must strive to do our best.
>
> Reach out to those who will light you up, not those who will accompany you in the dark. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 42)

Here, ordinary people represented negatively are not necessarily represented as wholly unsalvable – they have the possibility to improve, and even the doctor who is hurt wants to extend help. Similarly, in *TBB*, we hear the following account relating to the SARS outbreak:

> The recovering patient and her husband tried many times to send gifts to Li to thank him for his life-saving intervention. But each time he sent them back. He simply left them with these words: 'When you find yourselves in trouble, take a look around and see if other people are suffering too. If you can do that, you'll value your own life more.' (He, 2017, p. 119)

Here, the volunteer who helped save the life of a selfish patient who ran away from the hospital in fear used the patient and her husband's gratitude to educate them. The words are said to the patient and her husband but are directed at the readers, presuming they may act similarly during disasters and educating them to prevent such cases. It can also be argued that the separation of relatively 'bad' ordinary people from relatively 'good' ordinary people is present, but it is secondary to the need to reinforce solidarity and show that people who have acted less nobly can be redeemed. Again, no nomination/referential strategy is employed. It can even be argued that definitive labelling is avoided, as labelling may have negative effects: as Merton (2016) observes, a 'deviant' label can lead to further deviance, in a self-fulfilling prophecy. But when labelling is vague, pointing to a non-specific group that could be anyone, the threat hangs over people's heads and regulates people's behaviour. This is something I will return to in Section 4.2, as I argue that such a narrative constructs all Chinese people as possible subjects to be negatively labelled. It can also be inferred that the goal is to use the experience of disaster to educate the people, rather than exclude them

from the imagined community of the nation (further discussed in Chapter 7). In the following sections discussing negative or positive attributions, it is also clear that people are discussed in the form of a collective.

4.2 Predication Strategy: Cooperation

The predication strategy in Wodak's model suggests that social actors are labelled with stereotypical or evaluative attributions that are implicitly or explicitly negative or positive (Wodak, 2001, p. 73). My analysis reveals that the main negative attributes assigned to ordinary people depict them as acting in a less than noble manner or less cooperatively. As discussed in the Literature Review, ordinary people are often presented as less educated as opposed to the more educated (Jonsson, 2013, p. 8), which relates not only to knowledge but also to moral qualities.

In all four works, common people are presented as less cooperative, displaying self-protective behaviours that can seem selfish or aggressive and disrupt social order. For example, in *TBB*, the people are described as swamping pharmacies and supermarkets to obtain medicine, food and other daily necessities as their increasing fear of SARS creates panic:

> There was unrest outside.
>
> 'What's going on? People are dying! Make us up a prescription immediately!'

> ‘Aren't you a pharmacy? Who are you helping? Yourselves, or the people [老百姓, *laobaixing*]?’
>
> ‘Can’t you move a little faster? We’ve been waiting all day!’ (He, 2017, p. 68)

> Students began to leave their colleges in large numbers. Migrant workers began to leave the city on trains and buses. Those with money got out of Beijing by car or plane. Ordinary people rushed to shopping centres to stock up on food staples. Office doors shut one by one. Neighbourhoods put up blockades. Pedestrians and cars disappeared from the streets. City residents holed themselves up at home, not daring to go out, staring at the outside world with alarm. (He, 2017, p. 54)

Such self-protective reactions of ordinary people are depicted as stemming from their powerless state and the need they subsequently feel to protect themselves. In *TBB*, the story of a taxi driver is told: he was rejected from everywhere and by everyone, blocked out of his community by elderly residents and even barred from his home by his wife and daughter for safety reasons (He, 2017, pp. 54-56). Another example of ordinary people’s uncooperative behaviour is given in the case of a female patient who ran away from the hospital in fear, requiring a survey team to persuade her and her husband to return (He, 2017, pp. 116-119). This

particular book devotes considerable attention to describing the relatively negative side of ordinary people.

Similarly, in *WDFP*, many COVID-19 patients are represented as selfish or difficult. For example, though treatment was free, one patient accused nurses of throwing away an invoice she needed for reimbursement and only left when medical workers said they would call the police (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 42). Blogger Liu Mengying recorded several difficult patients from her perspective as a nurse, including an elderly man who did not cooperate and repeatedly removed his oxygen mask (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 91), patients who were picky about food in a time of material shortage (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 94, 97), patients who insisted on gathering together and chatting loudly (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 95, 96), a middle-aged woman who asked medical workers to clean the toilet (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 96) and patients who neglected public sanitation, relying on medical workers to clean up (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 97). As Liu posted these stories on her personal account, her account is straightforward in disapproving of such selfish actions. These examples illustrate that some ordinary people are represented as selfish, picky and demanding.

In short, negative representations of ordinary people centre on selfish and self-protective behaviours that disturb the social order and impede the fight against the pandemic. This implies that the desired behaviours of ordinary people involve cooperation with government policies and avoiding disruptions to the

social order. The intention of governing people through negative representation is thus linked to stabilising ordinary people and maintaining social order.

This discourse of negative representations of ordinary people is important but waning; it is primarily present in *TBB*, which was written in 2003. *WDFP* offers a relatively personal recording of events during the pandemic, and if considered an exception, the trend of negative representation of ordinary people has reduced over time. Neither *PF* nor *D76* stresses negative representations of ordinary people. While *WDFP* shows that people still act less than nobly, *D76* lacks such depictions, indicating that the negative representation discourse is waning. However, as *WDFP* is an important nonfiction text about disaster, from the perspective of ordinary people such as the bloggers in this work, negative representations remain significant. It can be argued that while negative representations of ordinary people are becoming less common, and the flawed aspects of national identity are waning, they still play an important role.

In summary, the negative behaviours of ordinary people may have two causes: first, their less privileged, powerless state, which fuels fear about not being able to obtain the food or medicine they need and justifies the government's role in resource allocation (further discussed in Chapter 6); second, flaws in their manner and character, such as selfishness, laziness and greed, which can be attributed to a lack of moral education.

4.3 Governmentality: Discourse of Shame and Humiliation

In the previous section, I discussed negative representations of ordinary people that appear to be aimed at steering people away from certain behaviours. But how is this achieved discursively? In the introduction, I mentioned the discursive context of these negative representations of ordinary people: the one hundred years of humiliation. Here, I argue that negative representations of ordinary people can be linked to this grand narrative and serve to govern people's behaviours through emotional discourses of shame and humiliation.

In China's discourse of the one hundred years of humiliation, ordinary people are constructed as numb, powerless, selfish, self-protective and in need of help. Criticising ordinary people is an important part of Chinese culture. In the early twentieth century, for example, social activist and political reformer Liang Qichao argued that 'everyone is responsible for the rise and fall of the country' (Liang, 1989, p. 9). This influential view positions ordinary people as responsible for the nation's suffering and serves as another important reason for such criticism. As mentioned in the Introduction, the negative representation of ordinary people in literature has its most important social origin in the New Culture Movement (1910s and 1920s), led by the enlightened author Lu Xun, who is often described as the father of modern Chinese literature. Lu Xun and his fellow writers of the New Culture Movement established the foundation of modern Chinese literature, and the narrative of Chinese people's inferiorities thereby became deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Lu Xun's concept of 'national inferiority' (国民劣根性, *guomin*

liegenxing) and Liang Qichao's categorisation of six inferiorities of Chinese people are quite similar: both agree that ordinary people share deep-rooted bad habits in times of crisis, especially being numb, passive, morally compromised and reluctant to take up responsibilities (Lai, 2007; Liang, 1994). This critique of ordinary people is a response, an answer, a proposed direction for improvement, and an inspiring discourse constructed around the most important failure of Chinese history. Some responsibility for the one hundred years of humiliation is placed on ordinary people.

The second period during which characters representing ordinary people are questioned is that of the new period literature, which followed on from the scar literature and reflection literature of the late 1970s to mid-1980s. Reflecting on the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-76), discussions of the inferiorities of the people reached another peak. Literary works reflected on the violent nature of the people as it erupted during the Cultural Revolution and the modern ideologies that spawned it, adding to the discourse of national inferiority (Fan, 2013). However, this discourse does not hold as important a status among Chinese historical narratives as the one hundred years of humiliation due to its political sensitivity. Another distinguishing factor is that violence is notably absent as a discourse in the nonfiction works I examine in this thesis. In fact, little evidence of violence and crimes can be found in media depictions of disasters. Violence, it appears, is deliberately avoided in discourses concerning national identity. Nonetheless, the negative representations of the Cultural Revolution demonstrate

that humiliation discourse is not singular but a recurring theme applicable to disaster narratives.

As mentioned in Section 4.1, ordinary people who displayed less than noble behaviours are not represented as unsalvable. To counter the less than noble actions of ordinary people – attributed to character flaws and insufficient education – comes moral education. Zhao (2019) argues that civic education has always been carried out at the national level outside of school education, is connected with Confucian punitive shame and sets the ground for governance. As noted earlier, Chinese historical consciousness depends on the collective memory of the 'one hundred years of humiliation', reinforced through the national 'Patriotic Education Campaign', which educates people with an official historical discourse (Wang, 2008). This serves as an important lens for analysing China's disaster culture.

Negative representations of ordinary people refer to the standard of responsibility that ordinary people bear toward their country and their people. As noted, it is an important part of Chinese culture that everyone is seen as responsible for the rise and fall of their country (Liang, 1989, p. 9). My analysis suggests that representations of ordinary people as less noble and uncooperative in contemporary nonfiction are implicitly connected to the ignorant and irresponsible ordinary people held responsible for the one hundred years of humiliation. Thus, negative representations of ordinary people in disasters are linked to the discourse of national humiliation. In Foucault's theory of

governmentality, the national humiliation and shame of the past become a governing tool, urging people to undo the shame (Pak Lei Chong, 2011). Shame, as a core construct of Confucianism and Chinese culture, is employed as a technique of governmentality to counter present societal challenges by encouraging people to prove their worth (Lin, 2012). Humiliation, rooted in historical discourse, also serves as affective governance (Law, 2014). Through negative representations of ordinary people, shame and humiliation are implicitly transferred from the national humiliation discourse to ordinary people. One significant feature of this governmentality is its stress on one's responsibility to the country and the collective, which is distinctively neo-socialist. It emphasises the protection of social stability and collective benefit, is based on state-supported discourse and is reinforced through civic education. This moral education essentially focuses on making ordinary people responsible citizens who cooperate with and participate in the fight against disasters. I will further discuss this in the discussion of citizenship in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, responsibility varies according to one's position in society, a concept deeply rooted in Confucian ideology. The early Confucian philosopher Mencius argued, 'when prosperous, one should contribute to the wellbeing of all; in poverty, one should still hold oneself to a high standard' (达则兼济天下，穷则独善其身, *da ze jianjitianxia, qiong ze dushanqishen*) (Mencius & Fang, 2018, p. 261). This sentiment is reflected in *D76*, where Wei Jing's father comforts her as she feels limited in her access to information and ability to help people, stating

that what 'we ordinary people need to do most is to cooperate with the call of the government. If we take good care of ourselves, we will do the most to help the government and medical staff without increasing their burden' (Xiong, 2020, p. 385). For the same subject – people in disasters – different requirements are proposed under different circumstances. The power of ordinary people is stressed and their small responsibilities are valued. In the context of the pandemic, the application of Mencius's idea is that if you have the ability, you help others; if you do not, you must cooperate with the government. In short, everyone has a place in society, and each position has its corresponding responsibility.

This can be discussed more productively in relation to the content of Chapters 5 and 6: citizens' responsibilities vary in scale, different social positions suggest different responsibilities, and in the fight against disasters, people are encouraged to take up corresponding responsibilities. For ordinary people, expectations are set relatively low in these works – such as being cooperative and fulfilling ordinary duties. By exceeding these expectations, their actions move others. However, as I will show in the next chapter, this foundation enables ordinary people, despite lacking the ability to accomplish something extraordinary, to be praised as heroes.

4.4 Directing the Ordinary People: Information Control

Information control emerges through step 4 of the SCA as an important sub-

category within the chosen works. A central representation of ordinary people is their limited access to information. This limitation causes problems such as negative emotions, an inability to protect themselves, and difficulties in government management. Of course, unlimited access to information may also cause problems. To address this, the government is shown to recognise the importance of publishing relevant information in a timely manner while simultaneously representing itself as the most trustworthy source and gatekeeper of reliable information. This reinforces the government's authoritative status as the implementer of neo-socialist governmentality. The government also acknowledges the importance of unofficial sources of information and supports the release of certain information to help construct the preferred narrative around disasters. Furthermore, negative representations of ordinary people justify information control, which in turn enables the government to construct ordinary people negatively or positively and shape desired disaster culture discourses. In the following sections, I will discuss the representation of ordinary people as less informed, information as a double-edged sword, levels of information control, hierarchy of information access and the release of information through official channels.

4.4.1 People as Less Informed

Having limited access to information is a frequent representation of ordinary

people across all four works. For example, in *TBB*, we are told that ordinary people did not know Beijing almost overcame the SARS pandemic twice (He, 2017, p. 10). The author suggests that the government devoted significantly more effort than ordinary people were aware of. Here, what was hidden by the media at the time but exposed by the author in the book is the contributions of certain people and the efforts of the government. This example confirms that information is withheld from the public, though the content of the information is relatively benign, mitigating the fact of its concealment.

Limited access to information is not limited to the contributions the government and some people make; it also relates to information about the severity of disasters. In *TBB*, He sets the background with information about SARS available to high-ranking officials but not to ordinary people:

> One day, four or five migrant workers would be diagnosed, and having received the figure, I'd immediately report it to the Mayor and the Secretary. The Mayor and the Secretary would worry, but the public [老百姓, *laobaixing*] would know nothing of it. (He, 2017, p. 14)

Such information is relevant to self-protection during disasters, but withholding it may help protect people's emotional states and maintain social stability. Again, the concealment of the information is mitigated by representing the information as non-crucial and without bad consequences.

However, having limited access to information can negatively impact

people's emotions. An example from *D76* shows this link:

> WeChat groups of college classmates are still flooded with messages. Some people asked for help in the group. They did not know how to treat the COVID-19 patients, and asked whether the superior doctors had instructions on medication and treatment. Wei Jing felt the desperation of the frontline clinicians, and she felt that donations alone could not solve the problem. Seeing her anxiety, her father comforted her, saying that what we ordinary people [老百姓, *laobaixing*] need to do most is to cooperate with the call of the government. If we take good care of ourselves, we will do the most to help the government and medical staff without increasing the burden of medical staff. (Xiong, 2020, p. 392)

Here, limited access to information in the face of impending disaster and the resulting emotional stress are depicted, with cooperation with the government as the proposed solution.

Depictions of limited access to information vary among the works. It is more emphasised in *TBB* and *D76*, while *PF* stresses the government's efforts to share information. *WDFP* posts focus on providing needed information to the less informed, such as firsthand news about deaths or positive developments in wards (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 1, 130). Despite these differences, control of information is a significant identified theme.

4.4.2 Information as a Double-edged Sword

Information is vital to disaster relief and recovery, and is also an important subject in relation to disaster generally. During disasters, information is closely linked to the core interests of both people and the government: people hope to obtain information in time to protect themselves and perhaps comfort themselves emotionally, while the government must release accurate information at the right time to maintain its authority and the stability of the society.

In the digital age, information control is an important technique of governmentality. It cannot be ignored that information acts as a double-edged sword for both ordinary people and the government. Collectives are susceptible to panic: certain information can cause panic, while the right information can prevent it (Drury et al., 2013, pp. 27-28). Information control is not inherently good or bad but must be handled carefully.

On one hand, both ordinary people and the government need the release of information. Ordinary people need relevant information to protect themselves (Shklovski et al., 2010), and the government needs to release certain information to guide disaster response and stabilise society. For the government, releasing information can facilitate critical expression, acting as a safety valve for society to release pressure due to imperfect disaster relief work. For example, Hassid (2012) concludes through large-scale content analysis and specific case studies that

information control can serve as a safety valve or pressure cooker depending on conditions. Information released through official social media causes less panic than unofficial accounts and can be used to manage citizen panic and preventive behaviours (Wu et al., 2022), while defects like 'slow speed, non-transparent content, poor penitence and weak department coordination' have a significant negative effect on regulating emotions (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 513). Publishing and propagandising contributions can relieve public anxiety and promote the government's image but also increases scrutiny and raises expectations for information transparency and effort devoted.

On the other hand, not knowing certain information might be discursively framed as 'ignorant bliss'. Social media plays an important part in spreading fear and panic, negatively affecting people's mental health and psychological well-being, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahmad & Murad, 2020), though it can also provide emotional support, solidarity and social cohesion, boosting community resilience (Neubaum et al., 2014; Ogie et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2012). For the government, releasing certain information can cause public panic and make stabilising society more difficult (Wu et al., 2022). Contemporary governmentality focuses on fostering and extending life (Zhang et al., 2010), including people's psychological well-being. Panic and anxiety can lead to severe public events such as panic buying or escaping quarantined zones. For example, in *TBB*, panic buying is identified as a cause of trouble for the government as it attempts to coordinate essential supplies (He, 2017, pp. 78-82). In *D76*, people

flee the city upon hearing news of the lockdown but are persuaded to return by the police (Xiong, 2020, pp. 140-141). Similar scenes we are told, occurred in France during lockdown (Xiong, 2020, p. 568). Such events threaten public safety and property without necessarily increasing safety, while potentially creating difficulties for government disaster management. This underscores the point that information control is not always negative but must be approached with care.

4.4.3 Levels of Information Control

There are different levels of information control. First, there is fundamental information control, which determines whether an incident should be covered by media and how much coverage should be allowed. Lorentzen (2014) examines the general level of media control in China and proposes that the amount of coverage is adjusted by the government according to social tensions. This strategy aims to benefit from many of the advantages of free media while maintaining social stability. He also argues that uncontrollable sources of information, such as the internet, may lead to increased information control. More specifically, information control is not only about whether to control media coverage and its volume but also what is said in that media coverage. Xia et al. (2022) focus on how media framing in China can also shape public opinion during crises:

> In times of crisis, framing can lead citizens of authoritarian regimes to pay more attention to the encouraging aspects of the crisis (e.g., lives

> saved), which evoke positive feelings. More importantly, framing can also alter the reference points that people use when establishing evaluative standards and thus help improve their perception of an authoritarian government's performance during a crisis. (Xia et al., 2022, p. 256)

On Chinese social media, more value is assigned to positive discourses than to negative ones (C. Zhang, 2022). That the four works focus more on the positive and encouraging content supports these views. The discourse of trauma is not stressed; rather, the focus is on potential positive outcomes of disasters, such as uniting the people and regenerating the country, which I will discuss further in Chapter 7.

Regarding permitted discourses on the Chinese internet, two significant ones are the 'positive energy' (正能量, *zhengnengliang*) discourse and the 'narrative of suffering' (苦难叙事, *kunan xushi*). Positive energy refers to 'the capacity to induce positive emotions and/or attitudes, the potential to induce constructive/conciliatory discourses and/or actions, in individuals or collectives such as the society and nation' (Yang & Tang, 2018, p. 15). Initially an internet catchphrase, it was later hijacked by the government to control online discourses (Yang & Tang, 2018, p. 4). At the individual level, positive energy manifests as a positive mental state when facing life challenges; at the social level, it encompasses issues such as charity, moral role models and civic virtues, emphasising ethical relationships; at the political-national/global level, it serves

ideological functions, promoting core values such as nationalism, patriotism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics, emphasising China's active role in the global order, such as peaceful rise and win-win relationships with other countries (Yang & Tang, 2018). The positive energy discourse is emotionally intensive, tapping into strong positive emotions like gratitude, and serves as affective governance (Hizi, 2021).

The narrative of suffering emphasises how China overcomes difficulties through perseverance, virtue and self-sacrifice, incorporating disasters into a discourse of 'suffering, struggle, solidarity and ultimate victory', thereby legitimising China's development model (Schneider & Hwang, 2014). The rise of positive energy discourse does not make the narrative of suffering obsolete, as the latter inspires people to overcome difficulties together (Chen & Wang, 2019). I argue that these two discourses can be viewed as a pair of *yin* and *yang*: the positive energy discourse offers a relatively positive interpretation of disasters, while the narrative of suffering provides a relatively negative interpretation, yet both work to mobilise and stabilise ordinary people through affective governance.

To sum up, information control involves decisions about which events are allowed to be represented, to what extent they are allowed to be represented, and how they are represented. A tendency to value positive discourses is evident, which helps explain the waning of negative representations of ordinary people.

4.4.4 Hierarchy of Information Control

In the new digital era, governments face new challenges (Lorentzen, 2014, pp. 409-412). Information control, aimed at stabilising society and protecting the authority of the government, can achieve its intended goals but also encounters difficulties in the context of internet development and information explosion. Later disasters, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, occurred during a time of information explosion. Information technology has introduced significant changes, becoming an important source of information. For example, in *D76*:

> It was a sleepless night. Gao searched the Internet for more information, and some agencies said that the virus was very similar to SARS. The SARS virus is a type of coronavirus. (Xiong, 2020, p. 34)

The quote shows that even Gao, a medical expert, obtains important information – such as COVID-19 being a kind of coronavirus – from the internet. This highlights how highly specialised and important information has become much more accessible online, potentially threatening the hierarchy of information.

One possible negative outcome for the government in terms of maintaining its authority is that it becomes more difficult to control information. There are several reasons for this. First, information control can backfire. Researchers such as Hobbs and Roberts (2018) have shown that while information control can reach its intended goal of limiting people's access to information, it may also stimulate people to dig for information and cause the spread of precisely the information

the government hopes to control. The internet, as a source of information that is very difficult to control, complicates efforts to manage information flow. Simply forbidding people to obtain information about something does not necessarily guarantee control of that information.

Second, while the internet provides people with a rich source of information, it also floods the digital space with all *kinds* of information, making it difficult to determine what is true. For example, in *D76*:

> Two days later, the police came out and issued a notice saying that some netizens had posted and forwarded false information on the Internet without verifying the situation, causing negative social impact. After investigation and verification, the public security organs have summoned eight illegal personnel and dealt with them according to the law. (Xiong, 2020, p. 100)

This 'rumour' was posted by the real-life COVID-19 whistleblower Dr Li Wenliang (Green, 2020). The discussion in the book covers the spread of the rumour, its truthfulness, its effects on the public, the government's reaction, the clearing of the rumour and finally the penalty imposed on Li Wenliang. In the digital age, the proliferation of rumours presents another challenge to government control.

However, the advantages of the internet, social media and other relevant technologies of the digital age should not be ignored. The internet has expanded the number and range of information sources, and some researchers highlight the

emancipatory potential of the digital age (Monshipouri, 2016). During disasters, online communication provides people with emotional comfort and practical assistance (Neubaum et al., 2014; Ogie et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2012). While the benefits of the internet should be acknowledged, the challenges of the digital age remain pressing.

To summarise the challenges the people and the government face in regard to information control, the core problems boil down to two issues. First, what information should people trust? It is difficult to determine what information to trust online. Second, how can the government control the overflow of unauthenticated information?

In the four works, the Chinese government's solution is to *increase* official information publication. In *TBB*, people are represented as aware of much of the relevant information about the disaster:

> 'Look!' said Wen Jiabao excitedly to Wang Qishan afterwards. 'Look how much of an impact the anti-SARS campaign has had on people! That old lady didn't know that I'm the Premier, but she knew all about SARS and how to prevent it. That's no mean feat! If the people are on board like this, I have full confidence in our victory against SARS!' (He, 2017, p. 17)

Here, people are represented as sufficiently knowledgeable to cope with the disaster. Notably, however, while on the surface it is the old lady who is being

praised, the praise implicitly lauds government policy rather than individual awareness. The actual effectiveness of the policy is not the focus of the author's construction; what matters is that it is represented as sufficient. However, as noted earlier, access to certain information, such as real-time data of diagnosed cases, remains restricted.

In *PF*, the authors particularly stress the government's commitment to the timely and transparent communication of information, particularly during disaster relief efforts following the earthquake in Wenchuan. The Tangshan Earthquake[3] is also mentioned numerous times (62 times in fact), with 32 comparisons drawn between the two earthquakes to highlight improvements in information clarity. The Tangshan Earthquake happened 32 years ago, and information about the event, restricted by the technology, social environment and international relations of the time, reached very few people:

> No one expected that the statistics of earthquake casualties would be published so quickly and accurately in the media. Later, in a commentary in the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Zheng Yefu, a professor of Peking University, wrote: 'When Tangshan was devastated, we knew nothing except one piece of news. Today, 32

[3] The Tangshan earthquake occurred on July 28, 1976, and had a magnitude of 7.8 and a peak intensity of 11 degrees at the epicentre. Its destructive impact was extensive, affecting an area of approximately 210,000 square kilometres, of which more than 30,000 square kilometres were severely damaged. The casualties were extremely heavy, with 242,000 deaths; 164,000 serious injuries; and countless minor injuries. Wang, X. (2016). "Zaihou chongjian" guocheng de guojia quanli yu diyu shehui--yi zaihai jiyi wei zhongxin [The Role of National Power and Regional Society in the Process of Post-disaster Reconstruction: Centered on Disaster Memories]. *Hebei Academic Journal*, *36*(05), 161-166.

years later, we are wide-eyed, concerned about the disaster and rescue of compatriots. In the midst of great misery and grief, we found something that had never happened in any previous disaster – the people were in the know. People knowing is worth more than 100 familiar slogans that unite people.' (Wu, 2008, p. 26)

A senior editor involved in the story said: A decade or two ago, when it comes to whether or not to report catastrophic events, authorisation must be waited for, but now a lot of the boxes have been broken. 'Some major emergencies, such as the snow disaster in early 2008, the violence in Lhasa and the train crash in Shandong province, Xinhua News Agency also released news to the world at once and sent reporters to the scene to report.'

All these rapid responses played an important role in paving the way for the rapid, continuous, in-depth, and all-day reporting of the Wenchuan Earthquake. At the same time, the media from all over the country rushed to the forefront of the quake-hit areas spontaneously under the command of the disaster situation and made the highest level of judgment and the largest scale of coverage of the disaster for the first time. (Wu, 2008, pp. 27-28)

> A commentary on the Chinese government website noted that the relatively full disclosure of information and the quick response of senior officials were vastly different from China's response to the Tangshan Earthquake. (Wu, 2008, p. 32)

> The rapid release of information about the Wenchuan Earthquake is not surprising. It reflects the changes in China's political landscape in recent years.
>
> Xiong Wenzhao, a law professor at Minzu University of China, believes that the media's quick response to the earthquake is related to the ideological liberation of the Chinese government. On the one hand, ideological liberation has enabled China to make great achievements in the past 30 years of reform and opening up, which has provided a material and spiritual basis for dealing with disasters. On the other hand, the unprecedented disclosure of information after the disaster is itself the most visible example of ideological liberation.
>
> China's response to the Wenchuan Earthquake stands in stark contrast to its response to the Tangshan quake. (Wu, 2008, p. 32)

The speed of the release of official information is also stressed. Information published through official accounts significantly reduces people's negative emotions compared to unofficial sources (Wu et al., 2022). This is closely linked to

the idea that by framing reference points around the improvement of information publication, the government reinforces its authority (Xia et al., 2022) and projects an image of transparency (Bauhr & Grimes, 2012; Florini, 2002). These changes are driven by technological advances, shifts in China's sociopolitical environment, and governmental recognition of the importance of timely communication through official channels.

During COVID-19, the importance of information escalated further, as people were by then used to getting information online, and it had already become a trend for the government to release urgent information online, as this was faster than traditional media such as newspapers (Chen & Liu, 2011). In *D76*, the word '信息, *xinxi*' (information) appears a total of 143 times, compared to just eight times in *TBB*, 70 times in *PF* and 25 times in *WDFP*. The text stresses the importance of information and the need for transparency:

> Zhong Nanshan explained the huge impact of the Spring Festival on the epidemic, stressing that the epidemic information should be open and transparent to let everyone know the seriousness of the problem. Strict prevention and control measures should be taken at the fastest speed. The government should promptly and objectively inform the community of the epidemic, publicise the effectiveness of prevention and control, and respond to the concerns of the community.
>
> Leaders of The State Council fully affirmed and thanked them for their

> opinions and suggestions, saying that the professional advice provided by the two experts is very important for how to make scientific decisions in the next step. (Xiong, 2020, p. 85)

> On December 31, Wuhan Municipal Health Commission released information on the epidemic in accordance with the law. On January 21, the National Health Commission released the national epidemic information on its official website and new media platform for government affairs, and on February 3, the relevant data were released simultaneously on its English website, bringing the number of confirmed cases and deaths into the public eye. (Xiong, 2020, p. 224)

The government is represented as recognising the importance of information publication and communication of relevant information to the public, especially through new media platforms.

