

War on COVID—Military Metaphor in Chinese Political Pandemic Discourse Through People’s Daily Online

ZHANG Huicao

The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

The global prominence of COVID-19 has made it a widely discussed topic in recent years. During the process of conceptualizing new items, such as a novel virus/disease, individuals often draw on cognitive domains pre-existing in human brain. The process is metaphorical framing. The current study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, to investigate the underlying mechanisms of the military metaphor and ideological implications used in the online platform “People’s Daily Online” (CPDO). As a propaganda tool of the Communist Party of China, CPDO aims to reach both domestic and international netizens. Through a thorough analysis of linguistic data using the tenor-vehicle mapping, it is found that the “WAR on COVID” metaphor employed in CPDO aligns with Mao’s military principles and exhibits various characteristics that evolve with the progression of the pandemic and changes in propaganda focus.

Keywords: COVID-19, conceptual metaphor, disease discourse, military metaphor

Introduction

Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) acquired its name following its initial detection in late 2019. By the end of December 2023, COVID-19 has resulted in over 6.99 million deaths out of more than 773.45 million confirmed cases. This infectious disease was initially reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. On January 15, 2020, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention initiated a first-level emergency response. Subsequently, on January 23, Wuhan City, a transportation junction with a population exceeding 10 million, implemented a 76-day lockdown, coinciding with China’s most significant festival, the Spring Festival, which typically involves mass population migration. The World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” on January 30, 2020. In response, various authorities adopted different approaches and measures based on their cultural and political contexts. In an era of globalization, the virus developed several variants in its faster-than-ever global spread and had profound impacts worldwide. COVID-related issues, such as mask-wearing, regional lockdowns, national and international transportation, vaccination, and specific medications became concerns for every corner of the global village.

Given the fact that COVID-19 affects the respiratory system and exhibits symptoms similar to pneumonia, including sore throat, diarrhea, and headache, in mainland China, the term “新冠肺炎” (meaning “novel-corona-pneumonia”) was commonly used to refer to COVID-19. However, COVID-19’s impact is not limited to the realm of pneumonia. For instance, Long COVID often results in brain fog, primarily affecting the nervous system.

ZHANG Huicao, M.A., Senior Research Assistant, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China.

In late December 2022, China's National Health Commission renamed the ailment as "Novel Coronavirus Infection" and downgraded its classification in terms of infectious disease management.

In May 2023, the WHO downgraded the severity of COVID-19¹. The United States leads the list with over 193 million cumulative cases². There are still suspicions and disputes concerning the origin of the newly discovered virus and its initial transmission to humans. The term "COVID-19 Recession" denotes significant economic losses attributed to the pandemic, compounded by other socio-political events, such as Brexit, the China-United States trade war, and the Russo-Ukrainian War. In 2020, China became the only major economy to achieve positive growth in Gross Domestic Production, reaching 2.3%³. On December 7, 2022, mainland China implemented "10 New Measures", which allowed mild cases to isolate at home and relaxed nucleic acid testing or digital health codes in public places. These measures marked the abandonment of the "Zero-COVID Policy", which had been in place for nearly three years. The turning point occurred between protests against the "Zero-COVID Policy" in November 2022 and the Spring Festival in January 2023. The 2023 Spring Festival Travel Rush transported about 1.6 billion persons; the number was about 50.5% more than that of 2022 and was about 53.5% of the number of 2019 before the overall breakout of the pandemic, according to China's Ministry of Transport⁴.

Literature Review

First proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the continuum of metaphor and metonymy is considered an innate cognitive faculty in the human brain. Grounded in embodied experience, metaphor connects the source domain, which is more familiar to human's perception, to the target domain, which is further in space or perception. This assumption is supported by evidence from cognitive sciences, such as neural mappings in the human brain (Feldman, 2006; Lakoff, 2009; Anderson, 2018).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) posits that people perceive concepts in a systematic, asymmetrical, and unidirectional manner (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1994; Thompson, 1996; Grady, 1997; Feldman, 2006). We understand a concept in the target domain by relating it to something more familiar in the source domain. In this process, certain aspects of the "borrowed" concept from the source domain are emphasized (foregrounded) to interpret relative properties in the target concept, while other aspects may be downplayed or concealed (backgrounded). This way of "defining reality" makes metaphoric representations powerful in public discourse, particularly when employed intentionally. The choice of metaphoric vehicles may be specific to a particular culture or may serve ideological or political purposes within the same cultural framework.

