

Freelancers or ‘Public Intellectuals’? Professional Identity and Discursive Representation of Chinese Independent Media Writers in a Fast-Changing Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Freelance journalists in China emerged in the early 2000s as a much-needed professional entity in a sector that had changed significantly since the media reform was launched in the country in 1978. When Chinese newspapers, which formerly survived thanks to state funds, had to adopt a business mindset, freelance writers became necessary to sustain these changes. They contributed in particular to the diffusion and standardization of the genre of the “commentary on current affairs” (*shiping* 时评), establishing themselves as new and original voices in a media system that is still tightly controlled. Building on an analysis of the linguistic features of a corpus of qualitative interviews conducted with Chinese freelance writers between 2008 and 2015, this paper studies their self-representation and understanding of their mission, discussing the extent to which they believe their independent opinions matter in the public arena, in a context that has been changing quickly, due to the decline of print media and due to a new political environment.

Keywords: China, civil society, commentary on current affairs, commercialization, discourse community, freedom, freelancers, genre, journalists, media.

1. NEW PROFESSIONALS IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT

Freelance journalists in China emerged in the early 2000s as a much-needed professional entity in a sector that had changed significantly since the media reform was launched in the country in 1978 (Shen 2003; Lava-

gnino 2006; Gongyang 2008). The aim of this paper, as I will explain in the next pages, is to analyse the role freelancers believe they play in the country's media system.

As many scholars have described in detail (Zhao 1998 and 2008; Wu 2000; Shao, Lu, and Hao 2016), the Chinese media reform aimed to change the financial management of news companies and reinforce media credibility. Lynch (1999, 5-7) pointed to commercialization, globalization and “pluralization” – a term he used to refer to “the growing diversity of the sources of communications messages” which “is reducing the state's overall relevance in the construction of the symbolic environment” – as key processes in the metamorphosis of the country's media. Chinese newsrooms, which formerly survived thanks to state funds, had to change to a business mindset in order to generate profits, thus also affecting the evolution of genres (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993), language and styles (Shirk 2011; Stockman 2013) of journalism.

Among the many developments in the sector, a new type of media professional, referred to in Chinese as “free editorial contributor” (*ziyou zhuangaoren* 自由撰稿人), became increasingly significant in the production of news – using the term *news*, here, to signify “a broad spectrum of journalistic activities” (Catenaccio *et al.* 2011, 1844). Handbooks published in China for aspiring freelancers argue that, even though Chinese freelance contributors became important in all types of media, their written production for print and online outlets can be primarily linked to the journalistic genres of entertainment features (*yule xinwen* 娱乐新闻) and news commentaries (*pinglun* 评论) (Shen 2003; Gongyang 2008; Zhu 2011). The initial tendency of newsrooms to rely on freelance contributors also for the publication of investigative articles (*diaocha xing baodao* 调查性报道) is now considered a rarer occurrence in the current media environment compared to the early 2000s, due to the introduction of normative restrictions as well as an increasingly cautious approach to the use of freelance contributors for the production of potentially controversial articles (Ying 2010; Svensson, Saether, and Zhang 2013; Lupano 2016).

It should be noted that the concept of “freelance journalist” or “freelance editorial contributor” used in this paper derives from the definitions and understanding of the phenomenon provided by Chinese authors who have written on the subject, an analysis of which is available in Lupano (2011). This concept does not fully align with the definitions used by those European scholars who have explored the phenomenon in Asia (Gynnild 2005; Massey and Elmore 2011; Edstrom and Ladendorf 2012; Brems *et al.* 2017), but a comparison between the two is not among the goals of this paper.

Contractual and organizational autonomy are, nevertheless, a freelancer's defining characteristics in every part of the world, and, before the reform was implemented, such a condition was impossible in the People's Republic of China in any sector, including the media. Journalists working in a newsroom were tied to the setting in their place of work, and through this they were also tied to political authority. Regardless of the processes of commercialization and internationalization, over the last four decades not much has changed for journalists who are under contract to a newsroom. Media organizations, both at national and local levels, are still firmly controlled by the country's leadership. Influence is exerted on both Party and institutional outlets (respectively *dang bao* 党报 and *jiguan bao* 机关报), which are still financed by the Party or by public organisms, as well as on commercial outlets (*shichang bao* 市场报), which are not financially supported by public entities (Qian and Bandurski 2010; Stockman 2013). The result is that journalists in China are still directly accountable to political power.