WDFP, a collection of posts online – in other words, a collection of unofficial sources of 'information' – illustrates the growing role of unofficial sources of information during disasters. During the pandemic, the bloggers in the book – medical workers using their real names – gained thousands of followers but operated under self-censorship. Their blogs tend to be positive, in line with the 'positive energy' discourse that prioritises positive emotions and represses

negative emotions ones (C. Zhang, 2022). Their posts avoid unrestricted emotional catharsis, conforming to and protecting core official narratives like unity and positive energy. They can therefore be thought of as essentially unofficial official sources of information, aimed at countering completely uncontrolled information streams.

Boin et al. examine post-9/11 crisis management in the United States and identify different groups of people who participated in the communications that constructed the narrative about the disaster: political leaders and top officials, corporate management, media outlets, celebrity activists, social influencers and general social media users, in addition to the receiving audiences (Boin et al., 2021, p. 75). It is acknowledged in the works that different groups – ordinary people, the government, experts – have differential access to information. It can be argued that the different groups, due to their status in society, their positions or roles in the disasters, and information control policies, are presented as having different places within a hierarchy of information control.

It can be inferred that the hierarchy of information control presented in the works under study here places the government at the top, experts under the command of the government (such as medical workers, including corporate management, which helped deploy resources during the disasters) in the middle, and the rest following the model of Boin et al. (2021). As for the groups that create the narratives, the government is still at the highest level, the experts come second, the authors and other social influencers come next according to their respective

ability to influence the public, and the receiving audiences are at the bottom. Experts like Zhong Nanshan and Zhang Wenhong, who were the leading medical experts in the government's COVID-19 pandemic response efforts, served as trusted information sources, while authors and social influencers (such as the bloggers in *WDFP*) operated under governmental monitoring. Together, they form a multi-layered system within the hierarchy of information control, functioning as instruments of neo-socialist governmentality.

4.6 Summary

Employing SCA and DHA, I studied various strategies within the chosen texts as they relate to ordinary people. In terms of nomination/referential strategy, a construction of in-group and out-group is present, differentiating between good and bad ordinary people. However, as public negative labelling may lead to more negative outcomes (Merton, 2016), the labelling is not definitive. The absence of nomination/referent for specific negative representations of ordinary people provides ground for slippage between good and bad; the threat of being labelled bad hangs over everyone, while the absence of labels means everyone can become good. It is also stressed that ordinary people who behave negatively can be educated and changed. This construction aims to present ordinary people in China as a hopeful unity.

In terms of predication, I identified the main negative representation of ordinary people as acting less than nobly and uncooperatively. The origin of such negative representation can be traced to the humiliation discourse centred around the one hundred years of humiliation and supplemented by reflections on the Cultural Revolution. These negative representations of ordinary people elicit emotions of shame and humiliation and serve as techniques of governmentality. Shame and humiliation are useful tools of governmentality (Law, 2014; Lin, 2012; Pak Lei Chong, 2011; Sigley, 2006; Zhao, 2019), and combined with the cultural construct that ordinary people are responsible for the rise and fall of their country (Liang, 1989), they guide and manage people's behaviours. This governmentality is neo-socialist in nature as it stresses people's responsibility to the country.

Information is a double-edged sword, as both ordinary people and the government need its release for protection or social stabilisation (Drury et al., 2013; Hassid, 2012; Wu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020), yet how much information, what kind of information and how the information is presented are crucial. The positive energy discourse and the narrative of suffering can be regarded as a pair of *yin* and *yang* discourses; while focusing on different aspects, they come together in uniting, mobilising and stabilising ordinary people. The four works depict a hierarchy of information control similar to that proposed by Boin et al. (2021), stressing the authoritative role of officially released information, with various levels of information control at play creating permitted discourses, especially through experts, authors and social influencers.

It can also be argued that information control is both a source of and solution to problems. Information control is represented in the chosen texts as contributing to the behaviours that result in negative representations of ordinary people. It perpetuates these negative representations, yet it is also the mechanism through which behaviours and negative representations may be reduced. The negative representations of ordinary people and the positive outcomes of information control can, in turn, justify information control. Official accounts on social media have a significant influence on public panic levels and behaviours (Wu et al., 2022) and represent one important governmental solution.

The negative representation of ordinary people is mitigated by the possibility of change through information and education, and the problematic aspect of information control is mitigated as no important information is represented as hidden and no negative consequences are shown. The perpetuated and intensified discourse is that of the importance of and need for moral education, deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture and the one hundred years of humiliation narrative. Generally, negative representations of ordinary people are waning, as the works shift from criticising the character of Chinese people to more positive discourses.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the culture of humiliation provides a 'push' force in educating people. The culture of humiliation reminds people of their past failures due to their own flaws and encourages them to improve themselves, but more importantly, it also reminds people of the past contributions of the CPC and

the government and calls for cooperation with policies. Ordinary people are represented collectively: negative representations of ordinary people focus on excluding no one from the group that may cause harm, while positive representations focus on including everyone in the group that may contribute. Both deliberately avoid a clear construction of in-group and out-group. In the next chapter, I explore the other half of the force: the 'pull' of ordinary people constructed as heroes.

Chapter 5: Pulling the Ordinary People

Introduction

Building on the negative representation of ordinary people discussed in the preceding chapter, this chapter explores a very different way in which they are presented in the four works. My analysis through SCA reveals how ordinary people can also be presented in a relatively positive light; some are even presented as extraordinary, as the heroes of their respective disasters.

The construction of ordinary people as heroes is not new to research. Zimbardo et al. (2013) identify two versions of the relationship between ordinary people and heroes: an exclusive version and an inclusive one. The exclusive version stresses heroic leadership by extraordinary individuals, while the inclusive version locates heroism in the everyday life of ordinary people. The exclusive version implies that opportunities for ordinary people to be extraordinary are limited, while the inclusive version implies that anyone has the potential to become a hero. In this chapter I show how both versions are present but in different proportions and for different purposes across the four works. I will demonstrate that the inclusive, rather than exclusive, version of heroism is more relevant. From the perspective of virtue and heroism, Annas (2015) lists two possible interpretations of the concept of hero: people who display exceptional levels of virtue, or people who continue to sustain their virtue in extreme

circumstances, further relating the discussion to characteristics. Both Zimbardo et al. (2013, p. 224) and Annas (2015, p. 16) stress the power of situation, which helps connect heroism with the extreme circumstances of disasters.

Chinese scholars have looked at heroism rather differently, proposing two kinds: individual heroism and collective heroism (Xiong, 2022). Rather than focus on whether a single hero is extraordinary or ordinary, ordinary heroes are deeply connected with collectives. Individual heroism, which stresses individuals saving the world and sacrificing themselves to shape a noble self-image, they argue, is deeply tied to US-centrism; collective heroism, which focuses on ordinary people and stresses the power of the collective in shaping the world, holds that individual power is only part of collective heroism (Xiong, 2022). This categorisation of heroism also stresses the participation of ordinary people, as in Zimbardo et al. (2013), and is relevant to the virtue discourse of Annas (2015), but emphasises the significance of unity and the collective. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, individual heroism plays an important role, while collective heroism is more central to Chinese culture than the former.

There is no doubt that the discourse of the hero is, and has been, important in China. The shaping of the image of the hero in China has been seen as a central task of socialist literary writers since even before the establishment of the PRC in 1949 (Kou, 2022). However, it has been carried out under the direct guidance of the CPC and its various levels of government. A central question is: how are heroes constructed in China? Both the discourse of extraordinary heroes and the

discourse of ordinary heroes, related to Lefebvre's concept of the new man and the real man (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 61), coexist. In the presentation of the 'ordinariness' of heroes, authenticity is stressed, but in the presentation of their 'extraordinariness', their educational influence becomes paramount (Kou, 2022). In this chapter, I will show how the representation of heroes in the chosen works has gone through a series of changes across the three disasters and these changes reflect broader shifts since Mao's era.

Furthermore, heroism can be considered an important technique of neo-socialist governmentality. Heroism is intertwined with Chinese history and governmentality; the state has often used it as a way to govern the people through narratives about heroism, serving as moral discourses to control people's attitudes and actions; and, in turn, the people have used it to govern themselves and others (Bai & Zhang, 2024). The use of narratives and images of extraordinary heroes is significant to governmentality, as it has been used frequently to guide the behaviours of citizens (Jeffreys & Su, 2016). Lei Feng (雷锋), a soldier of the People's Liberation Army, is perhaps the best-known modern Chinese hero. Known for his unwavering loyalty to the country and his selfless deeds serving others during the early days of the PRC, he remains an important cultural symbol today. His legacy continues to be preserved through books, essays and news coverage in both print and online media decades after his passing (Tian, 2011).

My discussion of heroism here is firmly founded on the ideas presented in the previous chapter. The culture of heroism and ordinary people should be

considered with regard to the dyad of *yin* and *yang*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, employing SCA, the main category of positive representation of ordinary people is identified, centring on constructing them as heroes, with sub-categories of collective heroism, extraordinary heroes, ordinary heroes, place-based heroism and denial of heroism. Employing DHA, I further analyse these categories, showing how the chosen works use predication strategies to positively label Chinese ordinary people, focusing on collective heroism and ordinary people as heroes. Secondly, the works perpetuate and justify this through place-based heroism, whereby the discourse of ordinary people as heroes is justified through historical traditions and passed down through generations. Thirdly, I examine the intensification and mitigation of ordinary people as heroes: positive framing of heroes is intensified through the contrast between ordinary people and heroic deeds, and simultaneously intensified and mitigated through denial of heroism.

5.1 Predication Strategy: Heroes and Collective Heroism

The DHA Predication Strategy focuses our attention on the 'discursive characterisation/qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events processes and actions' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 113), whether positive or negative. In this chapter I explore the positive representations of ordinary people as '英雄' (*yingxiong*), commonly translated as 'hero'. Semantically, the word has been traditionally defined as referring to 'outstanding figures' (杰出的人物, *jiechu*

de renwu), which simply means people who stand out from the norm because of their achievements and/or behaviour (Xia, 2002, p. 2565). It is worth noticing that the word does not intrinsically denote extraordinary people who help others. While it is difficult to pinpoint when this connotation emerged, it has become an important aspect of the word's contemporary usage. In this chapter, I focus mainly on the criteria by which heroism can be identified, especially for ordinary people.

5.1.1 Collective Heroism

While Chinese academia does not reach a consensus on the relationship between heroism, individual heroism and collective heroism, research has shown that collective heroism has been more valued historically (Hu, 2022; Kou, 2022; Pang, 2020; Ran, 2022; Yan & Shi, 2023). By contrast, individual heroism is often considered an overexaggeration of the role of individuals, which diminishes the contributions of the people (Pang, 2020, p. 124). This tendency is also seen in the four works. Table 3 provides a statistical breakdown of the appearance of the term in the four works. There are instances where 'hero' refers to individuals, but in the vast majority of cases, the word denotes collectives of ordinary people rather than individuals.

Table 3: The appearance of the word '英雄' (*yingxiong*) in the four works

Work	Total	Individuals	Collectives	Places	Others
TBB	5	1 (Shen Zhuang, director of the Beijing CDC Emergency Response Centre)	4 (Epidemiological Survey Team)	0	0
PF	22	4 (Emperor Yu and three times where the individuals deny the title)	9	2	3 (The name of a song or refers to dogs)
D76	19	2 (Yuan Boyang and Zhang Boli, doctors who made great contributions to fighting the pandemic)	10	5	2 (Slang for recruitment (英雄帖, *yingxiong tie*) and name of a game)
WDFP	67	13 (Among which 11 deny the title)	35	14	1 (Name of a charity project)

The most obvious way heroism is used collectively is with reference to the people of China. The term 'heroic' is often used to describe the people of China or the Chinese nation more broadly. In *PF*, for example, the following instances of usage in relation to the Wenchuan Earthquake disaster illustrate this:

> 'I firmly believe that no difficulty can overcome the heroic Chinese people!'

—Speech delivered during inspection of the disaster-stricken area in Shiqi on May 18 (Wu, 2008, Flyleaf: Speech by General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, President of the State and Chairman of the Central Military Commission on the front line of earthquake relief)

Wenchuan will not forget such a voice. At the most serious rescue scene of the disaster, General Secretary Hu Jintao shouted firmly with a loud voice: 'No difficulty can defeat the heroic Chinese people!' (Wu, 2008, prologue)

Perhaps we were once strangers to each other, but when the disaster came, all the standards and barriers that kept us apart have were transcended and the heroic Chinese nation wrote scene after scene of love that shone with the brilliance of humanity. (Wu, 2008, p. 48)

Similar depictions are seen in *WDFP,* where readers of the COVID-19 blog posts comment: 'All people of China are heroes!' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Readers' Comments). It can be inferred that General Secretary Hu's construction of the heroic Chinese people stresses not the heroic deeds of the current disaster, but more importantly heroism as an historical tradition. The previous chapter discussed the Chinese sense of national inferiority. Employing the discursive strategy of predication in parallel, two seemingly contradictory attributes are

assigned to the entirety of Chinese people based on historical discourses – the *yin* and *yang* of ordinary people is mapped out. In terms of positive predication, Chinese people are constructed as innately heroic, and their actions during disasters confirm this construction, firmly linking Chinese national identity with heroism. What we have here is an expectation delivered in the form of a compliment that binds people together by suggesting Chinese people share a heroic historical tradition and, therefore, are a unified collective bound by that heroism. This makes it easier for people to internalise the idea and act accordingly, as opposed to if they were asked directly to act heroically. Importantly, it also suggests that no one is excluded from the heroic collective.

Chinese scholars have argued that Chinese heroism focuses on collective heroism rather than individual heroism. Statistical and contextual analysis of the four works here supports this point: more often than not, the word hero refers to a collective or a group of people, and the stress of the construction of hero culture is on constructing people as a heroic *group*. In short, collective heroism may be as large as the people of the whole country. It is one of the most important constructions of Chinese collective heroism: every Chinese person is part of the heroic group that is all Chinese people. Everyone is a hero unless they act otherwise. This sets the ground for further discussion about who the hero is, how collective heroism manifests and what part collective heroism plays in Chinese disaster culture.

5.1.2 Extraordinary Heroes and Ordinary Heroes

Beyond the nation as a collective, what models of heroes are constructed for ordinary people, and for what purposes? Combining the idea that heroism is associated with virtue (Annas, 2015) and the theory of the new man and the real man (Lefebvre, 2014), I suggest that there are two kinds of social actor associated with the word 'hero' represented here, with different levels of virtue: the new man as extraordinary hero, and the real man as ordinary hero.

5.1.2.1 The Extraordinary Hero: The New Man

The construction of heroes in China's past has established hero models who are great, morally noble, distinctively extraordinary, very much in the image of the 'new man'. Such a man is described as 'entirely positive, heroic, fearless and blameless in work, war or love … defined by his wholehearted devotion to (socialist) society and by the way he discovered the meaning of his individuality in dedication and self-sacrifice' (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 61). Lei Feng is one such exemplar. As noted earlier, a role model, Lei Feng has been adapted for the times and, despite facing the challenges of the new age, is still considered an important part of national ideology (Tao & Lv, 2010; Zhu, 2021), significant for governmentality in guiding the behaviours of citizens (Jeffreys & Su, 2016). This construction of an extraordinary hero is not the only construction in Chinese hero culture, but it is nonetheless an important construction.

My analysis reveals that the four works show varying degrees of influence from this extraordinary hero tradition. For example, in *TBB*, He depicts an almost perfect female medical researcher, Ding Lixin, whom he interviewed. She is an important protagonist in his book and takes up most of Chapter 5 (approximately one-sixth of the book). He describes her as young and beautiful upon their meeting (Wu, 2008, p. 84). We are told that Ding described to He her hard work researching the SARS virus:

> 'On the worst day, I was in the lab for 15 hours straight. At that point we still didn't know the cause of SARS. The whole world was desperate to find out, because we could only deal with it once we figured that out. In those days, we didn't have time to think about whether close contact with the virus was dangerous or not – we had to find out the cause of the virus by any means necessary.' (He, 2017, pp. 88-89)

Later, Ding faced possible contamination and was willing to sacrifice herself for research – though her superior denied this approach as unethical (He, 2017, pp. 90-94). Similarly, other medical workers like Shen Zhuang are represented as extraordinary heroes who risked their lives to treat patients (He, 2013, p. 46). The Epidemiological Survey Group is also represented as fighting on the dangerous frontline, with the author comparing their contributions to those of war heroes (He, 2013, p. 146, 158). In short, medical workers during SARS are characterised

as noble, diligent, hardworking and willing to sacrifice themselves. The heroes of *TBB* are mainly medical workers.

In contrast, *PF* portrays soldiers as extraordinary heroes; they are described as selfless and fearless, risking their lives to save the people (Wu, 2008, p. 62, 67, 119, 185, 213). Soldiers do not belong to the category of ordinary people, as their occupation inherently requires service and sacrifice for the people (Xi, 2017). The book also tells us about mothers and teachers who sacrificed their lives to save children as extraordinary heroes (Wu, 2008, p. 45, 49). These roles are special with responsibilities toward children, and their sacrifice of life represents are extreme selflessness, but are not presented as examples for ordinary people to follow.

The representation of medical workers in the later COVID-19 pandemic works shows a different tendency. While they are still represented as noble, their predicaments and emotional distresses are not ignored. The noble tradition is carried over from the time of SARS. In *D76*, a section outlines their 'application for battle assignment' records:

> 'We were members of the medical team of Nanfang Hospital who were ordered to fight SARS in Xiaotangshan, Beijing in 2003. We made our due contribution to the national fight against SARS and achieved zero infection among medical staff.

> ‘Today, 17 years later, when people of the whole nation are facing the ravages of the new coronavirus, as a collective of heroes with rich experience and victory over SARS, we are duty-bound!
>
> ‘We hereby plead to the Party Committee of the hospital, willing to defeat the new SARS-like epidemic, to respond to the transfer order at any time. All members of Xiaotangshan will go to the frontline to make our due contribution.
>
> ‘We are here to fight: if there is a war, we will be called back, and the war will be won!
>
> ‘All members of the former First Military Medical University Medical team to Xiaotangshan.’ (Xiong, 2020, p. 230)

The war metaphor is significant here, a point I will elaborate on in Chapter 7. The medical workers present themselves as fearless and duty-bound in times of crisis. A similar portrayal of extraordinary heroes appears in *WDFP*:

> They are local medical staff in Wuhan, who have not been home since the beginning of the epidemic. They go from the hotel to the hospital and from the hospital to the hotel only every day. They have not seen their families for a long time, have not had a good sleep in a long time, and have not eaten a meal cooked by their families for a long time. But they really don't have a word of complaint, they are so positive at all times, they are one of thousands of heroes in this city!

(SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 60)

The heroes are represented as morally noble. They do not utter a word of complaint despite the hard work. While sections in both books do address the emotional struggles of medical workers, this particular depiction ignores their internal struggles, presenting them instead as selflessly sacrificing to serve the people.

In short, I argue that the extraordinary hero discourse emphasises moral nobility, selflessness and fearlessness. Although this discourse is not central to the later works, it persists to serve an inspirational function. The extraordinariness of these heroes also means the discourse inevitably shares traits with individual heroism. This aligns with the negative framing of ordinary people discussed in the previous chapter, where heroes are often contrasted with passive observers. For instance, Lu Xun (鲁迅) illustrated this through the revolutionary hero Qiu Jin (秋瑾) – who sacrificed herself in the 1907 Anti-Qing Uprising – juxtaposed with the numb people of old China. In this contrast, Lu Xun expressed concern about the estrangement between such extraordinary hero models and the common people (Yang, 2006). This concern supports the turn towards ordinary heroes as the 'real man'.

5.1.2.2 The Ordinary Hero: The Real Man

Ordinary heroes can be linked to Lefebvre's concept of the 'real man', a man who

is ‘diverse, individual, complete with his conflicts and contradictions, and exemplified in his different types’ (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 61). In Chinese culture, the most basic characteristics of a hero are those of the people: they come from the people and serve the people. The idea of the people’s heroes is not new. It has been tied to significant monuments and rituals, such as the Monument to the People’s Heroes in the centre of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, which was built in 1952 ‘to commemorate those who had sacrificed their lives for the building of a new Communist state’ (Hung, 2010, p. 235). Mao stressed that ‘the masses are the real heroes’, and a hero must act in line with the interests of the masses (Hu, 2022, p. 249). This is a tradition that starts with the ‘people’s hero’ (人民英雄, *renmin yingxiong*) proposed by Mao Zedong and supported by current General Secretary Xi Jinping’s view of heroes: that heroes come from the people, and the fundamental characteristics of heroes are the characteristics of the people (人民性, *renminxing*) (Ran, 2022). However, the characteristics of the people have recently received more attention because of Xi’s speech. Because of the CPC’s persistent criticism of elitist individual heroism, ordinary heroes have become the main body of heroes (Hu, 2022). My analysis of the four works shows, too, that heroism is more likely be of the ordinary, rather than extraordinary, variety. Not only does the construction of Chinese hero culture constantly work to include ordinary people in their scope of candidates for heroes, but Chinese hero culture, and especially here in hero culture within disaster, focuses on the ordinary.

5.1.2.2.1 Ordinary People as Heroes

The general construction of the hero image in China has undergone a turn toward the ordinary since the establishment of the CPC: in terms of hero types – whether war heroes, national heroes or labour heroes during the construction period – the main subjects are workers, farmers and other ordinary people; in terms of hero image, it has transitioned from lofty and untouchable figures to ordinary and often nameless heroes; in terms of profession, traditional elite heroes are mainly individuals who emerge in troubled times and war to turn the tide, while people's heroes are ordinary workers who become labour models and exemplars in production management (Hu, 2022, p. 252). A similar tendency is seen in the four works. As mentioned earlier, *TBB* focuses on the representation of extraordinary heroes, and *PF* also includes examples of extraordinary heroes but stresses ordinary people as heroes, such as representing the entire nation as heroic.

In contrast, *WDFP* and *D76* seldom use the word 'hero' to represent exceptionally extraordinary individuals; instead, they clearly intend to represent ordinary people. For example, in *D76*:

> She thought that without everyone's conscious cooperation, the epidemic in Wuhan would not have eased so quickly to what it is today. In fact, everyone is amazing, and heroes come from the ordinary. (Xiong, 2020, p. 552)

Although discussing individuals, the implication is that any group of ordinary people can be heroes. Similarly in *WDFP*:

> Who's the real hero? Ordinary people move me the most. Here is a record of a group of people who you would think are the most ordinary, but they show their heroic side here. Think of the early days of the epidemic, when cities were empty. Now look at it, thriving. Because of them, everything is possible. In this thrilling 'battle', everyone is a warrior and a hero. This heroic epic was written by the brothers and sisters who participated in the aid to Hubei, volunteers, public welfare workers, patients and their family members. The people who lived through the experience do practical things and tell the truth, which most truly reflects the heroism and brilliance of this 'battle'. The achievements China has made in fighting the epidemic are valuable experience and spiritual wealth for the whole world. When people work together, life shows its value, and facts prove that 'people and life come first'.
>
> – Director of the Department of Infectious Diseases, Huashan Hospital Affiliated to Fudan University and head of Shanghai Medical Treatment Expert Group, Zhang Wenhong (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Recommending Preface 1)

Again, the metaphor of battle and warrior appears, but here people who are the

'most ordinary' show 'their heroic side', which is deeply moving. This creates a contrast between ordinariness and heroism, where ordinariness is used to stress heroism. I will further discuss this in Section 6.2.

Furthermore, the prefaces of *WDFP* play an important role by serving two functions: first, they reflect the themes of the book; second, they guide readers on how to *interpret* the book. The above extract comes from a preface written by Dr. Zhang Wenhong, a leading doctor in the fight against COVID-19. In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette et al. advise close attention to seemingly innocuous elements of a book's presentation, as they can tell us a lot about its purpose and how we should read it. They identify three functions of epigraphs: justifying the title of the book, commenting on the text and acquiring the backing of the epigraph's author (Genette et al., 1997, pp. 156-160). Zhang Wenhong's quote fulfils the latter two. It emphasises key themes: everyone is a hero; ordinary people who are heroes are particularly moving; the collective power of ordinary people can accomplish anything; the battle against the pandemic is heroic; and China puts people and life first. As one of the more famous heroic medical workers who led the fight against the pandemic, Zhang endorses the book's content and authenticity, and recommends the book to readers – a point made explicit by the epigraph's title: 'Recommending Preface' (推荐序, *tuijianxu*). Another recommending preface states: 'In the spring of 2020 in Wuhan, everyone is a sufferer and everyone is a hero' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Recommending Preface 2). This recommending preface is written by Liu Xinglong, another famous

Chinese writer who also wrote a nonfiction book about the COVID-19 pandemic, again stressing that everyone is a hero. Both writers have special status – one the leading expert in the pandemic, the other a famous author – lending authority to the points they make and the authority of the book and their recommendation of it. Another preface, called 'Readers' Comments' (读者寄语, *duzhe jiyu*), also stresses that everyone is a hero and heroes emerge from ordinary people:

> No one is born a hero; there are always people who achieve greatness with ordinariness. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Readers' Comments)

> You, ordinary yet extraordinary, have kindled hope and brought light. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Readers' Comments)

> All people of Wuhan, all people of China are heroes! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Readers' Comments)

I argue that the prefaces reflect the theme of the nonfiction, especially as the readers' comments are carefully chosen from social media messages left for the bloggers. Depictions in the text also support this link between heroism and ordinariness:

> There are only ordinary heroes in this war. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 197)

> The epidemic has made me rethink my view of the people. Doctors and nurses have become heroes who seize hope and seize tomorrow from the hands of death. Security guards in the community protect the community continuously for the safety of residents. Hairdressers help medical staff cut hair regardless of life risk. Janitors are doing the purification of the city to become the first line of defence of the city… It turns out that every ordinary person is a hero, is a great person, is the most honourable person. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 258)

Thus, an important theme reflected in the prefaces is: everyone is a hero, ordinary people can be heroes, heroes are ordinary people and heroes possess ordinariness.

Additionally, the prefaces guide readers on how to interpret the book. Genette et al. suggest that prefaces establish the 'contract' of fiction (Genette et al., 1997, pp. 199-229). This pact, initially proposed by Lejeune, is 'the implicit or explicit contract proposed by the author to the reader, the contract that determines how the book is read' (Lejeune, 1982, p. 219). Zhang Wenhong states that *WDFP* is an authentic nonfiction work, as the bloggers provide firsthand information about the pandemic and offer the most honest depictions of the battle against the pandemic (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Recommending Preface 1). Similarly, Liu Xinglong states that it is difficult to imagine what

happened in Wuhan, and imagination cannot compare with lived experience; the bloggers recorded their experiences truthfully, without the intention of making them public reading material, implying *WDFP*'s authenticity (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Recommending Preface 2). In the third preface, Yan Zhi, founder of the Zall Public Welfare Foundation, adds that the on-site recorders truthfully documented their personal experiences, leaving valuable historical materials for future generations (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, Recommending Preface 3). All three writers position *WDFP* as authentic firsthand recordings. Furthermore, they emphasise that the heroic deeds of ordinary people in the book are moving, indicating its purpose to evoke emotion in readers, leading them to internalise its themes and messages. The central theme, I suggest, is that everyone can be a hero, heroes are ordinary people and ordinary heroes are the most moving, implying that, to an extent, the work is educational and aims to shape ordinary people's behaviours, encouraging them to be ordinary heroes.

Like extraordinary exemplars, this ordinary hero discourse can also function as a technique of neo-socialist governmentality. By presenting everyone as a potential hero and heroes as ordinary people doing relatively ordinary things under extraordinary circumstances, it provides practical examples for people to follow and serves as an effective technique of governmentality.

5.1.2.2.2 The Ordinariness of Heroes

Beyond linking ordinary people with heroes, I argue that there are also efforts to link heroes to ordinary people by presenting depictions of heroes facing predicaments and experiencing emotional distresses similar to those ordinary people face. For example, *D76* represents medical workers in dire circumstances: their work environment is terrible, their workload is intensely high, and the death rate of patients puts them under immense pressure. As a result, their emotional states are severely affected, with some even suffering from nightmares (Xiong, 2020, p. 237). These medical workers are described as reaching the point of breakdown due to exhaustion and, above all, helplessness (Xiong, 2020, p. 204) – characteristics not normally associated with the heroic image. Another example from *D76* illustrates this further:

> Fighting the new coronavirus has upended modern medicine, and the team members are like soldiers on the battlefield who have lost a battle and are even disarmed and laughed at by the enemy. This group of medical elites in Shanghai had a deep sense of frustration. Everyone felt sad, helpless, upset, depressed, blamed themselves, and even collapsed.
>
> The first eight nurses who came into the ward didn't say a word after work. Zheng Junhua found them and talked to them one by one, comforting them, letting them slowly calm their emotions. Zhou Xin, a professor who fought against SARS, lamented, 'The past experience

> is not working'. Director Chen Dechang, who has rich experience in rescuing critically ill patients, had to take medicine because his blood pressure rose unprecedentedly. Zheng Junhua was under great pressure – which often resulted in insomnia – due to the anxiety of treating seriously ill patients, and a concern about being infected.
>
> Such a death rate is unbearable. (Xiong, 2020, p. 251)

The metaphor of war reappears, emphasising the emotion distress of the medical workers. Another example is head nurse Qu Zhaohui, who, we are told, did not break down even under great pressure – not because she was not affected by what was going on, but because her team needed her (Xiong, 2020, p. 301). We are also told she had problems at home, such as her husband complaining about her absence from home (Xiong, 2020, p. 196). Similarly, the bloggers in *WDFP* also focus on their own struggles and difficulties. Diary is an inherently emotional genre. For example, in *D76*, the word '累' (*lei*, tired) appears 10 times in depictions of medical workers, while it is used 23 times in *WDFP*, despite the latter being significantly shorter (300,000 words compared to 427, 000 words). All of the medical workers wrote about the hardness of their work, their exhaustion, and the emotional stress they endured. *WDFP* portrays them in a more human light, diverging from the godlike, selfless and sacrificial model more common in *TBB*.

