"Together, we fight the virus": An exploratory study of the use of metadiscourse in Hong Kong's Chinese newspapers

Victor Ho and Vincy Zhang

Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study was conducted in the summer of 2020 when Hong Kong people probably needed a substantial boost in their confidence in themselves, the government, and the future. Through the lens of metadiscourse, we investigated the way the city's Chinese newspapers attempted the confidence boost in editorials and opinion columns – the two newspaper genres that are probably the most persuasive because of the inclusion and expression of the journalists' and newspapers' stance and ideologies. Drawing upon metadiscourse as the analytical framework, the article analyses the rhetoric of the discourse of 31 editorials and opinion columns extracted from five key Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong. The patterns of use of metadiscourse in the two genres have been identified. The roles played by Chinese newspapers that circulated in Hong Kong while the city was undergoing one of the hardest periods in its history are discussed.

Keywords: metadiscourse, persuasion, newspaper genres, freedom of press, self-censorship

1. Introduction

This article represents one of the first attempts at investigating the use of metadiscourse in Chinese newspaper editorials and opinion columns in the Hong Kong context. Studies investigating the journalistic discourse in Hong Kong are not lacking, and the foci of their discussion cover a wide range of issues including, for example, press freedom, self-censorship, patriotism, and identity (Flowerdew & Leong, 2007; Leung, 2019; Li & Lin, 2006; Zhang & Mihelj, 2012). The linguistic dimension of the journalistic discourse in Hong Kong, however, has not yet received comparable research attention. As a result, few, if any, studies adopting a metadiscursive approach to analysing news discourse in the city have been conducted.

One of the main purposes for speakers or writers ('writers' hereafter) to use metadiscourse in a text is to interact with hearers or readers ('readers' hereafter) in order to enhance the persuasiveness of the text (Hyland, 2005). Persuasion is achieved by making appeals to the rationality, credibility, and character of the writer, and to the emotion of the reader. These appeals correspond respectively to Aristotle's three means of rhetoric, namely logos, ethos, and pathos (Hyland, 2005). Persuasion is particularly relevant to newspaper editorials as they are usually supposed to perform such a function (Li & Lin, 2006). Through editorials, as well as opinion columns, which are also supposed to be persuasive, journalists can participate actively in public debate (Le, 2004) expressing the stance and ideologies of the news organisations owning the newspapers (Flowerdew & Leong, 2007). It is desirable for journalists to be able to persuade readers who will then identify with the newspapers' stances and ideologies.

This article will explore the way editors and opinion columnists attempt to persuade the people of Hong Kong to perform certain behaviours in order to boost their confidence in themselves, the government, and the future of the city during one of the most difficult periods the city has gone through (see Section 2 below for more details). Editorials and opinion columns are chosen as these two sections of a newspaper most probably reflect the news organisation's stance and ideologies (Hackett & Zhao, 1994; Le, 2004), which, in turn, would

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probably influence people's perception of social reality and understanding of social problems (Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010).

2. Background to the study: what Hong Kong has been through since June 2019

2.1 From stability to chaos

Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China, has been regarded as one of the most successful cities not only in China, but also in South-East Asia for various reasons, including its economic success, especially after its return to China at the end of the British colonial rule in 1997, the strong support it receives from China, the advanced medical services it provides, its effective rule of law, and the freedom its people enjoy (e.g. freedom of speech and the press).

The success of the city, however, started to show signs of wavering in mid-2019 when a series of social events were staged following the Hong Kong government's proposal to introduce the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 (commonly known as the Extradition Bill (Amendment)). The resulting unrest escalated along with an increase in the intensity of the social events whose ultimate aim, as their organisers and participants claimed, was to cause severe damage to Hong Kong, or to achieve 'mutual destruction', a term coined by the same group of people. The damage the city had suffered since mid-2019 was exacerbated by the highly untimely arrival of COVID-19 in January 2020. The city's stability and prosperity continued to deteriorate at an unprecedented rate, bringing people's confidence to a new low since the return of the city's sovereignty to China in 1997.

2.2 From chaos to panic

When the people of Hong Kong started to see signs of a dying down of social unrest upon the enactment of The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (The National Security Law (HK)), they found themselves in the middle of the

third wave of COVID-19, which caught the whole city by surprise with merciless brutality. The way the Hong Kong government handled and contained the pandemic, unfortunately, did not seem to be able to convince its people that it could get the situation under control. The government's slogan "Together, we fight the virus", which attempted to unite the people in the fight against the pandemic, was not as effective as the government had wished. The people's fragile confidence resulting from the year-long chaos and the first two waves of the viral attack, sadly, dipped further, and panic started to develop among them.

The surge in the unemployment rate and the number of confirmed cases and casualties set up a worrying contrast with the plunge in the confidence and spirit of the people of Hong Kong. The imposition of various kinds of sanctions against Hong Kong by the United States-led international community in response to the enactment of the National Security Law (HK) at this critical junction was not particularly helpful to the city and its people.

2.3 Attempts to boost confidence

The Hong Kong government has attempted to boost the confidence of its people by rolling out a series of pandemic relief measures. The relief may have been able to ease the financial pressure faced by the people of Hong Kong, making available to them some short-lived breathing space. Rather disappointingly, contrary to the city's expectations (perhaps wishful thinking in retrospect), the pandemic had not died down but started to hit the city even harder in late June. The city's hope for a speedy and strong economic recovery and the resumption of its normal way of life did not materialise, crushing the people's confidence and spirit once again. The government's attempt at boosting confidence has therefore failed to serve its purpose as well as was planned.

2.4 The role of the local press

The Hong Kong press, apart from playing its usual role of monitoring the government's work, has also assumed another role in these challenging times, as this article attempts to show:

the body that boosts people's confidence in themselves, in the government's ability to control the pandemic, and in the future of the city. In Section 5, we will show how the local press could fulfil this important role by revealing the persuasive attempts it has made with the use of metadiscourse.

We will now turn to a brief review of previous studies of news discourse in Hong Kong.