Administrative and political institutions such as the Department of Propaganda of the Communist Party, the State Administration of Press Publication, Radio, Film and Television and the State Council Information Office supervise media production at different levels, using different tools (Brady 2008; De Giorgi 2008; Franceschini and Negro 2014; Lavagnino e Mottura 2016), while the work of journalists is also controlled through administrative decisions and professional regulations. The possibility of obtaining and holding down a position in media organizations, for instance, is linked to "political correctness": journalists are officially required to follow and represent the Party line, in order to influence public opinion on behalf of the political authorities (Polumbaum and Xiong 2008; Young 2013). China's president and the *Chinese Communist Party's* (CCP) general secretary, Xi Jinping, recently reiterated this principle in a speech at the *Party's News and Public Opinion Work Conference* held in Beijing on 19th February 2016, where he reminded the media of their traditional duty to maintain a "Party character" (*dang xing* 党性), meaning they should represent and support the CCP's views and policies. On the same occasion, he asked the Party media to "keep the Party's surname" (*xing dang* 姓党), a new formulation (Schoenals 1992; Ji 2004) that requires the media to fully identify with the CCP (Bandurski 2016a, 2016b and 2016c; Lupano 2016, 82-83).

Chinese freelance editorial contributors are an exception in the system, since they are not directly constrained by the relations that bind contracted journalists to the Party through their place of work and since their financial support is not linked to only one media outlet. Therefore,

they can be expected to act as at least partly independent voices in the industry. This is especially the case for those who write news commentaries, and more specifically the so-called “commentaries on current affairs” (*shiping* 时评), a sub-genre of news commentaries that Chinese researchers have deemed particularly innovative and which has been developing since the late 1990s (Hu, Qin, and Tu 1998; Wang 2007 and 2008; Cheng 2008; Zhao 2012). The commentary on current affairs is an article that expresses the author’s opinion on social issues from a specialist’s point of view. The authors are often freelance contributors – who are either full-time freelancers or contributors who have another, main job, for example lawyers, teachers, public officials, scientists, engineers, IT experts etc. The latter, defined by Chinese scholars as one of the types of “freelance journalists”, can be considered members of the same discourse community (Swales 1990) as full-time freelancers and contracted journalists, as discussed in a recent study (Lupano 2016, 16-17) and as I will explain in greater detail below.

Perceived by the Chinese audience as the ultimate channel for expressing independent opinions (Wang 2004), commentaries on current affairs have been extensively used as marketing tools by commercial papers, and freelance journalists have contributed to spreading and standardizing them, by becoming their primary authors (Gongyang 2008; Zhu 2011). As such, the freelance contributors who write them hold a key position in the potential expansion of the debate in China’s growing civil society (Zheng and Fewsmith 2008; Cavalieri e Franceschini 2010; Tsang and Men 2016).

Whether they aim to perform this role and then succeed in doing so is the question guiding the long-term research project that this paper draws on, a venture that I undertook as a PhD candidate starting in 2007. I originally carried out the research by conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with a number of Chinese media professionals in China in 2008-2009¹. Later, in order to trace the evolution of the sector and China’s social and political developments over the following years, I updated and expanded my fieldwork study by conducting new interviews in 2014-2015. I then used the transcripts of the audio recordings of all the interviews to build a corpus where discursive features can be analyzed to find information about freelance journalists in China. This was the core of a published work (Lupano 2016) where I selected and analyzed parts of the interviews, identifying and discussing what I considered key themes in the discourse of

¹ The results of that study are described in my PhD dissertation, archived at the national libraries in Rome and Florence (Lupano 2011).

the interviewees. The question underlying the previous study was whether in China freelance journalists, contracted journalists and media experts can be considered part of the same discourse community, defined by their professional activity and by sharing a common language (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993; van Dijk 2009). The study revealed the use of recurrent expressions and terms that I consider a mark of specialized language (Sobrero 1993; Cortelazzo 1994, 8; Gotti 2005, 24) in the community of Chinese media workers. These terms and expressions have been organized in a glossary that is also intended to be used for training purposes.