I argue that this depiction of ordinary people as heroes challenges the past model of extraordinary heroes by presenting imperfect yet authentic figures. This

adds credibility to their claims, especially that ordinary people can overcome distresses and be heroes. A symbolic example is Zhang Haidi, a disabled model citizen who persevered to overcome her particularly difficult circumstances (Dauncey, 2020). Narratives of ordinary people overcoming struggles to perform sacrificial acts are more powerful than those of exceptional individuals, from whom greatness is expected.

The title of hero does not contradict depictions of internal struggles. I argue that the hero discourse constructs the role of hero in specific contexts, such as disasters, and that people may take on the role of the hero in these contexts. The hero discourse is perpetuated through a consensus between people acting as hero and the people recording the acts, with an understanding that it is the image and the role of the hero rather than specific actors that they must protect. Thus, they present the heroic role on stage and hide emotional distress and personal struggles backstage. I will further discuss this in Section 6.2.

5.1.3 Summary

Unlike research focusing on the development and continuity of self in the context of disasters (Nourkova & Gofman, 2023), Chinese narrative emphasises collective heroism, and both extraordinary heroes and ordinary heroes play important roles in Chinese hero culture.

The discourse of extraordinary heroes is still influential, depicting clear

characteristics such as selflessness and the spirit of sacrifice. In contrast, the discourse of ordinary heroes is relatively new, with lower standards for heroism – simply cooperating or performing ordinary duties in extraordinary times can qualify one as a hero. Both discourses are rooted in the CPC's construction of hero images. Extraordinary heroes are emphasised for their educational influence (Kou, 2022); they are ideal characters of the new society and country, exemplifying fearless spirit, self-sacrificing revolutionary heroism in the face of enemies and difficulties, and a selfless, communist spirit of striving for the people's cause (Kou, 2022, p. 61). Ordinary and imperfect heroes stress the process of becoming and impress people through authenticity (Kou, 2022). At present, both discourses play important roles in hero culture and serve as techniques of neo-socialist governmentality, though the focus is increasingly shifting toward the latter.

5.2 Perpetuation and Justification Strategy: Linking Heroism and Place

Wodak argues that strategies of perpetuation 'attempt to maintain and to reproduce a threatened national identity' (Wodak, 2009, p. 33), while strategies of justification 'attempt to justify or relativise a societal status quo ante by emphasising the legitimacy of the past acts of the "own" national "we" group which have been put into question' (Wodak, 2009, p. 33). The previous chapter discussed the national inferiority assigned to the Chinese people. The two parallel discourses of ordinary people – national inferiority and heroism – form a *yin-yang*

relationship, coexisting in dynamic tension as they continually challenge and question each other. Furthermore, selfless traditions and collective heroism are being challenged by globalisation and the popularity of individual heroism (Li, 2012; Zhang, 2013). Whether and how heroic national identity is perpetuated remains an important question.

In *WDFP*, we hear that 'no one is born a hero' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, message from readers), suggesting that heroism is not determined by genetic factors or pre-determined factors. This idea can be traced back to the origins of Chinese hero culture, encapsulated in the phrase 'Emperor, dukes, generals and ministers are not genetically made' (王侯将相宁有种乎, *Wanghoujiangxiang ning youzhong hu*) (Liang, 1975). This aligns with the ideas of Zimbardo et al. (2013) and Annas (2015), who argue that heroes are made by situations and choices, and that anyone can become a hero by making the right choices at the right times. What, then, inspires Chinese people to make the right choices? One answer lies in the link between heroism and place. Tracing the historical justification for constructing ordinary people as heroes reveals a discursive connection between heroism and geographical or cultural locations. The perpetuation of heroic national identity is thus tied to the specific ways in which the relationship between heroism and place is crafted.

5.2.1 How is Place Linked to Heroism?

Take Wuhan as an example. Historically, Wuhan was the site of the Xinhai Revolution,[4] the Battle of Wuhan[5] and the '98 Flood Resistance.[6] These important historical events, rooted in the local culture and geographical position of Wuhan, have contributed to the city's cultural identity and characteristics. In their study of Wuhan's major epidemic prevention and control and public crisis management, Fu and Yan (2020) introduce the concept of 'cultural character' (文化性格, *wenhua xingge*). Derived from Erich Fromm's 'social character', 'cultural character' refers to the psychological structure of urban residents', encompassing the shared psychological characteristics of a group under the same cultural form (Fu & Yan, 2020, p. 6). It is embodied in the stable mentality of the urban community and the tendentious attitude that dominates community behaviour (Fu & Yan, 2020, p. 6).

Fu and Yan (2020) propose that Wuhan's culture is based on Jing-Chu culture, traceable to the Chu State (?-223 BC) of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). The Chu people, both individually and collectively, did not rest until victory and faced death unflinchingly. Wuhan's geographical traits, such as 'big river, big lake, big Wuhan', have shaped its people's generous character. Its position at the boundary of north and south, and as one of the first cities exposed to Western

[4] 辛亥革命, *Xinhai geming*: one of the most important revolutions in modern Chinese history, it ended the absolute feudal monarchy. Liu, W. (2023). Lun xinhai geming dui zhongguo chuantong hexin jiazhiguan xiandaihua zhuanxing de tansuo [On the Xinhai Revolution's exploration of the modernization transformation of Chinese traditional core values]. *Chinese Journal of Contemporary Values*, *8*(5), 65-72. .

[5] A large-scale battle during the Anti-Japanese War. It was the largest, longest and most destructive battle in the strategic defence phase of the War of Resistance against Japan.

[6] The fight against the catastrophic 1998 China floods.

culture, further influenced its development; historical events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly influenced Wuhan's cultural character. In short, for Wuhan specifically, geographical traits, historical events and cultural exposure have collectively shaped the characteristics of its people, and subsequent generations are presented as having inherited these characteristics.

Following Fu and Yan (2020), we might argue that hero culture is shaped by assigning great importance to certain major historical events, interpreting past actions of certain individuals and groups of people as heroic, and assigning these heroic characteristics to a city or locale in the present. The four works present several examples of linking heroic characteristics to place. For example, the word 'hero' is used to describe the city of Wuhan 14 times in *WDFP* and five times in *D76*. In *D76*, Xiong stresses the heroism of Wuhan, borrowing the words of experts, medical workers, policemen and ordinary citizens. For example:

> When the car came to pick her up, her friends in the care unit hugged her and saw her off. Zheng Xia's vision blurred, tears streamed continuously all the way. She felt that part of her soul, her heart was left in this heroic [英雄, *yingxiong*] city, left to the brothers and sisters of Jinyintan South Building 7. (Xiong, 2020, p. 304)

> In an interview with Xinhua News Agency, he talked about Wuhan people singing the national anthem, talked about believing that

> Wuhan can pass the test, talked about how Wuhan is a heroic [英雄, *yingxiong*] city, with tears in his eyes, lips tightly pressed into a straight line. (Xiong, 2020, p. 324)

> He has a new understanding of the country and his mother city Wuhan. Just like experiencing the baptism of battle, from going back to Wuhan during the 'lockdown', to rushing to build a hospital at Huoshen Mountain, those days of morning and evening reversed, are exactly the portrayal of his own fight against the epidemic. He was proud of his part in the fight against the epidemic. Today Wuhan is finally back, the hero [英雄, *yingxiong*] city restarted, and the sky and the earth are different. (Xiong, 2020, p. 555)

The bloggers in *WDFP* also describe Wuhan as a heroic city:

> Today we are leaving Wuhan, a heroic city. … I want to say thank you, thank the Wuhan people who took good care of us, thank the warm people who cared about us silently. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 82)

In short, I argue that Wuhan's case provides sufficient evidence of a discursive link between heroism and place. This can be understood as a sort of *place-based heroism* – not to suggest that heroism is only bound to this place or to place in general, but that it can be meaningfully associated with specific places. Ultimately,

this connection between heroism and place serves to extend heroic qualities to the ordinary people living in these places.

5.2.2 The Background of Heroes: Heroic City, Heroic People

Just as the city of Wuhan is constructed as heroic, this heroic character is extended to the people living in it. Both works depict a clear link between the heroic city and its heroic people. In *D76*, for example:

> Unlock, Wuhan had been waiting too long! Wuhan is a heroic [英雄, *yingxiong*] city, and the people of Wuhan are heroic people [武汉人民是英雄的人民, *Wuhan remin shi yingxiong de renmin*]! (Xiong, 2020, p. 533)

Similarly, in *WDFP*:

> In the face of this disaster, people of Wuhan have paid an unspeakable price, Wuhan is really a heroic city, everyone in this city is a hero. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 30)

> At 1 o'clock in the morning, on the shuttle bus back to the hotel, I looked at the driver who picked us up day and night, looked at the shiny police cars on the road, looked at the pedestrians, looked at the city. Heroic [英雄, *yingxiong*] Wuhan, heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*] of Wuhan. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 81)

> Thank you to the 136 brothers and sisters who fought side by side, thank you to the close cooperation of the teachers of Wuhan Fourth Hospital, thank you to the bus drivers who work day and night every day, thank you to the hardworking hotel staff, thank you to Captains Wang Yaoping and Zhu Shengyong, who live and work alongside us, working for our safety and well-being every day, thank you to the heroic [英雄, *yingxiong*] city of Wuhan, thank you to the heroic [英雄, *yingxiong*] people of Wuhan. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 82)

Again and again, Wuhan as a heroic city and its people as heroes are mentioned in tandem. The effect of linking heroism to place aims to connect the heroic tradition of a place to the people living in it, potentially inspiring them to uphold the tradition. As this excerpt from *D76* reveals, this inspiration can be quite explicit:

> The doctor told her to take antipyretics if her temperature rose to 38.5. At night, Li Jing was lethargic. There was a dry and hot section in her throat. She took out some antipyretic and hesitated, to eat or not to eat? Zhong Nanshan said there is no specific medicine for the disease, and we have to rely on our own immunity to fight against the virus. Isn't an elevated body temperature just an immune system fighting the virus? Zhong Nanshan said that Wuhan is a heroic city. As a native residence of Wuhan, I should also be brave and rely on

> my own immunity to defeat the virus! Li Jing decided not to take fever-reducing medicine. To prevent overheating, she put on an antipyretic patch to cool down. She imagined burning the virus with her fever. (Xiong, 2020, p. 174)

Here, the specific reason Li Jing gives for fighting the virus with her immune system, and the source of her strength, is the idea that Wuhan is a heroic city. She, too, must be 'brave'. This demonstrates the tangible influence of such discursive links.

Of course, Wuhan is not the only place in China that has a heroic tradition. For example, in *WDFP*:

> We are in Wuhan, our hometown is this city which is known as the 'nine provinces thoroughfare'. No matter what difficulty, this city will not cry – the hero city Wuhan; We come from Liaoning, our hometown is the city with black land, the one that will empty their pockets for you but still be embarrassed they don't have more for you, China's 'eldest son' Liaoning! Come on, Wuhan! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 57)

Here, it can be seen that other cities and provinces are also assigned heroic characteristics, which is based on the history of the region making outstanding contributions to the country's economic construction in the early days of the founding of the PRC (Zeng, 2019). It can even be argued that China itself, while a

political concept, also has a geographical meaning and is another important locus for heroism. The people of China are often described as heroic in these works, further linking the concept of heroism with geography.

Place-based heroism involves inheritance by choice, where people choose to accept this discourse and use it for self-governance. As mentioned, in addition to historical events, geographical traits and positions also influence the cultural character of a place. This influence fuels a silent contract in Chinese culture: when you live in a place, you blend into it and become part of it, as the old saying goes, 'blend in with the customs of the place' (入乡随俗, *ruxiangsuisu*). However, it is also that people are influenced by the place they live in, as Li Jing's example shows. Thus, all people who live on this land are represented as integrated into this culture and inheritors of its characteristics. This shows how hero culture persists regardless of ethnicity or ancestral origin: it is tied to geographical region. As stated: 'Wuhan is really a heroic city, everyone in this city is a hero' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 20). A distinct example is the foreign student Daming in *D76*, who helped in the fight against the pandemic and expressed a deeper understanding of Chinese collectivism (Xiong, 2020, p. 432). This suggests the culture is inclusive: all who come and live on this land possess the potential to become heroes.

By relating hero culture to the land, this narrative finds a resilient means of endurance across dynasties and population movements. The relation between heroism and place is widespread in China, as seen earlier with Liaoning, and in *PF*,

where heroic character is assigned to Beichuan County and its people (Wu, 2008, p. 100). It is less prominent in *TBB* regarding the SARS pandemic, as representations then leaned more toward negative and educative depictions. For *PF* and the Wenchuan Earthquake, this relation is further magnified from a city to an entire nation.

Few researchers have established links between place and heroism. A notable exception is Ivo Mijnssen's (2021) study of Russia's 'hero cities', which shows how painful memories of the Second World War were transformed into narratives of victory and celebration, particularly in the 13 Hero Cities. However, Mijnssen focuses on how this construction cannot mask rifts in Russian society. In China, similar constructions exist but remain understudied. Post-COVID-19, some scholars have examined the reconstruction of Wuhan's image (Chai, 2023; Zheng & Chen, 2023), especially its portrayal as a heroic city (Zheng & Chen, 2023; Zhou & Xu, 2023), or through heroic depictions of medical workers, community workers and volunteers (Xie & Zhou, 2021). These construction of the image of Wuhan exhibits diverse characteristics through the interactive reconfiguration of various media forms to enhance the international dissemination power and influence of the city's image (Chai, 2023). The studies do link heroism to city, but are about constructing city image. These studies confirm the link of heroism to place but focus on city image construction, contributing little to understanding the construction of hero culture and its link to governmentality.

This construction of hero culture linked to place counters presupposed

expectations of individual heroism and exclusive version of heroism. Since the one hundred years of humiliation, foreign knowledge and thoughts – whether forcefully imposed or voluntarily adopted – have influenced China (Song, 2004). Individual heroism, propagated through powerful carriers like movies (for example, Marvel's Avengers), has become influential in popular culture (Li, 2012; Zhang, 2013), challenging the collective heroism of Chinese mainstream culture. Linking heroism to geography appears be a strategy for enabling more people, potentially everyone, to see themselves as heroes-in-waiting (either by simply meeting minimal standards of cooperation or by aspiring to extraordinary heroism). As I discuss in Chapter 7, this strategy aims to improve the general public's resilience during disasters.

5.3 Intensification and Mitigation Strategy

Intensification and mitigation modify 'the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 95). In application, certain linguistic techniques can intensify or mitigate the power of discourses. In the four works, the discourse constructing ordinary people as heroes is intensified through contrasting the ordinariness of people with their heroic deeds, while the denial of heroism can serve as both intensification and mitigation.

5.3.1 Intensification through Contrast: Ordinary People and Heroes

The depiction of ordinary people as heroes, or the suggestion that they make better heroes, can be seen not only in the use of the word 'hero', but also in the contrasting use of the words for 'ordinary': '平凡, *pingfan*' and '普通, *putong*'. To a certain extent, these two words are interchangeable in everyday parlance; it is natural, therefore, that in the four works, they are used differently by the different writers. Both are common words in Mandarin Chinese, so their use is usually by choice rather than dialect habit. The difference is that *putong* (普通) can be used to describe something ordinary, common or general as opposed to special (for example, an ordinary ward as opposed to an intensive-care or VIP ward), while *pingfan* (平凡) specifically describes character or status as ordinary versus extraordinary (for example, ordinary people as opposed to extraordinary people, or ordinary jobs as opposed to high-ranking government jobs). *Putong* can also cover the meaning of *pingfan*.

The contrast between ordinary people doing extraordinary things can be implied. For example, in *PF*, *pingfan* (平凡) is used to describe two elderly donors: one a beggar who donated 100 yuan, and another who donated 100,000 yuan, one-third of his relocation compensation (Wu, 2008, p. 150). *Putong* (普通) is used to describe a position as an ordinary teacher before the character became a leader (Wu, 2008, p. 56). Among the 13 times this word is used to describe people in this book, three times it stresses that even though they are normal, ordinary people, they still contributed to the earthquake relief (Wu, 2008, pp. 11, 203, 214). This

contribution of ordinary people grounds the author's depiction of the country's top leaders describing the entire nation as heroic. Similarly, in *D76*, an anonymous person who made a large donation states:

> Although we are all just ordinary folk, ordinary people [平凡之人, *pingfan zhi ren*], we also understand that the nation's survival is the responsibility of each person. When disaster strikes, we want to do our part and hope that the people of Wuhan can overcome the epidemic. We don't want donation certificates, we just want to donate masks to frontline medical workers. You fit our ideals, and that's why we chose you. (Xiong, 2020, pp. 415-416)

The word 'folk' mentioned above is translated from '民间人士, *minjian renshi*', which means people among the people. It is often used to stress people's identity as non-government officials. Combined with 'ordinary people' (平凡之人, *pingfan zhi ren*), it first denies any special identity, then denies extraordinary ability or character – a double intensification of ordinariness. The authors imply rather than directly state this contrast.

At other times, the contrast between ordinary identity and extraordinary deeds is represented more directly. In Chinese, there is a common writing technique called '欲扬先抑, *yu yang xian yi*', meaning 'to compliment, first create contrast'. For example, in *WDFP*:

> Since the beginning of the epidemic, I have seen too many touching

> people and things, often moved to tears, in addition to medical workers, there are many ordinary people, but they are doing extraordinary things [还有很多普普通通的人，他们却做着不普通的事, *Haiyou henduo puputongtong de ren, tamen que zuozhe buputong de shi*]... (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 18)

By making this comparison, the effect is stressed: extraordinary acts by ordinary people seem *even more* extraordinary:

> The outbreak made me rethink the perception of people, doctors and nurses became heroes robbing hope and tomorrow from the hands of death, community security worked alone around the clock for the safety of the residents, Teacher Tony[7] provided the medical workers with haircuts regardless of the danger to their lives, construction workers of Huoshenshan cast in his own sweat to build the dikes of life, cleaning women cleaning the city to become the city's first line of defence... It turns out that every ordinary person [普通人, *putongren*] is a hero, is a great person, is the most honourable person. After this my 'people are not born equal' ideas are completely shattered by myself. Be a hardworking person, a person of sunshine, to influence the people around, and this is why once one takes up volunteering work they cannot stop, because I was lit by a group of little suns, then maybe slowly I will start to give out light and warmth, I hope I can be

[7] Popular internet nickname for hairdressers.

> like them, slowly influence my surroundings, and let us be together in becoming positive, hardworking, kind people. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 258)

Most often, *pingfan* (平凡) is immediately followed by *bupingfan* (不平凡) or similar phrasing, contrasting ordinary identities with praise for their deeds (both ordinary and extraordinary) as extraordinary. For example, Zhang Wenhong's preface: 'Who is the real hero? Ordinary people [平凡的人们, *pingfan de renmen*] moved me the most. Here is a record of a group of people you would think are the most ordinary [最平凡的人, *zui pingfan de ren*], but they showed their heroic side here' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, flyleaf). Of the 30 instances of *pingfan* (including *bupingfan*), 17 occur in sentences with some degree of contrast. A few are used to stress that those who made sacrifices and contributions are just ordinary people. For example, in *WDFP* we hear:

> Today, I read the letter to the family of my senior schoolmate at lunch time. I couldn't help but burst into tears. Every medical worker fighting at the front has a family waiting for their safe return. Medicine is a sacred profession, but it is an ordinary person [平凡之人, *pingfan zhi ren*] who takes up this ministry. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 39)

And in *D76*:

> She thought that without everyone's conscious cooperation, the

> epidemic in Wuhan would not have eased so quickly to what it is today. In fact, everyone is amazing, and heroes come from the ordinary. (Xiong, 2020, p. 552)

This quote emphasises that everyone is a hero simply by cooperating. In these examples, the emphasis is on the ordinariness of those making great contributions. In others, the emphasis is on ordinary people doing extraordinary things:

> These are ordinary people [平凡的人, *pingfan de ren*], but at this moment, I think they are extraordinary [不平凡, *bupingfan*], they use their own strength to warm the people in this city, but also in their own way to protect the city. Yes, love and hope spread faster than the virus, Wuhan will be better with you! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 19)

> However, when we got up in the morning and unexpectedly got the legendary hot and dry noodles to eat, we were so excited. The resident chef made hot and dry noodles for us over 100 people in the early morning, it is really hard work. In fact, there are a lot of people in this 'battle', in their ordinary posts [平凡的岗位, *pingfan de gangwei*], they are doing extraordinary things [不平凡的事, *bupingfan de shi*]. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, pp. 59-60)

In both cases, the technique is 'to compliment, first create contrast', stressing the

juxtaposition of ordinary people and extraordinary behaviours.

I argue, therefore, that ordinary people crowned as heroes fall into two categories: those who do extraordinary things, risking their lives under disaster circumstances, and those who do ordinary things, such as simply cooperating with government policies. Categorising the latter as heroes sets a basic requirement for ordinary people and fulfils the function of uniting them through praise. By contrasting ordinary people doing extraordinary things (which may simply be ordinary actions in extraordinary circumstances or simple cooperation) and specifying that ordinary heroes are more touching, the discourse constructing ordinary people as heroes is intensified. This intensification both describes ordinary people more powerfully as heroic and strongly encourages them to become heroes.

5.3.2 Intensification and Mitigation through Denial

In the previous section, I discussed how the contrast between ordinary people and heroes is an important construction of Chinese hero culture. This contrast leads to an interesting phenomenon: the denial of the hero title. My discussion has touched on the traditional construction of model heroes as selfless, hardworking and morally noble. However, this construction faces new scrutiny in the current era. I argue that an important development present in the four works is the denial of heroism.

The denial of heroism is not unprecedented. Annas notes the perplexing phenomenon that heroes often deny they did anything out of the ordinary (Annas, 2015, p. 6), thus rejecting the title of hero. She finds this problematic because while people admire the actions of heroes, they cannot make sense of the reasons for them. Thus, the phenomenon of heroes refusing to admit they have done anything out of the ordinary and rejecting the title of hero warrants study, including possible reasons for this denial.

To begin, recall 'no one is born a hero' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, message from readers). As mentioned, heroes are not genetically determined but result from situations and people's choices. This implies that everyone can be a hero, expanding the pool of candidates and encouraging people to act heroically. Yet, assuming the title is not always natural. A good question to ask might be: *Why* would people reject the title if it is presented as a positive thing?

First, people may deny the title because they feel they fail to meet hero standards. For example, in *PF*, people who held on under debris deny the title because they believe their actions are not worthy – they were just trying to survive – and the title should belong to their rescuers (Wu, 2008, pp. 89, 119). This stresses that heroes in disaster are associated with altruistic values and helping behaviours. In *WDFP*, bloggers deny being heroes 11 times, and many explain why they have denied the title of hero. Some state that they only did what anyone would do: 'Not a hero. I just did what thousands of medical workers would do' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 134). This reason aligns with Annas's observation that heroes

often say they did nothing extraordinary:

> All say that we are heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*], there are not so many heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*] in the world, and there are many people like me. I'm still the same person, but I just changed my work clothes and went to a different place to do the same job. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 144)

> People keep saying we're heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*]. In fact, we are not heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*], we are just nurses, and always have been, only to shift the battlefield and face a more dangerous enemy. Because we're nurses! That's what we do. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 174)

> On the 24th day of coming to Wuhan, people said that we were angels in white, in fact, there were no angels, only children who had learned to act like their predecessors, snatching life back from death' s grasp, saving the dying and tending to the wounded. Some people say that we are heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*], but we are just ordinary medical workers on a different kind of battlefield, continuing to fight against the dangerous virus. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 175)

By their own definition, these medical workers fit Annas's standard of sustaining

virtue in extreme circumstances (Annas, 2015, p. 16), carrying on their work ethics during the pandemic. Further, the title of hero is undesirable:

> We are not heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*], we are all ordinary people, are flesh and blood, all have a small family, who is not afraid of death? Who doesn't know the value of life? However, when the battle horn sounded, these ordinary people's sense of mission overcame their instinctive fear. We will persevere together and win the final victory. In the past, we always said that the world is worth living in, but this epidemic has made us see what the real world is, and the world is very cruel, because there are natural disasters and man-made disasters. The world is also very gentle, because there are a lot of gentle people who have been working hard, every minute making small efforts, which might change lives. And the efforts of countless people, countless little bits, will change this era. I don't want to be a hero [英雄, *yingxiong*], I want to be a little spark in this mediocre world, there is light in my heart, which lights me up, but also reflects on others. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 147)

This quote shows that becoming a hero is not the goal; they acted not in order to be seen as a hero, but rather to be a 'spark'.

> No one wants to be a hero [英雄, *yingxiong*], I just want to do my best to make a contribution, I am not a hero [英雄, *yingxiong*], and

> I'm not at all heroic, I am just the plainest nurse, who hops that everything will be well. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 179)

> There are not so many heroes [英雄, *yingxiong*] in the world, and there is no superman wearing underwear, and some are just a group of 'heartless' people, a group of afraid people wearing several layers of masks on the outside. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 180)

These quotes show bloggers rejecting the hero title for medical workers, stressing that they are just ordinary people. Similarly, in *D76*:

> I am a Party member, and the head nurse, our city is sick, we should treat it, rather than abandon it! This is a serious epidemic. If I don't step up, who will? Thankfully, none of my relatives have been infected, but what kind of mess would it be if everyone left it alone? And who gets away with it? I don't want to be a hero [英雄, *yingxiong*], but if something happens to me during this epidemic, you should be proud of me! (Xiong, 2020, p. 224)

In short, people see themselves as doing their ordinary jobs under difficult circumstances, which fits the standard of ordinary hero discussed above, yet they deny the title of hero. The reasons people use to deny the title of hero are consistent and can be summarised as follows. First, they believe their contributions do not meet the standards of heroes, as they only did what others would do and

many other people made similar contributions. It can be argued that the hero model they refer to here is that of extraordinary heroes. Second, they claim they acted out of a sense of responsibility, not expecting recognition or anything in return.

These reasons result in two modifications to the ordinary-people-as-heroes discourse. On one hand, the ordinary-people-as-heroes discourse places strong responsibility on ordinary people, and denial mitigates its power by relieving ordinary people of the need to hold themselves to the high standards associated with the extraordinary hero discourse, including the burden that comes with the hero title itself and the requirements and sacrifices. On the other hand, denial of the hero title intensifies the force of the discourse of ordinary people as heroes, as it is consistent with the idea that ordinary heroes are more moving, and such modesty is a prevailing norm in China (Cai et al., 2011) that promotes trust (Ma et al., 2019) and implicitly emphasises the positivity of the modest person (Cai et al., 2011). Long promoted by orthodox education, not seeking recognition for good deeds is almost a formula in China, with Lei Feng as a model. Seeking recognition for doing good deeds often raises suspicion of impure motives and self-interested tendencies – it is not a noble moral performance (Hu, 2014). Therefore, the bloggers deny the title due to cultural shaping and social education. This may actually enhance their image as ordinary heroes and add to readers' trust in them.

If people reject the title of hero because of its associations with sacrifice and high standards, why is hero culture constructed this way? The answer may go back

to Chinese culture's preference for collective heroism over individual heroism. The examples above show that people are led to believe that as individual heroes, they will be held to extraordinary standards, face public scrutiny and risk attack, as no one is impeccable and all are vulnerable to scrutiny and attack in the digital age. But as part of a group regarded as heroic, individuals will not be placed under the same pressure.

Furthermore, other people seem to reject the idea of the hero for the benefit of those fighting for them. As the quote 'We don't need heroes, we don't need martyrs, we just want your safe return' (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 125) shows, people are aware of the difficult situations in which heroes are often placed in today's society. From the perspective of those being helped, denying the hero title expresses gratitude and compassion for the people fighting to save them. This implies that the extraordinary hero discourse focuses on individuals, and both the people fighting the disasters and those protected by them are resisting the sacrifice discourse of the extraordinary hero – the sacrifices the title requires individuals to make and the high standards it requires. The people 'don't want martyrs'. The hero title seems dangerous for individuals, which partly explains why it is more often used to describe groups of people rather than individuals. This supports the shift toward the discourse of the 'real man'.