One prominent example discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is "Argument as War", which serves as the starting point for CMT. The war metaphor is pervasive in public discourse, as demonstrated by Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau (2018) in their list of "war on X" phrases throughout American history and recent headlines, ranging from crime and cancer to sunshine salad. The effectiveness of the war metaphor for communication and reasoning can be attributed to several factors: (a) the prototypical nature of war as salient human knowledge and its widespread familiarity; (b) the resemblance between war and common topics; and (c)

¹ WHO: Statement on the Fifteenth Meeting of the IHR (2005) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic, 5 May 2023, [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic).

² Ibid.

³ Commentary: Decoding CPC Leadership's Path to China's Economic Success (*People's Daily*, June 30, 2021).

⁴ https://www.mot.gov.cn/zhuanti/2023chunyun/chunyundongtai/202302/t20230216_3758346.html.

the prevalence of war metaphor in context, which enriches the context itself (Boroditsky, 2000; Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Kövecses, 2003; 2005; Lakoff, 1987; Thibodeau & Durgin, 2011; Williams-Camus, 2009). Conversely, a metaphor may be less effective in discourse if it lacks appropriateness or fails to evoke a salient structure or emotion (Alexandrescu, 2014; Elwood, 1995; Gray, 2011; Mallea, 2014).

Consequently, the use of the metaphorical war in public discourse can be powerful in capturing attention, eliciting emotions, shaping people's way of conceptualization of a public issue and further actions towards the issue. However, it also has its limitations and criticisms. One drawback is that the war schema tends to evoke emotions of fear, threat, and panic, which may unnecessarily amplify the severity of the issue and lead to other negative consequences (Elwood, 1995; Degner, Hack, O'Neil, & Kristjanson, 2003). Moreover, the widespread use of the war metaphor, even on insignificant issues, can dilute its impact. The oversimplification of complex issues through the lens of war may hinder critical reasoning and solution exploration. Additionally, the influence of a metaphorical schema extends beyond thoughts and can manifest in behavior, potentially leading to real conflicts between individuals with differing opinions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Larson, Nerlich, & Wallis, 2005).

Hauser and Schwarz (2015) studied the effects of the war metaphor in cancer prevention and found that when cancer was framed by military vehicles, people showed less willingness to engage in preventative activities because the concept of "prevention" was distant from the prototypical war frame. The negative effects were only mitigated when preventative behaviors were described as actively "fighting" cancer. Furthermore, patients may attribute their lack of improvement to themselves as they were not "fighting" hard enough, perpetuating unrealistic expectations of success or victory in a disease-defending situation (Semino, 2008; Coleman, 2013; Flusberg et al., 2018).

The presence or absence of war metaphors in medical contexts may also have socio-cultural reasons. For instance, Islentyeva (2020a) compared the official statements and speeches of world leaders and found that German Chancellor Merkel and Russian President Putin framed COVID-19 as a challenging "task" or "situation" in which doctors and nurses played a primary defensive role. Merkel's avoidance of war metaphors may be influenced by historical implications of the World Wars and a focus on peace, unity, and solidarity in Germany and Europe. In contrast, the texts of US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister featured military terms to emphasize the dynamic and violent nature of the coronavirus. Bates (2020) argued against the appropriateness of Trump positioning himself as a wartime president and using war rhetoric in response to the contagion from the vehicles of "War", "Wartime President", "Enemy", "Soldiers", "Homefront", and "Victory".

In the current contagion of COVID-19, war metaphor is also recurrent in Chinese discourses, notably with expressions like "抗疫" (to combat the pandemic). Li (2020) identified nine subtypes of war-related expressions in Chinese publicity slogans, such as "zu-ji-zhan" (阻击战, blocking-action) and "ding-shi-zha-dan" (定时炸弹, time bomb). The systematic use of military terms in the context of a pandemic may have its relevance and limitations. However, it is important to note that war is not the only source domain for conceptualizing the contagion, and there is still much to explore regarding metaphorical patterns in Chinese media. A comprehensive study on the conceptual metaphors employed in media, focusing on the Chinese version of *People's Daily Online* (CPDO), can shed further light on the metaphorical representation of the war on COVID-19 regarding its vehicles and political stances in public discourse.

