

Entrepreneur or capitalist?

Discursive constructions of a deceased business leader in Chinese digital mourning discourse

Ming Liu, Cindy S.B. Ngai and Han Li
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

This study examines the public mourning discourse surrounding the death of Zong Qinghou, founder of Wahaha Group, on Chinese social media. By incorporating text mining into critical discourse studies, this research provides a corpus-assisted discourse study of competing ways of constructing Zong's identity as an entrepreneur or a capitalist. The analysis offers insights into how Chinese society negotiates its relationship with private enterprise and wealth creation while maintaining cultural continuity. It contributes to understanding how public mourning discourse serves as a lens for examining social transformation in rapidly changing societies, particularly in the context of China's unique political and economic environment.

Keywords: mourning, business leader, social media, corpus-assisted discourse study, text mining, entrepreneur, capitalist, discourse-conceptual analysis

1. Introduction

The linguistic distinction between 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) and 资本家 (*capitalist*) in contemporary Chinese discourse illuminates the intricate relationship between China's socialist foundations and its market-oriented reforms (Wu 2007). While both terms fundamentally describe individuals involved in business and capital, they have developed distinct socio-economic connotations, historical contexts, and cultural implications that mirror China's complex economic transformation. This linguistic evolution reflects not only changes in economic policy but also shifts in social values, political ideology, and public perception of wealth creation.

The term 资本家 (*capitalist*) carried strong negative connotations during the early years of the People's Republic of China, particularly under Mao Zedong's

leadership. Associated with the bourgeois class, it was viewed as fundamentally opposed to socialist ideals and was frequently used as a pejorative term during political campaigns like the Cultural Revolution. Capitalists were portrayed as exploiters of the working class, and the term became deeply embedded in the political rhetoric of class struggle. Following Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the late 1970s, the emergence of the term “企业家” (*entrepreneur*) marked a significant shift in China's economic discourse (Wu 2007). This new terminology reflected a positive rebranding of business leaders, who were increasingly viewed as essential contributors to economic growth, innovation, and modernization (Li and Ai 1988). The transition from condemning 资本家 (*capitalist*) to celebrating 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) represented a fundamental shift or “conceptual flipping” (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024) in China's economic ideology, as the country moved from a strictly planned economy to what would eventually be termed a “socialist market economy”.

In contemporary China, the term 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) continues to carry its positive connotations and represents a new kind of business leader who is expected to balance profit-making with public service, innovation with social stability, and individual success with collective prosperity. This evolution reflects China's broader effort to develop what it calls “企业家精神” (entrepreneurial spirit) with Chinese characteristics, emphasizing the importance of combining market efficiency with social responsibility. Meanwhile, “资本家” continues to carry negative or neutral connotations, often associated with exploitation, inequality, and excessive wealth accumulation. In political discourse, particularly in debates about economic inequality, the term is frequently used to criticize those perceived as prioritizing profit over social welfare (Wu 2021). The persistence of these negative connotations reflects ongoing concerns about the potential negative effects of unfettered capitalism and serves as a reminder of the ideological boundaries within which Chinese entrepreneurs must operate (Li 2021).

This study views public mourning over Zong Qinghou on social media as a critical discursive moment in transitional China (Liu and Chen 2023), and investigates how the two concepts, 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) and 资本家 (*capitalist*), are drawn upon in public imaginations and expectations of an ideal business leader in contemporary China (Krzyżanowski, 2016). On 25 February 2024, Zong Qinghou (宗庆后), the 79-year-old founder and chairman of Hangzhou Wahaha Group Co., Ltd., passed away in Hangzhou, marking the end of an era for one of China's most influential first-generation entrepreneurs (Gan 2024). The Wahaha Group officially announced his death through its social media accounts, triggering an outpouring of public remembrance and reflection on Chinese social media platforms. The public mourning following Zong's passing was indeed unprecedented for a Chinese business figure, marking a unique moment in contemporary Chi-

nese society. The scenes at the Wahaha headquarters in Hangzhou, where citizens formed a ten-mile-long queue to pay their respects, and the entrance was covered with flowers and tributes including signature Wahaha products like AD Calcium Milk, demonstrated a level of public grief typically reserved for national leaders or renowned scientists (Yuan 2024).

The study of public mourning discourse has emerged as a crucial field of academic inquiry, offering profound insights into the intricate interplay of social, cultural, and political dynamics that shape contemporary society, as well as the processes of identity formation and maintenance within modern contexts (Aguilar et al. 2024; Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013). The passing of Zong Qinghou provides a particularly rich example of how public mourning discourse reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward wealth, success, and entrepreneurship in contemporary China. The study has three objectives: (1) to examine how the two concepts are recontextualized and represented in public mourning discourse; (2) to demonstrate how the two concepts compete to construct Zong Qinghou as an ideal business leader; and (3) to uncover the socio-political and cultural factors behind the representations of these two concepts in public mourning discourse surrounding Zong Qinghou.

2. Previous studies on public mourning discourse

The contemporary landscape of public mourning has been dramatically transformed by the proliferation of digital platforms and social media (Moss 2004; Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013; Church 2013; Walter 2015; Christensen and Sumiala 2024). The uniqueness of digital mourning lies in its perceived interactivity, where the bereaved may feel that the deceased are responsive to their messages, fostering a continued sense of connection (Walter et al. 2012). These “new social spaces” have fundamentally transformed how mourning discourse is shared and observed by broader audiences (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013; Church 2013; Gibson 2016). The participatory nature of social media platforms has created unprecedented opportunities for shared narratives and communal healing processes, fundamentally altering how society engages with death and remembrance (Proust 2024).

The emergence of social media as a platform for collective remembrance and public mourning of celebrities has garnered increasing scholarly attention (Harju 2015; Martini 2018; Matley 2019; Van den Bulck and Larsson 2019; Bingaman 2022; Hidalgo-Downing and Pérez-Sobrino 2022; Akhther and Tetteh 2023). Studies within Western contexts, examining platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit, have revealed diverse emotional responses and coping strategies in

mourning such notable figures as Michael Jackson (Sian Lee and Hoe-Lian Goh 2013), Steve Jobs (Harju 2015), Aaron Swartz (Martini 2018), and Kobe Bryant (Bingaman 2022). These studies have consistently shown how digital mourning discourse serves not only as an outlet for grief but also as a means of negotiating, legitimizing, and alleviating the disenfranchised grief of mourning fans, especially when traditional avenues for public mourning are limited.