Another reason might be that this serves as an encouragement for people to accept that contribution does not guarantee return. This is also an important construction of hero culture: that contributions must not be made with an

expectation of something in return. This can be traced to both the extraordinary hero discourse represented by Lei Feng and the spirit of sacrifice in Chinese culture, such as the beliefs: 'Till the end of life a silk worm keeps producing silk, till burning itself out a candle goes on lighting' (春蚕到死丝方尽，蜡炬成灰泪始干, *chuncan dao si si fang jin, laju cheng hui lei shi gan*), and 'Come with a full heart, leave without a single blade of grass' (捧着一颗心来，不带半棵草去, *pengzhe yike xin lai, bu dai banke cao qu*) (Chen, 2023, p. 19; Qin & Ji, 2021, p. 13). Again, the influence of the extraordinary hero model suggests that being a hero entails selfless sacrifice. This returns to the reason for people's rejection of the title: they find the high standard difficult to meet.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I argue that Chinese hero culture is intrinsically linked to the responsibility of ordinary people discussed previously: 'Everyone is responsible for his country's rise or fall' (天下兴亡，匹夫有责, *tianxia xingwang, pifu you ze*). As shown in the previous chapter, negative representations of ordinary people relate to the 'fall'; in this chapter, I demonstrate that positive representations of ordinary people are related to the 'rise'. This reflects a key characteristic of Chinese representations of ordinary people in disasters: each person has their role and should strive to fight the disaster collectively. Simply by doing their part, they may be honoured as heroes, often as a collective sharing victory. This can be viewed

as an extension of the spirit conveyed in 'Emperor Yu Tames the Flood'. As noted in the literature review, a contrast exists between Chinese and Biblical flood myths. Rather than passively wait for the flood to fade or to be saved by extraordinary individuals, the story of Emperor Yu depicts ordinary people, led by Yu, actively fighting the disaster. Chinese disaster culture stresses that when disaster strikes, it is not only the responsibility of a few extraordinary individuals; all people are in it together and share the responsibility to fight it.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the four works continue the Chinese tradition of heroism. Predication strategies in these works can be identified around the following aspects:

a. *Heroes can be individuals, but Chinese disaster culture leans towards collective heroism; sometimes the collective is as vast as the Chinese nation.*

   This aligns with Chinese culture's traditional stress on collective heroism, as discussed by scholars such as Kou (2022). This constitutes a foundational element of Chinese hero culture, in contrast with the focus on individual heroism in other cultural contexts.

b. *Two hero discourses exist: the extraordinary hero discourse, with high standards, and the ordinary hero discourse, with low standards, enabling everyone to be a hero.*

   The extraordinary hero discourse relates to Lefebvre (2014)'s concept of the 'new man', while the ordinary hero discourse corresponds to the 'real

man'. The extraordinary hero discourse, exemplified by Lei Feng, remains an important part of Chinese hero culture. Conversely, through persistent criticism of elitist individual heroism, Chinese hero culture shifts towards ordinary people as heroes. However, the construction of extraordinary heroes is not abandoned but used to inspire people, while the construction of ordinary heroes provides more practical examples for people to follow. Both discourses serve as techniques of neo-socialist governmentality.

c. *Ordinary actions, when performed under extraordinary circumstances, can be considered heroic.*

   This builds on the findings of Annas (2015), and helps to explain that actions considered ordinary during ordinary times can be seen as heroic under extraordinary circumstances. Ordinary people, by simply cooperating with the government, can be considered heroes.

The perpetuation and justification strategies identified from the chosen works are:

d. *The discourse of ordinary people as heroes is justified and sustained through place-based heroism.*

   Place-based heroism assigns heroic characteristics to historical events that happened at certain places, links these heroic characteristics to those places and extends them to their inhabitants. Similar to how memories of war can shape a place's heroic tradition (Mijnssen, 2021), and consistent with China's tradition of assigning characteristics to certain places (Fu & Yan, 2020) and shaping heroic images for historically significant cities (Chai,

2023; Zheng & Chen, 2023; Zhou & Xu, 2023), one strategy of Chinese hero culture is to develop this place-based heroism. Thus, as long as the place exists, its people will be inspired to carry on the heroic tradition, with everyone included in the hero culture.

The intensification and mitigation strategies identified from the chosen works are:

e. *Heroes who are ordinary people are more valued.*

Government officials represented by Xi Jinping and scholars such as Qin and Ji (2021), Hu (2022) and Yan (2023) all talk about ordinary people being heroes, even great heroes, but I would extend this and argue that such emphasis aims to encourage more ordinary people to become heroes. Through increased media coverage and literary depiction, ordinary heroes become more socially and culturally 'valued'. This reinforces the governance power of the ordinary-people-as-heroes discourse, achieved by contrasting ordinary people with their extraordinary heroic deeds, stressing that ordinary heroes are more touching and even greater, and encouraging them to become heroes. The construction is both the result of and reinforces neo-socialist governmentality.

f. *The denial of the title hero both intensifies and mitigates the ordinary-people-as-heroes discourse.*

Though hero culture leans toward ordinary people as heroes, the extraordinary hero discourse is still influential, leading to denial of the hero title. This denial mitigates the discourse of ordinary people as heroes by

distancing it from unattainable standards but may also intensify it by embodying modesty or selflessness. The result of this, I argue, is that the title of hero itself functions as an award, costing little to the government and the people, yet effectively encouraging people to become heroes and thanking them in return. The construction is also both the result of and reinforces neo-socialist governmentality.

Chinese hero culture, which focuses on ordinary people, has adapted over time by expanding the candidate pool for heroes to encourage broader participation and enhance social resilience during disasters. A notable example is the 2008 'Touching China' (感动中国, *gandong Zhongguo*) award, an annual CCTV-led programme since 2002 that, with media and public participation, selects and honours ten inspiring individuals at a national awards ceremony (Sun & Dong, 2025). The programme helps shape the Chinese spirit discourse (Sun & Dong, 2024), integrates into civic education (Sun & Dong, 2025), leverages the power of media and attaches to emotional discourses (Chen et al., 2024), serving as affective governmentality. The 2008 'Touching China' award honoured all Chinese people, again stressing that everyone can be a hero.

Yet, Chinese hero culture still faces certain challenges. Drawing on Lefebvre, I argue that these four works reveal that ordinary people resist the image of the hero constructed as the 'new man', which holds the hero to high standards of selflessness, fearlessness and the like. Chinese culture is actively reshaping its concept of the hero toward greater inclusivity, advanced significantly through the

culture constructed about disasters. However, I argue that this can be pushed one step further, that the 'new man' hero model persists within mainstream hero culture, reflecting a characteristically Chinese cultural tendency toward multiplicity and contradiction, akin to the *yin-yang* dynamic. The two models not only contradict each other but also support each other, with each containing characteristics of the other. I contend that hero culture is constructed in a similar manner. On one hand, there exists the accessible image of an ordinary hero that anyone can become; on the other hand, the idealised image of a selfless, nearly perfect extraordinary hero remains potent. The former encourages more people to become ordinary heroes, while the latter inspires some people to be extraordinary heroes. This duality is also consistent with the two tendencies identified by Kou (2022) in the introductory section of this chapter: one that values authenticity and another that values educational exemplarity.

Furthermore, the hero is an essential role that someone must play in times of disaster. Historically played by extraordinary individuals, this role is increasingly performed by ordinary collectives. Those who assume this role consciously conceal their emotional struggles and complaints backstage to protect the role's image, recognising that future disasters will require others to play the role. The role must be carried on. The denial of the hero title may also be considered a form of protection of the role; by refusing the title, ordinary people prevent their perceived ordinariness from tainting the role's heroic ideal.

Heroism is an important part of disaster culture, serving to stabilise and mobilise affected populations by assigning clear roles and responsibilities, while also helping people to recover and feel comforted through the honouring of heroes. Essentially collective in nature, this aspect is fundamental to Chinese culture in general and functions as a 'pull' force that shapes Chinese citizens through appeals to responsibility. This constitutes an important dimension of governmentality – distinctly neo-socialist in character – wherein cultural discourses originating from government-supported official narratives and civic education function as techniques of governmentality. Through the multi-layered influence of different hero models, these discourses guide ordinary people's behaviours toward collective benefit.

Chapter 6: A Process of Citizen-Making

Introduction

The two previous chapters examined how people behave in terms of their characteristics and interactions with others. The negative representations of ordinary people as uncooperative and the positive representations as heroic form a *yin-yang* construction in disaster contexts. Both are tied to cultural discourses of national character. Building on these findings, this chapter shifts focus toward an articulation of ordinary people not just as culturally Chinese and members of a cultural collective, but also specifically as subjects or citizens of the country. In this chapter, I investigate how ordinary people are constructed as existing in relation to the government and the country, and how an image of the 'good citizen' emerges in times of disaster.

The government has been present throughout this thesis, but in this chapter, it takes on a more forthcoming role as I focus on the relationship between ordinary people and the state through the idea of citizen-making, which subsequently builds toward the exploration of nation-building via the concept of imagined community in the final chapter.

'The people' always exist in relation to 'the government', and disasters represent moments where this relationship is reinforced and its mutuality emphasised. This has particular force in China due to historical and cultural factors,

revealing underlying social mechanisms such as governmentality, social responsibility and the paternal role of the government. In this chapter, I will employ the idea of citizenship to explore how the mutual relationship between the people and the government is constructed and what image of the good citizen emerges in this context. Citizenship is not simply a status but also a practice (Fu, 2021; Lister, 1998a, 1998b; Oldfield, 1990). It involves not only empowering citizens or providing opportunities but encouraging them to practice citizenship (Oldfield, 1990). Academic discussions around citizenship have moved from static, institutional 'status' to dynamic, action-based 'acts of citizenship' (Guo, 2022; Zhao & Wang, 2023), emphasising responsibility, participation and virtue in addition to rights. Faulks (2000) argues that citizenship cannot be simply about rights or benefits, but also encompasses duties and obligations, relating it to governance that maintains social order and distributes material and cultural resources. In the context of China, scholars have proposed a post-orientalism perspective where citizenship is shaped by traditional culture and political structure (Guo, 2022; Wang, 2024; Woodman & Guo, 2017). Tilly (1995) distinguishes 'thin citizens', who emphasise rights with minimal responsibility, from 'thick' citizens', who combines 'political participation with individualist morality and public issues with personal responsibility' (Wang, 2024, p. 82) – a distinction whose influence can be seen in the work of Wang (2024) combining Confucianism and Chinese citizenship. The tension between rights and responsibilities is heightened in disasters and forms the general structure of this

chapter, with a focus on the construction of responsibility and processes of governmentality.

Leaning toward Stevenson (2001), this thesis takes a more sociological approach to citizenship, specifically cultural citizenship. Traditional constructions of cultural citizenship through civic education, empowerment and cultural homogeneity are challenged by globalisation, multiculturalism and mass culture (Stevenson, 2001). How to deal with these challenges and what grounds cultural citizenship are key questions. Cultural citizenship offers a promising framework to study how political subjectivity is shaped through diverse discourses and practices linked to cultural differences (Zhao & Wang, 2023, p. 76). At the same time, the Chinese government appears to pursue a culturally homogeneous Chinese entity through traditional culture (Zhao et al., 2023, p. 626), strengthened through civic education and empowerment, such as gratitude education, through which values and norms are internalised.

In this chapter, I analyse the sub-categories of the representations of government and ordinary people identified through SCA. Using DHA, I examine the construction of citizenship. In the first section, against the background of cultural homogeneity, I focus on the emphasis of responsibility in the construction of citizenship, especially the 'good citizen' model, which builds on my previous analysis of negative and positive representations. This model requires people to trust and follow the lead of the government, with certain contents adapted from wartime to disaster contexts. In the second section, I explore the justification of

these responsibilities: people enjoy rights to the service and protection of the government, and these rights, combined with gratitude education, create moral debts requiring people to fulfil their responsibilities. In the third section, I discuss the increasing invisibility of the government, and suggest that this is a strategy the government has adopted to protect its legitimacy while paradoxically reinforcing its leading role.

6.1 The Construction Strategy: Citizenship

The construction strategy in DHA focuses on the 'attempt to construct and to establish a certain national identity by promoting unification, identification and solidarity, as well as differentiation' (Wodak, 2009, p. 33). In this section, I will examine the construction strategies employed in the four works. The construction of citizenship can be dissected into the commonly accepted cores of rights and responsibilities (Wang, 2024, p. 16). While such rights and responsibilities are associated with legal status, culture plays an important role in understanding identity (Stevenson, 2001, p. 47). Within the framing of rights and responsibilities in the permitted discourse – which sets an important groundwork – I will also discuss the 'good' citizenship construction that stresses action and participation.

As mentioned in the literature review, much of the content of the idea of the citizen is absorbed into the concept of the people. Even the translation of citizen is often not *gongmin* (公民, the dictionary translation) but *renmin* (人民), with the

latter being a more valued concept in the Chinese context (Chen & Zhu, 2018, p. 144). As discussed in Chapter 4, the word *renmin* (人民), 'the people', serves as an important nomination representing ordinary people. In terms of predication, *renmin* is used solely to represent people positively, and no specific standard is given in the four works to exclude anyone from the collective. The use of the word in the four works is provided in Table 4 below.

Table 4: The appearance of '人民' (*renmin*) in the four works

Work	Total	Names of hospitals, newspapers, etc. (irrelevant)	People of the whole country
TBB	45	21	2
PF	166	24	18
D76	59	33	5
WDFP	68	15	4

Beyond the four works under study, *renmin* (人民) is considered a relatively political word in the Chinese linguistic context, one with positive connotations – for example, the country's official name is 'People's Republic of China' (中华人民共和国, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo*). In the four works, it is the term used to

refer to ordinary people in official government documents. For example, in *D76*:

> January 23 at 2 a.m. All of a sudden, Wuhan's COVID-19 prevention and control headquarters issued the No. 1 notice –
>
> > In order to do our best to prevent and control the epidemic of the novel coronavirus, effectively cut off the transmission route of the disease and virus, resolutely curb the spread of the epidemic, and ensure the safety and health of the people [人民, *renmin*], the relevant matters are hereby announced as follows: … (Xiong, 2020, p. 129)

In Chinese culture, therefore, it is a word that carries great significance. Its earliest use in the political sense is in the classic Confucian philosophical text, the *Mengzi*: 'There are three treasures of the feudal princes: land, people, and government affairs'; it is used in contrast to 'enemy' (Xia, 2002, p. 1757). Since then, it has played an important role in traditional Chinese governmentality. It also has origins in valued classic works of Marxism, tracing to Marx's belief that the people are the masters of the state – the real subjects exercising state power – in a state system where the people constitute reality, the people are free and independent, and the power of the state should belong to all of the people (Hu & Du, 2022, p. 5). Lenin further developed the idea to focus on the exploited labourer. The constitution of the PRC defines the people as 'workers, peasants, intellectuals, all socialist workers, patriots who support socialism and patriots who support the reunification of the

motherland', later evolving to 'all socialist workers, builders of the socialist cause and patriots who support socialism' (Hu & Du, 2022, p. 5). Usage of the word with such political implications appears in the four works under study:

> Victory in the People's War [人民战争, *renmin zhanzheng*] requires the people [人民, *renmin*] to have faith that their leaders work for the people's [人民, *renmin*] greatest benefit, using their knowledge and abilities to get the optimum results. (He, 2017, p. 19)

> The decisive handling of the crisis event by the state and the transparent release of the disaster situation have greatly boosted the confidence of the people of the whole country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*], making us believe in the power of the government and the strength of the 1.3 billion people [人民, *renmin*]. No matter how great the difficulty is, we can overcome it! (Wu, 2008, p. 32)

> When the people [人民, *renmin*] have faith, the country has strength. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 56)

> People from all over the country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*] supported Wuhan, including potatoes from Inner Mongolia,

> bamboo shoots from Sichuan, aquatic products from Guangdong, oyster oysters from Guangxi, apples from Xinjiang and melon dishes from Hainan. It's all just pouring in. (Xiong, 2020, pp. 516-517)

It can be inferred from the quotes that the relationship goes two ways: when people are being served by the country, they are 'the people'; when they are giving back to the country, they are 'the people'. The people are both the subject of rights *and* responsibilities. The word *renmin* (人民), 'the people', represents the standing of ordinary people in relation to the government, whether praising the government, judging the government or helping the government. As proposed by Mao, the people are the active subjects of responsibility, the creators of history and the subjects to be served (Mao, 1990). The political meaning of *renmin* makes it an important term referring to ordinary people in the construction of China's disaster culture and a keyword in the study of citizenship.

6.1.1 Construction of a Single Unity

In times of disaster, the construction of a country as a single unity tends to be stressed, especially in China, which can be considered an important context for the discussion of citizenship. For example, in discussing citizenship enactment after disasters, Shindo (2015) proposes imagining the country as one unified entity, where this construction sets the background for the enactment of citizenship.

As shown in Table 4, the phrase *quanguo renmin* (全国人民), 'people of the whole country', appears significant. In *TBB*, it is used twice to indicate that those fighting the pandemic had support from the people of the whole country (He, 2013, p. 26) and that the people of the whole country won the battle against SARS (He, 2013, p. 42). The phrase is frequently employed in *PF* to stress collective solidarity, implying deep concern for the sufferings of fellow citizens and willingness to extend generous assistance. For example:

> The earthquake happened more than 30 hours ago, but there is still no news from Wenchuan, the people of the whole country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*] are concerned about: How is Wenchuan? (Wu, 2008, p. 35)

General Secretary Hu's speech in the same book specifically highlights how people stand together in facing disasters, emphasising support from the Party and the government, assistance from the whole country, and the support of the People's Liberation Army and Armed Police Force:

> The Central Committee has called on the whole Party and the military and people of the whole country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*] to take urgent action to fight against the earthquake and relief efforts. … Please rest assured that with the care of the Party and the government, the assistance of the whole country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*], and the support of the People's Liberation

> Army [人民解放军, *renmin jiefangjun*] and the Armed Police Force, we will surely overcome the difficulties and tide over the difficulties. (Wu, 2008, p. 145)

The authors of *PF* also recall past earthquakes overcome with the help of the people of the whole country (Wu, 2008, pp. 166-167), and express hope for establishing a tradition of collective action against disasters. Similarly, in *WDFP*, the people of the whole country are portrayed as helping the people of Wuhan with all they have (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, preface), uniting in heart and spirit (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 15), and being thanked by people who received help (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 146). In *D76*, the people of the whole country are represented as caring and supportive (Xiong, 2020, pp. 128, 514), in the disaster together (Xiong, 2020, pp. 228, 253) and mourning together (Xiong, 2020, p. 522). Of course, in reality, not everyone in the country actually cared or contributed to fighting the pandemic. What matters is how ordinary people, up to the level of the whole country, are constructed as a unified group in the face of disaster. This unity is central to the construction of citizens and citizenship and relates to the discussion of imagined community in Chapter 7.

Chinese citizenship often stresses obligations (responsibilities) that contribute to nation-state building (Guo, 2014, p. 358; Yan, 2017, p. 13), where unity is stressed. This stress on unification is not uncommon in citizenship studies; for example, Corrigan and Sayer associate citizenship with governmentality, where the state's moral regulation aims for 'unitary and unifying expression to what are

in reality multifaceted and differential experiences of groups within society' (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985, pp. 4-5). In China, citizenship aims to construct a culturally homogeneous Chinese entity, that leans away from ethno-religious complexities and ideological heterogeneities (Zhao et al., 2023, pp. 626-627). Thus, I argue that before addressing diversity, culture can build consensus and unify aspects of citizenship, particularly through governmentality focusing on morality. Again, citizenship is discussed in the context of collectiveness. Ordinary people form a politically meaningful group, grounding the next discussion: how the Party and government actively mobilise the power of the people.

6.1.2 Responsibilities: From the People

Thick citizenship stresses civic virtues and communitarian participation, and individuals' responsibilities to the community (Wang, 2024). In the previous chapters, I discussed how all citizens have their corresponding positions and responsibilities in society – in traditional Chinese culture and in the relevant depictions in the four books. The term *renmin* (人民) also comes with certain responsibilities. In the specific circumstances when the people and the country are mentioned, *WDFP* states that:

> I firmly believe that the place where you stand is your China. Whatever you are like, China will be like. Whatever you are, China is it. If you have light, China will not be dark. When the people have

> faith, the country has strength [人民有信仰，国家有力量, *Renmin you xinyang, guojia you liliang*]. Come on, Wuhan! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 56)

The first half of this quote was borrowed from Cui Weiping, who published it in her (no longer visible) Weibo account, which was later cited by the account run by the national newspaper *People's Daily*. Cui later said in a speech she gave on this theme in a class at Northwest University of Political Science and Law: 'The place where you stand is your China. Whatever you are like, China will be like. Whatever you are, China is it. If you have light, China will not be dark' (Cui, 2013). It was once a very popular internet saying, and, although most do not know the origin, people often quote the saying 'The place where you stand is your China' to stress that China and its people are closely linked, implying that if one is not satisfied with China, one should start with changing oneself rather than blaming others. It can be inferred that criticism of the government is mitigated and even absent in the four works. The second half of the quote – 'When the people have faith, the country has strength' – comes from the speech Xi Jinping gave at the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017.

It can be summarised that the responsibility aspect of citizenship focuses on assigning relevant responsibility to people of different social status. The specific responsibilities of the citizens contribute to the construction of 'the good citizen'.

6.1.2.1 The Good Citizen

Culturally, citizenship may be defined as 'a set of norms of what people think they should do as a good citizen' (Dalton, 2009, p. 21). Good citizenship plays a key role in political discourses, as it maps out encouraged and discouraged behaviours (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 524). Based on the earlier discussions of negative and positive representation of ordinary people, it can be argued that an important part of disaster culture is to construct the 'good citizen'. The concept of the 'good citizen' stresses the act of citizenship rather than citizenship as a status (Pykett et al., 2010). The negative representations of ordinary people as uncooperative discussed in Chapter 4 establish the bottom line of the 'bad citizen' and serve as the 'push' force that steers people away from undesired behaviours; the positive representations of ordinary people as heroes discussed in Chapter 5 provide the model of the 'good citizen' and serve as the 'pull' force to encourage desired behaviours.

Chinese citizenship is influenced by three discourses: traditional Chinese culture; official narratives of the Chinese government, such as patriotism, moral cultivation and political ideologies; and Western-inspired citizenship (Zhao & Wang, 2023, p. 77). Wang further argues that Chinese citizenship must be considered in connection with its indigenous origins, such as Confucianism and the party-state system (C. Wang, 2016, p. 436), which I believe is crucial. In the following sections, I will illustrate the elements of good citizenship identified, which requires the people to trust and follow the lead of the government and

participate in mobilisation.

6.1.2.2 Trust in the Leadership of the Party and the Government

An important theme the authors of the four works have in common is *trust*. The trust required from the people is built upon the representation of the government as putting the people's interests first and ensuring the basic living needs of the people, as I will discuss in Sections 6.2.1.1 and 6.2.1.2. For example, in *TBB*, He proposes that an important aspect of a healthy relationship between people and the government is that people must trust the government. He quotes the Mayor of Beijing, Wang Qishan:

> 'My confidence lies in the Party's central leadership. The Party's anti-SARS guidelines haven't changed. It shows the firm and brilliant decision-making at the heart of the Party. So, in a way, our victory against SARS was already established from the outset.' The Mayor's voice echoed in my ears. (He, 2017, p. 16)

Here, the Mayor identifies the reason for his confidence as the Party's central leadership. The author adds:

> Indeed, no war can be won if its leaders do not have the proper strategy. Victory in the People's War requires the people to have faith that their leaders work for the people's greatest benefit, using their knowledge and abilities to get the optimum results. The faith

> of the people comes in part from feeling sincerely connected to their leaders. (He, 2017, p. 19)

It can be inferred from this quote that power of the people is connected to the leaders with their trust, that only having the trust of the people can the leaders mobilise the power of the people.

> Citizens can only trust a government – and a government can only achieve anything of value – if it places the lives of the people first. Beijing's quick and decisive victory against SARS owes everything to the candid, firm, transparent, and earnest leadership of the Party and the government. For this, they earned the boundless love and trust of the people. (He, 2017, p. 50)

Furthermore, the leadership is only trustworthy if it is *good* leadership, as I will further discuss in Section 6.2.1.2.

We see similar statements of trust and confidence in leadership in *PF*:

> The decisive handling of the crisis event by the state and the transparent release of the disaster situation have greatly boosted the confidence of the entire nation, making us believe in the power of the government and the strength of the 1.3 billion people. No matter how great the difficulty is, we can overcome it! (Wu, 2008, p. 32)

In *D76*, in contrast to depictions of the people as selfish and panicked in the face of disasters, deep trust in the government is clearly stated:

> They did not run away in panic. They trusted the government, their compatriots, and adhered to the order. The spirit and culture of Oriental collectivism are reflected incisively and vividly in such persistence. They all went back to their cubicles, each insisting on doing the right thing. (Xiong, 2020, p. 143)

> It's all funny and sad. But everyone is comfortable in the face of disaster. People quickly adapted to the crisis. There were no riots, no panic buying, no mass incidents. (Xiong, 2020, p. 144)

In *WDFP*, trust is also an obvious theme. Among the 17 times the word *zhengfu* (政府), 'government', is used, 10 of them are to describe what the government or regional government did, five of them advocate for the people to trust the government, and two are about actively cooperating with the government. For example:

> Here I appeal, please believe our country, believe the scientific decision of the epidemic prevention personnel! Together, lighten the load of the temporary hospital. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 5)

> Every day you stay in the temporary hospital is a day for saving your relatives, friends and villagers, and to protect your beloved

> family. Trust the country, trust the government! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 38)

> To win this 'battle', everyone is making their own efforts, believing in the country and the government. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 49)

> Everyone is making an effort to win this battle. We are not spreading rumours and do not believe in rumours, and are protecting ourselves. Trust the country and the government. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 230)

The imperative sentences and frequent exclamation marks stress the need to trust the leadership of the Party, the government and the country, intensifying the discourse's impact. This calling for trust in the country and the government can be explained through the idea that the internet is an important source of learning for people's citizenship, and practicing citizenship online can be understood as a form of identity performance (Fu, 2021). The bloggers perform the 'good citizen' identity they have learned, thus providing learning material for other netizens.

Furthermore, in the specific cultural context of China, an important fact to be acknowledged is that the government and the CPC are often regarded as one and the same. This is determined by China's political constitution: while there are a

handful of historical minor political parties, the CPC is the sole ruling party of China; important documents published by the Party are often used to instruct the government, while the good deeds of the government are often used to add to the authority of the Party. Florence and Defraigne (2012) characterise this as a 'party state'. Furthermore, an important substitute for the government is the country. In addition to being a tangible entity with specific functions, the country can be understood through the concept of the 'imagined community', discussed further in chapter 7, where strong emotional pull is essential (Anderson, 2006). Unlike the government, which may make wrong decisions during disasters, the country is not subject to criticism. Any criticism can be questioned, as everyone is responsible for the country. Tapping into the strong and positive emotions of belonging represented by the country and the exonerating discourse built upon the responsibility of ordinary people to the country, the trust required is justified.

In short, trust emerges as one of the most important themes here, especially trust in the leadership and policies of the government. Trust between the people and the government is represented as a key reason for improvements in disaster response and as both essential and actively encouraged. This is founded on the discourse that the people of China must follow the lead of the Party and the government. Many scholars believe that the leadership of the CPC is the most significant feature and advantage of Chinese emergency management (Gong, 2020; Xiao & Che, 2020). This emphasis on CPC leadership can be traced to the founding of the country, is rooted in the belief that without the leadership of the

Party there would be no PRC (Ding et al., 1981), and has been continuously emphasised through all historical periods (Yue & Zhao, 2023). The representations of trusting Party leadership, the government and the country in times of disaster continue this enduring tradition.

6.1.2.3 The Metaphor of War

War is a common metaphor used in disasters, especially the most recent COVID-19 pandemic, both within and outside China (Gui, 2023). Chinese national identity is rooted in narratives about the founding of the country, especially the people-oriented approach, government's command (Liu & Li, 2024) and the Party's leading the people to win the battles against invaders and oppressors, as discussed in Section 6.1.2.2. War has symbolic meaning in the Chinese cultural context, where unified identity and mobility are stressed. Thus, the good citizen model established in the context of war is readily transferred into the context of disaster.

In China and the chosen four works, the term *kangyi* (抗疫 'fight against the pandemic') is used to represent the pandemic response and the term *kangzhen* (抗震, 'fight against the earthquake') is used to represent the response to the earthquake. Table 5 shows the occurrence of metaphors of war, including 'war', 'battle', 'warrior' and 'fight against', in the four works.