Data and Methodology

The research process involves data collection, theme-setting, and metaphor identification. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are involved.

The linguistic data used in this research are obtained from a channel of CPDO called “Important Opinions on Public Affairs from People’s Daily”. This channel includes opinions, theories, policies, and information delivered by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the authority. It comprises additional information and articles selected from *People’s Daily* (PD), which has been a significant mouthpiece of the CPC since the 1940s. The data consist of articles published between December 2022 (when COVID-19 was first reported) and October 15, 2023 (when it has been normalized), totaling 3,680 articles (about 10.16 million Chinese characters) throughout 46.5 months.

Firstly, the quantitative analyses are based on data up until July 14, 2021. The quantitative corpus consists of 1,188 articles (about 789,700 Chinese characters) in total, out of which there are 496 articles containing theme-setting keyword (TSK) (41.75%). At earlier stages of the pandemic, it received much attention as the virus was newly found (while mentions of the virus/disease/pandemic became less frequent as it became normalized, roughly 5% articles in 2023). Qualitative analysis is applied throughout the entire data collection process.

Secondly, beside dates, theme-setting keywords (TSKs) work for the second extraction since the bulk of articles from the selected media within the span from January 2020 to mid-October of 2023 are not all relevant to COVID-19. Here the articles extracted are not exclusive to those taking COVID-19 as the main topic, but also the ones mentioning the disease or virus. The way that COVID-19 is expressed matters in both a topical and non-topical context. Unlike previous studies that typically focus on one end of a metaphorical mapping, this research selects data from both the target domain and the source domain. In the target domain, major terms, such as “疫” (epidemic or disease), “病” (disease), and “新冠” (short for the novel coronavirus), are considered. For military expressions in the source domain, Isentyeva (2020a) summarized vocabulary for military metaphor in English: army/armies, attack(s), battle(s), defeat, enemy/enemies, fight, lose, tactic, troop(s), victory, warfare, and win. Additionally, based on close reading, Chinese counterparts for “beat, frontline, combat, defense, warrior, soldier, success, and failure”⁵ are added as potential metaphorical vehicles. Sentences and passages containing TSK are then scrutinized to testify if COVID-19 is a referent in an article.

It is important to note that sentences containing these terms do not automatically imply that they are the metaphors under focus. The final step involves identifying, interpreting, and explaining the metaphors in the data (Chateris-Black, 2004).

Result

CPC, the world’s largest political party with over 98 million party members (by the end of 2022)⁶, has a long history of experiencing major wars since its founding in July 1921. The mention of “war”, whether in a literal military sense or as a metaphor, is widely used in the official media of the party. In the context of COVID-19, the war metaphor is prominent in terms of frequency, systematicity, and complexity. The framework of the war metaphor in CPDO can be divided into various aspects of a war against the pandemic, including the nature of the war, the warring sides, heroes and participants, weapons, and the outcome.

⁵ “Success” and “failure” are not necessarily war-related words; while in a war context, they are prevalently used to describe the result, a core part of a war.

⁶ Xinhua (2023, February 6). *CPC sees membership surpass 98 mln*. The State Council of The People’s Republic of China. Retrieved from https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202306/30/content_WS649ecd11c6d0868f4e8dd637.html.

Nature and Content of the War on COVID-19

The way the action of controlling and preventing the virus/pandemic is named reflects the martial nature of the action. Table 1 illustrates the explicit vehicles used to refer to the martial nature of this action. The terms “抗疫” and “战疫” (fighting or combatting the pandemic) are among the most commonly used expressions in CPDO, appearing 689 and 97 times, respectively. This may be partly due to the fact that these expressions are homophones for “抗议” (protest) and “战役” (campaign), which are common words in the Chinese language. In Chinese, both “war” and “battle” can be conveyed by the character “战”, and they are not specifically differentiated in this research (see Table 1).