3. Previous studies of news discourse in Hong Kong

As Hong Kong is predominantly an ethnic Chinese society, almost all of the local newspapers are published in Chinese, with only a few in English. Previous studies of news discourse in Hong Kong have used both Chinese and English newspapers as data. We will first briefly review those studies that analysed the English newspapers below.

Probably because of the unique and ever-evolving political situation of Hong Kong since China first expressed its intention and determination to resume the city's sovereignty back in the 1970s, previous studies of the journalistic discourse in Hong Kong have shown a strong interest in various issues facing Hong Kong before and after the transfer of sovereignty. Using Concgram as the corpus analytical tool, Cheng and Lam (2010) studied the change in media representation of human rights in Hong Kong after its handover. Among the changes they identified were the roles ascribed to the United States, mainland China, and Hong Kong in that the United States were seen to be less critical of human rights issues, and both mainland China and Hong Kong were regarded as more of an information source than, respectively, an object of criticism and a place where human rights issues were a concern. Cheng and Lam argued that such change reflected "an ideological shift in the newspaper's stance in response to the current situations in both local and world politics" (Cheng & Lam, 2010, p. 507). Using a corpus-based critical discourse study (CDS) approach, Cheng and Lam (2013) discussed Western perceptions of Hong Kong ten years after the reversion of its sovereignty back to China. Their corpus-based CDS analysis suggested that the West perceived Hong Kong as having "increased politicisation" (Cheng & Lam, 2013, p. 182). Flowerdew, Li, and Tran (2002)

adopted a manual critical discourse analytical approach to studying the issue of discrimination by analysing the news articles and editorials of the *South China Morning Post*, the most popular English newspaper in the city. They observed a discrepancy between the news articles and editorials in the magnitude of the discriminatory attitude expressed, leading one to question the institutional stance of the newspaper.

Like those studies that analysed the journalistic discourse in English, studies that analysed news articles in Chinese also showed a strong interest in issues that were related to or had arisen from the change of the city's sovereignty, such as the discursive construction of patriotism and Hong Kong identity in the post-handover era. Flowerdew and Leong's (2007) study had a strong linguistic orientation and looked at how writers of editorials and opinion pieces of ideologically different local newspapers used metaphors in constructing patriotism. Drawing upon critical discourse analysis and collective identity theory, Zhang and Mihelj (2012) found that the patterns of discursive construction of Hong Kong identity evidenced in the local newspaper editorials varied depending on the ownership (whether the owners have business in mainland China, what political orientation the owners hold), commercial imperatives (presence or absence of such), and type (tabloid or broadsheet) of the newspapers. The freedom and self-censorship of the local press, probably due to their sensitive nature, have also attracted considerable research attention. This research has argued that journalists were taking on the challenge of reduced press freedom by making adjustments, such as appealing to professionalism which embraced objectivity and neutrality: choosing a "'centrist' and pragmatic" position (Fung, 2007, p. 164), taking a neutral stand (So & Chan, 2007), and presenting their opinions and judgment as if they were hard facts and creating a scenario involving rational debates (Li & Lin, 2006).

Two interesting points can be made of the brief review above. First, the majority of the previous studies of journalistic discourse in the Hong Kong context did not have a strong linguistic orientation. Second, editorials seemed to be the main genre of the newspaper being studied, echoing the importance

of this genre in terms of its function – expressing the news organisations' official position and ideologies (Hackett & Zhao, 1994; Le, 2004). The present article, being exploratory in nature, aims to extend the research into local journalist discourse by conducting a linguistic analysis of the discourse of the editorials and opinion columns of five key Chinese newspapers circulating in Hong Kong. In particular, the writers' persuasive attempts will be analysed from a metadiscursive perspective.

4. The present study

4.1 Analytical framework – metadiscourse

Metadiscourse has been defined and interpreted in a number of different ways. It is generally interpreted as discourse about discourse (Vande Kopple, 1985). Ädel (2006, p. 59), emphasising the reflexive nature of metadiscourse, defines it as "text about the evolving text, or the writer's explicit commentary on her own ongoing discourse". Hyland (2005, p. 37) defines metadiscourse as "the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community". This definition highlights first the nature of metadiscourse: it is self-reflective; and second, the pragmatic functions of metadiscourse: it negotiates interactional meanings, assists discourse production, and engages with consumers of discourse. Based on this definition, Hyland (2005) proposes an interpersonal model of metadiscourse consisting of two main categories, interactive and interactional. The model is illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1: Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse

Sub-category	Function	Examples in English	Examples in Chinese
Interactive metadiscourses			
Transitions	Express relations between main clauses	*In addition; but; thus*	此外 (*cǐwài* 'in addition'); 因此 (*yīncǐ* 'thus'); 但 (*dàn* 'but')
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences, or stages	*Finally; to conclude; my purpose is*	首先(*shǒuxiān* 'firstly'); 总体来看 (*zǒngtǐlákàn* 'to conclude'); 更值得注意的是(*gèng zhídé zhùyì de shì* 'what's more')
Endophoric markers	Refer to information in other parts of the text	*Noted above; see Fig; in section 2*	以上三方面 (*yǐshàng sān fāngmiàn* 'the above three aspects')
Evidentials	Refer to information from other texts	*According to X; Z states*	根据实验室提供的资料 (*gēnjù shíyànshì tígòng de zīliào* 'according to the information provided by the laboratory'); 医管局还表示(*yīguǎnjú hái biǎoshì* 'the Hospital Authority states')
Code glosses	Elaborate propositional meanings	*Namely; such as; in other words*	例如(*lìrú* 'for example'); 即(*jí* 'namely'); 也就是说(*yějiùshìshuō* 'in other words')
Interactional metadiscourse			
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	*Might; perhaps; possible; about*	一定程度上 (*yídìng chéngdù shàng* 'to a certain extain'); 可能 (*kěnéng* 'perhaps'); 似乎 (*sìhū* 'seem')
Boosters	Emphasise certainty or close dialogue	*In fact; definitely; it is clear that*	當然 (*dāngrán* 'of course'); 絕對 (*juéduì* 'definitely'); 事實上 (*shìshíshàng* 'in fact')
Attitude markers	Express writer's attitude to proposition	*Unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly*	令人憂慮 (*lìngrén yōulǜ* 'sadly'); 很可惜 (*hěn kěxī* 'it's a pity that'); 所幸(*suǒ xìng* 'fortunately')
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to author(s)	*I; we; my; me; our*	我(*wǒ* 'I'); 我們(*wǒmen* 'we')
Engagement markers	Explicitly build relationship with reader	*Consider; note; you can see that*	可见 (*kějiàn* 'you can see that'); 试问 (*shìwèn* 'consider'); 可以看到(*kěyǐ kàndào* 'can see')

Interactive metadiscourse serves to help readers to navigate through the text, providing them with various kinds of

signposts. It consists of five sub-categories: transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses. Interactional metadiscourse serves to involve readers in the text, providing them with opportunities and channels to become active participants of the discourse, making meaning together with the writer. Like interactive metadiscourse, it also consists of five sub-categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers.