Table 5: Occurrence of war metaphors in the four works

Work	Occurrence of war metaphors
TBB	238
PF	282
D76	297
WDFP	463

It is apparent that war metaphors are frequently used across the four works to describe the circumstances of disasters, and are quite central to the construction of disasters and ordinary people in disasters.

An important sub-frame of the war metaphor in fighting diseases, as proposed by Gui (2023), is the 'People's War'. The term *renmin zhanzheng* (人民战争, 'People's War') is a concept introduced by Mao, stressing the mobilisation of the entire country and people as the foundation of victory (Gui, 2023, p. 148). Originally referring to war organized and armed by the masses against class oppression or foreign invasion, its meaning has expanded to signify uniting, mobilising and relying on the people to confront threats (Xia, 2002, p. 1758). Closely linked to patriotic campaigns, the 'People's War' frames disaster response as a collective movement. For example, in *TBB*, a central depiction is of a people's war:

> Now I'm getting more confident. But my confidence doesn't

> depend on figures. It depends on whether the people of Beijing [全市的人民, *quanshi de renmin*] are involved in the fight against SARS. Now when you go around Beijing, everyone is doing their part to fight SARS- on every street, in every building, at every school, and within every family. You can't fail to feel moved by it. The power of a People's War [人民战争, *renmin zhanzheng*]! It's so great, seeing residents doing their utmost to fight the epidemic, all with understanding and confidence in their government. It was thanks to them that we managed to overcome the strain on our medical resources. They bought us time. (He, 2017, p. 16)

The term is used in a positive way here, acknowledging the People's War as powerful and useful in the face of disasters. The passage stresses that the government puts people's interests first, and, in return, the people trust and understand the government and its officials. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the author constructs disaster as a severe, war-like event that requires people to stand together and combine their efforts – rather than passive reliance on a few saviours. The metaphor of war taps into people's pre-established understandings of unity and mobilisation during wars, transferring the construction of the 'good citizen' from the context of war to the context of disasters.

The dominant culture of the PRC has long been pervaded by the vocabulary of war, even in times of peace. For example, in the famous debate around the national anthem, some argued to change its wartime lyrics describing China in a

moment of life-or-death struggle[8]. However, the lyrics were retained with support from Mao and Zhou Enlai (Lou, 2023; Xia & Wang, 2023; Zhong, 2022). This reflects the traditional Chinese idea of the need to remain mindful of adversity in times of prosperity (居安思危, *ju an si wconei*), which is deeply connected to the Confucian idea of living with the awareness of adversity (Xu, 2022; Zhang, 2025). According to Xu (2022), staying alert to hardships and risks is central to Confucian responsibility. Both the national anthem and the concept of People's War show China's desire to prepare its people for the worst. The Party and the government promote a culture where individuals regard themselves as part of a collective, with responsibilities to the country, ready to contribute to a People's War when necessary. Drawing from past successful war experiences, the metaphor conveys complex and intense meanings succinctly and motivates people to participate in disaster response. By transforming the 'good citizen' ideal from war to disaster, the discourse reinforces people's responsibility to the country and intensifies collectivist values.

[8] During preparations for the New Political Consultative Conference in 1949, the proposed national anthem was deemed unsatisfactory. The sixth group of the conference, responsible for drafting proposals for the national flag, national emblem, national anthem, calendar system, capital city, etc., temporarily gave up selecting it before the founding ceremony. The turning point was on September 25, when Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai presided over a symposium. Ma Xulan formally proposed temporarily using *March of the Volunteers* as the national anthem. The main point of contention was whether the lyrics, "The peoples of China are at their most critical time" should be revised. Zhang Xiruo, Liang Sicheng, and others advocated maintaining historical integrity, while others such as Guo Moruo believed it needed adjustment. Tian Han even suggested that the lyrics be entirely replaced. Zhou emphasized that the original words could stimulate emotion, and Mao finally approved temporary use of the original version. The meeting records show that after all the representatives sang together, it was unanimously approved. The next day, the review committee officially established its status as the national anthem. Wang, X. (2020). Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guoge kao [Research on the National Anthem of the People's Republic of China]. *Historical Studies of Modern Literature*(04), 41-58.

6.1.3 Summary

The responsibility aspect of citizenship is emphasised by scholars such as Faulks (2000), Guo (2022) and Yan (2017), and it is also an important theme in the chosen works. Although both governmental and public responsibilities are depicted, the books address the general public rather than the government – the government is not the subject of education here. Thus, subtly, ordinary people are shaped as the primary agents responsible for disaster relief.

Ordinary people are governed through the model of the good citizen. In Chapter 4 – pushing the ordinary people with shame and humiliation – and Chapter 5 – pulling the ordinary people through inspirational models of heroism – the general range of how people should act is mapped out, and important aspects of governmentality are discussed.

Two main responsibilities are emphasised among ordinary people, corresponding to the two advantages of Chinese emergency management proposed by Gong (2020): the centralised and unified leadership of the Party, which the people trust in and follow, and close reliance on the people to pool resources and accomplish major tasks. The latter is achieved by mobilising the people through the war metaphor. Both aspects are rooted in traditional Confucian culture: centralised authority and the concept of staying mindful of adversity in times of prosperity. These ideas also connect to the prevailing

discourses of the one hundred years of humiliation, where the legitimacy of the Party was established by defeating enemies, establishing the new country and saving people from misery. By drawing on these historical discourses, the books effectively transfer the 'good citizen' constructed in the context of war into the context of disaster.

Such construction of the 'good citizen' function as a technique of neo-socialist governmentality. It is formed on the basis of multi-layered system that draws from Confucianism and historical and cultural background, and provides a model for people to follow.

6.2 The Justification Strategy

Analysis of the justification strategy employed in the books focuses on legitimising past actions that are now questioned, thereby justifying past social orders (Wodak, 2009, p. 33). I contend that this strategy also be used to explain current social orders by tracing their historical roots. The responsibility placed on ordinary people is justified through the rights they have and the protection and service they receive. The depictions in the four books centre on two levels: valuing ordinary people, as everything is for the people, and serving the people through protecting their basic ways of life.

6.2.1 Rights: For the people

Disaster relief is not always considered the responsibility of the government or a right of citizens. For example, Dauber (2019) argues that in the United States, disaster relief depends on political context and public sympathy, and requires the recipients to prove their losses resulted from unforeseeable events rather than their own decisions. The extent of disaster relief varies by government; not all governments provide free treatment during pandemics, yet the chosen works suggest China did for both SARS and COVID-19. This gives ground for efficient disaster relief to become a source of government authority, building on the previously discussed logic that a good government is one worthy of trust and following. The representations in the chosen works show: first, everything is for the people, with the government prioritising the people's rights and interests; and second, the government protects people's basic livelihood.

6.2.1.1 Everything Is for the People

A significant representation of the rights of ordinary people and responsibility of the government identified through SCA in the four works is that everything is for the people. For example, in *The Battle of Beijing*, the author states that 'People [人民, *renmin*] can only trust a government – and a government can only achieve anything of value – if it places the lives of the people [人民, *renmin*] first' (He, 2017,

p. 50).[9] Similarly, in *PF*, Premier Wen Jiabao stresses that the leaders of the country require public servants of all levels to do everything for the people without fear of sacrifice.

> At 7 o'clock, the 'News Broadcast' quickly broadcast the Premier of the State Council, the general commander of the earthquake relief headquarters Wen Jiabao's important speech on the special plane: the Party Central Committee, the State Council requirements: leading cadres at all levels, to stand in the first line of earthquake relief, to take the lead, to lead the masses, and to do a good job in earthquake relief work. We must carry forward the style of continuous combat without fear of sacrifice or fatigue, and do everything with the people [人民, *renmin*] in mind, for the people [人民, *renmin*], and for the people's [人民, *renmin*] interests. (Wu, 2008, p. 27)

It is emphasised that the speech was given in a timely fashion on the plane and through the news, stressing the importance and urgency of the message. By directly quoting one of the highest government officials of China, it stressed that the interests of the people are paramount. The Premier also states that the requirement is aimed at the leaders of the country at all levels, from the top to the base. General Secretary Xi Jinping is also represented as putting people's lives

[9] The translation is slightly off here, as the original text suggests that the government can only gain people's trust and become capable if it places the lives and interests of the people first. He, J. (2013). *Feidian shinian ji: beijing baoweizhan [Ten-Year SARS Memorial: The Battle of Beijing]*. New World Press.

and interests first in *D76*:

> On the afternoon of January 22, General Secretary Xi Jinping evaluated the situation, put people's lives first, and made important instructions: Immediately implement strict closed traffic controls on the flow of personnel and external channels in Hubei Province and Wuhan City. (Xiong, 2020, p. 129)

Here, the people are placed in a very important position. The imperative to prioritise their interests and well-being applies not only to government officials, but also to extensions of the government such as soldiers and medical workers. For example, in *PF*, soldiers risk their lives for the people:

> On the 14th, with the intermittent heavy rain, weather conditions meant that one could not parachute down. No ground guidance, no topographic markings, no weather data. But with loyalty to the people [人民, *renmin*], on this day, 15 airborne advance force soldiers resolutely wrote their posthumous papers, and with two marine satellite phones, boarded the plane to Mao county. The fate of thousands of people in the disaster area depends on their success or failure. (Wu, 2008, p. 62)

The stress that the fate of thousands of people depends on the soldiers shows the vital role of the People's Liberation Army and also makes clear for whom the Army fights. The name *renmin jiefangjun* (人民解放军, 'People's

Liberation Army') and its variation *renmin zidibing* (人民子弟兵, 'People's Own Army', implying that the soldiers are people's sons and brothers) appear seven times in *PF*. The name is used to stress that the soldiers come from the people, are rooted in the people, and share destiny with the people (Ha, 2011). Even though this is the Army's official name, or the commonly used name, the presence of *renmin* (人民) can be seen as reinforcing its relationship with the people: it belongs to the people, it has deep connections with the people, and it protects and serves the people. We see this connection emphasised also in *WDFP*, in a doctor's rallying cry to his fellow doctors that moved many, the people are specifically mentioned as subjects to be served:

> We come from far and wide. We are fearless soldiers in white. We fought with the plague in the same trench, regardless of remuneration, regardless of life and death, for the people [人民, *renmin*], for the motherland, to die, formed as brothers and sisters in life and death. Although we will have to part one day, but from now on, we are comrades-in-arms, until forever. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 63)

Such descriptions function as both practical calls to action and emotional expressions. This can be interpreted as an accumulation of moral capital by medical workers, which can be transferred into moral debt, allowing them to then ask people to take up their responsibilities – a point I will discuss in section 6.2.1.3. Generally, this emphasis on 'everything is for the people' is perhaps best encapsulated by the title of the book about the Wenchuan Earthquake, *People*

First. It can be argued that 'for the people' is one of the core components of the constructed disaster culture, especially concerning the role of the government.

Scholars such as Li and Huang (2022) and Chen and Jiang (2022) contend that the idea of 'people first' (人民至上, *renmin zhishang*) developed from Marxism and traditional Chinese culture, and has been a priority of the CPC for over a hundred years. The idea received further support from General Secretary Xi Jinping in his speech at the 100-year anniversary of the CPC, when he declared that the 100-year history of the CPC is a history of the Party and the people's hearts and minds, breathing together and sharing a common destiny, a history of hard work and unremitting efforts to put the people first and ensure that the vast majority of Chinese people live a better life (Li & Huang, 2022, p. 3). Zhang and Yang (2023) explore the shaping process and the deepening path of the CPC's 'people first' image. They argue that the Party's persistent pursuit of national liberation, well-being, prosperity and revival – even during times of global upheaval – has been fundamental to constructing and maintaining this image. Taking the role of saving and serving the people during disasters is an important part of this process, which relates to the discussion in Section 6.1.2.2. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the discourse centring on 'everything is for the people' is highly emotional. Its ultimate aim is to foster positive emotions like public gratitude, thereby maintaining the authority of the government – a point I will discuss further in Section 6.2.1.3.

6.2.1.2 Government Intervention to Protect Basic Life

As mentioned, it is crucial for ordinary people to maintain their ordinary lives and sustain basic livelihoods. To stabilise society during disasters, the government may choose to intervene. The chosen works represent the Chinese government as taking the leading role in disaster response, with some interventions later becoming part of the expected structures for preventing or relieving future disasters.

On a basic needs level, the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics resulted in quarantines and restricted people's mobility; the Wenchuan Earthquake destroyed infrastructure, including homes and roads. In each case, people faced restricted mobility and the threat of material shortages. During SARS, panic sparked shopping frenzies and shortages (He, 2017, p. 54, 78). Similarly, during COVID-19, people stockpiled food (Xiong, 2020, pp. 130-131), the normally easy online ordering became difficult (Xiong, 2020, p. 156, 167) and people were forced to eat less (Xiong, 2020, pp. 156-157). The Wenchuan Earthquake destroyed local infrastructure, including transportation, and people were trapped in the disaster area with severe shortages of all essentials (Wu, 2008, p. 6, 51, 226). In each case, people's basic way of life was challenged, especially regarding food.

To counter these problems, the government became more directly involved with people's lives, providing help and applying regulations such as quarantine. Consequently, ordinary people's lives become more regulated by the government during disasters. In *China's Crisis Management*, Chung proposes five established

norms: 1. Prioritising prevention and preparation measures; 2. Clear assignment of duties within the bureaucracy; 3. Openness to international aid and media; 4. Deploying armed forces in time; 5. Promoting advanced technology and know-how (Chung, 2011, pp. 141-145). All five are present in the four works. For example: 1. The spread of relevant knowledge and measures of control such as quarantine (He, 2017, p. 17; Wu, 2008, pp. 18, 140; Xiong, 2020, p. 519); 2. The depictions of actions of different levels of government officials (which I will further discuss in Chapter 7); 3. Accepting international aid (Wu, 2008, pp. 200-203); 4. The deployment of armed forces (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 60, 63; Xiong, 2020, pp. 507-508); 5. Depictions of warning system (Wu, 2008, p. 18, 140; Xiong, 2020, p. 28). The deployment of the Army, the moving of essential materials and the use of different levels of the bureaucracy are how the government is shown to protect people's basic livelihoods.

In *TBB*, we are told that the government reacted quickly to material shortages, ordering supplies from cities around the capital:

> Later I discovered that Beijing had half a year's grain reserves in stock, but it would take fifteen days before it could be processed and find its way onto Beijingers' plates. The sudden onset of the fight against SARS posed a serious problem to the administration of supplies.

> After a short period of panic – 30 or 40 hours perhaps – Beijingers found that the city's stores would never go through such turmoil again as they did on the afternoon of the 24th. The shelves were once again filled with goods: instant noodles, rice, oil, salt, vinegar – as much as anyone would need.
>
> Beijing stood firm, as the people's government had stood firm. But the battle against SARS did not stop simply because the people were now well-fed. (He, 2017, p. 80)

He also writes that Beijing, in a 'battle state', performed thousands of miracles to meet shortages in a short time (He, 2017, p. 82), with the government and entrepreneurs working hard to meet people's needs. In *PF*, we are told that Secretary General Hu ordered that every effort be made to send food, drinking water, medicine, tents, winter clothes and other relief materials to the affected areas (Wu, 2008, p. 144), and further to remote disaster-affected areas (Wu, 2008, p. 149). Considerable effort is made to show how authorities stepped in to protect people's basic way of life.

Compared to SARS, the COVID-19 pandemic had higher requirements due to its longer duration and the need to deliver food to quarantined people. In *WDFP*, one blogger writes about government officials delivering food to her parents (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 18); another describes asking a company to donate food to medical workers, elders in communities and children in

hospitals (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 241) and obtaining other needed materials (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 242). The book also includes posts about volunteers working hard to deliver materials to people in need (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, pp. 244-248). In *D76*, Xiong talks about how the government guaranteed Wuhan's material needs:

> The top priority has been to ensure the livelihood of residents. The community, sunken Party cadres and volunteers have set up 'voluntary service teams for material distribution', which are responsible for the collection of residents' needs, distribution, collection and purchasing of materials. (Xiong, 2020, pp. 510-511)

> In order to ensure the daily necessities of Wuhan residents, the National Development and Reform Commission transferred a large number of daily necessities. As of February 2000, 2,000 tons of central reserve meat, 80,000 tons of rice, 80,000 tons of noodles, 120,000 tons of cooking oil, 36,000 tons of pork, 29,000 tons of vegetables, 2,900 tons of eggs, 12 million packages of instant noodles, 300 tons of ham sausage, 3,400 tons of cold meat and 1,000 tons of frozen food had been transferred.
>
> Wushang, Zhongbai, Wal-Mart, Hema Fresh and other major retailers, conforming to the principle that 'all actions listen to the

> command', corresponding to the grid, direct to the community, continue to supply group purchase of grain, oil, fruits and vegetables and milk, eggs and other high protein food.
>
> During the lockdown period, Wuhan consumed 4 million tons of water and 4.7 million KWH of electricity every day. The daily supply of water and electricity reached twice the daily demand, which was guaranteed by domestic emergency dispatching and service mechanism optimization.
>
> The people of the whole country supported Wuhan – Inner Mongolian potatoes, Sichuan bamboo shoots, Guangdong aquatic products, Guangxi River snail noodles, apples in Xinjiang, melons and vegetables in Hainan... It just keeps coming in. Chongqing has provided 400 tons of vegetables of 20 varieties, including pumpkins, potatoes and cucumbers, free of charge.
>
> More and more materials have been donated to Wuhan from all over the country. The government hall of the development zone is full of goods, which are constantly moved in and out every day. (Xiong, 2020, pp. 516-517)

These accounts show the government transferring needed materials to Wuhan and arranging for Party members and community workers to distribute them to the people. In *TBB*'s depiction of the SARS pandemic, the moving of essential

goods relies more on entrepreneurs, while in the COVID-19 pandemic, entrepreneurs are less mentioned, and the government became what ordinary people rely on – part of the expected structure for future disaster relief. In short, the government is increasingly presented as taking responsibility for mobilising and delivering materials to guarantee the basic life of ordinary people in disasters.

The deployment of military personnel is also shown to play a vital role. In *PF*, soldiers quickly clear drop sites with whatever tools they can find so supplies can be dropped into the disaster area (Wu, 2008, pp. 27-28). In *D76*, the government organises military transportation:

> Suddenly, the exciting news went viral on the Internet: In the morning, the Air Force sent a total of 11 aircrafts of three types, including Y-20, IL-76 and Y-9 transport planes, which took off from seven places including Urumqi, Shenyang, Xining, Tianjin, Zhangjiakou, Chengdu and Chongqing at the same time and landed at Wuhan Tianhe Airport. The aircraft carried 74 tons of medical supplies, as well as medical teams from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, Strategic Support Force, Joint Logistic Support Force and Armed Police Force.
>
> This is the first time for the Y-20 transport aircraft to participate in a non-war military operation, and also the first time for the Air Force to systematically dispatch large and medium-sized transport aircraft in service for emergency airlift missions. The PLA has sent

> three batches of more than 4,000 medical workers to support Wuhan in its fight against COVID-19. (Xiong, 2020, p. 508)

People are represented as excited to see the PLA coming to their rescue (Xiong, 2020, pp. 507-508). The deployment of the military is not represented as intimidation but as a highly efficient rescue method, showing it is understood as both a quick response and an expected norm in disasters.

To sum up, the role of the government is presented as crucial in disaster situations, particularly for protecting and maintaining basic livelihoods; it is depicted as holding the essential roles of control and caretaking.

6.2.1.3 Civic Education of Gratitude

As people enjoy the rights of being put first, having their interests considered, being served and having their basic ways of life protected, moral debt is accumulated, which they must repay by taking on responsibilities. This is actualised through the elicitation of positive emotions such as gratitude. Representations of gratitude in the four works are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: The appearance of words representing 'gratitude' in the four works

Work	Total	感谢 (gan xie)	感恩 (gan'en)	谢谢 (*xie xie*)	To the country/government	To soldiers/medical workers/other relevant extensions of the government

TBB	7	0	0	7	0	4
PF	42	27	9	6	0	16
D76	60	35	7	18	0	37
WDFP	265	151	23	91	2	98

Gratitude is not a significant theme in *TBB* but is relatively prominent in the later three books. Considering the book's length, it is a particularly stressed theme in *WDFP*.

In academic literature, gratitude is regarded as beneficial to society and often promoted by civic education. White (1999) argues that gratitude is an essential democratic virtue like hope, courage, trust and honesty; it plays a vital role in sustaining a healthy democracy by promoting comradeship among citizens. Gratitude can be regarded as a feeling, a moral obligation and a social requirement. A major aim of citizenship education is to widen 'the beneficent circle of gratitude and mutual recognition' (Davids, 2014; White, 1999). However, in this sense, gratitude focuses on relationships between people, which indirectly benefits the country and the government.

In the Chinese context, gratitude takes on a different meaning, as the primary object of people's gratitude is the government. Lee (2021) argues that paternalistic gratitude stems from Confucian obligations, and the CPC adopts this discourse to justify expectations of citizen obedience. Such gratitude education is

rooted in traditional Chinese culture and modern history. Like White, Zhu (2022) argues gratitude is a traditional Chinese virtue and a key part of Chinese civic education (Yi & and Vickers, 2024). Gratitude for the Party and its leaders in political discourses dates back to the founding of the country (Lin & Jackson, 2025). Affective governmentality can also be achieved through gratitude (Shoshana, 2022). For example, in the Wenchuan Earthquake, the Party's sacrifice was bound with a debt of gratitude (Sorace, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic saw a similar stress on gratitude (Xie & Zhou, 2021). Gratitude education often occurs after disasters; the aid provided by the government expects a return, through which governmentality is realised and people are urged to take responsibility (Zhang & and Zhan, 2021). White (1999) identifies two forms of gratitude: the debt account and the recognition account. In the context of gratitude education, I believe gratitude leans toward the former, generating moral debts that require repayment (Xie & Zhou, 2021), thereby justifying the responsibilities required of ordinary people and adding to the government's legitimacy. Although gratitude is often not directly aimed at the country or the government, it is often directed toward extensions of the government like soldiers and medical teams, which I will discuss in Section 6.3.

WDFP's statistics show a particular stress on gratitude. This could again result from citizenship learning and identity performance (Fu, 2021), where bloggers perform roles learned through civic education. As a collection of social media posts, *WDFP* shows a strong tendency to perform the learned identity of grateful,

good citizens. Observing this as the outcome and perpetuation of gratitude education, I argue that, in addition to being mutually beneficial between citizens, gratitude education in China cultivates a required attribute for good citizenship.

In short, gratitude education in the context of China is not simply about cultivating affections among ordinary people, but more importantly, it cultivates positive sentiments toward the government. It is a process through which the government justifies its requirements of the people. However, it cannot be ignored that this gratitude also proposes standards for the government, as its good performance must be observed before gratitude can be generated.

6.2.2 Summary

To justify the responsibilities required of ordinary people, the rights they enjoy are stressed. This occurs on the strategic level (that everything is for the people) and on the practical level (that the government protects the basic ways of life of ordinary people). This is a significant feature of neo-socialist governmentality, where the government plays a crucial role in allocating resources and serving the people. This leads to gratitude education, which, as a neo-socialist technique of governmentality, reinforces this moral debt and encourages people to fulfil their responsibilities.

Both the strategic and the practical actions the government takes to protect and serve the people, as depicted in the four books, accumulate a moral debt that

obligates cooperation in return. Gratitude education is more direct method, as it transforms this moral debt to encourage ordinary people to take up their responsibilities.

6.3 The Invisibility of the Government

Beyond justifying the responsibilities of ordinary people by stressing the rights they enjoy and eliciting gratitude, a more subtle way to ensure they fulfil their responsibilities is to avoid negative representations of the government. This involves substituting representations prone to criticism with representations that are less prone to criticism. Despite the government's role becoming more visible – such as representing itself as steady protector of people's basic livelihood during disasters, as discussed in the previous section – my analysis reveals that the government is also becoming increasingly invisible by choosing to be represented by ordinary people.

6.3.1 Government Officials: From High to Low

The government is often represented by its officials. My analysis across the four books reveals that, over the period from 2003 to 2020, the representation of government officials shifted from high-ranking government officials to low-ranking figures.

In *TBB*, only high-ranking government officials are represented. Head of state

Secretary General Hu is represented as 'warmly shaking hands and conversing with the people' (He, 2017, p. 19) on the streets of Guangdong, and Premier Wen Jiabao as 'confessing how the past few days of dealing with the SARS issue had brought him to tears' (He, 2017, p. 19) in front of the students of Peking University. The book focuses on Beijing, where the SARS pandemic was most severe. Because Beijing is the national capital and a municipality directly under the central government, its mayor is a high-ranking government official. We are told that the mayor accompanied Wen Jiabao to the outskirts of the city to examine the effects of anti-pandemic policies (He, 2017, p. 17); we are also told that, while there, he ate nothing but vegetables to make sure he stayed healthy so he would not waste any time in helping the people (He, 2017, pp. 15-16). Municipal Party Secretary Liu Qi is reported as having checked traffic intersections and talked with ordinary people and workers: 'In the five days between the 27th and the 31st, I paid particular attention to the Beijing News. I watched Liu every day, reporting from rail stations, streets, communities, construction sites, suburbs, and rural villages' (He, 2017, p. 10). The deputy mayor of Beijing also makes an appearance:

> At that moment, a young man squeezed his way into the jam-packed pharmacy. He wanted to say something to calm people down, and he tried to say something to that effect, but nobody listened. People still scrambled over each other to get their prescriptions filled. Getting a prescription was a lifeline, a ray of hope. Chen and Zheng recognised the young man – it was the

deputy mayor. (He, 2017, p. 70)

The high-ranking government officials are represented as hardworking and deeply involved in helping people on the ground.

In *PF*, most of the representations centre around high-ranking government officials, but low-level government officials also appear more frequently. An important part of the relationship between ordinary people and the government is expressed through the relationship between ordinary people and the high-ranking officials General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. Hu is mentioned 46 times in the book, and Wen 32 times. Both Hu and Wen went to the frontlines of the disaster area, directed earthquake relief work and comforted people in the disaster area. Their decisions and actions are represented as timely and crucial – as shown in the example of giving important directions from a plane – and they are depicted personally, such as showing compassion to disaster victims. They represent the government's efficiency, its valuing of the people and its human face. This is encapsulated in the statement that 'as the Premier wins more and more respect from the people, the prestige and cohesion of the Party and the government have also reached an unprecedented height' (Wu, 2008, p. 22). Thus, the government gains authority through these portrayals of high-ranking government officials as good leaders. low-level officials are mentioned twice: once for organising donations (Wu, 2008, pp. 151-162) and once for organising a volunteer team (Wu, 2008, p. 165); some are also named (Wu, 2008, pp. 154, 165). The representation still leans heavily on high-ranking government

officials, but the base level is receiving more attention. It is also worth noting that both the SARS pandemic and the Wenchuan Earthquake occurred during Hu and Wen's tenure, so the shift in representation indicates a change in political culture rather than reflecting the characters of different state leaders.

In *WDFP*, the focus is also on low-level government officials, particularly community workers – arguably the lowest tier of officialdom. Government officials are represented a total of 48 times, of which only one is of a relatively high-ranking government official of the province – but he is only shown welcoming medical workers back from the fight in Wuhan, not participating in disaster relief (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 82). The rest of the representations of government officials are about community workers and the care and help they provide for people, such as taking their temperatures and providing them with food. Continuing this trend, in *D76*, the entire Chapter 12 is devoted to a specific community – Green Island community – and its community workers. Community worker Liu Bin is the main character represented in Chapter 12, but Liu's co-workers and the detailed and difficult work they do every day are also depicted. On the other hand, no specific image of high-ranking government officer appears. Secretary General Xi Jinping is only mentioned in the official documents that set the background, without personalised representation.

To sum up, it can be argued that low-level government officials are depicted as playing an increasingly important part in disaster relief, and there has been a shift in tendency from depicting high-ranking government officials to depicting

low-level government officers. This tendency is further enforced as the government is increasingly represented by medical workers and soldiers.

6.3.2 Medical Workers and Soldiers

As shown in Table 6, the objects of representation, particularly the targets of people's gratitude, are often not the government itself but its extensions. Increasingly, the direct representation of the government is substituted by the government's deployed extensions: medical workers, soldiers and certain volunteers.

The texts show that these extensions of the government operate under the deployment and command of the government; therefore, the government should also take credit for their contributions. For example, in *TBB*, the government is represented as leading and making arrangements (He, 2013, p. 21, 23, 42). In *PF*, Premier Wen Jiabao stresses the leading role of the Party and the government (Wu, 2008, p. 27), noting that the government took appropriate measures, promptly mobilised health workers and deployed many health facilities (Wu, 2008, p. 221), In *WDFP*, the government is shown steering the wheel in the fight against the pandemic (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 231). In *D76*, members of the former First Military Medical University team, deployed to the town of Xiaotangshan to fight SARS, ask to be deployed again to Wuhan (Xiong, 2020, p. 230). They are permitted to help fight the pandemic as individuals but must follow

the command of the government. Similarly, soldiers and police can only act under government orders.