Table 1

Frequent Vehicles for the Nature of the War Towards COVID-19

	Vehicle terms	Frequency	Frequency per 10,000 characters
1	抗疫 fighting the pandemic	689	8.733
2	斗争 fight/combat	580	7.351
3	战争 war/battle	227	2.877
4	战斗 battle/combat	127	1.610
5	战疫 (战“疫”) combatting the pandemic	97	1.229
	Total	1,720	21.800

One of the most prominent features of the war metaphor used to describe the fight against COVID-19 is that it is referred to as a “people’s war”. Mao’s theory of a people’s war, as summarized by Lin (2017), highlights its defensive nature, the crucial role of people’s actual participation in winning it, and the focus on how to win it rather than how to declare it. CPDO reflects these characteristics in the way it describes the nature and content of the war against the disease. For example, in a quote from the Sea Tower column on March 30, 2020 (Example 1), the term “人民” (people) appears four times in the sentence, emphasizing that the people are the participants, beneficiaries, and dependents of the war. The collocation of “人民战” (people’s war) occurs 143 times in the quantitative corpus. In many instances, “人民” functions as an attribute for “战” or “战争/战斗” (war, battle), as shown in Example 2.

(1) 人民战“疫”为人民，人民战“疫”靠人民。

People fight the “pandemic” for people; people’s fighting the “pandemic” depends on people.

(2) 我们一定能打赢疫情防控的人民战争、总体战、阻击战。

We will definitely win the people’s, unitary and blocking war of pandemic prevention and control.

Modifiers play a crucial role in implying the nature of a noun phrase. In CPDO, as listed in Table 2, the war on COVID-19 is often described using various modifiers including “people’s” (人民, 143 times/1.81 times per 10,000 characters), “blocking” (阻击, 241/3.05), “unitary” (整体, 79/1.00), “defensive” (保卫, 60/0.76), and “active” (主动, 3/0.04). The phrases “blocking/unitary battle” (阻击战/整体战) often stand in a parallel construction with people’s war or an active war (主动战). “Blocking” echoes the defensive nature proposed by Mao. A “unitary battle” is given importance to in a big country, while regional defenses are also mentioned. Example 3, published on July 24, 2021, affirms the achievements of regional battles, highlighting the significance of regional defenses to the national results. In Example 4, the contents of the war are delineated in detail, such as manpower organization and material support (see Table 2).

Table 2

Frequent Modifiers for the Nature of the War Towards COVID-19

	Modifiers for the war/battle	Frequency	Frequency per 10,000 characters
1	阻击战 blocking	241	3.054
2	人民战 people's	143	1.812
3	总体战 unitary	79	1.001
4	保卫战 defensive	60	0.760
5	主动战 active	3	0.038
	Total	526	6.667

(3) 用3个月左右的时间取得了武汉保卫战、湖北保卫战的决定性成果，进而又接连打了几场局部地区聚集性疫情歼灭战，夺取了全国抗疫斗争重大战略成果。

(People) won decisive achievements from the defensive battle for Wuhan and for Hubei within about 3 months, and then fought several regional wars of annihilation towards aggregative pandemic; captured great strategic results of national anti-virus fight.

(4) 我们迅速开展全方位的人力组织战、物资保障战、科技突击战、资源运动战。

We conducted quickly an all-round war of manpower organization, material support, science and technology assault, and resource movement.

Warring Sides: The Enemy and the Heroes

In the war metaphor used to describing the fight against COVID-19 in CPDO, one side of the war is clearly defined—the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The term “疫” (pandemic, epidemic) serves as the shared object for the metaphoric “combat” or “fight.” Example 5, which is the first line of an article published on April 9, 2020, depicts the adversarial relationship between the epidemic and all humans, transcending national boundaries.

(5) 疫情无国界，它是全人类共同的敌人。

The epidemic is beyond the boundary of nations—it is the common enemy for all humans.

(6) 在这场没有硝烟的战斗中，广大医护人员是抗击疫情的急先锋，也是救治患者的主力军。

In the battle without smoke of gunpowder, the numerous medical staff are the daring vanguard of combatting the pandemic, as well as the main force in saving and curing the patients.

(7) 女性医务人员是战胜疫情的重要力量，务必高度重视对她们的保护、关心、爱护。

Female medical workers are significant forces in defeating the pandemic; high attention should be paid to protect, take after and care about them.

The other side of the war against COVID-19 in CPDO is undoubtedly the people. Their high significance is pointed out and emphasized in Example 1 through repetition. However, within the category of people, different occupations and social roles are specified to accentuate the narration. The first sub-category is medical staff, who are portrayed as the “daring vanguard” and the main force in the combat against the pandemic (Example 6). Furthermore, on March 8, 2020, Women’s Day, special attention was given to female medical workers (Example 7).