Building on those results, this paper attempts to answer the question of whether freelancers perceive themselves as actually striving to perform an intellectual role in society through their professional activity. I aim to do this by qualitatively and quantitatively analyzing the same corpus in order to discover whether the primary aspects of freelancers' discursive self-representation as professionals – the self-representation by those who have specialized in writing commentaries on current affairs – include the ambition to express independent opinions in order to influence society, which is the defining purpose of the journalistic genre they are writing in.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

Having described the available literature on the subject and the method this paper is based on, the findings I will present should therefore be understood as one step in a wider-ranging project, whose ultimate ambition is to integrate text, practice and interaction, or, in other words, to put into practice a “linguistically sensitive, ethnographic approach to news production” (Catenaccio *et al.* 2011, 1846).

I believe progression analysis (Perrin 2003; Sleurs, Jacobs, and van Waes 2003; van Hout and Jacobs 2008) is a suitable method for investigating Chinese freelance journalists' role in the public arena, since it involves “collecting and analyzing data in natural contexts in order to reconstruct text production processes as a cognitively controlled and socially anchored activity”. Of the “three levels” that Perrin described as the ingredients of progression analysis, I consider the study presented in this paper as part of level one, defined by Perrin as the one that “determines through interviews and observations what the writing situation is and what experience writers draw on to guide their actions”, and that includes the collection of “data on the self-perception of journalists” (Perrin 2012, 137).

2.1. *Data and method*

As mentioned above, this paper is based on a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews (Ricolfi 1997; Fabietti 1999; Silverman 2002), which I conducted in Chinese with 12 journalists, media scholars and freelance media contributors in China over two periods of time, 2008-2009 and 2014-2015.

The methodological choice of using qualitative interviews as a primary research tool appeared to me a necessity when approaching Chinese freelance journalism as a subject of study. The literature available on this specific topic in China – both when this project started and at present – seems to be limited to a small number of handbooks for aspiring freelance journalists written by Chinese media workers (Shen 2003; Lupano 2007; Gongyang 2008). While these handbooks do indirectly provide information about the professional definition, background and strategies of freelance journalists in China, their aim is not to offer a description and interpretation of the phenomenon, but rather to deliver professional advice and guidelines to those who already are or would like to become freelancers.

Internationally, while Chinese journalists have been at the centre of many studies analyzing their professional activity in general (De Burgh 2003; Pan and Lu 2003; Polumbaum and Xiong 2008; Tong and Sparks 2009; Stockman 2013) or focusing on specific types of journalists, in particular investigative journalists (Tong and Sparks 2009; Bandurski and Hala 2010; Svensson, Saether, and Zhang 2013), very few academic studies seem to have signaled the growth of the interesting phenomenon of freelance journalism in China, with the exception of Lavagnino (2006).

Although the scarcity of references made the search for original data and information from primary sources vital, the characteristics of freelance editorial work – practised at an individual level, based on reading and researching more than on interviewing sources – suggested that the option of backstage research, as used in recent years by a number of scholars to analyze newsroom dynamics (Cotter 2010; Perrin 2012), could not be easily replicated. Basic, preliminary information about the commonly understood definition, profile, routines, areas of practice and expertise, capabilities, goals and challenges of freelance journalists in China were needed before undertaking an ethnographic study. Therefore, the interviews revolved around such themes as self-definition, professional background, activity and routines, practical and ethical challenges, professional drive and goals.

2.2. *Corpus selection*

A total of 23 professionals were interviewed in this research project, some of whom I met both in 2008-2009 and in 2014-2015, while others I only met once. Nevertheless, to build the corpus for this paper, I had to exclude those who had refused to be recorded, or who had insisted on being interviewed in English rather than Chinese. While providing precious data and information to better contextualize the study, they were not suitable for this analysis, which is based on the transcripts in Chinese of the original audio recordings of the interviews.

Given the scarcity of available information on Chinese freelance contributors as a coherent professional group, the selection of the interviewees was inspired by John Stuart Mill's "most different systems" design, in order to maximize the variety of profiles included in the research. As a result, the 12 interviewees included in this study vary from famous freelance journalists to young professionals at an early stage of their career; from an age of 31 to 70 (in 2015); from living in Beijing or Shanghai, to being based in Guangzhou or Fujian province. Some, even though they also work as freelance journalists, were contacted because they are respected media experts in China. Finally, only one is a woman: despite my attempts to achieve gender balance, only one of the five female interviewees agreed to be recorded.

Since the purpose of this paper is to discuss self-perception as to the possibility of freelancers to express independent opinions and expand public debate, 10 of the selected interviewees are authors of commentaries on current affairs. The remaining two are editors of, as well as contributors to, publications where commentaries on current affairs are included and are therefore in charge of dealing with freelancers on behalf of their media organisation. They have been included in the sample in order to enrich the research, by offering a view of the freelancers' perceptions from a different perspective, which nevertheless belongs to the same discourse community.