To sum up, in *TBB*, high-ranking government officials are frequently mentioned, while entrepreneurs and medical workers are represented less. In subsequent works, the latter are shown more as extensions of the government. They get the credit for fighting disasters, while the government gets credit for organising and deploying them. In *PF*, high-ranking government officials are represented, and low-level government officials begin to appear, but soldiers receive more representation. In *WDFP*, due to its nature as a collection of online diaries, the focus is mostly on doctors and nurses, patients and volunteers. In terms of government officials, those represented are mainly low-level officials, especially community workers. If *WDFP*'s focus is due to its format, in *D76*, high-ranking government officials are rarely depicted; the General Secretary remains only a slight, distant background figure without personalised representation, while medical workers and low-level government officials are represented much more frequently.

As discussed in the previous chapter, a practical reason for this representational shift might be that with the development of digital technology and social media, increased exposure also increases the risk of criticism. Xu (2016) studies how, during the Wenchuan Earthquake, the moral performance of state leaders – being compassionate, sad, participating in mourning rituals and actively deploying disaster relief – effectively stabilised the public. He also points out that

such performance depends on the leaders' instant reaction and the actual effectiveness of disaster relief, while facing the challenge of persuading the growing middle class. For example, gratitude education suggesting the residents of Wuhan should thank the Party's leadership was met with outrage, but was then quickly replaced with General Secretary Xi Jinping thanking the residents of Wuhan for their display of national spirit and sentiment (Xie & Zhou, 2021, p. 27).

The shift toward representations of ordinary people can be regarded as a different attempt to address the defects of representing the government with compassionate state leaders. Generally, this tendency of the government becoming relatively invisible does not contradict the increasing stress on its crucial leading role. Rather, it protects its legitimacy by: firstly, hiding high-ranking government officials from view, providing less evidence for public criticism; and secondly, blurring the line between the government and ordinary people, representing the government with relatively ordinary people such as community workers, medical workers and soldiers. Again, the discursive construction circulates back to the responsibility of the people: since they are properly protected and served, they should fulfil their responsibilities.

6.4 Summary

The construction of citizenship in the four works begins with the construction of unity. The introduction of culture into the realm of citizenship stresses shared

experience (Delanty, 2002, p. 64). Disasters provide a shared experience that reinforces citizenship and the imagining of a homogenous Chinese citizenship. This relates to the construction of an imagined national community (Anderson, 2006), which I will discuss further in the next chapter.

The construction also leans towards the thick citizenship model, where personal responsibility is stressed in public issues and personal morality is invoked to encourage political participation (Tilly, 1995; Wang, 2024). The good citizen model provides a set of norms mapping out desired and undesired behaviours (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Pykett et al., 2010). Responsibility is assigned to the individual through the combination of personal responsibility and public issues (Wang, 2024, p. 82). Specific requirements of the good citizen stresses trusting and following the lead of the government, becoming part of the mobilised force, and the negative and positive representations discussed in the previous two chapters that map out the pushing and pulling regulating the behaviours of ordinary people. Furthermore, the constantly mentioned metaphor of war transfers the established good citizen model into the context of disasters. The theory of citizenship, especially the model of the good citizen, is an important technique of neo-socialist governmentality.

To justify the responsibilities of citizenship and the good citizen model, the works also represent the rights of ordinary people in disasters. Disaster relief is not always considered a right of ordinary people, which makes it a source of government authority. In China, the government must be seen to protect the

people's rights and livelihood. Associated with the 'people first' discourse (Chen & Jiang, 2022; Li & Huang, 2022; Zhang & Yang, 2023), constructing the government as putting the people and their interests first reinforces its authority. Another important focus of cultural citizenship is civic education (Delanty, 2002, p. 64). Gratitude education in China stresses gratitude toward the government (Lee, 2021; Lin & Jackson, 2025) rather than between citizens, turning government protection and service into moral debt (Sorace, 2017; White, 1999; Xie & Zhou, 2021; Zhang & and Zhan, 2021), further justifying the responsibilities expected of ordinary people. This grateful citizen can also be regarded as the desired good citizen in China. As the government represents itself as doing everything for the people and protecting the people's livelihoods, its significant role is stressed. The moral debt transformed through gratitude education encourages people to take up responsibilities for collective benefit, which is also a significant feature of neo-socialist governmentality. Through this, the chapter makes a preliminary exploration of the techniques of neo-socialist governmentality.

Furthermore, beyond justifying the responsibilities required of ordinary people by stressing the government's beneficial acts, hiding the government from criticism may be another way of reinforcing its authority. Past government representations in disasters focused on state leaders (Xu, 2016), which carries risks and flaws. Shifting focus toward ordinary people may be an attempt to address such risks, including criticism (Xu, 2016). Across the four books, my analysis reveals that representations of the government changed; the general tendency moved

focus away from high-ranking government officials toward low-level government officials (especially community workers) and extensions of the government, such as medical workers and soldiers deployed by the government. A strong connection is made between the government and these low-level figures, allowing the government to take credit for their work while remaining relatively invisible and protected from criticism.

In this chapter, by examining the relationship between ordinary people and the government, I further identify the techniques of neo-socialist governmentality and relevant cultural discourses that are particularly significant in times of disasters. Building on the analysis presented in the two previous chapters, I argue that this contributes to a distinct Chinese culture of disaster.

Chapter 7: A Culture of Resilience

Introduction

In this chapter, I bring together what happens in Chinese culture in times of disaster and how ordinary people are understood to be central to the cultural response to disaster. I show how the chosen works depict what I identify as a form of cultural resilience to disaster and how this contributes to the reinforcement of an imagined community.

In terms of resilience, culture can influence people's thoughts and behaviours and, as such, can be either a source of resilience or a source of vulnerability (Webb, 2017, pp. 113-114). As mentioned in the Introduction, disaster should not be considered independent of ordinary lives but an essential part of it. This chapter examines the discursive construction of a culture of disaster, which can be understood as a culture of resilience rooted in the everyday life experiences of ordinary people. Resilience can be defined as 'the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, or more successfully adapt to actual or potential adverse events' (National Research Council, 2012, p. 16, quoted in Webb, 2017, p. 115). Lorenz (2013) contends that social resilience against disasters stresses the adaptive, coping and participative capacities of social systems, while Busic-Sontic and Schubert (2024) stress social cohesion and support. Webb lists three possible cultural sources of resilience: 1. the emergence of new values and norms such as

altruistic values and helping behaviours, especially when leading to the formation of therapeutic communities; 2. disaster subcultures among generations of regional communities; and 3. rituals such as memorials and techniques such as humour and singing (Webb, 2017, pp. 115-116). The second cultural source, focusing on regional disaster subculture, while relevant to Webb's and others' interests, lies beyond the scope of my own focus on *mainstream* culture. The first and third sources, by contrast, have particular resonance with the disaster culture identified in this study and will form key frameworks for the following analysis.

In terms of imagined community, I focus on how the chosen books build a narrative about Chinese-ness, including shared culture and memories. The concept of imagined community provides a framework for analysing the collective constructed. In the literature review, the concept of imagined community proposed by Anderson (2006) is explained as focusing on how national connections are made possible beyond physical limits. Disaster may be considered a condition that provides the threat of death, enabling the construction of an imagined community; other elements such as memory and history that demarcate a nation from its neighbours may also contribute to the construction (Wang & Goh, 2017, p. viii). Collective memory, especially of disasters, contributes to the construction and reinforcement of imagined community; the harder and more difficult the collective actions, the stronger the collective memory; and the intense emotions generated, whether positive or negative, become social glue that ties people together (Xiao & Huang, 2021, pp. 16-17).

The imagined community may be constructed and reinforced through kinship and indirect social relationship (Phillips, 2002, Calhoun, 1991, cited in Breuilly, 2016, p. 5; Putri et al., 2018, p. 567) and through rituals and symbols (Anderson, 2006; Breuilly, 2016). This corresponds with the two cultural source of resilience proposed by Webb (2017).

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the emergence and reinforcement of imagined community in times of disaster. Based on Webb (2017)'s first cultural source of resilience, through SCA, the various levels of community construction are identified. I focus on how the books depict and thus help construct a new sense of what a good resilient community looks like. Thus, these permitted books describe new values and norms emerging in Chinese society during disasters, but they also have a role in constructing those values and norms and reinforcing the idea that they are good and desirable and people should aspire to them. This eventually contributes to the construction and reinforcement of the imagined community of the nation.

In the second section of this chapter, I discuss how rituals and symbols contribute to the construction and reinforcement of resilience and imagined community. Webb's third cultural source of resilience proposes that techniques such as singing and rituals such as memorials, ceremonies and galas play an important role in the culture of resilience. Through SCA, various rituals and symbols are identified. These are also connected to the reinforcement of imagined community (Breuilly, 2016). Recently, mourning rituals have increasingly relied on

mass media (Pantti & Sumiala, 2009), breaching physical limits and further contributing to the reinforcement of imagined community. Anderson also believes that rituals such as mourning and symbols such as national anthems play an important part in the construction and reinforcement of imagined community (Vermeulen, 2009). It can be argued that both rituals and symbols are rooted in ordinary lives and, under the influence of disaster, become active and effective.

To explore how the books both describe and construct this culture of resilience centring ordinary Chinese people, DHA is useful in revealing what is portrayed and how it is talked about. Through the predication strategy, the discursive characterisation/qualification of the social phenomenon of disasters is identified and found to further implicate Chinese-ness. How disasters help to construct national identity is also of interest to this chapter, related to an important part of disaster culture: inspiring people to become 'good' citizens, as discussed in the previous chapter. Much of the power of the books in relation to these disasters comes linking directly to existing discourses about Chinese national character and making links across Chinese history. DHA is useful because it can help to unpack why the depictions of rituals are not just neutral/objective depictions of reality but part of a discursive strategy that constructs an imagined community.

7.1 A Community of Resilience

For the construction of the imagined community of the nation to be possible, people need to abstractly conceptualise others as their equals, with the construction of metaphorical kinship and indirect social relationships (Phillips, 2002, Calhoun, 1991, cited in Breuilly, 2016, p. 5; Putri et al., 2018, p. 567). As mentioned in the Introduction, the first cultural source of resilience is emerging values and norms such as altruistic values and helping behaviours that construct therapeutic communities (Webb, 2017, p. 115). I argue that it is possible to integrate the two and suggest that emerging values and norms, including altruistic values, helping behaviours and thus the establishment of kinship, may contribute to the reinforcement of the imagined community, which in turn increases ordinary people's resilience to disaster.

What cannot be ignored is that the most important community being constructed in the four works is the entire nation. In chapters 4 and 5, my analysis shows that negative representations of ordinary people focused on excluding *no one* from the possible group being criticised, while positive representations focused on including *everyone* in the possible group to become heroes. In Chapter 6, the construction of the single community of the entire nation is discussed. Based on this, I will discuss the construction and reinforcement of the imagined community in the context of disasters.

7.1.1 Disaster as a Chance to Reinforce Imagined Community

The predication strategy of DHA can also be applied to the social phenomenon of disasters, identifying its discursive qualifications that have the purpose of strengthening resilience (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017). The following analysis will show that, on top of admitting disasters as traumatic and destructive, the construction actually portrays disasters as having positive effects. The analysis will show that the narrative about trauma is played down, while the narrative about resilience is promoted. One significant meaningful construction of disaster culture concerns disaster as a chance to reinforce the imagined community.

Lorenz argues that the first way of coping with disaster is making disaster part of expectations (Lorenz, 2013, p. 16), meaning that rather than regard ordinary lives as uneventful, one lives with the understanding that disaster might happen. This relates to my argument that disaster should be regarded as part of ordinary lives. The second way of coping with disaster is to is to situate disaster 'in a teleological inevitable chain of events, whereby a former event is needed to achieve later stages of evolution' (Lorenz, 2013, p. 16). Disaster is still calamitous, but as I will show here, it is regarded as a challenging situation where people have to work together, thus reinforcing solidarity. This construction is perhaps best represented by the slogan Premier Wen Jiabao wrote on the blackboard of a school affected by the Wenchuan Earthquake: 'Difficulties revive the nation' (多难兴邦, *duo nan xing bang*) (Qi & Tan, 2008). How is the nation's revival achieved through disasters? One possible explanation is that disaster is represented as a

difficult situation that people can only overcome together; through cooperating to overcome such enormous difficulties, people are brought closer together, values and norms such as altruistic values and helping behaviours emerge, and the imagined community of the nation is reinforced.

In *TBB*, He writes that 'Beijing had completely changed. "The country's problems come first" became the pet phrase of many officials and ordinary people' (He, 2013, p. 85).[10] It is depicted that changes are brought about by the SARS disaster: people are united, fighting for the country. Similar depictions are seen in *PF*:

> Salihe, from Xinjiang, said: 'The disaster has united overseas Chinese around the world. It is incumbent on us to donate to the people of the disaster area, dedicate love and share their suffering.' (Wu, 2008, p. 200)

> After the earthquake, the Olympic flame was given a new mission to 'strengthen unity by supporting the victims' and become a fire of 'revival and hope' for the Chinese nation. (Wu, 2008, p. 203)

Here, the value and norm of helping behaviours in disaster is shown to unite people, strengthen unity and form part of the grand narrative of the country's

[10] In the translated version, the ordinary people are ignored, and the sentence stressed only government officials.

revival. In *D76*, there are also depictions explaining how COVID-19 bound people together as 'comrade[s]-in-arms':

> It's not a doctor-patient relationship in the normal sense, it's a comrade-in-arms relationship. Diseases bind medical workers, patients, their families, and society as a whole. (Xiong, 2020, p. 303)

And in *WDFP*, similar images of people coming together because of the pandemic are mirrored in the words of different bloggers:

> Surely winter will pass and spring will come. At that time, Wuhan will still be the same Wuhan, but Chinese people will be linked even closer together……Cheer up! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 49)

> At this special time, they stick to their posts, they work hard. Fortunately, instead of alienating people, the virus has made us more united and brought us closer together. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 121)

> One warm person after another, one touched thing after another, hearts closely linked together, because we are one family! Cheer up, China! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 173)

Across all four works, people are shown uniting over the disasters, and this unity

contributes to the building of the nation. Because disaster is constructed as an obstacle people must overcome together, it is also constructed that by fighting the disaster together, people learn to put the country's problems first and become united through their collective struggle.

In short, the imagined community is tied together through shared narratives of memories and overcoming difficulties together, of values and interconnected fate. And the imagined community in turn strengthens the resilience of the country to disasters. The most significant narrative here is the grand narrative of the destiny of the Chinese nation and the required unity of ordinary people. Disaster can be used as a chance to educate the people and perpetuate the idea of putting the country's problem first.

7.1.2 How are People Constructed as a Unity

Anderson stresses equal comradeship in the shaping of imagined community (Anderson, 2006, p. 15). The personal sense of national identity and belonging focuses on the imagined quality of the nation, based on indirect social relationships (Phillips, 2002, Calhoun, 1991, cited in Putri et al., 2018, p. 567). Imagined community is made possible through the construction of kinship (Breuilly, 2016, p. 5). Based on Webb (2017), it can be argued that emerging values and norms of altruism and helping behaviours contribute to the formation of the imagined community; other ways of establishing indirect social relationships

include donation, sharing of information and making emotional connections. The books show that the imagined community is reinforced through the construction of comradeship, a construction that is also extended to the books' readers. My analysis reveals that, across all four works, the unity of the people is central to the construction of disaster culture in China, and ordinary people are at the centre of this disaster culture.

7.1.2.1 People on Site

Face-to-face relationships between people at the site of a disaster are the easiest to construct. In *PF*, a close relationship is shown between ordinary people affected by disaster and the soldiers and volunteers who come to their aid (Wu, 2008, p. 84). In the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics, the construction leans on medical workers, describing a strong relationship between them and their patients (He, 2013, p. 37; SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 120; Xiong, 2020, p. 269). For example, in *TBB*, the members of the Epidemiological Survey Team offer to be the mother of a patient who lost her mother (He, 2013, p. 168). These direct helping behaviours help construct the sense of community and serve as a cultural source of resilience. On a relatively micro level, people are represented as showing humanistic care for each other, that none of the people who suffered from the disaster is alone: people around them feel for them, care for them and are ready to help them.

7.1.2.2 The General Public

A strong relationship is also constructed between people at the immediate site of a disaster (both people suffering from it and people helping to fight it) and the general public, who may be many miles away. For example, in *TBB*:

> People were more aware of prevention than ever could have been imagined before. Under the premise of self-preservation, people paid their utmost attention to their surroundings for any gap in their defences. Everyone shared a common understanding: if you want to keep yourself safe, you have to make sure everyone else is safe too. (He, 2017, p. 62)

This reflects the idea that the public and the people immediately affected are in it together to end the SARS pandemic. Similarly, in *PF*:

> Everyone is very concerned about this problem. After the Wenchuan Earthquake, relief supplies from all over the country flooded to the disaster areas in Sichuan. How do the authorities distribute the aid wrapped in love? Will the supplies finally reach the affected people? At the big warehouse in Shina where relief supplies were distributed, we witnessed the process of receiving relief supplies. (Wu, 2008, p. 30)

The entire country is shown as being very concerned about the earthquake and wanting to provide help. In the two works about the COVID-19 pandemic, we see

references to the whole country getting behind those immediately affected:

> We are very tired, but we will persist. I know we are not alone. The hearts of the whole country are with us. Where there is love, there is hope. I hope we can all stay safe until spring, until the epidemic recedes, and until families reunite. Come on, Wuhan! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 15)

> Photos, videos and messages from across the country are being shared. In order to persuade people to not go outdoors, someone walked through the streets and lanes, carrying red flags, knocking on the gong, shouting with a megaphone: 'The most important thing is safety and the best way to stay safe is to stay home! Resident friends, this kind of medicine, that kind of medicine, not going outdoors is the special medicine. Resident friends, eat sleep, sleep eat, the virus can't do anything to me.' (Xiong, 2020, pp. 143-144)

People across the country are represented as a united community that stands together in the face of disasters, from simply paying attention to the news and caring about the people immediately affected by disasters to actively taking up responsibilities to fight them.

7.1.2.3 Reciprocity: The Continued Cycle of Repaying Society

My analysis also reveals that people are not only connected across geographical space but also connected across time. For example, the Tangshan Earthquake is mentioned 62 times in *PF*:

> On the afternoon of May 12, after learning of the devastating earthquake in Wenchuan, Sichuan Province, Song Zhiyong could not sit still any longer: 'Our Sichuan brothers have been hit by the disaster, and our hearts ache. Because Tangshan has experienced the same disaster and suffering, and also received help from people all over the country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*], we must do something.' (Wu, 2008, p. 166)

> 'We in Tangshan have also suffered this disaster. We have a special feeling for the people in Sichuan. We must do something for the disaster areas in Sichuan, just as the people of the whole country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*], including Sichuan people [四川人民, *sichuan renmin*], helped Tangshan,' said the members of the team. (Wu, 2008, p. 167)

> She said: People in nursing homes are loved by society. Without that love, they might not be alive today. Tangshan received the assistance

> of the people of the whole country [全国人民, *quanguo renmin*] during the earthquake and the process of reconstructing homes. Tangshan people personally experienced the pain caused by the disaster and the family affection of 'when one place suffers from disaster, people from all directions give their support'. After the Wenchuan Earthquake, she was very sad, but she believes that the people in the disaster area [灾区人民, *zaiqu renmin*] will be able to overcome the natural disaster! (Wu, 2008, p. 191)

The people who extend help are stressed as people of the whole country, which supports the previous discussion of the stress on the entire nation as an imagined collective. Even though the people who suffered from Wenchuan Earthquake are not exactly the people who helped those who suffered from the Tangshan Earthquake, an indirect social relationship is formed, and gratitude and help are channelled through it. It is stressed here that there is a tradition of receiving help and giving back to society, and the emerging importance of place: the people who are giving help back to society are not necessarily people who have received help in previous disasters, and the people they are giving back to are not necessarily the people who helped them before. An imagined and indirect relationship is established through places, adding to the significance of place discussed in Chapter 5.

Furthermore, such a past imagined indirect social relationship may inspire the continuation of the new and of the future. In *WDFP*, three medical workers state

that they were unable to help when the SARS pandemic happened, but they look up to the medical workers who fought that pandemic and now they are following in their steps to make contributions, to protect their people, and not to leave any regrets in their lives (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 134, 161, 169). The medical workers held the same jobs and believed they inherited the responsibility, following the footsteps of the indirect social relationships they imagined.

7.1.2.4 Readers

Through certain ways of writing, the books' readers are also included in these indirect social relationships. For example, the word '我们' (*women*) and '大家' (*dajia*) are often used in the four works. '我们' usually translates to 'us', and '大家' can be understood literally as a group extended from family, but it is often loosely translated as 'everyone'. The collective it refers to is not necessarily bound by blood but can be immediate, not too large, and has a certain level of intimacy. The words imply a sort of deep and warm connection, if not an immediate family. To Billig (1995), these sorts of pronouns are also symbols of banal nationalism. This can also be associated with the perspectivation strategy of DHA, which studies from what perspective nominations, attributions and argumentations are expressed (Reisigl, 2017, p. 86) and how it works to appeal to the audience (Tang & Li, 2024, p. 10). In the four works, it can often be seen that the perspective represents itself as representing the readers. This can also generate a feeling of inclusivity for them.

In *WDFP*, the word *dajia* (大家) sometimes refers to the readers of the posts, as the instant and public nature of the posts determines that the bloggers are speaking to the readers in conscious interactions. For example:

> Yesterday, the colleague in charge of contacting the transport of protective materials sent pictures. SF Express outlets were filled with donations from all over the world, including overseas Chinese enterprises and institutions, star fans, and individuals who donated anonymously. In recent days, some friends have been contacting me, hoping to find channels for donation. Thank everyone [大家, *dajia*] again! There is a need to remind everyone that: at present the hospital has a strict model of medical protective materials they ask for, the standard verification of the protective products cannot be used in clinics, can only be stored or distributed to the low-exposure population, please be sure to check the requirements when you [大家, *dajia*] donate! Ling Chumian, on behalf of the frontline medical staff in Wuhan, would like to thank everyone [大家, *dajia*] for your attention and support! Gratitude! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 3)

This expressed the gratitude the blogger has for people who donated. Of course, not all readers donated, yet everyone is included.

> In times of crisis, panic is worse than the destruction caused by the virus. The shelters were built to cut off transmission routes as much

as possible, and to allow patients with mild symptoms to have closer physical monitoring and a greater chance of recovery. The establishment of this new model is almost unprecedented, and the preparations and practical operation are bound to be fraught with difficulties. However, there is no doubt that life support and medical services will slowly catch up, and many of the shortcomings exposed now will be solved one by one. Please be patient and understanding![11]

In this appeal, please believe in the country,[12] believe in the scientific decision of epidemic prevention personnel! Let's work together[13] to 'reduce the burden' of the cabin. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 5)

By using the word *dajia* (大家), a sense of intimacy is created, a sense that the blogger is one of them, by their side or on their side; the post is aimed at appeasing people's anxiety and panic under the difficult circumstances, suggesting that they are not alone.

In *D76*, Xiong takes further steps to ensure this feeling: sometimes, when he quotes medical workers and other experts, he leaves out the quotation marks. For example:

On the same day, the Wuhan Municipal Committee and government wrote an open letter to citizens, expressing that the epidemic

[11] The word '大家' (*dajia*) is left out in the translation, but the advocation is aimed at everyone.
[12] The word '大家' (*dajia*) is left out in the translation, but the advocation is aimed at everyone.
[13] The meaning is translated from '大家' (*dajia*).

> prevention and control situation is still grim, and everyone is responsible for the prevention and control of the epidemic, and everyone can contribute to the prevention and control. Wuhan is a city that has the courage to face difficulties and constantly overcome them. If we [我们, *women*] work with one heart and one mind and do a good job in prevention and control, we will surely win the battle against the epidemic. Start from me, start from now, start from every health habit. You can, I can, Wuhan can! (Xiong, 2020, p. 90)

> She called Gao Gucheng, asked him to go find supplies together, as they must ensure the alcohol and disinfection materials' supply for obstetrics and gynaecology during the pandemic. Newborns are the hope of every family. We [我们, *women*] want to escort the coming of new lives. (Xiong, 2020, p. 398)

Without the quotation marks, the readers naturally include themselves as part of the 'we'. This makes people connect with the medical workers more easily, both with the decisions they make and the emotions they feel. It shows how united the medical workers were in the face of the disaster, how hardworking they were and their self-sacrificing spirit, and it makes readers feel that the medical workers are ordinary people and close to them as well.

Furthermore, the word *women* (我们, 'we or us') appears 364 times in *PF*,

which on average equates to more than once per page. Nonfiction works usually use a third-person perspective to lead the narrative, but this book leads the narrative with '我们'. The word does appear in direct quotes, but the reason it appears so many times in the book is because the abstract collective is the protagonist. For example:

> Let us [我们, *women*] remember his historic description – 'I am near-sighted, my glasses are gone, I could only see that everything around was enveloped in a huge cloud of smoke, I wiped my eyes, the whole county had disappeared, not a single house.' (Wu, 2008, p. 5)

> Was it a weapon with which children try to dispel their fears? We don't know, but that's exactly what singing did in the lonely city. (Wu, 2008, p. 9)

> If we add up the buried, the dead and the rescued, we [我们, *women*] can roughly estimate that more than 63, 000 people were buried in Sichuan province on May 12th (some of whom may have died instantly). The reason we [我们, *women*] count this number is we [我们, *women*] want to know, after the earthquake, when roads and communications to the isolated city had not been opened and there was still a lot of speculation, how many people experienced that

moment of great pain but expressed only strength. (Wu, 2008, p. 11)

The examples go on. In conclusion, the word '我们', representing the distantly imagined collective of the people of China, serves as a perspective that describes the site of the disaster, showing what happened and how people reacted. As the narrative stresses 'we', the reader is instantly integrated into a collective: all the facts 'we' gathered, all the sentiments 'we' felt and all the conclusions 'we' drew include the reader as well. Similarly, in *TBB*, the writer also speaks to the readers directly at the very beginning of the book:

> In the spring of 2003, Beijing, China, was like a city of terror, a city of plague and a city facing death. I believe all the people who were in Beijing at that time had the same feelings as me. At that time, it seemed as if we felt that the world was about to die out and humanity would become completely extinct… Because every day we live in suffocating air, in this ancient city where there is no place to hide, and between ourselves and the world of fear we have set for ourselves.
>
> Ten years flies, ten years ago feels like yesterday – we seem to have just turned a page.
>
> Ten years flies, ten years feels like a few centuries ago – we have forgotten it. (He, 2013, p. 1)

While such use is not as strong as in *PF*, it is still apparent that the author consciously engages with the readers, thereby hoping to appeal to them and warn them not to forget the lessons learned from the disasters.

In short, the authors actively try to construct the readers as part of the imagined community by including them through certain terms. They may also be a general collective that is being praised or thanked. Because it is impossible to know all the members of even the smallest imagined community, it is possible that the general descriptions or praise applies to some readers, and the indirect social relationship will have a chance to connect to all readers. By including these readers in the imagined community, the authenticity of the representation is reinforced.

7.1.3 Summary

Disaster serves as a threat of death that brings people together within an inclusive culture (Wang & Goh, 2017, p. viii). To increase resilience against disasters, one important way is to situate disaster as an inevitable step leading to evolution (Lorenz, 2013, p. 16). Relating this to the first cultural source of resilience – forming community based on shared values and norms – and Anderson's theory of imagined community, it can be argued that an important part of Chinese disaster culture is the unity of the people brought about by disaster and the national

regeneration this unity leads to. This process constructs disaster as meaningful, and the elements of loss and devastation are thereby mitigated.

Imagined community is made possible through deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson, 2006, p. 15). The four works depict several ways of constructing such kinship: face-to-face, across space, across time, and by appealing to readers. Through these constructions, disaster culture is able to transcend time and space as a complex web of meaning and narrative that includes people from all places and carries on through time.

Altogether, these constructions aim to create an imagined community that people feel they can be a part of and rely on. Furthermore, this discourse constructing the imagined community of the entire nation as a desirable community is also a technique of governmentality. I argue that it is not only a community people believe they are a part of, but also a community that aims to make people *want* to be a part of it. In other words, the construction of imagined community is not only based on what people have in common, but also on what benefits people. When a sense of belonging is felt, further requirements can be proposed to the members of the community, as shown in the previous chapters.