The term “hero” in this war encompasses more groups beyond doctors and nurses. For example, it includes policemen, army personnel, party members of CPC, reporters, entrepreneurs, and volunteers, as shown in Examples 8 to 10. However, there are also negative comments about certain social groups, such as the criticism

on leading cadres in Example 11. These problems, pointed out in CPDO, which is known for its overwhelmingly positive coverage, may have special socio-political implications.

(8) 不独是医护人员，数不清的公安干警、人民解放军、社区干部、公益志愿者奔波在抗疫第一线。

In addition to medical personnel, frontline workers on the go also include policemen, army men, community officers, and volunteers.

(9) 在抗击疫情的战场上，有一群特殊的战士——驰援武汉的445名新闻工作者。

In the battlefield on the pandemic, there is a group of special soldiers—445 news workers rushing to aid Wuhan.

(10) 在抗击新冠肺炎疫情斗争中，很多青年大学生加入志愿者行列，协助学校、社区构筑起疫情防线，充分展现出当代大学生的奉献精神和蓬勃力量。

In the battle of combatting COVID-19, a number of young college students joined the line of volunteers, assisting the school and community to build a line of defending the pandemic, and reflecting the dedicating spirits and vigorous power of modern college students.

(11) 这场疫情，将一些领导干部防范化解重大风险意识薄弱、能力不足暴露无遗。

This pandemic revealed the lack of awareness and ability of some leading cadres to prevent and tackle major risks.

Finally, in CPDO, there is a special title given to participants working in the actual locations of the pandemic—“逆行者” (retro-grader, people moving in the opposite direction) with nine occurrences and another 44 for “逆行” (to move in the opposite direction). The term “烈士” (martyr) occurs 22 times, and “牺牲” (sacrifice) appears 138 times, emphasizing the sacrifices made by individuals in the fight against COVID-19.

Weapons and Causes for Winning

The weapons to defeat the virus, according to the official mouthpiece of CPC, can be categorized into scientific methods, people's spirits and actions, and the party's system. A prominent scientific means is the vaccine (“疫苗”), which has been used as a weapon against the virus since early February 2020 and appears 227 times in the quantitative corpus. Example 12 mentions the scientific means of vaccines and effective medicine as invincible opponents to the virus, but highlights the need for a full understanding of the virus for them to function effectively. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is also emphasized as a sharp weapon to combat the pandemic, with about 100 occurrences. Example 13 claims the effectiveness of TCM in the war against the pandemic, drawing on its long experience spanning millennia. Additionally, the phrase “popularization of science” appears four times in the scientific category of metaphorical weapons.

(12) 认清病毒才能战胜病毒……抓紧研发疫苗和有效药物等病毒克星，增强人民群众抗击疫情的信心。

It is a must to recognize the virus before winning it ... Hurry up with the development of invincible opponents to the virus such as vaccines and effective medicines, and enhance people's confidence in combatting the pandemic.

(13) 几千年积攒下来的中医经验仍是抗疫“利器”。

Experience of traditional Chinese medicine, which has had accumulation of thousands of years, is still a “sharp tool” in combating the epidemic.

The second category of weapons in CPDO involves cooperation and people's spiritual power. The term “solidarity” (团结) appears 540 times, and “cooperation” (合作) appears 651 times. Narratives like Example 14

put humans from all nations on the same line and call for solidarity and cooperation as a weapon for the disease. In Example 15, love is portrayed as the “armor” to defend against the pandemic, and the context is that a mother reminds her son to take care of himself before embarking on a rescue mission to Hubei Province.

(14) 战胜关乎各国人民安危的疫病，团结合作是最有力的武器。

To win the disease that is concerned with people from all over the world, solidarity and cooperation is the most powerful weapon.

(15) 爱是亲情眷顾的“软肋”，却也是抵御疫情的“铠甲”。

Love is the “soft spot” of a family, but also the “armor” to defend the pandemic.

Another set of causes considered essential in CPDO is related to the system of CPC and the authority. This includes the overall regime and specific principles or rules, such as “the paramount value that the CPC attaches to the people” (“中国共产党坚持人民至上”), “transparency of information” (“信息的公开透明”), and “the style of work” (“作风”). In terms of China’s overall regime, the advantage of the “national regime and governing system” in Example 16 is considered crucial in winning the battle against the pandemic. Example 17 attributes the positive phase results in the war to the paramount value that the CPC attaches to the people.