Both interactive and interactional metadiscourse, according to Hyland (2005), contribute to the persuasiveness of a text by making appeals to the writer's rationality, character, and credibility, as well as the readers' emotion. Interactive metadiscourse allows writers to appeal to their own rationality (i.e., logos) by making the logical development of their arguments more explicit to the readers in four ways. First, transitions can express the relations between main clauses clearly (Hyland & Tse, 2004; Li & Wharton, 2012). Second, frame markers can signal the stage of the development of the arguments, the writer's purpose, or the discourse act performed (Hyland, 1998). Third, endophoric markers can enhance the coherence of the text by linking up and cross-referencing the concepts and points presented in different parts of the text (Hyland, 2000). Lastly, code glosses can remove the burden of interpretation from the readers, allowing them to appreciate the logic of the text with greater ease (Ho, 2018b; Hyland, 1998). Interactive metadiscourse also allows writers to appeal to their credibility and character (i.e., ethos). Evidentials provide a convenient means for writers to build their own arguments upon significant sources, allowing them to enhance the credibility of their arguments and themselves (Fu & Hyland, 2014).

Interactional metadiscourse plays a key role in making appeals to the writer's ethos, as well as to the readers' emotion (i.e., pathos). According to Hyland (2005) and Martin and White (2005), both hedges and boosters help to create a credible persona. Hedging can show the writer's reservation for and cautiousness about the propositions or value positions being put forward, and the writer's awareness of and willingness to entertain readers' possible alternative voices. Boosting can

show the writer's certainty for the propositions or value positions being put forward, which convey to the audience a strong sense of authority and confidence. Attitude markers, which express the writer's evaluation of a proposition or value position like surprise, agreement, and pleasure, will lead readers to "experience the discourse in the same way, and create and emphasise a set of standard, taken-for-granted purposes and understandings" (Hyland, 2005, p. 82), thereby appealing to readers' emotions. Similarly, engagement markers can make affective appeals by aligning "the goals and desires of the writer with those of the reader" (Hyland, 2005, p. 82). Self-mentions can further magnify the effect of the credibility appeals and affective appeals when they are used together with respectively hedges/boosters and attitude markers/engagement markers (Hyland, 2005).

The present article will adopt Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse for its high applicability as suggested by the wide range of genres that have been analysed using this model. The genres include, for example, research articles (Hu & Cao, 2015), L2 (English) academic essays (Li & Wharton, 2012), workplace emails (Jensen, 2009), job advertisements (Fu, 2012), and managerial responses (Ho, 2018b).

However, only a small number of metadiscourse studies, mostly contrastive in nature, have investigated Chinese news articles. For example, Chen (2016) analysed 50 newspaper reports (not editorials or opinion columns) covering political and economic issues extracted from three Chinese newspapers circulated in mainland China. Huang and Xiong (2012) analysed 30 award-winning news commentaries. Mu (2010) analysed 60 editorials extracted from six Chinese newspapers circulated in mainland China. Only Chen (2016) adopted Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse as it was; the other two only used the interactive-interactional typology and modified the sub-categorisation of interactive-interactional metadiscourse with reference to Dafouz-Milne (2008).[1]

4.2 The data and its analysis

Five key local Chinese newspapers (the web versions) were selected from which editorials and opinion columns were

extracted as the data for the present study (see Table 2).

Table 2: Newspapers used as data source

Newspaper	Type	Political orientation	Web address
Wen Wei Pao (文匯報) (Wénhuì Bào)	Broadsheet	Pro-government	http://paper.wenweipo.com/
Ta Kung Pao (大公報) (Dàgong Bào)	Broadsheet	Pro-government	http://www.takungpao.com.hk/
Ming Pao (明報) (Míng Bào)	Broadsheet	Neutral	https://www.mingpao.com/
Oriental Daily (東方日報) (Dōngfang Rìbào)	Tabloid	Slightly pro-government	https://orientaldaily.on.cc/
Headline Daily (頭條日報) (Tóutiáo Rìbào)	Tabloid	Slightly pro-government	https://paper.stheadline.com/headl

The editorials and opinion columns written on the topic of COVID-19 appearing in these five newspapers published within the period from 1 January 2020 to 30 June 2020 were extracted and formed the data for the present study. A small corpus of 31 articles, totalling 27,191 Chinese characters, was created for metadiscursive analysis. The average length of each article was 877 characters.

The 31 articles were analysed manually by the two authors separately by drawing upon Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse. Both authors have substantial experience in conducting metadiscursive analysis of different genres using the model (e.g., Ho, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). Unlike other metadiscourse studies which adopted a top-down approach to identifying metadiscourse tokens by applying the list of metadiscourse tokens proposed by Hyland (2005, pp. 218–224), this study adopted a bottom-up approach for two closely related reasons. First, only some examples of metadiscourse tokens in Chinese have been identified (Chen, 2016; Huang & Xiong, 2012; Mu, 2010); a list of Chinese metadiscourse tokens comparable to Hyland's (2005) in coverage and validity is not yet available. Potential

metadiscourse tokens in our Chinese data would be overlooked if a top-down approach based on the currently available lists of Chinese metadiscourse were adopted. Second, adopting a bottom-up approach would allow the identification of Chinese metadiscourse markers which have so far escaped researchers' scrutiny. An inter-rater reliability of 86% was obtained. The discrepancy was reconciled through discussion.