The corpus is composed of over 71,000 Chinese characters, corresponding to roughly 40,000 Chinese words. Single interviews range from 2,400 to 10,400 characters and last from 45 minutes to 3 hours. The total recording time for this paper amounts to 30 hours.

3. FREELANCERS' DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATION

After the selection, I carried out a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the corpus, in order to pinpoint the most significant themes in the interviewees' discourse, according to the most frequently recurring

terms and expressions. For this purpose, I produced a list of occurrences using the AntConc software (version 3.4.3w) in order to detect the first 100 words in the list. I then selected the occurrences that I recognized as particularly relevant to the purpose of this paper, namely terms and expressions that have to do with the specialized language of media workers (i.e. terms that have to do with professional practice) or with values attributed to freelance journalism by the interviewees. Finally, I analyzed the context in which they frequently appear and the themes they most often refer to, in order to draw general conclusions about the interviewees' discourse.

3.1. *A discourse community*

A large number of terms in the list of 100 appeared related to the theme of professional activity and routine. "Media" (*meiti* 媒体) is the most used relevant word in the frequency list (15th position), "news commentary" (*pinglun* 评论) is the 17th, "newspaper" (*baozhi* 报纸) is the 23rd, "write" (*xie* 写) is the 27th, "article" (*wenzhang* 文章) is the 61st, "journalist" (*jizhe* 记者) is the 64th and "news" (*xinwen* 新闻) is the 65th, while "publish" (*fabiao* 发表) is the 80th and "blog" (*boke* 博客) is the 83rd. Only one of these terms (news commentary) actually refers to activities that are typical of freelancers as opposed to regularly employed journalists. This suggests that the interviewees do not consider the basic professional practice of freelancers and regularly contracted journalists vastly different and that they can be considered part of the same discourse community.

3.2. *The 'self' at the centre*

The term "self" (*ziji* 自己), which occurs 177 times, also occupies a very high position (22nd). It can be considered relevant since it appears mostly in relation to statements linking the definition of freelance journalism to practical autonomy, professional values and journalistic "stancing". Stancing is defined by Perrin (2012, 135) as "the practice of taking and encoding a particular position", where "position" refers to "implicit or explicit commitments that are based on judgements, assessments and thus are related to subjective properties such as opinions, attitudes, and emotions". As such, "self" is sometimes used to refer to attributes that distinguish professional features of freelancers from professional features that define other media workers: "He has his own brand" (*ta you ziji de pinpai* 他有自己的品牌), "you

count on yourself to earn money” (*ziji kao duli zhuān qián* 自己靠独立赚钱), “have your professional angle to look at issues” (*you ziji de zhuānyè kàn wèntí jiāodu* 有自己的职业看问题角度). Also, this is a key term in utterances where the interviewees remark on and stress the benefits of being freelance journalists, claiming that they have the possibility to follow “their own interests” (*ziji de xìngqù* 自己的兴趣).

However, “self” is also frequently used in sentences that manifest the desire (and aspiration) of freelancers to “speak in their own voice” (*fāchū ziji de shēngyīn* 发出自己的声音), an expression that repeatedly appears with the consistency of a formulation, or with minor changes like in “publish your own voice and point of view through the media” (*tōngguò mèiti fābiào ziji de shēngyīn guāndiǎn* 通过媒体发表自己的声音观点). “Publish one’s own opinion” (*fābiào le ziji de jiànjiě* 发表了自己的见解) is just another version of the same concept, while “to speak their own independent voice” (*fāchū ziji duli de shēngyīn* 发出自己独立的声音) and “to speak from your own independent angle” (*cóng ziji duli zìyóu de jiāodu lái shuō* 从自己独立自由的角度来说) clearly express the idea of autonomy of thought.

Only once in the corpus is “self” used in a sentence that refers to the opposite of independent expression: “[the decision] to leave sensitive topics [in an article] has to do with the editor’s degree of self-control” (*mǐngǎn huàtí zài shēng xiáilái jiùshì biānjǐ ziji kōngzhì chǐdù* 敏感话题再剩下来就是编辑自己控制尺度) is a reference to the practice of self-censorship that is well known by Chinese journalists (Polumbaum and Xiong 2008; Tong 2009; Young 2013).