Research within the Chinese context, though relatively limited, provides crucial insights into digital mourning discourse shaped by Confucian principles and official ideology (Yan and Chen 2023; Cao, Zeng, and Evans 2022). Analysis of memorial accounts on *Bilibili* has further illuminated unique practices of mediated memory that foster connections between the living and deceased, fulfilling traditional Chinese postmortem world imaginations known as “The Other Side (彼岸)” (Yan and Chen 2023). These digital spaces serve not only as carriers of the deceased’s personal digital legacy but also as significant means of communication with the departed, reflecting distinct cultural patterns of grief expression and remembrance. The influence of Confucian principles and official ideologies significantly shapes emotional expressions in online environments, creating unique patterns of digital mourning discourse that differ from Western contexts. This requires a more nuanced understanding of how cultural, social, and political factors influence digital mourning practices in China.

3. Theoretical underpinning

This study views the public mourning on social media as mediatisation (Phelan 2014; Hjarvard 2013; Christensen and Sumiala 2024) and focuses on the discourse-conceptual analysis in critical discourse studies (Krzyżanowski 2016; Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2024). Mediatisation refers to the process by which media increasingly influences and shapes various aspects of society, including culture, politics, business, and interpersonal communication (Hjarvard 2013). As a theoretical framework, mediatisation examines how media not only serve as channels for transmitting information but also actively shape the practices, structures, and norms of institutions and individuals (Phelan 2014). The theory of mediatisation has evolved with the rapid development of digital and social media, highlighting the growing pervasiveness of media in everyday life and its role in shaping public opinion, cultural practices, and institutional behaviour (Frostenson and Grafström 2022).

Social media has transformed how individuals and societies engage with mortality, making it more visible, interactive, and public than ever before (Jacobsen 2020). This phenomenon reflects broader trends in mediatisation, where media

increasingly shape and influence cultural and social practices. In the context of death, social media platforms serve as spaces for public mourning, digital memorialization, and even entertainment, blurring boundaries between private grief and public spectacle (Sumiala and Jacobsen 2024). As social media continues to evolve, so too will the ways individuals and societies navigate the mediatized realities of death and mourning (Christensen and Sumiala 2024). In China, this phenomenon, however, is shaped by the interplay between traditional Confucian values, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) regulation of digital spaces, and the growing influence of global digital culture (Chan 2025). Platforms like Weibo and WeChat provide new spaces for mourning, memorialization, and collective grief, blending traditional rituals with digital practices. However, this would not have been possible if without the permission and support of the Chinese government (Chan 2025). In this sense, the large-scale public mourning over a business leader on China's social media should not be taken as accidental.

Critical discourse studies (CDS) is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between language, discourse, power, and society, and investigates how discourse constructs and reflects social practices, ideologies, and power dynamics (Wodak and Meyer 2016). The main schools of CDS include the socio-dialectic approach (Fairclough 2001, 2003), the socio-cognitive approach (van Dijk 2008), and the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2016). As Krzyżanowski (2016) argues, all these approaches focus on the “mis/representation of society and its members/groups” but fail to address “the increasingly conceptual nature of discourse” (p.309). This is a pity considering the fact that “contemporary public discourse increasingly revolves around debating and redefining various social and political and indeed abstract concepts, often in lieu of re/presenting the actual society of its members” (Krzyżanowski 2016, 309).

The discourse-conceptual analysis in CDS, however, focuses on the interplay between concepts and discourse and examines how concepts are formed, contested, and deployed in discourse, and how they reflect and reinforce power relations, ideologies, and social practices (Krzyżanowski 2016; Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2024). The basic assumption is that concepts are fluid and inherently contested, subject to negotiation and reinterpretation in different discourses (Krzyżanowski 2019; Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024). This approach is particularly well-suited to the present study, which examines not just the representations of the deceased business leader Zong Qinghou in public mourning discourse but, more importantly, how the two concepts, 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) and 资本家 (*capitalist*), are drawn upon and contested in public imaginations of an ideal entrepreneur in contemporary China.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data collection and corpus building

This study analyses social media discourse surrounding the death of Zong Qinghou (宗庆后), the founder of Wahaha Group, through a systematic examination of Weibo posts. The data collection encompasses a three-week period from his passing on 23 February 2024 to 15 March 2024, capturing both immediate public reactions and subsequent discussions. Using Python for initial data extraction and preprocessing, we compiled a comprehensive corpus of 2,121 Weibo posts. This dataset, containing 125,124 tokens and 13,455 types, represents a substantial body of digital mourning discourse that enables a detailed analysis of public sentiment and collective narrative construction following the death of one of China's most prominent business figures.

4.2 Analytic methods and procedure

While CDS used to value the close analysis of a small sample of texts, corpus linguistics has become increasingly integrated with CDS due to its capacity to enhance the empirical rigor and methodological sophistication of discourse analysis through large-scale data examination (Baker 2006). This study incorporates text mining into CDS to give a corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS) of the recontextualization of the two concepts in the construction of Zong Qinghou (Liu 2024; Wang, Liu, and Liu 2024; Liu and Huang 2024).

This study follows the three-dimensional analytic framework in the analysis of the representations of the two concepts in the corpora: (1) topics/themes; (2) discursive strategies; and (3) linguistic means and realizations (Reisigl and Wodak 2016). The corpus-analytic tool KH Coder is used in this study for the quantitative analysis of texts. KH Coder is an open-source software for quantitative content analysis and text mining that enables both statistical and linguistic analysis of text data (Higuchi 2016, 2017). Key features of KH Coder include co-occurrence network analysis, hierarchical cluster analysis, correspondence analysis, word association analysis, etc. These functions allow researchers to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within text data that might not be immediately apparent through manual analysis (Liu, Zhao, and Ngai 2022; Liu 2023, 2024; Liu and Huang 2025 [In press]).