5. Metadiscourse use patterns in Hong Kong's Chinese newspapers

5.1 Frequency of use

Table 3 shows the frequency of use of various metadiscourse categories in the data covering the topic of COVID-19.

Table 3: Frequency of use of metadiscourse

Category	Raw frequency	Normalised frequency (per 1,000 words)	
Interactive			
Transitions	62	2.28	(43%)
Frame markers	40	1.47	(28%)
Endophoric markers	1	0.04	(1%)
Evidentials	24	0.88	(17%)
Code glosses	16	0.59	(11%)
Sub-total	143	5.26	(100%)
Interactional			
Hedges	34	1.25	(28%)
Boosters	31	1.14	(25%)
Attitude markers	26	0.96	(21%)
Self-mentions	1	0.04	(1%)
Engagement markers	30	1.10	(24%)
Sub-total	122	4.49	(100%)

Three observations can be made of Table 3:

1. Interactive metadiscourse recorded a higher frequency of use than interactional metadiscourse. The respective normalised frequencies were 5.26 (54%) and 4.49 (46%), giving a difference of 0.77, or 8%.
2. Among the interactive metadiscourse sub-categories, the writers of the articles used transitions most frequently

(43%), followed by frame markers (28%), evidentials (17%), code glosses (11%), and lastly endophoric markers (1%).

3. Among the interactional metadiscourse sub-categories, the writers of the articles used hedges most frequently (28%), followed by boosters (25%), engagement markers (24%), attitude markers (21%), and lastly self-mentions (1%). The writers showed a similar level of reliance on the interactional metadiscourse sub-categories (except self-mentions).

5.2 Metadiscourse in action

This section will discuss the significance and implications of the three observations in the context of Hong Kong. Extracts were taken from the corpus to illustrate the way writers of these newspaper texts make persuasive attempts. All the metadiscourse tokens are highlighted and the sub-category to which the tokens belong is specified in parentheses following the tokens.

5.2.1 A slightly stronger favour towards interactive metadiscourse
Two extracts featuring the use of metadiscourse will be presented in this sub-section. Emphasis will be on the way the use of metadiscourse could contribute to the persuasiveness of the text.

Extract (1) was the concluding paragraph of an opinion column published in *Wen Wei Pao* on 11 May 2020. Through the column, the writer was addressing the issue concerning the people's negative response to the government's initiative to distribute free reusable masks to people. The extract shows four instances of the use of metadiscourse – two interactive and three interactional.

(1)
Suǒyǐ (transition) ***wǒ*** (self-mention) ***tíyì*** (frame marker) *shèjiāoméitī qúnzǔ nèi de péngyou, duō fā zhèngnéngliàng de xùnxī, hùxiāng gǔlì,* ***dàjiā*** (engagement marker) *xuéxí cóng bùtóng jiǎodù qù kàn wèntí, duō diǎn xīnshǎng, xuédǒng gǎn'ēn, zuìhòu zuìdà déyì shì **zìjǐ*** (engagement marker).

所以 (transition) **我** (self-mention) **提議** (frame marker)社交媒體群組內的朋友，多發正能量的訊息，互相鼓勵，**大家** (engagement marker)學習從不同角度去看問題，多點欣賞，學懂感恩，最後最大得益是**自己** (engagement marker)。

Therefore (transition), **I** (self-mention) **suggest** (frame marker) members of social media groups send more positive messages to cheer one another up, and **we** (engagement marker) learn to approach an issue from different perspectives and show more appreciation and gratitude for others. It will be **ourselves** (engagement marker) who benefit most in the end.

After presenting and countering a number of conspiracy theories as conceived and propagated by various anti-government groups, the writer concludes the column with the gist of the message. S/he signals to the readers that the main message is forthcoming with the transition marker 'Therefore', which serves to tell the readers that s/he is going to draw a conclusion based on what s/he has already presented. While the readers are ready for the conclusion, they are told what discursive act the writer is about to perform immediately – to make a suggestion (but not to give an instruction, express disappointment, or stage a complaint, for example) with 'I suggest'. Both the transition marker 'Therefore' and the frame marker 'suggest' serve to contribute to the logos appeal. The former makes explicit the logical relationship (consequence in this case) between the clauses it connects. The latter makes the discursive act of the writer explicit, providing the readers with a frame for them to orient and perceive the forthcoming information in the desired manner. The use of the self-mention 'I' in front of 'suggest' shows that the writer is willing to be held accountable for the proposition put forward, helping him/her to establish a desirable character, thereby making an appeal to ethos.

The two instances of engagement markers –'we' and 'ourselves' – serve to signal to the readers that the columnist and the readers are facing the challenge together. This could help to appeal to the readers' emotions.

The propositional content of the opinion column, which aimed to boost the readers' confidence by painting a brighter

picture for Hong Kong, should then be more likely to be interpreted by the readers in the way desired by the columnist.

Extract (2) was taken from the *Headline Daily* editorial published on 15 May 2020. The editor was reassuring Hong Kong people that the city's anti-pandemic measures had been effectively implemented. The extract shows the use of six instances of metadiscourse – four interactive and two interactional.

(2)
Gēnjù (evidential) *yīxiàng guójìyánjiū fāxiàn, yīgè guójiā dìqū néngfǒu yǒuxiào èdī xīnguànfèiyán de chuánbōlǜ hé zhìsǐlǜ, shìhū sāndàyīnsù:* (code gloss) *yī shì mínzhòng dài kǒuzhào de bǐlì, èr shì xiànzhì shèjiāo de zhèngcè, sān shì jiǎncè de fùgàilǜ. Guòqù sāngèduōyuè, Xiānggǎng zài **yǐshàng** (endophoric marker) sān fāngmiàn jūn zuò dé **búcuò** (hedge), kàngyì biǎoxiàn yōuyú **bùshǎo** (hedge) xiānjìn guójiā, **dàn** (transition) miànduì yìqíng juǎntǔchónglái, Xiānggǎng bùnéng zìmǎn.*

根據 (evidential) 一項國際研究發現，一個國家／地區能否有效遏低新冠肺炎的傳播率和致死率，視乎三大因素：(code gloss) 一是民眾戴口罩的比例、二是限制社交的政策、三是檢測的覆蓋率。過去三個多月，香港在**以上** (endophoric marker) 三方面均做得**不錯** (hedge)，抗疫表現優於**不少** (hedge) 先進國家，**但** (transition) 面對疫情捲土重來，香港不能自滿

According to (evidential) an international research study, whether a country/region can effectively suppress the infection rate and mortality rate of pneumonia caused by the new coronavirus depends on three main factors: (code gloss) the ratio of people who wear face masks, the policy restraining social activities, and the test rate. Hong Kong has done **quite** (hedge) well in **the above** (endophoric marker) three aspects. Its performance in fighting the pandemic is better than **quite a number** (hedge) of developed countries. **However** (transition), Hong Kong cannot be complacent while tackling the comeback of the pandemic.