3.3. ‘Government’: obedience and critique

It is interesting to observe that the term “government” (*zhèngfǔ* 政府), which appears 94 times and is the 48th most frequent in the corpus, also connects with the theme of freelancers’ political influence as well as with censorship.

“Under the government’s control of speech” (*zài zhèngfǔ de yánlùn kōngzhì* 在政府的言论控制), “the government violates the individual rights of citizens” (*zhèngfǔ qīnfàn gōngmín gèrén de quánlì* 政府侵犯公民个人的权利), “when the government puts pressure” (*zhèngfǔ dà yā de shíhòu* 政府打压的时候), “the government pays attention to it, so the system of control is really strict” (*zhèngfǔ hěn guānxīn tā, guǎnlǐ de tǐzhì hěn yǎnmì* 政府很关心它, 管理的体制很严密), “why is the government allowed to take you [r blog] down” (*zhèngfǔ wèishénme kěyǐ bā nǐ gěi chāidào* 政府为什么可以把你给拆掉) are examples of sentences that pinpoint the latter.

Among the statements in which “government” refers to a power against which freelancers can act, the sentence “the interest of *Beijing News* is the interest of Chinese common people, the interest of better controlling the government” (*Xinjingbao de liyi er shi weile Zhongguo laobaixing de liyi, weile geng hao de jiandu zhengfu* 新京报的利益而是为了中国老百姓的利益, 为了更好地监督政府) is a rare example in the interviews of the use of a term (“supervision”, “control”: *jiandu* 监督) that is part of a formulation employed in the official discourse by the political leadership. “Public opinion supervision” (*yulun jiandu* 舆论监督) is in fact a well-known expression in the authorities’ discourse on Chinese media (Qian and Bandurski 2011; Lupano 2016). Otherwise, and as I will highlight later, when they talk about their profession, the interviewees do not seem to use what Schoenals (1992, 3) called “formulations” (*tifa* 提法) and Link (2013) calls “official language”.

The highly frequent expression “criticize the government” (*piping zhengfu* 批评政府) also goes in this direction. Overall, the verb “criticize” (*piping* 批评) appears in the corpus 53 times; among these, 20 times it is in combination with “government”. Sentences like “if you criticize the government online, your blog can be shut down” (*ni zai wangluo shang piping zhengfu, ni de boke keneng bei guandiao* 你在网络上批评政府, 你的博客可能被关掉); “you cannot directly criticize the provincial government or the central government” (*bu neng zhibie piping sheng zhengfu ah zhongyan zhengfu ah* 不能直接批评省政府啊中央政府啊); “the power with which it criticizes the government does not compare to the media of the Southern [Group] and [the magazine] *Caijing*” (*ta piping zhengfu de qiandu buru Nanfang meiti he Caijing* 它批评政府的强度不如南方媒体和财经); “the people who criticize the government generally don’t like the left” (*piping zhengfu de ren tamen yiban lai shou bu tai xihuan zuopai* 批评政府的人他们一般来说都不太喜欢左派); “I criticize the ideology of the government” (*wo piping zhengfu de yishixingtai* 我批评政府的意识形态) – all imply the idea that criticizing the political power at different levels is central to their thoughts as a freelance journalist, but also suggests that they believe it will not be received positively by the authority criticized.

It should be noted that, while the term “government” in Chinese indicates the executive power, which in the order of the People’s Republic of China is separate and distinct from the CCP, in the language used by the interviewees “government” predominantly refers to the political powers in general, showing no interest in distinguishing between State authorities and Party authorities. Besides, the term always signals a power that is seen to be in opposition to the interviewees’ goals and interests.

3.4. “Public intellectuals” influence society

According to the interviewees, a critical attitude towards the political powers linked with the ambition to influence society is the defining trait of a “public intellectual” (*gongzhi* 公知). This term recurs 73 times in the corpus and is strictly linked to the activity of freelance journalists: “public intellectuals publish suggestions for society and criticize the government” (*gongzhi de ren dui shehui fabiao yijian piping zhengfu* 公知的人对社会发表意见批评政府); “a real public intellectual has to be very objective, very neutral” (*zhenzheng de gongzhi yinggai shi hen keguan hen zhongli de* 真正的公知应该是很客观很中立的); “normally, if you talk publicly about a public issue, you are a public intellectual” (*yiban lai shuo, ni zai gonggong shiwu shang fayan, ni shi gongzhi* 一般来说,你在公共事务上发言你是公知).