In order to examine how capitalists and entrepreneurs are constructed in the corpus, this study starts with a word association analysis of the two terms 资本家 (*capitalist*) and 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) respectively. With the help of KH Coder, two networks of those words which have a strong tendency to co-occur

with each term in a sentence can be produced. KH Coder can cluster these strong co-occurring words into different groups, rank them in decreasing prominence, and visualize them in terms of different colours (see Figures 1 and 2). These different groups of words can suggest different topics and themes associated with each term.

It is followed by a close examination of these words that have a strong tendency to co-occur with the two terms in a sentence. The present study focuses on the top 50 strong co-occurring words of each term. Then it focuses on the use of **nomination** (i.e., how actors are named and referred to), **predication** (i.e., what characteristics are attributed to them), **argumentation** (i.e., how claims are justified) and **perspectivization** (i.e., how claims are justified) strategies in constructing entrepreneurs and capitalists.

The different ways of constructing entrepreneurs and capitalists are further interpreted in terms of the Confucian legacy on business in the Chinese context, including relationalism, morality and individual commitment, status and social order, ritual and action, and education and transformation (Herrmann-Pillath 2023). It will be further explained in terms of the Changing socio-political context of China. It is believed that a close examination of the specific ways of constructing capitalists and entrepreneurs can further shed light on the dynamics between business, tradition and culture in transitional China.

5. Findings

5.1 Co-occurrence networks of 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) and 资本家 (*capitalist*)

Figures 1 and 2 show the co-occurrence networks of the two terms and Appendixes 1 and 2 show the English translation of these words in each cluster. The analysis reveals eleven distinct thematic clusters in the discourse surrounding entrepreneurs (see Appendix 1 for the English translation of the words in each cluster). **Theme 1** establishes Cao Dewang (founder and chairman of Fuyao Glass Industry Group) and Ren Zhengfei (founder and CEO of Huawei Technologies) as archetypal entrepreneurs, representing successful leadership of globally significant Chinese corporations. **Themes 2–7** (except for 5) focus on Zong Qinghou's characterization, highlighting his multifaceted legacy. These themes emphasize his national contributions, modest demeanour, and social responsibility – traits that distinguish him from wealthy but morally questionable figures (**Theme 2**). The discourse particularly celebrates his personal qualities of diligence, excellence, and responsibility (**Theme 3**), while positioning him as a moral-patriotic

figure who balanced national loyalty with business success (**Theme 4**). He emerges as a historical figure whose practical industrial achievements contributed significantly to national development (**Theme 6**), with emphasis on the rarity of entrepreneurs of his calibre (**Theme 7**).

Theme 8 explores the crucial distinction between entrepreneurs and capitalists, particularly focusing on entrepreneurs' social responsibilities. **Theme 9** examines Zong's spiritual legacy, notably through Jack Ma's funeral couplet: "Life's struggles at forty are not too late – the pioneer spirit (人生搏击四十不晚, 开拓者精神); Facing countless entrepreneurial challenges, seeking innovation day and night – the true nature of an entrepreneur (创业千难夙夜求新, 企业家本色)". This framing situates Zong's entrepreneurial achievements within broader moral and cultural contexts. **Theme 10** addresses public accountability, using the Nongfu Spring controversy to illustrate how Chinese internet discourse scrutinizes top entrepreneurs, particularly those managing consumer brands. This scrutiny focuses on personal conduct (修身) and family management (齐家), reflecting traditional Confucian values. This demonstrates the moral scrutiny and challenges that top entrepreneurs face in the internet era. **Themes 5 and 11** emphasize the widespread respect Zong earned, underscoring how his adherence to these values shaped his public image.

The discourse around 资本家 (*capitalist*) reveals nine distinct themes (see Appendix 2 for the English translation of the words in each cluster). **Theme 1** establishes the criteria for earning public respect, invoking the historical discourse that "The early prosperous should help those who prosper later" (先富带动后富). This theme distinguishes between business leaders who genuinely benefit society and those who merely maintain a superficial moral facade, particularly contrasting figures like Zong with companies like Nongfu Spring accused of exploiting market advantages. **Theme 2** focuses on Zhong Shanshan, Nongfu Spring's founder, as an archetypal capitalist. Public criticism of Zhong stems from both nationalistic sentiments amplified by official media and his alleged actions against Zong Qinghou and his company. **Theme 3** articulates broader public criticisms of capitalists, establishing a clear distinction between admired entrepreneurs (like Zong Qinghou and Ren Zhengfei) and criticized capitalists. The discourse emphasizes that public opposition targets exploitative practices rather than wealth itself. **Themes 4 and 5** address identity labels, with **Theme 4** examining "capitalist" as a neutral descriptor, while **Theme 5** specifically emphasizes Zong's identity as an entrepreneur rather than a capitalist. **Theme 6** highlights society's increasing moral expectations of business leaders and the declining public support for unethical capitalists. **Theme 7** frames the public mourning of Zong as symbolizing a resurgence of Chinese patriotic sentiment and socialist core values, reflecting public desire for fair market competition. **Theme 8** positions