People's confidence in their own government had been at a low level since the start of the social unrest in June 2019. The series of blunders related to the handling of the pandemic (e.g., insufficient supply of face masks, rumours concerning the discontinuation of the supply of daily necessities from mainland

China, and the strike staged by the healthcare professionals) just further lowered the confidence level. The editorial attempts to boost people's confidence in the government by highlighting the government's achievements in its pandemic control. To persuade people to be confident in the Hong Kong government, the editor makes appeals to his/her own credibility and rationality with the use of four instances of interactive metadiscourse and two instances of interactional metadiscourse. S/he first enhanceds his/her credibility with some hard facts (Ettema & Glasser, 1998) by soliciting support from the outside with an evidential token 'According to' – an international research study is referred to at the very beginning of the paragraph. The most important and relevant findings of the study are then introduced with a colon ':', an instance of a code gloss. The achievements are referred to with an endophoric marker 'the above'. In presenting the achievements, the editor withholds his commitment by using two instances of hedges realised as 'quite' and 'quite a number', indicating his/her awareness of possible alternative viewpoints or even disagreement from the readers. After his/her attempts at boosting people's confidence by highlighting the government's achievements, the editor signals a change in his/her attitude to the readers, from being optimistic to cautious, reminding them that they should still stay vigilant to face the challenge posed by the next wave of the pandemic. The transition token 'However' serves to signal the attitude change and allows the readers to perceive and interpret the forthcoming message correctly.

Appeals to the editor's rationality and credibility are achieved by the use of respectively four instances of interactive metadiscourse and two instances of interactional metadiscourse. Readers of the editorial would then be more likely to be persuaded into believing in the government's ability to handle the pandemic and to lead Hong Kong to a speedy recovery of its economy and social order.

It has been argued elsewhere that a balanced use of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse is important in enhancing the persuasiveness of a newspaper opinion column (Dafouz-Milne, 2008). Achieving a balance is particularly relevant and important to editorials and opinion columns for their

persuasive nature. The fact that interactive metadiscourse was used only slightly more frequently than interactional metadiscourse should therefore allow both genres to achieve more effective persuasion. Such importance was further evidenced by a large difference (62%) between interactive and interactional metadiscourse in news reports, which should normally remain neutral and objective (Chen, 2016).

5.2.2 The role of interactive metadiscourse

The five interactive metadiscourse sub-categories were relied upon by the writers of the articles to various degrees in their attempts to persuade their readers. The following discussion will first show how these interactive metadiscourse sub-categories – transitions (43%), frame markers (28%), evidentials (17%), code glosses (11%), and endophoric markers (1%) – could help to boost confidence in Hong Kong. The two most frequently used sub-categories – transitions and frame markers – will be given more attention in the discussion below.

Extract (3) was taken from the editorial published in *Wen Wei Pao* on 1 May 2020. The editor highlights the government's effective handling of the pandemic, and reminds readers of their own effort in containing the pandemic, giving them the confidence needed to overcome the difficult situation they are in. There are two instances of use of transitions in the extract.

(3) (*WWP* 51)
Cǐhòu, 750 wàn gǎngrén dàishàng kǒuzhào qíqí zhànyì, zòngrán kǒuzhào yǎngài xiàoróng, yìzhèng lāyuǎn wǒmen de jùlí, ***dàn*** (transition) *"yì jìng" zhōng wǒmen bèngfā rénxìng guānghuī, yīhù wēixiǎn, rìyǐjìyè jiùzhì quèzhěnzhě; shèqū nèi de shìmín, cáituán hé yìgōng, chūqián chūlì xiàng sùwèimóumiàn de pínkǔ dàzhòng shēnchūyuánshǒu; pǔluóshìmín guāiguāi liúzài jiā, dāngshì bāng yīhù shǒuzhù fángxiàn.*
Nǎpà xiānggǎng méiyǒu kàngyì de Huǒshénshān, ***dàn*** (transition) *wǒmen yōngyǒu Shīzishān xià qúncèqúnlì de jīngshén, yǐjí shěnshíduóshì de fángkòng zhèngcè wéidǔ bìngdú, zài jiēlián liǎngbō de yìqíng gāofēng zhōng qǔdé jiēduànxìng de chénggōng.*

此後，750萬港人戴上口罩齊齊戰疫，**縱然**口罩掩蓋笑容、疫症拉遠我們的距離，**但** (transition) "疫境" 中我們迸發人性光輝，醫護危險，日

以繼夜救治確診者；社區內的市民、財團和義工，出錢出力向素未謀面的貧苦大眾伸出援手；普羅市民乖乖留在家，當是幫醫護守住防線。

哪怕香港沒有抗疫的火神山，**但** (transition) 我們擁有獅子山下群策群力的精神，以及審時度勢的防控政策圍堵病毒，在接連兩波的疫情高峰中取得階段性的成功。

Since then, 7.5 million of Hong Kong people fight the pandemic together by wearing a face mask. **Although** (transition) the mask hides our smile and the pandemic lengthens the distance between us, the brightness of humanities shines in such difficult situation. The healthcare workers cure those who have contracted the virus around the clock despite the dangers they are in; citizens, consortiums and volunteers of the community help the poor whom they have not met at all by donating money and providing labour; and ordinary citizens help the healthcare workers to contain the pandemic by staying at home.