(16) 国家制度和国家治理体系的显著优势，成为打赢疫情防控阻击战的根本保障。

The apparent advantage of national regime and governing system has become the fundamental security for winning the blocking battle on preventing and controlling the epidemic.

(17) 疫情防控阻击战取得重大战略成果，无不得益于中国共产党坚持人民至上。

All the major strategic results from the blocking battle on the pandemic come from the paramount value that the CPC attaches to the people.

The Result of the War

In CPDO, the combination of “to win” (“胜”) and “the pandemic” (“疫”) appears 141 times in the quantitative data, conveying the expectation or determination for the outcome of the war against the pandemic, as seen in Examples 14 and 17. The pandemic had its ups and downs during its spread, and regional or national anti-virus fights were affirmed as “success”, as mentioned in Example 3 with the blocking fights in Hubei Province and Wuhan City.

Specifically, after the implementation of “10 New Measures” in late 2022, the war is claimed to be a success in China. An article titled “China’s Success in Fighting the Pandemic Has Brought Confidence and Hope to the World” (“中国抗疫成功给世界带来信心和希望”) was published on February 28, 2023. Authored by Anuthin Chanwirakun, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health of Thailand, the article praises China’s prevention and control measures in defending against the epidemic. Overall, China’s war against the infectious disease is remarked as a “success”, and it offers experience, confidence, and hope to other countries.

(18) 作为泰国公共卫生部长，我一直关注各国的新冠疫情形势，公共卫生部专家也在每天研判其他国家疫情形势。根据我们的观察，中国在疫情发生后采取的防控措施科学有效，既有效保护了中国人民的生命安全和身体健康，也为其他国家抗击疫情积累了宝贵经验。中国抗疫取得成功，给世界带来的是信心和希望。

As the Minister of Public Health of Thailand, I have been paying close attention to the COVID-19 epidemic situation in various countries, and experts from the Ministry of Public Health are also studying and judging the epidemic situation in other countries every day. According to our observations, the prevention and control measures adopted by China after the outbreak were scientific and effective, which not only effectively protected

the life safety and health of the Chinese people, but also accumulated valuable experience for other countries in fighting the epidemic. China's success in fighting the epidemic has brought confidence and hope to the world.

On the other side, CPDO uses the term “not do one’s best” (“不力”) 27 times to refer to the situation of virus-combat in the United States and other countries. Quantification is employed as a method to support this view. Example 19 provides a statistic of a 14.7% unemployment rate in the United States in April 2020 as evidence of the country’s losses and less satisfactory results in dealing with the situation.

(19) 美国抗疫不力已给自身造成巨大损失，例如4月份美国失业率已达到14.7%。

That the United States did not combat the virus to the best has caused great losses for itself; for example, the unemployment rate has reached 14.7% in April.

Terms and Images Related to Wars

In addition to the elements mentioned earlier for how the Covid-19 epidemic is framed via metaphorical mapping—namely the nature of war, sides, weapons, causes, and results, there are also terms and images related to wars that are used to depict the war on COVID-19 in CPDO. These terms and images evoke the cognitive domain of war and are systematically employed in conceptual metaphors.

(20) 疫情就是命令，防控就是责任。

The pandemic is the order; to prevent and to control it is the responsibility.

(21) 中国是这次疫情防控的第一线。流行性疾病需要各国合力应对。

China stands at the frontline of the pandemic control. Epidemic disease needs the combined force of all countries to tackle.

According to the statistics, the term “order” (“命令”) has the highest frequency among these terms. This may be influenced by the fact that President Xi Jinping mentioned the instruction in Example 20, which was then taken as a guideline and repeated in CPDO. In most contexts, the participants or heroes to receive and conduct the order are prominent, such as doctors or party members of CPC. “Combined force” (“合力”) is called upon not only within China but also globally, as seen in Example 21. Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the images and terms that trigger the war framework in CPDO.