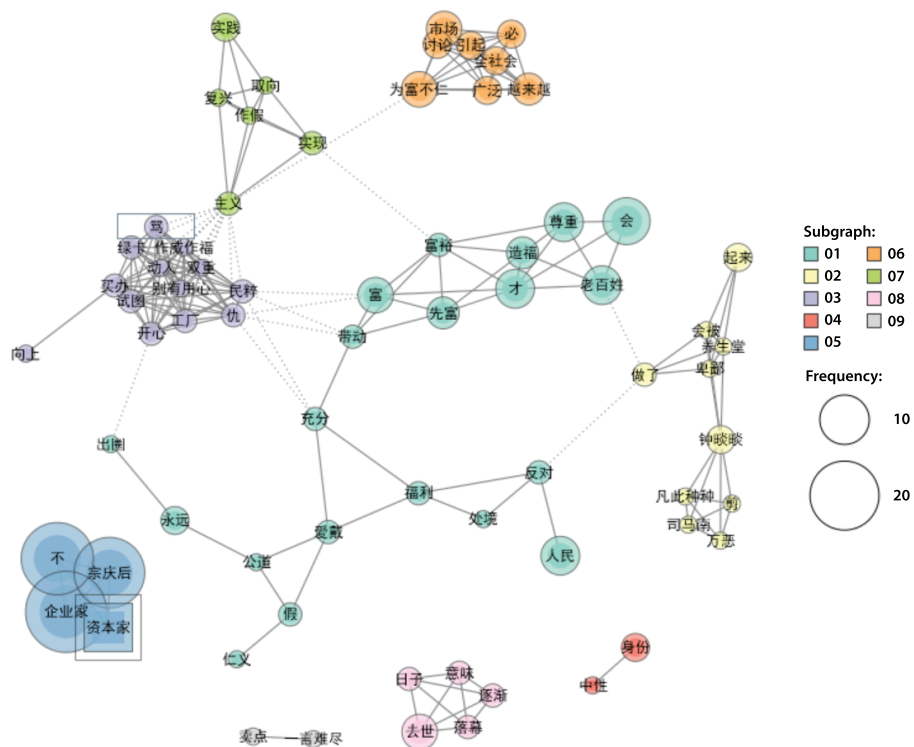


Figure 2. Co-occurrence network of *capitalist* (资本家) (Top 200)

5.2 Top 50 strong co-occurring words of 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) and 资本家 (*capitalist*)

Tables 1 and 2 show the top 50 strong co-occurring words of 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) and 资本家 (*capitalist*) in a sentence.

Table 1. Top 50 strong co-occurring words of *entrepreneur* (企业家)

Rank	Words	Freq.	LL	Rank	Words	Freq.	LL
1	民营 (<i>private</i>)	56	131.55	26	走好 (<i>walk well/rest in peace</i>)	21	17.47
2	中国 (<i>China</i>)	99	98.11	27	低调 (<i>low profile</i>)	14	17.43
3	宗庆后 (<i>Zong Qinghou</i>)	194	75.49	28	学习 (<i>learn</i>)	14	16.87
4	资本家 (<i>capitalist</i>)	28	74.41	29	贡献 (<i>contribution</i>)	17	15.58
5	民族 (<i>nation</i>)	47	74.27	30	成功 (<i>success</i>)	18	14.49

Table 1. (continued)

Rank	Words	Freq.	LL	Rank	Words	Freq.	LL
6	精神 (<i>spirit</i>)	38	67.29	31	杰出 (<i>outstanding</i>)	6	14.31
7	良心 (<i>conscience</i>)	28	65.64	32	落幕 (<i>curtain falls</i>)	6	14.31
8	责任感 (<i>sense of responsibility</i>)	16	47.31	33	造福 (<i>benefit</i>)	6	14.31
9	缅怀 (<i>commemorate</i>)	26	46.09	34	企业 (<i>company/enterprise</i>)	57	14.26
10	尊敬 (<i>respect</i>)	24	41.74	35	实干 (<i>practical</i>)	4	14.18
11	致敬 (<i>salute</i>)	20	40.53	36	稀缺 (<i>scarce</i>)	4	14.18
12	优秀 (<i>excellent</i>)	16	37.55	37	显得 (<i>appear</i>)	7	14.09
13	楷模 (<i>role model</i>)	12	37.52	38	爱戴 (<i>adore</i>)	7	14.09
14	脊梁 (<i>backbone</i>)	11	33.45	39	千古 (<i>eternal</i>)	5	13.74
15	社会 (<i>society</i>)	47	32.76	40	晚 (<i>late</i>)	5	13.74
16	值得 (<i>worthy</i>)	24	31.04	41	致富 (<i>become rich</i>)	5	13.74
17	任正非 (<i>Ren Zhengfei</i>)	18	25.32	42	区别 (<i>distinguish</i>)	6	13.03
18	祖国 (<i>motherland</i>)	10	23.03	43	挽联 (<i>funeral couplet</i>)	5	12.15
19	媚外 (<i>foreign-adoring</i>)	6	22.96	44	著名 (<i>famous</i>)	5	12.15
20	老百姓 (<i>common people</i>)	23	19.99	45	悼念 (<i>mourn</i>)	13	12.15
21	同志 (<i>comrade</i>)	8	18.66	46	人民 (<i>people</i>)	15	11.91
22	开拓者 (<i>pioneer</i>)	5	18.53	47	为富不仁 (<i>wealthy but immoral</i>)	8	11.90
23	典范 (<i>model</i>)	7	17.94	48	崇敬 (<i>reverence</i>)	4	11.74
24	忘记 (<i>forget</i>)	6	17.63	49	曹德旺 (<i>Cao Dewang</i>)	9	11.31
25	老一辈 (<i>older generation</i>)	6	17.63	50	勤俭 (<i>frugal</i>)	5	10.85

Table 2. Top 50 strong co-occurring words of *capitalist* (资本家)

Rank	Words	Freq.	LL	Rank	Words	Freq.	LL
1	企业家 (<i>entrepreneur</i>)	28	74.41	26	落幕 (<i>curtain falls</i>)	2	8.26
2	区别 (<i>distinguish</i>)	5	30.45	27	宗庆后 (<i>Zong Qinghou</i>)	21	7.82
3	为富不仁 (<i>wealthy but immoral</i>)	5	23.35	28	市场 (<i>market</i>)	5	7.56
4	造福 (<i>benefit</i>)	4	22.92	29	说 (<i>say</i>)	9	7.10
5	尊重 (<i>respect</i>)	6	22.57	30	公主 (<i>princess</i>)	2	6.99
6	富 (<i>rich</i>)	5	19.06	31	爱戴 (<i>adore</i>)	2	6.99
7	先富 (<i>get rich first</i>)	4	18.90	32	骂 (<i>curse</i>)	2	6.99
8	全社会的 (<i>whole society</i>)	3	18.36	33	仇 (<i>hatred</i>)	2	6.73
9	实践 (<i>practice</i>)	3	18.36	34	带动 (<i>drive</i>)	2	6.73
10	人民 (<i>people</i>)	6	17.65	35	民粹 (<i>populism</i>)	2	6.73
11	身份 (<i>identity</i>)	3	17.35	36	民族 (<i>nation</i>)	5	6.69
12	钟睺睺 (<i>Zhong Shanshan</i>)	3	13.98	37	去世 (<i>passed away</i>)	5	6.57
13	老百姓 (<i>common people</i>)	6	13.36	38	富裕 (<i>wealthy</i>)	2	6.49
14	讨论 (<i>discussion</i>)	3	12.26	39	日子 (<i>days</i>)	2	6.49
15	做了 (<i>did</i>)	2	11.84	40	福利 (<i>welfare</i>)	2	6.49
16	买办 (<i>comprador</i>)	2	10.96	41	一言难尽 (<i>hard to explain</i>)	1	6.48
17	反对 (<i>oppose</i>)	2	10.24	42	万恶 (<i>all evil</i>)	1	6.48
18	工厂 (<i>factory</i>)	2	10.24	43	中性 (<i>neutral</i>)	1	6.48
19	开心 (<i>happy</i>)	2	9.64	44	仁义 (<i>righteousness</i>)	1	6.48
20	试图 (<i>attempt</i>)	2	9.64	45	会被 (<i>will be</i>)	1	6.48
21	意味 (<i>meaning</i>)	2	9.12	46	作假 (<i>falsify</i>)	1	6.48
22	马云 (<i>Jack Ma</i>)	4	9.10	47	作威 (<i>abuse power</i>)	1	6.48
23	假 (<i>fake</i>)	2	8.66	48	作福 (<i>abuse power</i>)	1	6.48
24	主义 (<i>ideology</i>)	2	8.26	49	公道 (<i>justice</i>)	1	6.48
25	绿卡 (<i>green card</i>)	2	8.26	50	养生堂 (<i>Yangshengtang</i>)	1	6.48