Even though (transition) Hong Kong does not have Huoshenshan Hospital to fight the pandemic, our Lion Rock group spirit and the appropriate, timely preventive measures have allowed us to succeed in the two consecutive waves of the pandemic.

Both instances of the use of transitions set up a contrast – a pessimistic situation caused by or related to the pandemic is first presented followed immediately by an optimistic phenomenon resulting directly from the effort of the Hong Kong people. The contrasts can then lead the readers to appreciate and realise their own ability to turn the situation around, thereby boosting their confidence in both themselves and the future of Hong Kong. The editor introduces the first contrast with the transition token 'Although' and the second one with 'Even though'. Both tokens serve to signal to the readers that a contrast is forthcoming, providing them with a mental framework that would allow them to accurately perceive and interpret the writer's message and intention, thereby contributing to the rationality of the writer. The contrast set up by the transition tokens may also contribute to the appeal for rationality, in that the editor was able to attend to different or even conflicting opinions and voices, and to appreciate the situation from a macro perspective. This could create an impression that the editor's view was a result of "rational debate" (Li & Lin, 2006, p. 344).

Extract (4) below was taken from an opinion column published in *Wen Wei Pao* on 1 May 2020. After reassuring the people of Hong Kong regarding their success in containing the pandemic, in the first paragraph of the column, the writer in Extract (4) reminds the readers of the importance of staying vigilant and implementing the necessary measures in order to resume normal interactions throughout mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau. Appeals to logos are made with the use of a transition marker, two frame markers, and one code gloss.

(4) (*WWP* 85)
Dàn (transition) *bìxū kàndào, sāndì yào chóngxīn huīfù zhèngcháng wǎnglái, háiyǒu hěnduō gōngzuò yàozuò, bìxū cóng xiànzài kāishǐ jiù wěnbùtuījìn.* ***Shǒuxiān*** (frame marker), *sāndì yào xiéshāng jiànlì liánfángliánkòng jīzhì. Sāndì zhèngfǔ yào xiéshāng tǒngyī de fángyì biāozhǔn, jiànkāng shēnbào, huódòng guǐjì jiānchá děng, dōuyào xiéshāng luòshí;* ***qícì*** (frame marker)*, luòshí liánfáng lián kòng cuòshī de jùtǐ xìjié,* ***lìrú*** (code gloss) *Àomén yǐ qǐdòng xīnguànfèiyán chángguīhésuānjiǎncèjìhuà, Àomén jūmín jīng jiǎncè hòu kě huòfā shòujiǎnzhèngmíng...*

但 (transition)必須看到，三地要重新恢復正常往來，還有很多工作要做，必須從現在開始就穩步推進。**首先** (frame marker)，三地要協商建立聯防聯控機制。三地政府要協商統一的防疫標準，健康申報、活動軌跡監察等，都要協商落實；**其次** (frame marker)，落實聯防聯控措施的具體細節，**例如** (code gloss) 澳門已啟動新冠肺炎常規核酸檢測計劃，澳門居民經檢測後可獲發受檢證明 …

But (transition) we must see that there is still a lot of work to be done to resume the normal interactions throughout mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao, and steady progress must be made from now on. **First of all** (frame marker), the three places should negotiate and establish a joint defence and control mechanism. The three governments should work out an agreed upon standard for epidemic prevention, health declaration, activity trajectory monitoring, etc. **Second** (frame marker), specific details of the joint defence and control measures should be implemented. **For example** (code gloss), Macau has already launched a routine nucleic acid testing programme for COVID-19. Macau residents can be issued a certificate of inspection after the test …

The writer signals a change of tone at the very beginning of

the extract with 'But', indicating clearly to the readers that s/he was about to put forth a value position which might counter the preceding one. This serves to make the logic of the development of the argument clear to the readers, thereby appealing to logos. The logos appeal is then strengthened immediately with two consecutive uses of frame markers, 'First of all' and 'Second', preparing the readers for the two points introduced. To facilitate readers' comprehension of the propositions presented, the writer gives an example of what the Macau government has done and this exemplification is signalled by a code gloss token 'For example'.

Extract (5) below was taken from an opinion column published in *Tai Kung Pao* on 13 April 2020 where the columnist was expressing her optimism about the successful production of effective vaccines by scientists based in Hong Kong.

(5) (*TKP* 2)
Gēnjù (evidential) *shíyànshì tígòng de zīliào, zài yìqíng bàofā hòu duǎnshíjiān nèi, yánjiū tuánduì yǐ lìyòng yìmiáojìshùpíngtái, zhìbèi le yìmiáozhǒngzi; gāixiàng yánjiū bìng yǐ děidào kējìbù lìxiàngzhīchí, shì guójiā wǔgè zhòngdiǎn yìmiáojìshù cèlüè zhīyī.*

根据 (evidential) 实验室提供的资料，在疫情爆发后短时间内，研究团队已利用疫苗技术平台，制备了疫苗种子；该项研究并已得到科技部立项支持，是国家五个重点疫苗技术策略之一。

According to (evidential) the information provided by the laboratory, the research team had already prepared vaccine seeds using the vaccine technology platform shortly after the outbreak of the epidemic. The research project, being one of the five main national vaccine technology strategies, has secured the support of the Ministry of Science and Technology.

The writer of Extract (5) attempts to boost the confidence of the people of Hong Kong in the government's ability to contain the epidemic by citing objective scientific findings disseminated by a reputable laboratory in Hong Kong. The use of the evidential in introducing the source of information is important in that the people of Hong Kong might not have had enough faith in government sources, with which they had been disappointed

since the start of the social unrest.

5.2.3 Even reliance on hedges, boosters, engagement markers, and attitude markers, and non-use of self-mentions

Interactional metadiscourse contributes to the persuasiveness of a text by making appeals to primarily ethos and pathos. The following discussion will therefore highlight the role of the four sub-categories of interactional metadiscourse in appealing to the writer's credibility and character, and to the readers' emotions.