The interviewees also stress that the term “public intellectual” is often used in a negative way, to refer to those who, when discussing public problems, try to gain fame by being needlessly extreme and insulting others: “It is very easy for public intellectuals to become famous, they criticize a point with violence, they can be insulting” (*gongzhi hen rongyi chuming yinwei ta jiushi pi yi dian pi de hen lihui, ta hui ma* 公知很容易出名因为他就是批一点批得很厉害,他会骂). The interviewees’ ambition, instead, is to be “real” intellectuals: “what I want to be is a real public intellectual, I aim to be able to make an impact [on society]” (*wo xiang zuo de shi zhenzheng de gongzhi, wo xiwang wo ziji neng yingxiang* 我想做的是真正的公知,我希望我自己能影响).

The interviewees seem in fact to generally believe that freelance journalists have the chance to influence society. The term “society” (*shehui* 社会) appears 56 times and is in the 88th position, mostly related to statements about the possibility (or not) to “change this society” (*gaibian zhege shehui* 改变这个社会): “through writing articles, I hope to be able to have a promoting role towards changing society” (*tongguo xie wenzhang xiwang neng dui gaibian shehui qidao yi dian cujin zuoyong* 很多社会问题那通过写文章希望能对改变社会起到一点促进作用); “freelance journalists can shape a common point of view, this common point of view can change society, change the world” (*ziyou zhuangaoren keyi xingcheng yi ge gonggong guandian, zhege gonggong guandian jiu keyi gaibian shehui, gaibian shijie* 自由撰稿人他们可以形成一个公共观点,这个公共观点就可以改变社会,改变世界).

3.5. *The freedom of freelancers*

The term “freedom” (*ziyou* 自由) is at the top of the occurrences list, appearing 190 times in the corpus and in 18th position. Nevertheless, this result is largely connected to the extensive use (140 times) of the term “freelance journalist”, which, in Chinese, contains the word “freedom” (*ziyou zhuangaoren* 自由撰稿人). However, the remaining 50 appearances bear the full meaning of the term – a term that is politically controversial, since it has at times been included in the lists of banned words that the authorities regularly pass to the Chinese media (Lupano 2016, 30). The interviewees, who would not use the term lightly in writing, have used it extensively when describing themselves and their activity face to face.

In these appearances, the word “freedom” largely refers to the concept of freedom of expression. Some occurrences contribute to articulating the interviewees’ trust that a certain degree of freedom when expressing themselves does exist: “you can freely speak louder” (*ni keyi ziyou biaoda shengyin da yi dian* 你可以自由表达声音大一点); “in my articles I have average freedom, if you write online you are completely free” (*wo de gaozi wo you yiban de ziyou, ruguo zai wang shang ni shi wanquan ziyou* 我的稿子我有一半的自由, 如果在网上你是完全自由); “Weibo is the freest, you can publish with the highest degree of freedom” (*Weibo shi zui ziyou de, keyi zui ziyou de fabiao* 微博是最自由的, 可以最自由地发表); “when you reach job security [in another profession], you can maintain a condition of [journalistic] freedom” (*you yi fen gongzuo anding le yihou, jiu keyi baochi yi zhong ziyou zhuantai* 有一份工作安定了以后, 就可以保持一种自由的状态). In other instances, the interviewees appear less positive about the possibility of exercising freedom of expression: “so they canceled me, they canceled freedom” (*jiu ba wo shangdiao le, shangdiao le ziyou* 就把我删掉了, 删掉了自由); “you can dance, but in chains. You are not a free dancer” (*ni keyi tiao, danshi yao daizhe zhe xie suolian tiao. Ni bu shi yi ge ziyou de wudaojia* 你可以跳, 但是要带着这些锁链跳. 你不是一个自由的舞蹈者); “Chinese freelance journalists, in this sense, are not free” (*Zhongguo ziyou zhuangaoren zai zhege yiyi shang lai shuo bu shi ziyou de* 中国的自由撰稿人在这个意义上来说不是自由的); while “Western freelance journalists enjoy a real condition of freedom” (*xifang ziyou zhuangaoren shi yi zhong zhenzheng de ziyou de yi zhong zhuantai* 西方的自由撰稿人是一种真正的自由的一种状态).