5.2.1 Nomination

Different nomination strategies can be used for *capitalist* (资本家) and *entrepreneur* (企业家). *Entrepreneur* (企业家) is often used with more specificity and positive connotations (78%, 403 out of 518). It frequently appears alongside words that identify the type or origin of the entrepreneur, such as 民营企业家 (*private entrepreneur*), 中国企业家 (*Chinese entrepreneur*), and 民族企业家 (*national entrepreneur*), as in the following:

- (1) 再次向改开后第一代民营企业家宗老爷子致敬!
'Paying tribute once again to the first-generation **private** entrepreneur after the reform and opening up, Mr. Zong!'
- (2) 中国企业家的一股清流。
'A breath of fresh air among **Chinese** entrepreneurs.'
- (3) 民族企业家，一路走好
'To the **national** entrepreneur, may you walk well.'

Private entrepreneur emphasizes his non-state sector identity, contrasting with state-owned enterprises and sometimes implying certain limitations faced by private business, while also highlighting Zong's role in China's private sector development. *Chinese entrepreneur* is a more neutral and descriptive term which focuses more on professional management and business practices within the Chinese context. However, *national entrepreneur* has stronger nationalistic and patriotic connotations and emphasizes the role of entrepreneurs as contributors to national development and bearers of patriotic responsibility. They underline Zong's professional, national and ethnic identities in turn and foreground his social statuses and privileges.

Additionally, *entrepreneur* (企业家) is associated with words that convey positive moral qualities, like 良心 (*conscience*), 责任感 (*sense of responsibility*), and 实干 (*practical*). This implies that entrepreneurs are often viewed as having a strong ethical foundation and a commitment to hard work, as in the following:

- (4) 中国不缺企业家，缺的是有良心的企业家，人们并不仇富，恨的是为富不仁，宗老是中国企业家的标杆，宗老一路走好!
'China is not short of entrepreneurs; what is lacking are **entrepreneurs with a conscience**. People do not hate wealth itself but despise those who are rich but immoral. Old Zong is a benchmark for Chinese entrepreneurs; may old Zong walk well on his journey ahead!'

Furthermore, *entrepreneur* (企业家) is frequently paired with terms that express high social esteem. Words like 优秀 (*excellent*), 老一辈 (*older generation*), 低调 (*low profile*), 贡献 (*contribution*), 成功 (*successful*), 杰出 (*outstanding*), 稀缺

(scarce), and 著名 (well-known) are commonly used in conjunction with *entrepreneur* (企业家). This array of positive descriptors indicates the Zong is held in high regard in Chinese society, viewed as successful, praiseworthy, and valuable contributors to the nation. Examples are as follows:

- (5) 宗庆后作为一位优秀的企业家，他的勤俭节约和不屈不挠的精神令人敬佩。
'Zong Qinghou, as an excellent entrepreneur, his diligence and frugality along with his unyielding spirit are admirable.'
- (6) 从零开始出造打了娃哈哈企业,然虽非常富有,但生一也是低调朴素的企业家
'Starting from scratch, he built the Wahaha enterprise. Although very wealthy, he has always been a low-profile and simple **entrepreneur**.'
- (7) 中国著名企业家宗庆后同志去世，这是中国企业界的一大损失。
'The death of the well-known Chinese **entrepreneur**, Comrade Zong Qinghou, is a significant loss to the Chinese business world.'

In contrast, *capitalist* (资本家) tends to be used more generically (70%, 35 out of 50) and with fewer positive associations. The words that co-occur with *capitalist* are limited and less flattering. In terms of identification, *capitalist* is associated with 买办 (*comprador*) and 人民 (*people*), potentially suggesting a perceived divide between capitalists and the people. The two identity labels categorize capitalists in terms of social classes: the people's capitalists are those we should unite with, while comprador capitalists are enemies we must oppose. The distinction reflects historical and ideological perspectives on different types of capitalists in Chinese political discourse. Examples are as follows:

- (8) 而中国媒体喜欢的是人民资本家，诸如马云
'And what Chinese media like are people's capitalists, such as Jack Ma.'
- (9) 虽然也有很多令人不齿的买办资本家，但是这一批人总体来说价值观是健康向上，有理想的
'Although there are also many comprador capitalists that are despicable, on the whole, the values of this group are healthy and upward, and they have ideals.'

When it comes to social sanction, the phrase 为富不仁 (*wealthy but immoral*) is linked to *capitalist* (资本家), implying a negative moral judgment on capitalists as those who acquire wealth without regard for social responsibility, as in the following:

- (10) 必将引起全社会的广泛讨论，为富不仁的资本家越来越没有市场了。
'It will inevitably lead to widespread discussions throughout the whole society;
capitalists who are wealthy but immoral are increasingly losing their market.'