Table 3

Terms and Images Related to the War on COVID-19

	Terms or images	Frequency	Frequency per 10,000 characters
1	命令 order	119	1.508
2	防线 line of defense	97	1.229
3	合力 combined force	79	1.001
4	一线/前线 frontline/battlefront	57	0.722
5	战线 battle line	37	0.469
6	堡垒 fortress	28	0.355
7	战斗力 fighting capacity	24	0.304
8	阵地 position	11	0.139
9	旗/旗帜 flag	3	0.038
10	集结号 assembly horn	3	0.038
11	动员令 mobilization order	3	0.038
12	撤退 retreat	1	0.013

Discussion

Military metaphor is the most prominent one among metaphors employed to construct COVID-19 in public discourse. The current article gives a detailed description for the war on COVID-19 in Chinese political discourse through the lens of CPDO, exacted from the mouthpiece of CPC but aimed at a wider range of readers besides officers in the government and the party. From both qualitative and quantitative analyses, it can be seen that in CPDO, the war on COVID is portrayed as a blocking and defensive war in nature. Such a data-based result is contradictory to Yang (2020)'s conclusion that *People's Daily* favored offensive military metaphor over defensive military metaphors and military process metaphors according to collective disease coverage from 1946-2019. Actually, a defensive war is in line with Mao's military principles as stated in Lin (2017), and the contradiction can get further explanation from the disputes on the origin of the newly-found virus. For example, is it from laboratory leak, from the army, or from human contact with wild animals. The earliest traceable place and time is also in doubt. That on COVID-19 is also people's war, dependent on people's combined efforts to win it, and people who have significant contribution in the process are taken as heroes. In the narratives of CPDO and other propaganda tools of CPC, CPC takes the lead position of work from every walk and every aspect in the society, and so for the battles combatting COVID-19. This fact suggests a second consideration for Yu (2022), which argues WHO, an international organization, to be the leader or general for the anti-pandemic war based on coverage from PD. The examples quoted from PD gave recognition to WHO's irreplaceable role in its "central force in coordinating the global response" and "form a global alliance", not yet enough to support a figure of General or lead.

The weapons for the war, backgrounded in China, include vaccination and medication, people's spirits and actions, and the party's ascendant system. Previous regional defenses to the virus, during the pandemic's up-and-downs, were all remarked as success. The national war is claimed as a success especially after the implementation of the "10 New Measures" at the turn of 2022 to 2023, even though there is occasional mention of the disease/virus implying that it has not come to an end. On early stages of the virus being discovered, the war metaphor could have aroused the public's attention with its war-like severity and called for combined efforts to overcome the unprecedented situation in a globalized age. When it got normalized, the negative emotions like fear might convert to fatigue and insensitivity as real life is still going on. Later in some discourses, the outcome of the anti-pandemic war was even reckoned as "victory"; it remains a doubt as the virus is still there. Finally, the contributing elements to a military framework include but not restricted to the elements mentioned above. Other elements or images like "order" and "line of defense" all work systematically for the entirety of a cognitive mapping.

When it comes to research methodology, the current research also makes innovation in terms. Firstly, existing studies on disease metaphor and COVID-19 metaphor mainly take qualitative approaches while the current one is fueled by both qualitative and quantitative data to better understand what are the more prominent vehicles recruited in Chinese political discourse. Secondly, when it comes the methodology in metaphor analysis, military terms in disease discourse are extended from both the source and target domains. Thirdly, the current research makes innovation in taking bidirectional search with TSK in both source and target domains, to incorporate linguistic data as much as possible, with the aim to observe how the metaphorical mapping works in a more comprehensive way. Following a similar principle, the observation takes it into consideration when COVID-19 is being the focus or just mentioned as the background. Language in real use is given vital significance.

However, there are also some limitations of the current research. Firstly, the way to frame COVID-19 is assumed to change over different stages during the past three years since its breakout. The article points out that the frequency of mentioning the pandemic decreased from over 40% out of all articles in CPDO during the first 1.5 years after its breakout to about 5% in 2023. As for a diachronic portfolio, it is pending for future exploration with the patterns for military terms to target disease discourse over time, as such a barometer would reflect the changes not only in the way COVID-19 is framed over time but also the overall socio-economic situations internationally. Secondly, CPDO is but just one kind of media, which takes sharp-cut peculiarity in political propaganda, even though it makes efforts for a wider range of audiences than the paper medium. The pandemic of COVID-19 is an indelible experience shared by humans, the way it comes out of people's lips needs exploration from more and further perspectives.

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