In a small number of cases the term *ziyou* is also linked to practical freedom: “[to be a freelance journalist] is comparatively free, you have no limitations in terms of time and place of work” (*xiangdui bijiao ziyou, gongzuo didian shijian bu shou xianzhi* 相对比较自由, 工作地点时间不受限制); “I have economic freedom” (*wo you jingji shang de ziyou* 我有经济上的自由);

“[freelancers] are free, truly free, you don’t have to go to meetings, take crowded public transport, you don’t have to work office hours” (*ben ziyou, zhen de ben ziyou, ni bu yong qu kaibui, qu ji gongjiaochē, bu yong qu zuoban* 很自由, 真的很自由, 你不用去开会、去挤公交车, 不用去坐班).

After all, freedom in practical life and freedom of expression are interconnected, according to one interviewee: “Only if you are free at the economic level, only if you can fill your belly, can you maintain your freedom at the spiritual level” (*jingji shang de ziyou, neng chibao duzi le, cai neng baozheng ni jingshen shang de ziyou* 经济上的自由, 能吃饱肚子了才能保证你精神上的自由).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS: SELF-EXPRESSION AS A PATRIOTIC MANDATE

The analysis of the discursive features of the corpus presented above provided an answer to the question this paper set out to investigate, namely whether freelancer contributors’ discursive self-representation as professionals includes the ambition to express independent opinions in order to influence society.

As the analysis based on frequency data has shown, Chinese freelancers discursively identify themselves (and are identified by the editors they work for) as being public intellectuals who believe they can influence society in a positive way and who value freedom of expression highly, even though they are aware of the limitations posed by the system. The primary aspects of their discursive self-representation as professionals therefore include the aspiration to express independent ideas as a contribution to social improvement. The activities, skills and values in their discursive representation which pertain to their professional identity mainly revolve around the possibility to freely voice their opinions in the public space, and to criticize political power in order to improve society. In their own words, freelancers’ professionalism depends on their acting as public intellectuals.

This attitude of feeling committed to the destiny of the nation recalls the concept of “anxiety arising from within and trouble coming from without” (*neiyou waihuan* 内忧外患); or of “concerned consciousness” (*youbuan yishi* 忧患意识), that Xu Fuguan, an intellectual belonging to Neo Confucianism at the beginning of the 20th century (Bresciani 2001), used to refer to the sense of responsibility that draws intellectuals into ethical action rather than speculation (Sernelj 2013, 78). Gloria Davies has used the concept of *youbuan* (忧患) to describe the attitude of Chinese contemporary intellectuals and translated it as “patriotic worrying”, meaning a “moral concern over the nation’s well-being, complexly enmeshed with a pedagog-

ical resolve to improve the cultural quality of the Chinese people” (Davies 2007, 17). For Davies, this element is typical of Chinese intellectuals of all eras including the present, since they still hold to the “Confucian-derived mandate” of thinking, writing and speaking to serve China. This mandate, which many scholars have also attributed to contemporary Chinese intellectuals (Béja 2008; Cheek 2008), “haunts all Sinophone intellectual rhetoric, effecting an elevation of any authorial observation to the representative status of a declared political position” (Davies 2007, 18-19) and Chinese freelance contributors, in particular those who specialise in writing commentaries on current affairs, appear to have discursively embraced this mandate. Strafella, whose study focuses on humanist intellectuals, likewise points out their “prominent and privileged position” in Chinese society, and their ability to “animate the political sphere of the country from the imperial bureaucracy to the reformist and revolutionary movements of the twentieth century” (2016, 7).

Therefore, Chinese freelance contributors who produce commentaries can be better understood as part of intellectual circles, rather than mere media practitioners. This is a position presented by Gongyang Wangjun, the author of a handbook for freelancers published in China. According to him, “real” freelancers are those who fulfill the role of intellectuals by writing socially and politically engaged articles, which are often commentaries, and their activity is much more than just a profession: “The role of these contributors who write in the name of truth and justice is becoming more and more important. [...] They are the backbone of society” (Gongyang 2008, 136).

To further develop this study and discuss whether Chinese freelancers actually succeed in achieving their intellectual mission of expanding the public debate in their country, as they maintain, an analysis of text production should be carried out. Other possible research lines for the future would be to examine the differences and similarities between the concept of a “freelance journalist” in the Chinese and the European contexts, to focus on specific geographical areas within China, or on specific types of freelance contributors (i.e. full-time freelancers, university professors etc.) or to study their work with specific attention to the social media.

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