These linguistic patterns reflect a cultural and possibly political distinction in how entrepreneurs and capitalists are perceived in Chinese society. Entrepreneurs are often portrayed as positive forces, contributing to social and economic development, while capitalists are viewed more critically or generically. This difference in portrayal could be influenced by China's economic policies and social values, which tend to encourage entrepreneurship while maintaining a cautious stance towards unfettered capitalism.

5.2.2 Predication

Critical insights into this ritual-status framework emerge from examining the linguistic patterns surrounding *entrepreneurs* (企业家) and *capitalists* (资本家) in Chinese discourse. This differential treatment is evident in the following patterns of co-occurrence:

Table 3. Verbs and Nouns Co-occurring with 企业家 and 资本家

Terms	企业家	资本家
Verbs	缅怀 (<i>commemorate</i>), 尊敬 (<i>respect</i>), 致敬 (<i>salute</i>), 忘记 (<i>forget</i>), 学习 (<i>learn from</i>), 爱戴 (<i>love and esteem</i>), 崇敬 (<i>revere</i>), 走好 (<i>walk well/rest in peace</i>), 千古 (<i>eternal</i>), 悼念 (<i>mourn</i>)	尊重 (<i>respect</i>), 讨论 (<i>discuss</i>), 做了 (<i>did</i>), 反对 (<i>oppose</i>), 试图 (<i>attempt</i>), 意味 (<i>meaning</i>), 说 (<i>say</i>), 骂 (<i>curse/scold</i>), 仇 (<i>hate/enmity</i>), 一言难尽 (<i>hard to sum up in a few words</i>), 作假 (<i>fabricate</i>), 作威 (<i>act tyrannically</i>), 作福 (<i>seek privileges</i>), 落幕 (<i>curtain falls</i>)
Nouns	楷模 (<i>role model</i>), 脊梁 (<i>backbone</i>), 开拓者 (<i>pioneer</i>), 典范 (<i>model</i>)	仁义 (<i>benevolence and righteousness</i>), 公道 (<i>justice</i>)

Entrepreneurs are consistently associated with terms conveying moral approval and deep respect: 缅怀 (*commemorate*), 尊敬 (*respect*), 致敬 (*salute*), 学习 (*learn from*), 爱戴 (*love and esteem*), and 崇敬 (*revere*). Their elevated social status is further reinforced through honorific designations as 楷模 (*role model*), 脊梁 (*backbone*), 开拓者 (*pioneer*), and 典范 (*model*). In contrast, capitalists evoke more complex and often negative associations. While some neutral terms like 讨论 (*discuss*) and 尊重 (*respect*) appear, they frequently attract moral criticism through terms like 反对 (*oppose*), 骂 (*curse/scold*), 仇 (*hate/enmity*), and 一言难尽 (*hard to sum up in a few words*). Notably, capitalists maintain associations with moral concepts of 仁义 (*benevolence and righteousness*) and 公道 (*justice*), suggesting ongoing ethical expectations.

This linguistic distinction reflects how traditional Confucian values integrate with modern Chinese society through *jiaohua* (教化, transformation through learning) and *xiushen* (修身, self-cultivation) (Herrmann-Pillath 2023). The contrast between “authoritative” and “authoritarian” leadership (Chen and Farh 2010) becomes visible in the negative connotations of terms like 作假 (*fabricate*), 作威 (*act tyrannically*), 作福 (*seek privileges*) associated with capitalists. While entrepreneurs’ status derives from contributions to social transformation, capitalism faces scepticism within “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. The mourning discourse thus functions as a ritual mechanism for transforming individuals into moral persons (Herrmann-Pillath, Feng, and Guo 2019).

5.2.3 Argumentation

Topoi (singular: topos) are common rhetorical themes, arguments, or formulaic expressions that function as “places” or “locations” where speakers can find material for their arguments (Reisigl and Wodak 2016). Originating from ancient Greek rhetoric, topoi serve as shared patterns of reasoning and standardized methods of developing arguments, acting as mental shortcuts or heuristics for constructing persuasive discourse. Topoi in the discourse-historical approach (DHA) are content-related warrants or conclusion rules that connect arguments to conclusions, serving as justification strategies that provide standardized patterns of argumentation (Krzyżanowski 2019; Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2024). These argumentative schemes represent common-sense reasoning patterns that are often taken for granted within specific discourse communities.

Three topos can be identified in the distinction between entrepreneurs and capitalists, including “conscience”, “patriotism”, and “contribution”. The representative co-occurring words are as follows:

Table 4. Representative co-occurring words for each topos

Terms	企业家(<i>entrepreneur</i>)	资本家(<i>capitalist</i>)
Conscience	良心 (<i>conscience</i>), 责任感 (<i>sense of responsibility</i>), 为富不仁 (<i>wealthy but immoral</i>)	为富不仁 (<i>wealthy but immoral</i>)
Patriotism	中国 (<i>China</i>), 民族 (<i>nation</i>), 媚外 (<i>foreign-adoring</i>)	买办 (<i>comprador</i>), 绿卡 (<i>green card</i>), 民粹 (<i>populism</i>), 民族 (<i>nation</i>)
Contribution	贡献 (<i>contribution</i>), 造福 (<i>benefit</i>)	造福 (<i>benefit</i>), 福利 (<i>welfare</i>), 作假 (<i>fabricate</i>), 作威 (<i>act tyrannically</i>), 作福 (<i>seek privileges</i>)

The topoi of “conscience” can be formulated as follows: if a business leader is rich but without conscience, he is a capitalist rather than an entrepreneur, as in the following:

- (11) 中国不缺企业家，缺的是有良心的企业家，人们并不仇富，恨的是为富不仁，宗老是中国企业家的标杆，宗老一路走好！
 ‘China is not lacking in entrepreneurs; what it lacks are **entrepreneurs with a conscience**. People do not resent the wealthy; what they detest are **the wealthy without compassion**. Zong Lao was a role model for Chinese entrepreneurs. Rest in peace, Zong Lao!’