7.2 The Important Role of Creative Activities and Rituals

Rituals and symbols contribute to both the construction and reinforcement of imagined community and cultural resilience. The third source of resilience

proposed by Webb (2017) is rituals such as memorials and techniques such as humour and singing. Anderson also regards rituals and symbols as important in the construction of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006; Breuilly, 2016). Furthermore, disasters create a strong need for ritual to protect the existing political order and social values (Xu, 2016, p. 413). Thus, some of the significant rituals performed during disasters may have political meaning. In the following sections I will discuss the rituals, symbols and other relevant creative activities depicted in the four works – singing, mourning rituals, certain ceremonies and galas – and how they participate in reinforcing imagined communities and contribute to the construction of resilience.

7.2.1 Singing

On a spiritual level, disaster creates a highly stressful and desperate environment. One important activity mentioned in all of the works is singing songs together, which seems to serve as a coping mechanism. In *PF*, singing is mentioned multiple times. Three songs are mentioned as being sung by people who suffered from the disaster: a child's song (Wu, 2008, pp. 9-10), a popular pop song (Wu, 2008, prologue, p. 100) and the national anthem, *March of the Volunteers* (义勇军进行曲, *yiyongjun jinxingqu*), which is mentioned eight times in the book. For example:

> He saw some of his classmates dead not far away, blood everywhere, and fear made him cry.

> It was at this time that he heard some students nearby singing a familiar tune, the Chinese national anthem, 'March of the Volunteers'. Usually, every day when students do morning exercises, they sing the national anthem, at that moment, he couldn't help singing along, a voice into two voices, three voices... It became the voice of a group of children. This is probably the most exciting version of 'March of the Volunteers' in the world. Did you hear it thousands of miles away, anxious netizens?
>
> Is it a weapon with which children try to dispel their fears? We don't know, but that's exactly what singing does in the lonely city. (Wu, 2008, p. 9)

It is worth noting that the national anthem is stressed as being sung every day at morning exercises, which is a classic example of banal nationalism. The song, we are told, gives them strength at the most difficult times. *D76* also mentions people singing together for similar reasons. People are described as singing the national anthem together in quarantine (Xiong, 2020, p. 141, 153-155), and released patients sing *Me and My Country* (我和我的祖国, *wo he wo de zuguo*) together on the bus home (Xiong, 2020, p. 486).

Both the national anthem and *Me and My Country* show a strong emotional connection between ordinary people and the country; both works represent the people as gaining strength from singing these songs, especially those related to

the country. Anderson regards a national anthem as a physical realisation of the imagined community based on unisonality (Anderson, 2006, p. 164). Under high-stress, high-risk situations such as disasters, singing songs together strengthens ties between people and contributes to the construction of imagined communities and the reinforcement of patriotism and cultural nationalism. The descriptions of such activities in the four works stress the construction of these emotional ties, extend them to the readers and construct the song-singing activity as a norm in times of disasters.

The prevalence of songs such as *March of the Volunteers* and *Me and My Country* is an obvious sign in Billig's theory of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). Billig discusses how worshipping American songs can influence the people of Philippines' perceptions of the United States (Billig, 1995, p. 134). Hummel furthers the discussion and argues that the national anthem serves as a significant national symbol that unites and transcends people, represents the identity and character of the nation, invokes strong emotions and helps internalise national identities (Hummel, 2017). Songs like *Me and My Country*, though they do not have official status, serve similar functions due to their popularity and the strong patriotic emotions they invoke. Furthermore, I have argued above that disaster situations are not excluded from ordinary lives; and, in the literature review, I compared disaster to Lefebvre's understanding of festival as an intensified ordinary lives (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 187). Song singing is an example of this. For this activity to happen, people must have already learned to sing the songs; therefore, these

songs are imbedded in ordinary lives and only burst out along with intense emotions under the circumstances of disasters. Such songs are imbedded in people's ordinary lives through activities such as school flag-raising ceremonies, various parties and television shows that repeatedly play or perform them, eventually making them well-known and associated with intense patriotic emotions. These activities are also very familiar to the books' readers, so it is natural for them to feel part of the group with which they share such profound cultural experiences. Thus, the readers are encouraged to internalise and uphold the values as well. The banal nationalism accumulated during ordinary times bursts out under the extreme circumstances of disasters, becoming a strong source of resilience while further internalising patriotism and national identities.

7.2.2 Mourning Rituals and Memorials

Another important activity related with disaster is, unsurprisingly, mourning rituals and memorials. In all of the disasters under discussion here, many people died. The number of fatalities in the SARS pandemic is 349 (ChinaGovernmentNetwork, 2005), in the Wenchuan Earthquake over 90,000 people are dead or missing (Wu, 2008, flyleaf), and in *WDFP* the number of deaths is 4,633 (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 319). Durkheim argues that through rituals, people interact intensely and get lost in the group's emotions, and collectives and social wholes are strengthened (Wagoner & Bresco de Luna, 2021, p. 199). In certain cases, such as

after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, national sentiments may present as strong (Wagoner & Bresco de Luna, 2021, p. 200). Essentially, collective memories and identities can be connected to such practices of grief (Wagoner & Bresco de Luna, 2021, p. 197). Simko contends that such rituals have the power to 'ameliorate grief, foster solidarity, and restore trust in the social' (Simko, 2021, p. 111). Recently, mourning rituals have become increasingly reliant on mass media (Pantti & Sumiala, 2009). Such rituals play an important role in eliciting people's emotions and strengthening social solidarity.

Contemporary disasters demand that immediate and intense attention be paid to memorials. In China, since the Wenchuan Earthquake, such memorials have tended to focus on ordinary individuals rather than public figures, and they have even become compulsory (Simko, 2021, p. 110). TBB lacks depictions of memorials because they are a measure that was adopted after the Wenchuan Earthquake when, for the first time in the five thousand years of Chinese history, the deaths of ordinary people were mourned nationally (Wu, 2008, p. 182), with national flags at half-mast and a national mourning day established (Wu, 2008, p. 196). However, mourning is still an important theme in *TBB* – the Chinese name of the book is actually 'Ten-year Memorial', suggesting that the book itself is closely connected to mourning. The silent mourning ceremony is mentioned 49 times in *PF*, for example:

> As the 19th, 20th and 21st were designated as national mourning days, the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games

> suspended the torch relay activities in Ningbo, Jiaxing and Shanghai after the torch relay in Hangzhou on the 18th. At 14:28, the first team of the Beijing Olympic Torch relay operation team collectively observed 3 minutes in silence for the compatriots who lost their lives in the Wenchuan Earthquake. At the same time, the Beijing Olympic Torch relay car team sounded their horns in mourning. When the moving subway came to a halt, pedestrians stopped in their tracks, and the bustling city fell silent in an instant, the clock on the Shanghai Bund Customs House pointed to 14:28. At this moment, the 17 million people living in this city, in their respective positions, with the same feelings, looked up at the sky in the name of the country and as citizens, bowing their heads in silence. The whistle was long and resounding, to mourn the souls of the deceased, to pay tribute to the unyielding lives, and more importantly, to inspire the Chinese nation to forge ahead. (Wu, 2008, p. 192)

Later paragraphs show that, beyond Shanghai, people from the entire country participated, and in the quote, the identity of citizenship is stressed. In *D76*, Xiong also describe a mourning ceremony for people who died in the pandemic (Xiong, 2020, pp. 525-526). The books show that through participating in mourning ceremonies, people share one of humankind's deepest emotions and thus become closer to another. Similar depictions of mourning ceremonies appear in *WDFP* (for example, SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 10, 105).

Such mourning ceremonies are often associated with the traditional day on which Chinese people mourn the dead – the Qingming Festival – another reason we should see disaster as being deeply connected to festivals. In *D76*, Xiong describes the mourning during the Qingming Festival:

> China has designated Qingming Festival, April 4, as a National Day of Mourning for those who lost their lives in the fight against the new coronavirus. National flags flew at half-mast across the country and at diplomatic missions abroad, and public entertainment activities were suspended nationwide. People across the country witnessed a three-minute silence from 10:00 a.m. Cars, trains and ships honked their horns and air raid sirens blared.
>
> Qingming, the sun is particularly strong, shining so bright that people cannot open their eyes. Wuhan is solemn everywhere. At 10 o'clock, cars, trains and ships wailed all over the city, air raid sirens rang out across the Yangtze River, and people stood in silence, tears in each other's eyes. In Wuhan, more than 3,800 people did not make it out of the spring of the Year of Gengzi due to COVID-19. Squares, communities, hospitals, cemeteries, streets... there were mourners everywhere. Tears, flowers, pictures, words... there was sadness everywhere.

> Although Liu Bin knew that the air raid siren would sound at 10 o'clock, but when it actually sounded, his heart was still surprised. All the cars on the road stopped, and the people in the cars stood on the side of the road and bowed their heads in silence. He felt that the air in Wuhan was frozen, and the pain in his heart submerged him like the darkness and the tide. Three minutes of whining and heart-wrenching such that people could not breathe. His tears burst from his eyes. Past things like a movie again in front of his eyes, although he did not experience life and death, he experienced the grief and joy the epidemic brought. (Xiong, 2020, pp. 525-526)

This highly emotional depiction of the mourning ceremony engages with readers through empathy. The stressing of the Qingming Festival gives people good reason to mourn, even though they may not have directly experienced life and death during disaster themselves, like the character Liu Bin in the quote. A similar description appears in *WDFP*:

> Qingming, the whole country mourns the souls of the heroes. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 10)

> Today is Qingming Festival and a day of national mourning.
>
> Experienced a cold winter, our team lost a few great predecessors. They stayed in that winter, but let more people move on to the spring.

...

Today is a special day.

Honour the heroes who left their lives in the cold winter and fire, also mourn the compatriots who died in the COVID-19 pandemic. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 105)

Why is the home country prosperous, why are the people safe?

Ordinary people are not selfish. Ordinary people fought this country's disasters.

Honour the heroes, mourn the dead.

On April 4th, 2020, the Qingming Festival, in order to express the deep condolences of the people of all ethnic groups in the country for the fight against COVID-19 pandemic, the national mourning activities are held today. There were men and women who gave their lives in this battle, and it is because of them that we won this war. We are so touched, grateful, thankful and grateful. Thank all those who have contributed and sacrificed in this war. Grateful for our country. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 157)

Simko argues that rituals require ritualisation and narrativisation to produce the intended effect (Simko, 2021, p. 111). In the case of mourning rituals, the honking

of car horns and bearing of flowers are rituals people participate in that elicit strong emotions in them and give them a sense of contribution and belonging. The mourning rituals are attached to existing mourning traditions and constructed as part of the imagined community narrative, where lost lives are mourned as one's own people, even if one did not know them personally. The pandemic mourning ceremony only added new losses to an old tradition, and, thus, loss and trauma were incorporated into the ordinary life people were familiar with. It is stressed that the entire nation participated in this mourning ceremony together, and that the strong emotions evoked by the mourning rituals brought people closer together and strengthening the solidarity of the nation.

Online mourning rituals play an increasingly important role in China today. As a book published by one of the country's biggest social media platforms, *WDFP* provides statistics on participation in mourning online:

> On April 4, 2020, the topic of 'mourning' on Sina Weibo had 4,688,059 posts, 7,431,602 posts, 61,19448,794 readings, 74,593,667 interactions, and 25,167,730 retweets. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 233)

Clearly, levels of participation in online mourning are very high. Anderson places great importance on print capitalism's capacity to create a national population's simultaneous consciousness of events (Anderson, 2006, pp. 13-15) and to promote a national print-language (Anderson, 2006, pp. 39-40). Contrary to

Anderson's belief that print capitalism erodes cultural traditions and results in nations, scholars such as Smith (1986) argue that cultural traditions – including myths, symbols, values and memories – are fundamental to the construction of nations (Shamis, 2025, p. 4). It is not the medium that carries the information that matters, but the information itself that is crucial. Shamis (2025), drawing on Stiegler's Theory of Epiphylogenesis, which describes the relationship between technology and culture, argues that changes in media forms also result in changes in language. Shamis further extends Anderson's theory, observing that the vital role once played by print media has been replaced first by electronic media and then by digital media. As national awareness and media develop, language is gradually supplanted by the narrative it represents and that is repeated by the media. Technology, as an epiphenomenal system, continuously transforms culture. In other words, with each media revolution, different discourses are repeated and propagated.

Social media has profoundly changed people's usual ways of mourning, emotional communication and dealing with loss and trauma. Online mourning rituals breach geographical boundaries, creating a strong sense of solidarity among dispersed individuals and thereby reinforcing the imagined community of the nation. This can be seen as further evidence of the continued relevance of the imagined community in the digital age. By participating in these emotionally intense activities online, people transcend geographical boundaries and strengthen their bonds within a largely imagined collective. They construct virtual

yet potent relationships through the internet. To this day, every year on the anniversary of the Wenchuan Earthquake (May 12), people continue to participate in official and unofficial mourning activities, both online and in person. This mourning ritual has become an important annual tradition. Each year, the heroic stories of the soldiers, volunteers and rescuers, along with narratives of how the entire country provided help, are retold. Over time, the disaster culture becomes deeply impressed on public consciousness. Again, this Memorial Day tradition can be compared to the celebration of festivals and identified as part of the construction of banal nationalism. Repeated yearly, it becomes normalised as part of ordinary life, while simultaneously reminding people of the heroic deeds performed during the disaster and the solidarity of the nation, thereby helping them internalise these constructions.

7.2.3 Unlock Ceremony and Send-off Ceremony

Beyond mourning, the COVID-19 pandemic saw two new forms of ceremony emerge. The 'unlock ceremony' celebrated the end of quarantine, and the 'send-off ceremony' saw people line the streets and gratefully bid goodbye to the medical teams deployed to combat the pandemic. Academic studies of these ceremonies are absent, partly because the unlock ceremony is exclusive to the COVID-19 pandemic, while the send-off ceremony, though present in other disasters like forest fires, has simply lacked academic attention. However, these

ceremonies are similar to in-person mourning rituals, as they are activities people participate in that involve intense emotions and strengthen solidarity. In *D76*, Xiong describes the unlocking of Wuhan:

> Unlock, Wuhan had been waiting too long! Wuhan is a city of heroes, and the people of Wuhan are heroic people! At a time when the epidemic had been won at great cost, on a day of mixed emotions, we all needed a ceremony, and everyone needed a ceremony, to end these 76 extraordinary days. However, after the Qingming mourning, there is not a proper way, the only thing could get it done was the unsealing ceremony.
>
> Liang Yifeng understood the importance of this moment, he was going to use a meticulous attitude to achieve all the work to the ultimate. He had to live up to these days and nights, and live up to the more than 9 million people who were still trapped in the city of Wuhan. The city needs comfort and the strength to regenerate. (Xiong, 2020, p. 533)

As the pandemic is compared to a fight, the unlock ceremony is regarded as a much-needed 'win', and the people need it to celebrate their heroic acts and their victory. This again confirms that for people in disasters, certain rituals are important to inspire and comfort.

The send-off ceremony is another important ceremony marking the end of

some disasters. *TBB* does not mention them. *PF* also lacks such depictions, though we know that send-off ceremonies did happen during this time (Duan et al., 2018). In the books about the COVID-19 pandemic, the send-off ceremony is emphasised. For example, in *D76* we hear the following account:

> At 9 o'clock on March 31, Liu Bin attended the send-off ceremony of the Beijing medical team. A serious patient surnamed Huang in Green Island Garden was treated by the Beijing medical team, the 138 medical workers in total treated 220 patients. Liu Bin was especially grateful to the medical team for risking their lives to save Wuhan at the most critical time. Plus the West Hospital of the Union Medical College Hospital they rushed to help was a close neighbour to the community, he had to come to the send-off.
>
> At the gate of the Mingde Hotel, where the Beijing medical team stayed, a red banner reads, 'Warm farewell to the victorious return of the Beijing Medical Team helping Wuhan!' Someone in the street unfurled a huge banner: 'The people of Wuhan thank you forever!' 'The fight against Wuhan epidemic, grateful to have you!'
>
> Members of the medical team wore red coats, volunteers wore red vests, and the red national flag and team flag were waved. The scene was 'flaming red'. With the song 'Listen to Me Say Thank You': 'Thank you, thank you, to pass happiness...' Volunteers and children line up

> to perform a gesture dance to the doctors and nurses, bowing constantly. Nursing staff from the West Hospital of Wuhan Union Medical College Hospital also performed a farewell show. At the warm and touching moment, many people shed tears.
>
> At the end of the performance, everyone shouted: 'Thank you for fighting for Wuhan!' (Xiong, 2020, p. 524)

The quote can go on, as Xiong dedicates considerable length to the send-off ceremony, writing extensively about people lining the streets, holding up banners and shouting their thanks to the medical teams. The colour red, which is emphasised, is also a significant symbol, as it represents the country, revolution, sacrifice and victory (Huang, 2018). Generally, the send-off ceremony shows the gratitude of the people toward the medical workers.

As a book that focuses on the fight against the pandemic and stops the day before unlocking, *WDFP* does not include direct representations of the unlock ceremony or the send-off ceremony of the medical workers, but several glimpses of these ceremonies are recorded:

> Since last night, we have been enjoying the highest courtesy given to us by the people of Wuhan. Some volunteers even drove to the downstairs of the hotel in the middle of the night to give us a ride and waited until morning. Some Wuhan people rode bicycles from home since more than an hour earlier just to see us again!

The simplicity and kindness of the people of Wuhan brought tears to my eyes, and the gratitude of the people of Wuhan brought tears to my eyes.

When the plane landed at Taoxian Airport, the civil aviation people used their highest etiquette 'through the water gate' for us as welcome!

The whole way, all green light! Hometown people spontaneously formed a greeting team to wave to welcome us and salute us with whistles! This is the people of Liaoning Province welcoming us home and give us the highest courtesy!

Whether in Wuhan or Liaoning, we all share of the same roots in China. We all greet people with the highest politeness. Everything we do strikes directly at the softest part of our hearts. (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, pp. 68-69)

Yesterday, 41 medical teams, 3,675 members have left in an orderly manner. When I saw the people of Wuhan and the leaders of relevant functional departments bidding farewell to the members, I could not help but shed tears again. Because I have seen the deep gratitude of the people of Wuhan! Many times for those who have the courage to lend a helping hand, the difficulty is not terrible, the danger is not to

be afraid, if you know me, I can sacrifice myself for you in the time of crisis! (SinaWeibo & SinaRead, 2020, p. 165)

Potentially, these ceremonies establish a relationship between the people who fight on the frontline to save others during disasters and the people who are being saved. This further benefits relief efforts in future disasters, strengthening the the community's resilience. Those who received strong gratitude specifically state that because of it, they feel gratitude in return and are willing to sacrifice themselves – a crucial aspect of the imagined community. Contrary to mourning rituals that bond people through grief, the emotions stressed here are happiness and gratitude. These ceremonies, drawing on people's most intensive positive emotions, bond people closer together. The intense expressions of gratitude also show that people are bonded closely through disasters. These ceremonies provide a chance for the helped and the helpers to communicate with each other face-to-face, and the recordings of these communications – whether in writing or video clips spread over the internet – serve as direct evidence of people's gratitude toward those who helped them during the earthquake and the pandemic. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that gratitude is part of civic education; making the send-off ceremony part of the tradition gives another chance to show and practice people's gratitude. Again, this strengthens the ties of the imagined community.

7.2.4 The Television Gala

Another activity closely related to mourning ceremonies is the television gala. Abundant research has been done on the Chinese Spring Festival gala. Starting with the 1983 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, such events have become important opportunities to shape nationalist discourse (Wang, 2022) by creating public memory (Pan, 2010). These galas may include political marketing with intense emotions to construct a cultural nationalism that appeals to the middle class, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the Party and the government through a national identity bound with culture (Cai, 2014). Audience education occurs mainly through articulation and embedding (Feng, 2016), emphasising themes of unity, stability, patriotism (framing the nation as a big family) and praise for the Party, the military and the people (Rydholm, 2005). A distinct research gap, therefore, exists regarding the role such galas play in disaster culture.

In *PF*, a gala specifically dedicated to the earthquake is represented as one of the most important post-disaster ceremonies:

> With little entertainment, the evening was more about storytelling; There were few laughs, and the party brought more tears.
>
> This is the CCTV disaster relief party 'The Dedication of Love' held at 20:00 on May 18, 150 hours after the Wenchuan Earthquake. The party, sponsored by the Central Propaganda Department and other seven ministries, CCTV1, 3, 4 broadcast live, more than 1000

> celebrities from all walks of life performed on the stage, and raised funds on site.
>
> The touching story of the disaster area made almost everyone at the party – including the central leadership led by Li Changchun, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, guests from the cultural and art circles, and even photographers, journalists, and security guards – shed tears.
>
> In just four hours, 1.514 billion yuan was raised at the event, and 18.35 million yuan was donated by the telephone hotline. (Wu, 2008, p. 158)

This gala served as an important communication channel to people across the country, sharing stories and facilitating donations. It is also worth noting that many songs were sung, such as *My Country* (我的祖国, *wode zuguo*), *I am Chinese* (我是中国人, *wo shi zhongguoren*), *Tomorrow will be Better* (明天会更好, *mingtian hui genghao*) and *May We All be Blessed with Longevity* (但愿人长久, *danyuan ren changjiu*). These songs are deeply connected to Chinese culture, national identity and the relationship between the people and the country. The gala is an important vehicle for emotional involvement and active engagement, reinforcing people's national sentiment and strengthening their relationship with the country. Similarly, these galas can be compared to festival galas, and the songs, as key performances, stimulate people's emotions, as discussed in previous sections. Although galas are not mentioned in the other works, it is important to recognise

that they build the foundation for activities – such as communal singing – that are introduced and embedded in ordinary life, enabling people to bond during disasters.

7.2.5 Summary

Creative activities, such as singing, and rituals, such as mourning ceremonies and galas, are a crucial part of disaster culture. First, they represent an important cultural source of resilience, as proposed by Webb (2017). This resilience is closely connected to incorporation into the imagined community; these activities and rituals help people deal with negative and positive emotions, providing familiar narratives such as patriotism and grief traditions as a framework for understanding.

Second, creative activities and rituals contribute to the reinforcement of imagined community and the internalisation of patriotism and national identities. In times of crisis, rituals became increasingly important, serving as emotional release and communication, binding people together through collective memory and intense emotions (both positive and negative), reinforcing social values and strengthening social solidarity. Anderson (2006) emphasises the role of symbols in the construction of imagined community; national anthems and songs with similar functions, rituals connecting both tradition with the digital age, the collective memory of trauma, gratitude and even the disaster events themselves

can be regarded as symbols that reinforce the imagined community.

Third, I argue that the activities are essentially similar to festive activities. Cultural activities like singing, deeply emotional engagements like mourning ceremonies and galas, and celebratory events like unlock and send-off ceremonies are all designed to mimic festivals. Festival theory can help explain the significance of these activities in disasters. Lefebvre argues that festivals are not separate from everyday life but represent a more intense version of it, and have incredible power because they create a sense of community and strong emotions through specific ceremonies (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 187). Similarly, although the core of these activities may be sombre, they resemble festival activities in their aim to generate positive feelings, transforming a disaster from a negative event into an opportunity for people to bind together.

Furthermore, certain cultural activities, such as specific songs and memorial days, are rooted in ordinary life and are part of the construction of banal nationalism proposed by Billig (1995). Repeated elements, like songs, become commonalities between strangers during disasters, allowing people to connect and further establish these connections on a nationalistic level. In other words, representations of people connecting with each other through songs and memorial days imply the presence of these everyday nationalist activities in their ordinary lives. In situations like disasters, these commonalities allow people to connect with each other, and because the connection is based on nationalist activities, people's national identities are further strengthened.

7.3 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on an important aspect of disaster culture – resilience and its relationship with ordinary people. The cultural sources of resilience correspond with the construction and reinforcement of the nation as an imagined community. Essentially, all the discourses constructing ordinary people and disaster lead to this final goal: constructing the ordinary people of the entire nation as an imagined community to strengthen its resilience against challenges like economic development and disasters. The imagined community and community resilience are mutually reinforcing. This is based on the banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) of shared memories, values and symbols embedded in ordinary lives and expressed through rituals and symbols in times of disaster.

Disaster itself is culturally constructed. Its particular cultural construction in the Chinese context contributes to resilience building and is related to the solidarity discourse of the imagined community and its revival. The coping capacity of resilience proposed by Lorenz (2013) suggests two ways to raise resilience: one is to make resilience part of the expectation structure (that is, to regard disaster as inevitable and part of ordinary life); the other is to frame disaster as a necessary step in a chain of events leading to evolution. In the Chinese context, disaster is constructed as part of the nation's revival discourse (Qi & Tan, 2008) because it promotes solidarity. Disaster can thus be regarded as an

opportunity to reinforce the imagined community and build resilience.

As mentioned, the imagined community and community resilience are reinforced in two ways. First, building resilience through community building based on shared values and norms, such as altruistic values and helping behaviours (Webb, 2017), which is related to reinforcing the imagined community through horizontal comradeship (Anderson, 2006), especially by representing people as caring for and helping one another. As represented in the chosen works, equal and intense relationships are constructed between disaster victims and those who offer care and help. These relationships break boundaries of space and time, even reaching to the readers of the works. The foundation of these indirect relationships is vague, relying on factors as minimal as attention to the news and felt sympathy, and often depends on a shared place of origin. The aim is to include as many people as possible in the imagined community.

Second, creative activities and rituals serve as an important source of resilience (Webb, 2017) and as symbolic interactions contributing to the construction and reinforcement of the imagined community (Anderson, 2006; Breuilly, 2016). Songs in the four works have strong ties to patriotism and cultural nationalism. Mourning rituals and memorials connect tradition with the digital age and, combined with unlock and send-off ceremonies, people are tied together through the culture activities within which they actively construct their culture citizenship, and the rituals in turn help people deal with negative and positive emotions, connecting them through shared strong emotions and intense experiences like trauma, grief

and gratitude. The foundation for these creative activities and rituals to connect people is the banal nationalism proposed by Billig (1995). These activities are rooted in everyday life; songs and rituals must be pre-embedded and emphasised in daily life for them to become unifying symbols during disasters. It is also worth noticing the similarity to Lefebvre (2014)'s understanding of festivals. I argue that disasters represent a more intense version of everyday life, where unique rituals mimic festival celebrations to create a sense of community and strong emotions, thereby shaping the positive functions of disasters.

Therefore, the books depict ordinary people as an imagined community that is resilient in the face of disaster. The discourses can be argued to construct a culture of disaster where both resilience and the imagined community are essential: resilience is crucial, but it must be collective, closely connected to national symbols and national character; the imagined community is crucial, but it must mobilise every member to contribute to the community's resilience.

Furthermore, the constructions of the imagined community and resilience are closely connected to existing historical and cultural discourses while also creating a modern version of these older ideas. Elements like collective mourning are linked to old traditions and existing discourses about Chinese society as collectivist. They are shown as examples of ordinary Chinese people demonstrating their 'natural' resilient qualities – a strength and source of price to which all Chinese people should aspire. Such depictions make readers feel part of this community and strengthen connections with national identity. Through the constructed

relationships and the rituals and symbols that become normalised or assigned significant meaning, people's thoughts and behaviours are influenced and governed.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

At its heart, this thesis regards disasters as a critical space for examining the role of ordinary people. As discussed in the Introduction, ordinary people are often invisible in daily life and are academically difficult to study. Yet, they are potentially significant agents in the stabilisation and evolution of society. Whether represented as uncooperative or as exemplary heroes, the ways in which ordinary people are portrayed in culture can tell us a lot about notions of good citizenship, resilience and how communities respond to crisis. This thesis has explored the construction and the processes behind the construction of disaster culture in contemporary China through its nonfiction.

In **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**, I established the academic gap this thesis addresses and critically reviewed key theories and concepts that form the foundation of my analysis. Theoretically, the techniques of governmentality employed to govern ordinary people lack sufficient and systematic exploration. Methodologically, the permitted discourse surrounding ordinary people in disasters, as represented in nonfiction, has been overlooked. The specific context of China is academically interesting due to its specific cultural characteristics and expressions of patriotism. To address these research gaps, the thesis set out to explore the representations of ordinary people: how they are being stabilised and mobilised, what models of citizenship and relationship with the government are

being shaped, and subsequently what kind of Chinese disaster culture is revealed in relation to both traditional culture and contemporary governmentality.

In **Chapter 3 – Methodology**, I outlined my philosophical approach and research design. Taking a postmodern constructivist point of view, the thesis inductively studies representations of ordinary people in the permitted discourse of creative nonfiction through structuring content analysis (SCA) and the discourse-historical approach (DHA) of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Creative nonfiction is a culturally significant and politically filtered genre through which representations of ordinary people, techniques of governmentality and disaster culture are legitimised. By focusing on significant disasters – the SARS pandemic, the Wenchuan Earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic – and on works that are critical, typical and politically significant, this thesis examines how nonfiction, presenting itself as truthful accounts, engages with themes of ordinary people, governmentality and disaster culture.