 Extract (6) is the last section of an opinion column in *Tai Kung Pao* published on 13 April 2020. The writer presents a detailed analysis of a number of factors and concludes that the pandemic provided Hong Kong with the right opportunity to produce its own vaccine. S/he presents a number of arguments and pieces of evidence that highlight the strength of Hong Kong, which would naturally boost people's confidence in the future of the city and themselves. The persuasiveness of such arguments and evidence is enhanced with the strategic use of interactional metadiscourse. Extract (6) contains two instances each of the use of hedges and boosters, four instances of the use of engagement markers, and six instances of the use of attitude markers.

(6)
Zài cǐbèijǐng xià (hedge)*, Xiānggǎng **bìxū** (booster) yòng xīnde sīwéi lái kàndài gōnggòngwèishēng fēngxiǎn ... 2 yuèchū, nèidì yìqíng zhèng shuǐshēnhuǒrè, quánguó jūn "yīzhàonánqiú", **háowú** (booster) kǒuzhào shēngchǎnnénglì de Xiānggǎng xiànrù kǒnghuāng, zhèngfǔ pòyúwúnài xiàng nèidì qǐngqiú diàobō kǒuzhào gōngyìng, zhèyī xíngjìng bèi quántǐshìmín suǒ bùchǐ, zāodào zhūduō pēngjī. **Suǒxìng** (attitude marker)*, mínjiān zìfā qǐdòng kǒuzhào shēngchǎn, zhèngfǔ suíhòu tígòng zhīchí, Xiānggǎng chángyuǎn kǒuzhào gōngyìng yǒule yídìng **de** (hedge) bǎozhàng.*
Dànshì, ***yìmiáo yòu rúhé ne?*** (engagement marker)
Jiānglái yìmiáo shàngshì, ***Xiānggǎng jiāng cónghé mìdé huòyuán?*** (engagement marker)
Shìfǒu yòu zǒu tóngyàng de lù, zài shísìyì tóngbāo děngdài yìmiáo zhùshè de shíhou, ***qǐngqiú guójiā diàobō yìmiáo gōngyìng Xiānggǎng?*** (engagement marker) *— yúqíngyúlǐ, zhè dōu* ***shuōbùtōng*** (attitude marker)*. Ruò ōuměi chénggōng yánzhì chū*

*yìmiáo, yěshì běnguó yōuxiān, lúnbùdào gōngyìng Xiānggǎng. Yǒu zīyuán yǒu guǎndào de rén, **zìrán** (attitude marker) yǒubànfǎ mì dé; pǔtōngrén, **kǒngpà** (attitude marker) jiù zhǐyǒu děngdài le. **Kějiàn** (engagement marker), Xiānggǎng fāzhǎn yìmiáo chǎnyè, búdàn **kěxíng** (attitude marker), yìshì wéihù Xiānggǎng gōnggòngwèishēng ānquán de kèguān **xūyào** (attitude marker).*

在此背景下 (hedge)，香港**必须** (booster) 用新的思维来看待公共卫生风险… 2 月初，内地疫情正水深火热，全国均"一罩难求"，**毫无** (booster) 口罩生产能力的香港陷入恐慌，政府迫于无奈向内地请求调拨口罩供应，这一行径被全体市民所不齿，遭到诸多抨击。**所幸** (attitude marker)，民间自发启动口罩生产，政府随后提供支持，香港长远口罩供应有了**一定的** (hedge) 保障。
但是，**疫苗又如何呢**？(engagement marker)
将来疫苗上市，**香港将从何觅得货源**？(engagement marker)
是否又走同样的路，在十四亿同胞等待疫苗注射的时候，**请求国家调拨疫苗供应香港**？(engagement marker) 一于情于理，这都**说不通** (attitude marker)。若欧美成功研制出疫苗，也是本国优先，轮不到供应香港。有资源有渠道的人，**自然** (attitude marker) 有办法觅得；普通人，**恐怕** (attitude marker) 就只有等待了。**可见** (engagement marker)，香港发展疫苗产业，不但**可行** (attitude marker)，亦是维护香港公共卫生安全的客观**需要** (attitude marker)。

Against this background (hedge), Hong Kong **has to** (booster) look at public hygiene from a new perspective. In early February, the mainland pandemic was in dire straits, and face masks were scarce. Hong Kong, which had **absolutely** (booster) no mask production capacity, panicked. So, unwillingly, the Government had to ask the mainland for masks, which was slammed and scorned by all citizens. **Fortunately** (attitude marker), the private sector initiated the production of masks spontaneously and the Government provided support afterwards, which **to some extent** (hedge) has guaranteed the long-term supply of masks for Hong Kong.
However, **what about vaccines**? (engagement marker) **Where could Hong Kong find the sources of vaccine supply in the future?** (engagement marker) **Would Hong Kong need to ask the country for vaccines supply while 1.4 billion compatriots are waiting?** (engagement marker) It **doesn't make sense at all** (attitude marker). If the vaccine is successfully developed in Europe and the US, the priority will be given to their own citizens rather than Hong Kong. People who have resources **naturally** (attitude marker) can find a way to get the vaccine. Others, who are ordinary people, **I'm afraid** (attitude marker), would have to wait. It can be seen developing the

vaccine industry in Hong Kong is not only **feasible** (attitude marker), but also **necessary** (attitude marker) for it to maintain the safety of its public health.

The columnist in Extract (6) is trying to persuade the readers into agreeing that there is a need for Hong Kong to develop a vaccine for its own people instead of relying on other countries. The case of insufficient face mask supply during the first wave of the viral attack is used to justify the need. To make the justification more persuasive and thus a stronger one, the writer involves the readers a total of 12 times with interactional metadiscourse. What precedes the above extract is a description of a rather gloomy situation concerning the fast changing world economy, which would likely have a serious impact on Hong Kong. The columnist could therefore have started the extract by emphasising his/her certainty straight away with the booster 'has to', and left out the circumstantial element 'Against this background' which serves to hedge by specifying the circumstances under which the proposition would be valid. Retaining the circumstantial element should therefore have a reason: to exercise caution while expressing certainty, as there would be readers who did not think Hong Kong had to tackle public health risks with a new perspective. This combination serves to appeal to the writer's ethos. The other instance of the use of hedges – 'some' as in 'to some extent has guaranteed' – could also make appeal to ethos for similar reasons, that is, readers may not agree that mask production in Hong Kong has provided a certain degree of assurance. The columnist, however, does not hesitate to demonstrate his/her certainty for Hong Kong's incapability of producing face masks – the booster token 'absolutely' is used. This shows the writer's knowledge of the industrial sector in Hong Kong and could thus contribute to the writer's ethos.