The topoi of “contribution” can be formulated as follows: if a business leader is rich but does not make contributions to the people and society, he is a capitalist rather than an entrepreneur, as in the following:

- (12) 宗庆后：我不是资本家，是企业家，为老百姓造福才会受人尊敬
 ‘Zong Qinghou: “I’m not a **capitalist**, but an **entrepreneur**. Only by **benefiting ordinary people** will one earn respect”’

The topoi of “patriotism” can be formulated as follows: if a business leader is rich but does not love China, he is a capitalist rather than a capitalist, as in the following:

- (13) 宗馥莉提到自己的爸爸就像个骄傲的公主，她说爸爸是神一样的存在，评价自己的父亲时第一个说的是他爱国，偏远地区让他去投资他都去，宗老说自己不是资本家，是企业家，毕生心愿就是把企业搞好，为国家和社会做点事
 ‘When Zong Fuli mentioned her father, she was like a proud princess. She said her father was like a god to her. When describing her father, the first thing she mentioned was his **patriotism: he would invest in remote areas whenever asked**. Old Zong said he wasn’t a **capitalist** but an **entrepreneur**, and his life-long wish was to run his business well and **do something for the country and society**.’

5.2.4 Perspectivization

While the term *capitalist* (资本家) does appear in discourse about Zong, it is typically in the contexts of denial and self-identification. This is most prominently illustrated in Zong’s own declaration on CCTV’s “Dialogue” program: “I’m not a capitalist, but an entrepreneur”. This statement, often intertextually represented in Weibo posts, demonstrates Zong’s conscious self-positioning as an entrepreneur rather than a capitalist, as in the following:

- (14) 宗庆后：我不是资本家，是企业家，为老百姓造福才会受人尊敬
 ‘Zong Qinghou: “I’m not a **capitalist**, but an **entrepreneur**. Only by benefiting ordinary people will one earn respect”

This self-identification aligns with Confucian principles of individual moral autonomy, as noted by Herrmann-Pillath (2023), who emphasizes how Confucianism places individual moral agency at its ethical core while balancing personal development with social harmony. This is reflected in Zong’s own philosophical reflection, as in the following:

- (15) 第一句话：“我们之所以选择成为企业家，并非来自我们本能，也并非我们真正的性格使然。我们只是使劲儿地在为自己找一条出路。等到年纪大了，回头一看，自己竟然走出了一条路。”
 ‘The first sentence: “The reason we chose to become **entrepreneurs** was not out of instinct, nor was it truly a result of our character. We were just trying hard to find a way out for ourselves. When we get older and look back, we realize that we have actually blazed a trail.”

When discourse does label Zong as a capitalist, it appears in two distinct contexts. The first acknowledges his technical status as a capitalist while emphasizing his exceptional moral character (see Example 16). The second approach frames the capitalist label as purely descriptive, as one Weibo user notes while reflecting on Wahaha’s business history (see Example 17).

- (16) 实践证明，有良心的人无论做什么都有良心，就像宗庆后一样，也是资本家，但更有良知更有慈善
 ‘Practice has proved that people with a conscience have a conscience no matter what they do, just like Zong Qinghou, who is also a **capitalist** but more conscientious and charitable.
- (17) ...我说宗庆后的第一身份是资本家，这本是表述一个中性的事实
 ‘...When I say Zong Qinghou’s primary identity is that of a **capitalist**, I’m simply stating a neutral fact.

This discursive pattern suggests that the entrepreneur-capitalist distinction relies significantly on individual moral agency and self-identification, reflecting deeper Confucian principles of self-cultivation (修身) and ethical autonomy within social frameworks.

6. Discussion and conclusion

A corpus-assisted discourse analysis has revealed the specific ways in which the two concepts are recontextualized and represented in public mourning discourse surrounding Zong Qinghou. The co-occurrence network analysis identifies themes associated with both concepts, showing that entrepreneurs, exemplified by Zong Qinghou, receive positive representation due to their distinctive qualities and public respect, whereas capitalists, such as Zhong Shanshan and Jack Ma, face criticism. Analysis of the top 50 co-occurring words highlights distinct discursive strategies. Entrepreneurs are categorized based on social, national, and ethnic status, while capitalists are defined primarily by class. Additionally, entrepreneurs are praised for their moral conduct and social achievements, whereas capitalists are criticized mainly for their moral failings. Three main topoi – namely, “conscience,” “patriotism,” and “contribution” – are used to differentiate entrepreneurs from capitalists. However, the dissociation of Zong from the label of capitalist is often attributed to his personal choices rather than external pressures. The foregrounding of the two concepts in the representations of Zong Qinghou further demonstrates the “increasingly conceptual nature of discourse” (Krzyżanowski 2016, 309). It contributes to the reduction of the representations of Zong as either a friend or an enemy, foregrounding their moral qualities and backgrounding their business contributions (Krzyżanowski 2016).

The entrepreneur-capitalist dichotomy also mirrors China’s complex navigation between socialist principles and market practices in the 21st century. While the government actively promotes entrepreneurship as crucial for economic development, it maintains vigilance against potential social inequalities from unchecked capitalism. Under President Xi Jinping’s leadership, the role of entrepreneurs has evolved to encompass national strategic objectives, including technological self-sufficiency, environmental protection, and rural revitalization. Recent initiatives like “common prosperity” (共同富裕) demonstrate this balance, emphasizing wealth redistribution alongside economic growth. The continued sensitivity around the term “capitalist” serves as a reminder of the political and ideological constraints within which Chinese businesses must operate, while the promotion of “entrepreneur” reflects the government’s effort to channel private sector energy toward national objectives.

These distinctions are fundamentally rooted in Confucian relationality, which views individuals not as autonomous entities but as beings defined by their relationships and responsibilities to others (Herrmann-Pillath 2023). Central to this worldview is the concept of benevolence (仁), which stands as the supreme virtue and represents the essence of being truly human. This manifests through empathy,

consideration for others, and reciprocity in human interactions, working in harmony with other key virtues such as righteousness (义), ritual propriety (礼), wisdom (智), and trustworthiness (信). Through this cultural lens, success is measured not merely by individual achievement but by one's ability to maintain harmonious relationships and fulfil social responsibilities. This explains why Zong's modest lifestyle and contribution to national development resonated so deeply with the Chinese public, as it aligned perfectly with traditional values of social harmony and collective benefit, demonstrating how Confucian principles continue to shape modern business ethics and social expectations in China.