Chapters 4 to 7 formed the main analytical chapters, where I presented my analysis of the selected works of nonfiction. In **Chapter 4**, I identified that negative representations of ordinary people are carefully framed to avoid definitive labelling. These representations of ordinary people focus on them being uncooperative, suggesting that improvement is possible through civic education. Such negative predication is rooted in historical discourses and governs people's behaviours through the affective governance of shame and humiliation. In **Chapter 5**, I identified cultural discourses of heroism as techniques of

governmentality. Chinese heroism leans towards collective heroism and, stemming from Confucianism, is extended to ordinary people who fulfil the full responsibilities corresponding with their social status. Both the extraordinary model of the hero (the 'new man') and the ordinary model of the hero (the 'real man') coexist and work to govern the behaviours of ordinary people. Chinese heroism is perpetuated through place-based heroism, which works to include as many ordinary people as possible heroes, and this discourse of ordinary people as heroes is valued and to cope with the disasters. These two chapters serve as a pair of *yin* and *yang*; the depictions they explore work together to reinforce unity and resilience and to govern people's behaviours.

Chapter 6 built on this analysis. The construction of citizenship again stresses unity based on shared experience and leans towards a 'thick' citizenship that emphasises personal responsibility in public affairs. The 'good citizen' model requires people to trust the government, cooperate and contribute to the fight against disasters. Here, the framework of citizenship in the context of war is transferred to the context of disaster. Rights, such as the state valuing the people and protecting their ways of life, are not regarded as guaranteed but as state benevolence. Gratitude education transforms this benevolence into a moral debt and urges people to take up their responsibilities. The government is also becoming increasingly invisible, shifting its representation from high-level government officials to low-level officials and extensions of government such as medical workers and soldiers. This deflects possible criticism, legitimises the

government and reinforces the model of the good citizen.

Chapter 7 studied the construction of disaster as having the positive effect of uniting the people and leading to revival of the country. It analysed the convergence of cultural sources of resilience and the reinforcement of imagined communities through the construction of comradeship, rituals and symbols. Shared memories, overcoming difficulties together and emotional connections strengthen resilience and imagined community. Rituals and symbols do the same, connecting people through strong emotions. The significance of these rituals and symbols stems from their connection to practices of banal nationalism and their repetition in everyday life.

Overall, and in the remainder of this concluding chapter, I argue that there are key elements of Chinese disaster culture. Namely, at the intersection of everyday life and patriotism, disaster culture reflected in permitted discourse provides a common ground for the government and ordinary people to communicate – a space where the making of the good citizen and the ideal collective is centred. It is also worth noting that I have analysed this construction process through the logic of traditional Chinese culture; in other words, its construction follows the logic of *yin* and *yang*. I argue that on multiple layers, from the relatively micro to the relatively macro, what is being constructed is a duality: the unified and contradictory forces of *yin* and *yang*.

8.1 How Have Ordinary People Been Represented?

This first research question of the thesis sought to explore representations of ordinary people within the permitted cultural discourse of disasters, specifically examining the attributes assigned to ordinary people. My analysis revealed that these representations of ordinary people can be both negative and positive. These two models serve as the thesis's major pair of *yin* and *yang*, as I will explain below. Although both representations are present, the representations generally converge on a precarious positive notion of the Chinese citizen.

8.1.1 Negative Representations: Pushing the Ordinary People

I argue that negative representations of ordinary people serve as a pushing force – a technique of governmentality designed to steer them away from undesired behaviours. This negative representation centres on a lack of cooperation. However, it is not represented as absolute – it does not condemn the people and avoids definitive labelling. Rather, an exonerating tone pervades these representations, suggesting that ordinary people behave negatively due to limited access to information or limited means to protect themselves. Even when they are described as flawed in character, the possibility of education and improvement is consistently stressed. The goal is not to construct the people as unsalvable but rather to frame them as needing education and effort. This, I suggest, aligns with a strategy intended to motivate people to make more contributions rather than

discourage them by suggesting they are hopeless.

Thus, the negative representations of the ordinary people can be interpreted as part of a discourse of moral education, serving as a technique of affective governance that operates through emotions such as shame and humiliation. This form of governmentality can be regarded as rooted in the Confucian culture and historical discourse, and governs people by urging them to overcome shame and humiliation (Law, 2014; Lin, 2012; Pak Lei Chong, 2011). It can be argued that this establishes a behavioural bottom line for ordinary people, pushing them away from the undesired thoughts and behaviours depicted in the negative representations.

Furthermore, the control of information is central to this entire process of constructing and promoting disaster culture and central to the governance of ordinary people through shame and humiliation. Civic education efforts emphasise discourses related to shame and humiliation, using them to influence people to avoid undesirable behaviours.

8.1.2 Positive Representations: Pulling the Ordinary People

The positive representation of ordinary people centres on their construction as heroes, which serves as a pulling force – a technique of governmentality that encourages desired models of behaviour.

Two models of heroes exist in the chosen works. Zimbardo et al. (2013)

categorise heroes into an exclusive version, which stresses heroic leadership by extraordinary individuals, and an inclusive version, which locates heroism in the everyday actions of ordinary people. Similarly, from an ethical perspective, Annas (2015) categorises heroes as those who display an exceptional level of virtue and those who sustain their virtue in extreme circumstances. The heroes in the chosen works also fit these categories of extraordinary heroes and ordinary heroes. The former serve as inspirational models, while the latter provide more practical, attainable examples for ordinary people to follow.

These representations of ordinary people as heroes emphasise collective heroism over individual heroism. In China, historically, collective heroism has been more valued (Hu, 2022; Kou, 2022; Pang, 2020; Ran, 2022; Yan & Shi, 2023). The scale of the collective can extend to the entire nation. Just as heroism can be connected to the Chinese people as a whole, it is also linked to specific geographical places. Studies linking heroism to place include Mijnssen (2021), who examines how in the Soviet Union the painful memory of the Second World War was transformed into a narrative of victory and celebration through the construction of 13 'Hero Cities'. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, some Chinese scholars have focused on the reconstruction of Wuhan's image (Chai, 2023; Zheng & Chen, 2023), particularly its construction as a heroic city (Zheng & Chen, 2023; Zhou & Xu, 2023), or through the portrayal of its specific inhabitants – such as medical workers, community workers and volunteers – as heroic (Xie & Zhou, 2021). These studies also explore how the digital age influences the construction

of heroes and heroic cities (Chai, 2023). However, these studies focus more on the construction of the city's image. In contrast, I propose that linking heroism to place also contributes to the construction and perpetuation of hero culture itself, a process established through the theory of cultural character (Fu & Yan, 2020). This theory posits that certain cultural characteristics are assigned to a place based on its geographic traits and historical events that took place there (Fu & Yan, 2020). A connection is then made between the cultural character of a place and the people living there. In other words, the heroic discourse becomes anchored to something permanent: a geographic location. And whoever inhabits that place becomes enveloped by the discourse. This place-based heroic discourse is not limited to the city of Wuhan; representations of other places are also evident, and the discourse can be extended to the people of the whole country. This again corresponds with the repeated stress on collective rather than individual characteristics.

The construction of ordinary people as heroes is intensified through the writing technique of '*yu yang xian yi*' (欲扬先抑): to compliment something, first create a contrast. Furthermore, the denial of heroism can serve both to intensify and to mitigate the discourse. On one hand, it can mitigate the discourse of ordinary people as heroes by acknowledging that heroism comes with high standards such as sacrifice, and through the denial making the relevant requirements seem more attainable. On the other hand, it can intensify the discourse by combining with the civic education values of modesty and

selflessness (Cai et al., 2011; Hu, 2014; Ma et al., 2019), further enhancing the image of ordinary heroes. Furthermore, hero culture, as part of disaster culture, is characterised by a closed-loop logic: extraordinary heroes inspire people; ordinary heroes set examples for people to follow; and ordinary people who meet the set standards are then regarded as extraordinary and more moving; collective heroism is stressed to construct unity, to avoid scrutiny and criticism of individual heroes, and to cast a wide net of inclusion; because the standard for being a part of the heroic collective is relatively low, more people are included, and this collective contribution is often framed as requiring nothing in return.

Hero culture constitutes an important part of disaster culture, though not in a way that might be expected. Rather than focus exclusively on the exemplary, it also emphasises the ordinary, using the construction of collective heroism to mobilise the power of the people. Extraordinary heroes serve as a high standard that inspires people to maximise their contributions, while ordinary heroes provide an attainable model that encourages wider participation. Hero culture also expands its reach by including more people as potential heroes, such as by linking the culture to specific places. Because the standard for inclusion is lowered, expecting no fame or praise in return is justified. This connects to traditional Chinese values of selflessness (Chen, 2023, p. 19; Qin & Ji, 2021, p. 13) and the example set by Lei Feng, the most famous revolutionary hero of the Mao era (Hu, 2014). The result is a close-looped logic presented to ordinary people, encouraging them to make contributions to the country and their compatriots in

a way that is relatively low-cost for the government. This logic is balanced by Confucian ideologies concerning the country, the people and morality.

8.1.3 In the Context of the Digital Age

The context of the digital age is an important underlying theme. As stated in the previous sections, disaster culture is a constructed narrative that plays a crucial role in people's lives today. The internet has become an important public sphere that both helps and challenges this narrative construction. It is a battleground where people fight for the right to speech and the power of definition, for both political reasons and public attention. Governments, pursuing their own interests, may exert control over the internet, as seen in China's 'Great Firewall' and US efforts to block TikTok. In the depictions within the four works, the influence of the internet is shown to have evolved. It is increasingly portrayed as an affirmative part of disaster relief, integrated into the wider disaster response where social media facilitates public participation in disaster-related activities, enabling people to share emotions and form collective memories online.

The significant influence of the digital age on disasters manifests in several key challenges:

a. Problems related to determining the accuracy of online information;
b. Challenges the internet poses to hero figures, who face tighter public scrutiny;

c. Challenges for governments aiming to conduct efficient disaster relief, as they too face increased scrutiny and must deal with public opinion and critique;
d. The simultaneous opportunity for the internet to serve as a public space where the government can influence people's opinions.

To cope with these challenges, the discourse of information control is justified. Different levels of information control are exerted in China, including decisions on whether and to what extent coverage is allowed (Lorentzen, 2014). A significant method for maintaining control over timely and factual information is to publish it through official channels (Wu et al., 2022). By increasing official information publication, government authority is also protected (Xia et al., 2022). In other words, the general quantity of information is important.

However, more important is the type of discourse that is allowed, as the framing of narratives is crucial. As mentioned, the government actively participates in the shaping of discourses. While narratives of suffering remain important, the 'positive energy' discourse is becoming more valued (Yang & Tang, 2018). The government's emphasis on a framing that stresses positive values encourages the wider use of positive discourses (Xia et al., 2022; C. Zhang, 2022). This explains the tendency to shift the representation of ordinary people from negative to positive, as well as the emergence of a (at least partially) positive framing of disaster itself.

A hierarchy of information control that creates these discourses can also be

identified. It resembles the hierarchy of information proposed by Boin et al. (2021), where the government is at the highest level, experts come second, authors and other social influencers come next (according to their ability to influence the public), and the receiving audience comes last. This hierarchy is part of the multi-layered system of neo-socialist governmentality in China.

8.2 The Role of Ordinary People and Their Relationship with the Government

The second research question investigates what these representations tell us about how the imagined role of ordinary people in China during disasters and beyond, and how the relationship between ordinary people, the state and the nation is represented in such disaster writing. Previous historical research has shown that ordinary people were important as active participants. However, much less was known about the representation of this role in modern events. These roles are also defined in relation to the government, shaped by its performance and educational efforts.

8.2.1 The *Yin* and *Yang* of Ordinary People

I argue that the negative representations serve as the *yin*, and the positive representations serve as the *yang*. They function as a pair of unified contradiction. No ordinary person is excluded from the threat of shame and humiliation, yet all are included within the potentiality of the heroic collective.

This returns to the core of this thesis, that ordinary people play a crucial role in times of disaster. The negative representations steer them away from undesired behaviours, stabilising society during crises, while the positive representations encourage desired behaviours, mobilising them and harnessing their power in the fight against disasters. Furthermore, both constructions are linked to history, particularly the one hundred years of humiliation and the vital role ordinary people played in the founding and development of the nation. The aim of this historical referencing is to stress the responsibility of ordinary people to cooperate with the government and contribute their power to disaster relief.

The reasons ordinary people are presented as participating are thus clear:

a. They hope to avoid or undo shame and humiliation; they do not want to become part of the criticised group that only causes trouble without making contributions;
b. At a minimum, they have responsibilities to society according to their positions in society and should do their part;
c. They are encouraged to become ordinary heroes, with practical examples to follow.

This constructs a clear expectation of ordinary people: what they should *not* be, what they should *at least* be, and what they are *encouraged* to be.

The *yin* and *yang* of ordinary people as uncooperative and as heroes can be understood as relating to a greater *yin* and *yang* of ordinariness and greatness:

ordinariness can be great, and greatness can be found in the ordinary. A key depiction of this belief is that the people possess enormous power. This is an important construction of Chinese socialism, which draws from Confucianism and Marxism in believing that the power to relieve disasters and save the people comes from the people themselves. The government's role is merely mobilise the power and exert the power given to it by the people.

8.2.2 Citizen-Making

Through the pushing and pulling forces of governmentality – through shame, humiliation and the discourse of heroes – a range of encouraged and discouraged behaviours for ordinary people is mapped out. This can be further understood through the lens of citizenship, particularly cultural citizenship. Chinese citizenship focuses on obligations and responsibilities deemed essential to nation-state building (Guo, 2014, p. 358; Yan, 2017, p. 13). Based on Stevenson (2001)'s understanding of cultural citizenship, responsibility is the cornerstone. The responsibility proposed to ordinary people, in addition to the pushing and pulling discussed in previous chapters, is trust in the leadership of the Party and the government. This trust is also rooted in historical discourses asserting that the leadership of the Party led to the founding of the PRC (Ding et al., 1981), played a vital role across all historical periods (Yue & Zhao, 2023) and is considered a key advantage of Chinese crisis management (Gong, 2020; Xiao & Che, 2020). This

reliance on historical discourses is also evident in how citizen-making is closely linked with the metaphor of war – transforming the meaning of citizenship in wartime into a model for citizenship in times of disaster. The authority of the Chinese government is framed as stemming from its historical contributions, particularly how the CPC helped save the country and its people from the one hundred years of humiliation and conflict. This is also supported by that the military is deployed in disasters. The Party stresses its responsibilities and role in fighting disasters as an extension of this historical legacy.

To justify the responsibilities placed on ordinary people, the government is represented as putting the people first, and serving and protecting them in times of need. It can be argued that these values and actions of the government are aimed at eliciting gratitude from the people, forming a kind of moral debt that must be repaid (Sorace, 2017; Xie & Zhou, 2021). Gratitude is also a powerful emotion used in affective governance (Shoshana, 2022). To this end, gratitude is included as an important part of civic education (Yi & and Vickers, 2024). And, being grateful is also part of being a good citizen. Emphasising the positive image of the government encourages ordinary people to fulfil their responsibilities.

Possible negative views of the government are also hidden from view, to avoid discouraging ordinary people from fulfilling their responsibilities. The moral performance of the government was once embodied in high-ranking government officials (Xu, 2016), but more recent representations, like those in the works examined here, show a shift from high-level to low-level officials. Medical workers

and soldiers, represented as deployed by the government, contribute to the government's image. Thus, while the government shares in the glory of their contributions, it remains in the background to avoid criticism.

Furthermore, by stressing people's responsibilities and portraying the people as the true holders of power – while the government merely mobilises this power in times of need – the government also shares the responsibility for fighting disasters with the people. This sharing of responsibility protects the government's authority from being undermined by insufficient disaster management measures. Before criticising the government, people are prompted to reflect on what they themselves have done to help. In other words, the authority of the government is reinforced through a three-part process:

a. It is alluded to and reinforced without explicit expression that the authority of the government comes from its past deeds. This establishes where the authority of the government comes from and stresses the contributions of the Party and the government in the past, continuing the historical tradition.
b. New contributions by the government and its extensions further enhance its authority.
c. Potential undermining of the government's authority is mitigated by sharing responsibility for disaster response with the people.

This summary simplifies the process of reinforcing government authority. Its actual effect depends on the practical application of the process, but I argue that it is a

self-justifying and close-looped system. This thesis argues that a discussion of cultural citizenship reveals an important bottom line: in the face of the challenges of economic development and globalisation, regardless of the freedoms and respect people enjoy in other domains, a core cultural consensus must be reached – ordinary people must play their part in times of need. This consensus, built upon responsibility and mutual benefit, is both relatively acceptable to ordinary people and essential to the survival and continuity of the country.

8.3 Neo-socialist Governmentality

The third research question explores how such representations function as part of a strategy for governing ordinary people in China during times of disaster and beyond. The previous sections have already identified several techniques of neo-socialist governmentality, which I will summarise below.

Palmer and Winiger (2019) argue that neo-socialist governmentality combines features of socialist collectivism and neo-liberal subjectivism. The findings of this thesis support this view. Neo-socialist governmentality stresses the survival and revival of the country while encouraging ordinary people to become responsible citizens. Rather than suppressing individual freedom, freedom is managed and steered toward collective benefit.

Governmentality works through the mobilisation of certain discourses, which can be grouped into two major discursive trends: cultural discourses and emotion

discourses.

Cultural discourses functioning as techniques of governmentality include:

1. The discourse of the one hundred years of humiliation and national inferiority: used to define the undesired behaviours of ordinary people that resulted in the historical humiliation and also those which cannot help resolve past suffering.
2. The discourse of fighting off invaders, founding the new country and developing the country: maps out desired behaviours, such as fulfilling responsibilities, following the lead of the Party and trusting the Party.
3. The discourse of national revival: provides a goal that unites the force of the people.
4. The discourse of extraordinary heroes: inspires people to do their best.
5. The discourse of ordinary heroes or ordinary people as heroes: praises people for doing what they can.
6. The discourse of the good citizen: encompasses all of the above narratives.
7. The discourse of cultural citizenship and unity: emphasises national identify and cultural consensus, particularly the imperative to act in times of need.
8. The discourse of resilience: represents ordinary Chinese people as resilient to various challenges and encourages them to carry forward this tradition.

What can be generalised about these cultural discourses is that they are deeply rooted in China's historical context and thus support cultural continuity and national unity. As mentioned above, the discourses are shaped and sustained through a hierarchy of information control, which forms part of China's multi-layered system of neo-socialist governmentality.

The emotion discourses that serve as techniques of governmentality are:

1. Shame and humiliation: associated with the one hundred years of humiliation discourse and other discourses that reflect national inferiority such as the Cultural Revolution.
2. Patriotic emotions: related to discourses of fighting off invaders, founding the country and developing the country, such as national pride.
3. Grief: collective mourning rituals contribute to the construction of the imagined community and community resilience.
4. Gratitude: generates moral debt, requiring people to take up their responsibilities, cooperate with the government and trust the government.

Overall, cultural and emotion discourses are intertwined in neo-socialist governmentality. Ordinary people are positioned as subjects of responsibility, and the techniques of neo-socialist governmentality steer them towards making contributions to the imagined community. Emotion discourses tap into people's psyches, persuading them to follow the patterns laid out for them by cultural discourses.

8.4 A Positive Disaster Culture

The fourth research question explores the kind of disaster culture constructed in contemporary China, its distinct Chinese features, and both how and why it is constructed.

I argue that although disaster is a traumatic and destructive event that causes economical losses, physical harm and emotional distress, it is represented in the chosen works as having possible positive effects, such as building national resilience and reinforcing the nation as an imagined community. This is the very foundation of my thesis: that disaster culture itself is constructed from a perspective of *yin* and *yang* – the coexistence of negative and positive. As previously mentioned, the positive is often considered more valuable than the negative, which may explain why a considerable part of disaster culture focuses on the positive.

Ordinary people are central to disaster culture. In addition to the responsibilities proposed for them and their portrayal as protected and served, disaster culture emphasises resilience and imagined community. Webb (2017) argues that culture can both be a source of vulnerability and a source of resilience, and proposes three cultural sources of resilience. Two of these correspond with the concept of imagined community proposed by Anderson (2006). Based on the depictions in the chosen works, I argue that these two are: first, the construction

and reinforcement of community; and second, rituals, symbols and other creative activities.

Constructing disaster as an inevitable and necessary stage leading to evolution is a way of coping with disasters (Lorenz, 2013, p. 16). In the four books studied here, disaster is depicted as leading to strengthened unity. It is also constructed as leading to evolution, in line with beliefs such as '多难兴邦' (*duo nan xing bang*), 'much distress regenerates a nation', which suggests that disasters test the nation, the government can improve itself, and bring people closer together. Furthermore, scholars such as Anderson (2006) and Xiao and Huang (2021) contend that collective memory is foundational to nations and imagined communities. The effects of disaster culture are not limited to times of disaster; they play an important part in remembrance and the reinforcement of memories afterward. This is not to say that disasters do more good than harm, but since they are inevitable, this construction of their usefulness allows people to make the best of the situation.

8.4.1 The Construction of Community

Imagined community is constructed through deep and horizontal comradeship (Anderson, 2006, p. 15). In the depictions of the four works, kinship is constructed on various levels: face-to-face, across space, across time, and in ways that appeal directly to readers. Most significantly, the community being constructed is the

imagined community of the entire nation. Through the construction of comradeship, this imagined community is able to transcend the boundaries of time and space, forming a web of meaning and narrative that includes people across the country and aims to be passed down through generations. In general, disaster is portrayed as a force that strengthens unity and builds resilience – and this is an important part of the positive disaster culture constructed.

8.4.2 The Role of Creative Activities and Rituals

The construction of disaster culture centres around ordinary people and their ordinary lives. Rituals and symbols associated with banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) embedded in daily life, form the foundation of disaster culture – such as songs that help build consensus. What makes this culture significant is that it is deeply rooted in the ordinary. Consensus built through daily practices bring people together in extreme situations like disasters and is internalised by ordinary people in everyday life. Disasters are constructed not as isolated events, but as intensified ordinary life – similar to how festivals are viewed in the studies of Lefebvre (2014). For example, in the case of disasters, two clear cultural practices are: the songs people sing during disasters to cheer their spirit; and mourning ceremonies. Both rely on repetition in ordinary life. The songs reappear in galas and festivals, while mourning traditions are reinforced through commemorative holidays and festivals as well. In other words, coping mechanisms for disaster are deeply rooted in the

everyday practices of ordinary lives.

This culture uses the activities and rituals of everyday life to create consensus that people can rely on in times of disaster. Two of its most significant features are: 1. it mobilises the power of ordinary people to strengthen the imagined community, and 2. it increases the resilience of both the people and the nation. These rituals and creative activities are infused with strong emotions, such as patriotism during songs, sorrow during mourning ceremonies, and gratitude during send-off ceremonies. These emotional experiences also generate strong collective memories, reinforcing the imagined community.

8.5 Conclusion and Outlook

I believe that this thesis's key contribution to understanding of China is the argument that Chinese disaster culture displays a closed-loop logic rooted in historical tradition while adapting to the challenges of the digital era.

Disaster is constructed not only as realistically inevitable but as an inevitable stage of national evolution. Disaster is portrayed not solely as destructive, but also as having certain 'positive' effects that people and the government can exploit, such as setting standards for good citizenship, bringing people closer together as the threat of extreme circumstances justifies the need to put disaster relief first, and a chance to show the government's care for the people – thereby reinforcing its authority. In the Chinese context, 'evolution' refers to the unity and revival of

the nation. This discourse is deeply embedded in China's historical narrative. As a country greatly influenced by its past sufferings – or at least a country whose self-image is constructed as greatly influenced by its past sufferings – especially the one hundred years of humiliation, national humiliation is a reoccurring theme that has seeped into many aspects of ordinary life and profoundly shapes diverse contemporary discourses (Callahan, 2004).

China's history is constructed as greatly relying on the power of the people, a tradition carried on in modern disaster culture. Patriotism – central to modern nation-states – is constructed as stemming from past suffering as well, and finds renewed purpose in disaster response rather than military defence. As long as Chinese society remains stable and the government maintains its authority, this discourse of suffering, overcoming difficulties, revival and unity retains its legitimacy and continues to be supported.

My research shows that disaster should not be excluded from ordinary life. Constructing it as part of ordinary lives helps people build resilience to events that pose a threat to the authority of the government and the stability of society. I argue that it is also essential to incorporate ordinariness into our understanding of disaster. Like Lefebvre's festivals, disasters are intensified versions of everyday life that draw from shared experiences and repeated cultural practices. This suggests that to deal with the threat of disasters, people's ordinary lives must be valued, even in extraordinary times. Again this is linked to the banal nationalism proposed by Billig (1995), where national identity is reinforced through everyday

symbols, language and practices. In this sense, disaster culture can mobilise people to contribute to their country in everyday, practical ways.

Ordinary people are at the very centre of the discussion on the construction of disaster culture. While the construction of this culture appears to benefit the government – by shaping people's behaviours in times of disaster and creating opportunities for the government to strengthen its authority – it also in turn requires the government to take on certain responsibilities in times of disaster. What I hope to add to the understanding of ordinary people is that they should not be ignored in times of disaster; rather, they are at the very centre – it is they who are called upon to save themselves and their compatriots. As Marxism emphasises, ordinary people possess enormous power. No discussion of disaster can ignore this power, for it is ordinary people who can decide whether a disaster accumulates legitimacy or dissatisfaction for the government, they who can lend the government the power to manage crises and help develop the country. The most critical aspect of confronting disasters – and potentially turning them into positive opportunities – is how ordinary people are influenced and mobilised.

Regarding the theory of citizenship as a technique of governmentality and the construction of the 'good citizen', Wang (2024) studies the development of Confucian citizenship in the modern era, focusing on the interaction between education, the state and citizenship. He highlights the revival of Confucian ideology and the combination of nationalism and globalism in education. Similarly, General Secretary Xi has proposed the Second Integration – combining

Confucianism, Marxism and the realities of Chinese society (Xu, 2025; Zhao & Li, 2025; Zhong, 2025). In the face of economic challenges, multiculturalism and globalisation, the governance of ordinary people, especially in terms of cultural citizenship and acceptable citizen models, remains crucial. While Wang focuses on the role of Confucianism in this shaping of modern citizens, I argue that cultural discourses are constantly evolving, including modern narratives of humiliation, heroism and disaster culture.

It is important to note that Chinese disaster culture being constructed is not easily defined by clear rules. It is a uniquely Chinese-style culture, featuring *yin* and *yang* and inherent ambiguity. For example, who are the ordinary people? What deeds are to be condemned, and at what point do they become irredeemable? What deeds are to be praised, and where is the line between noble sacrifice and excessive sacrifice? The responsibility of citizens to trust the government is also vague, and the ideal of 'putting the people first' remains abstract. This ambiguity leaves space for interpretation, controlled by the dominant party, resulting in a logic that is difficult to refute precisely because it is vague and lacks concrete content. Perhaps it is this very flexibility that makes disaster culture resilient.

As a Chinese national who has lived through disasters, I have personally experienced and been influenced by the emotional power of the discourses I study. I understand that this discourse of Chinese disaster culture – mapping out encouraged and discouraged behaviours for ordinary people, and constructing a

'positive' side of disaster – is not the whole story of disasters, ordinary people or China. However, I believe I have made a useful preliminary exploration of crucial aspects of disaster discourse, particularly how permitted discourse reflects state-led narratives that play a role in governing ordinary people and constructing a relatively positive disaster culture.

In general, this thesis furthers the understanding of ordinary people by studying the permitted discourse that examines their governance. The findings of the thesis may serve as a frame of reference for future studies. Different discourses, such as the official discourse or the grassroots discourse, reveal different mechanisms. The permitted discourse is situated at the intersection of the official and the grassroots discourses: from above, it incorporates the taught model of the good citizen model from official discourse; in the middle, it represents sentiments that are inconvenient for the government to state directly; and from below, it allows for some of the reflections of ordinary people to enter the discourse. Through the study of this discourse, techniques of neo-socialist governmentality are identified, and the disaster culture they contribute to construct is explored.

All research has its limitations, but this work has highlighted several fruitful areas for further exploration. The scope of this thesis focuses on three specific contemporary disasters – the SARS pandemic, the Wenchuan Earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic – which leaves many more historical periods to be examined in the future. Expanding the range to different cultural contexts to understand

how other countries apply techniques of governmentality (including other socialist countries) would be highly worthwhile for understanding the variety of disaster cultures around the world. A comparative approach would add further depth to this understanding. The ways in which ordinary people are governed during times or moments that step outside the everyday – such as major festivals, grand celebrations or even war – may share similar traits and could be a productive area of inquiry. Finally, this research focused specifically on the role of nonfiction and permitted discourses in the creation of disaster culture; this leaves many other avenues – novels, films, documentaries, art, theatre and censored works – as potential sources for analysis. More empirical work, in the form of interviews and surveys, could also be considered to complement this discourse analysis.

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