The columnist has made a number of attempts at appealing to the readers' emotions. Contrary to the claim about the journalistic discourse in Hong Kong – that it lacked emotional and value-laden language (Ku, 2007; Lee, Chan, & So, 2004), the columnist does not hesitate to do so with attitude markers. S/he expresses her attitude to or personal evaluation of propositions or situations with six different attitude marker tokens:

'Fortunately', 'does not make sense', 'naturally', 'I'm afraid', 'feasible', and 'necessary'. Such expressions of personal attitude or evaluation could shorten the social distance between the writer and the readers, with the latter feeling that their association rights were being attended to (Ho, 2020; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The readers' feelings and emotions would then be aroused, leading to the making of effective appeals. Engagement markers were realised as rhetorical questions on three occasions, and as an attempt to align the readers' perspective on one occasion. All of them would draw the readers into the text, who would then participate actively in the text. They would either attempt to think of an answer to the questions (although they were not really supposed to answer them) or attempt to perceive and interpret the proposition or value position being put forward from the writer's perspective (Ädel, 2006). The series of appeals to the readers' emotions at the very end of the opinion column serves to draw the readers into the text, make them active participants of the discourse, channel their interpretation of the messages being conveyed, and ultimately persuade them into agreeing with the writer that Hong Kong should produce a vaccine for its own people.

The absence of the self-mentions sub-category (only one instance of use was recorded) might at first seem surprising, as it has been found to be one of the sub-categories that writers frequently use in constructing persuasive discourse (e.g. Crismore & Farnsworth, 1989; Ho, 2020; Hyland, 2001). Its absence from the data of the present study could be attributed to the journalists' awareness of the need to observe their professional norm of objectivity and neutrality (Fung, 2007; Ku, 2007).

6. Conclusion

The present study was mainly motivated by two factors: (1) the insufficient amount of research investigating the use of metadiscourse in journalistic genres in the Hong Kong context; and (2) the need to understand the role of newspapers in addressing pressing social issues. Drawing upon Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse, we have identified three characteristic features of the editorials/opinion

columns taken from five key Chinese newspapers circulated in Hong Kong. We have argued that these features can contribute to the persuasiveness of the articles, allowing the newspapers to help boost Hong Kong people's confidence in themselves, the government, and the future of the city.

These findings are supported by claims and observations made in previous journalism studies. First, news can function to influence the way people perceive social reality and understand social problems (Berns, 2004; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). We have shown how editorials/opinion columns have attempted to persuade their readers that, with their determination and dedication, the undeniably devastating COVID-19 attack could be effectively contained. Second, the media can be "an advocate and agent of political mobilization" (Ku, 2007, p. 194). While it may be controversial for us to frame the newspapers' attempts at boosting people's confidence as an act of political mobilisation, such attempts have still highlighted the newspapers' role in mobilising the people of Hong Kong to support one another through social media.

Interestingly, the findings have also allowed us to appreciate the uniqueness of the roles played by newspapers in the Hong Kong context. By helping the people of Hong Kong to restore their confidence in the government and the future of the city, the editorials and opinion columns have first done more than being the fourth estate monitoring the performance of government as an adversary or a watchdog (Chan & Li, 2007; So & Chan, 2007). Second, instead of perpetuating myths or generating panic (Ku, 2007; Leung, 2019), the editorials and opinion columns have attempted to do the opposite – they minimised social panic and gave people a sense of hope.

One might argue that the findings we have obtained can be attributed to two factors that have been thoroughly discussed in journalism studies after China resumed the sovereignty of Hong Kong: (1) the deterioration of the freedom of the press; and (2) the exercise of self-censorship by news organisations (e.g., Fung, 2007; Li & Lin, 2006). However, such attribution needs to be considered with caution, as the government of Hong Kong has admitted that press freedom is a "cornerstone" of the city's vibrancy (So & Chan, 2007, p. 156). The news

organisations, their editors, and columnists may therefore not be under much pressure to speak or act for the government.

However, the present study is limited in two aspects. First, the corpus is a small one containing 31 articles, with the total number of characters reaching 27,191. A moderate-sized corpus would have allowed the authors to conduct statistical analyses that would generate findings useful in both the identification and interpretation of the characteristic features of the Hong Kong data. Second, the corpus only consists of articles taken from five newspapers, with either a pro-government or neutral political orientation. Including newspapers with other political orientations would have allowed us to obtain a more comprehensive picture of metadiscourse use patterns in Hong Kong's Chinese newspapers.

About the authors

Victor Ho completed his PhD in linguistics at Macquarie University, Australia. He is currently Associate Professor in the Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He is a member of the University's Research Centre for Professional Communication in English. His research interests include pragmatics, professional communication, and English for academic purposes. He has published in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Discourse Studies*, E*nglish for Academic Purposes*, and *Journal of Politeness Research*.

Vincy Zhang obtained a Master of Arts degree in English Language Studies from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. She has been a Research Associate at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University for the past six years.

Notes

1. Dafouz-Milne's (2008) metadiscourse typology differs from Hyland's (2005) in that it classifies metadiscourse as textual metadiscourse and interpersonal metadiscourse. Textual metadiscourse consists of seven sub-categories, namely, logical markers, sequencers, reminders,

topicalisers, code glosses, illocutionary markers, and announcement. Interpersonal metadiscourse consists of five sub-categories, namely, hedges, certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers, and commentaries.

2. In their study of Chinese news commentaries, Huang and Xiong (2012) adopted Dafouz-Milne's (2008) typology of metadiscourse which has 'commentaries' as one of the sub-categories of the interpersonal metadiscourse. Commentaries in fact consist of two interactional metadiscourse sub-categories, namely self-mentions and engagement markers.

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