Therefore, a discourse-conceptual analysis addresses the increasingly conceptual nature of discourse and provides a significant perspective for understanding the discursive construction and contestation of concepts (Krzyżanowski 2016; Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024). As a critical methodology, it not only reveals the hidden dynamics of discourse but also has the potential to uncover how societal norms and power structures are reinforced or challenged through discourse. The representations of Zong Qinghou as an entrepreneur or a capitalist provide a unique opportunity to examine the evolving relationships between the public, business leaders, and the government in China's changing socio-political context. This study has also demonstrated how text mining can be incorporated into the critical analysis of competing concepts (Liu and Huang 2022). It is hoped that this approach will inspire further studies in this area.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Representative words for the co-occurrence network of *entrepreneur* (企业家) (Top 200)

Rank	Words
1	曹德旺 (Cao Dewang), 任正非 (Ren Zhengfei), 无疑 (undoubtedly), 典范 (model)
2	企业家 (entrepreneur), 宗庆后 (Zong Qinghou), 企业 (company/enterprise), 中国 (China), 宗老 (Zong Lao), 民营 (private), 员工 (employee), 民族 (nation), 走好 (walk well/rest in peace), 贡献 (contribution), 忘记 (forget), 社会 (society), 国家 (country/nation), 低调 (low profile), 显得 (appear), 越来越 (more and more), 责任感 (sense of responsibility), 致富 (become rich), 为富不仁 (rich but immoral)
3	去世 (passed away), 学习 (learn), 同志 (comrade), 著名 (famous), 优秀 (excellent), 担当 (take responsibility), 勤劳 (diligent), 传承 (inheritance), 爱的 (loving), 勤俭 (frugal), 知名 (well-known)
4	缅怀 (commemorate), 良心 (conscience), 媚外 (foreign-adoring), 集体 (collective), 挺直 (straighten), 脊梁 (backbone), 楷模 (role model), 深深 (deeply), 长久 (long-lasting), 祖国 (motherland)
5	爱戴 (adore), 崇敬 (revere)
6	人民 (people), 致敬 (salute), 落幕 (curtain falls), 老一辈 (older generation), 实业家 (industrialist), 实干 (practical), 千古 (eternal)
7	这样的 (like this) and 稀缺 (scarce)
8	老百姓 (the common people), 资本家 (capitalist), 区别 (distinguish), 造福 (benefit), 尊重 (respect)
9	精神 (spirit), 悼念 (mourn), 开拓者 (pioneer), 晚 (late), 挽联 (funeral couplet), 杰出 (outstanding)
10	坐到 (reach), 达标 (meet the standard), 互联网 (internet), 顶级 (top-level)
11	值得 (worthy of), 尊敬 (respect)

Appendix 2. Representative words for the co-occurrence network of *capitalist* (资本家)
(Top 200)

Rank	Word
1	福 (<i>prosperity</i>), 先富 (<i>get rich first</i>), 富裕 (<i>wealthy</i>), 带动 (<i>drive</i>), 造福 (<i>benefit</i>), 老百姓 (<i>common people</i>), 才 (<i>then</i>), 会 (<i>will</i>), 尊重 (<i>respect</i>), 充分 (<i>fully</i>), 福利 (<i>welfare</i>), 爱戴 (<i>admiration</i>), 反对 (<i>oppose</i>), 处境 (<i>situation</i>), 人民 (<i>people</i>), 公道 (<i>justice</i>), 假 (<i>fake</i>), 仁义 (<i>righteousness</i>), 永远 (<i>forever</i>), 出圈 (<i>go viral</i>)
2	钟睺睺 (<i>Zhong Shanshan</i>), 凡此种种 (<i>all such things</i>), 剪 (<i>cut</i>), 司马南 (<i>Sima Nan</i>), 万恶 (<i>all evil</i>), 做了 (<i>did</i>), 卑鄙 (<i>despicable</i>), 会被 (<i>will be</i>), 养生堂 (<i>Yangshengtang</i>), 做了 (<i>did</i>), 起来 (<i>rise up</i>)
3	骂 (<i>curse</i>), 绿卡 (<i>green card</i>), 作威作福 (<i>abuse power</i>), 动人 (<i>moving</i>), 双重 (<i>double</i>), 买办 (<i>comprador</i>), 别有用心 (<i>ulterior motives</i>), 民粹 (<i>populism</i>), 试图 (<i>attempt</i>), 工厂 (<i>factory</i>), 仇 (<i>hatred</i>), 开心 (<i>happy</i>), 向上 (<i>upward</i>)
4	中性 (<i>neutral</i>), 身份 (<i>identity</i>)
5	资本家 (<i>capitalist</i>), 企业家 (<i>entrepreneur</i>), 宗庆后 (<i>Zong Qinghou</i>), 不 (<i>not</i>)
6	为富不仁 (<i>wealthy but immoral</i>), 市场 (<i>market</i>), 讨论 (<i>discussion</i>), 引起 (<i>cause</i>), 全社会 (<i>whole society</i>), 必 (<i>must</i>), 广泛 (<i>widespread</i>), 越来越 (<i>increasingly</i>).
7	作假 (<i>falsify</i>), 复兴 (<i>rejuvenation</i>), 取向 (<i>orientation</i>), 实践 (<i>practice</i>), 主义 (<i>ideology</i>), 实现 (<i>realize</i>)
8	日子 (<i>days</i>), 意味 (<i>meaning</i>), 逐渐 (<i>gradually</i>), 去世 (<i>passing away</i>), 落幕 (<i>curtain fall</i>)
9	卖点 (<i>selling point</i>), 一言难尽 (<i>hard to explain</i>)

Address for correspondence

Ming Liu
Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Hung Hom
Kowloon, Hong Kong
China
mingi.liu@polyu.edu.hk

Biographical notes

LIU Ming is an assistant professor at Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research interests cover critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, pragmatics, systemic functional linguistics, and intercultural communication. His recent publications have appeared in some international journals, such as *Discourse & Communication, Language & Communication, Journal of Language and Politics, Text & Talk, Discourse, Context & Media, Lingua* and *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3815-4705>

Cindy S.B. NGAI is an associate professor at Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research interests cover corporate communication, crisis communication, and health communication. She has published a number of journal articles in these fields.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0664-075X>

LI Han is a PhD student at Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research interests cover critical discourse studies and corpus linguistics.

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0619-1161>

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