



Heroic Narratives in Chinese social media: A Case Study of Bilibili¹

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Abstract— Heroes embody the essence of national spirit and serve as the catalysts for national rejuvenation. Narratives play a pivotal role in conveying heroic tales and upholding the ethos of heroism. While traditionally set in the domain of mainstream media, the responsibility of crafting and disseminating heroic narratives has increasingly shifted to social media in response to societal evolution. This study examines the innovative approaches to heroic narratives on the Chinese social media platform Bilibili. It highlights how Bilibili has transformed traditional heroic storytelling by adopting concise and concentrated narrative modes, featuring accessible and approachable narrative characters, and fostering diverse and dynamic narrative voices. These innovations underscore Bilibili's role as a pioneering platform for re-imagining heroic storytelling in contemporary social contexts and digital environments.



Keywords— Narrative, Social Media, Heroic Narratives, Bilibili

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I. INTRODUCTION

Heroes are the vanguard of national rejuvenation and the source of national spirit. At the National Publicity and Ideological Work Conference in 2018, General Secretary of China, Xi Jinping, proposed to create a strong atmosphere of honoring heroes, learning from heroes, defending heroes and caring for heroes. In recent years, the mainstream media, grounded in Chinese history and culture and contemporary experiences of struggle, have narrated stories of heroes such as “the Heroic Company of Lake Changjin” and “the Heroes against the COVID-19”, boosting the sense of national pride among Chinese people around the world. With the transformation of intelligent technology, the heroic narrative is facing the challenge of information overload, and reliance solely on mainstream media is insufficient to achieve effective dissemination (Skog & Lundström, 2022). Consequently, there is a

compelling need to enhance and expand the role of social media in the dissemination and construction of heroic narratives.

On the Bilibili platform, the content creator *了不起的中国人* (*Amazing Chinese People*) has produced a substantial and diverse collection of videos that are deeply intertwined with heroic narratives, exerting significant influence. As of January 15, 2025, *Amazing Chinese People* has uploaded 1,022 videos, amassed 1.558 million followers, received 62.32 million likes, and achieved a cumulative total of 780 million views.

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the creator's heroic narrative videos, examining the distinctive features of heroism in social media narratives through the lenses of narrative modes, characters, and voices. Specifically, it employs the top five most viewed videos as case studies to delve into these characteristics in detail.

II. CONCISE AND CONCENTRATED NARRATIVE MODES

Heroic narrative videos in social media do not conform to the traditional heroic motifs of “hero, outlaw, victim, hero’s treasure” (Zhou & Li, 2008). Instead, they adopt a narrative mode that is concise in content and concentrated on empathy. Within the traditional heroic narrative mode, “suffering” serves as a pivotal narrative thread, with heroes often emerging from or maturing through suffering, or rescuing others ensnared in it.

However, the vast majority of social media users are disinterested in narratives of suffering. Their engagement in social media activities is primarily driven by a quest for emotional sustenance or entertainment. Social media predominantly features commercial short videos, which are characterized by their strong immersive quality, ability to swiftly capture attention, and fragmented narrative mode (Yang, 2020). Narrative modes that use suffering as the central thread tend to be protracted for viewers, and narrators find it challenging to complete the heroic narrative within the limited duration of a video while ensuring its completion rate. Table 1 presents the overall statics of the top five most viewed videos from Bilibili.

Table 1. Video Statistics (as of January 15, 2025).

	Video Title	View Count (million)	Hero
1	Envied by Japan and South Korea! Chinese People Enjoy Freedom to Eat Watermelons, Thanks to This Grandma	10.468	Wu Mingzhu
2	Policeman Collects Controllable Firearms from a Senior, Who Smiles: "A Founding General Gave This to Me"	6.768	Teng Xiyuan
3	This Photo, Known as the "Darkest Moment" in Chinese Medicine	6.631	Chen Zhongwei
4	25 Deployed, 25 Sacrificed, the Only Fire Brigade Where No One Returned Alive	6.433	Tianjin Port Fire Brigade, Fifth Squadron
5	He Utters "I'm Sorry" Three Times in Tears, Yet None of Us Deserve His Apology	6.302	Wu Jingbiao

The study reveals that heroic narrative videos on social media generally adhere to the “contribution-destiny” heroic narrative mode. Video 1 recounts the story of Wu Mingzhu, an academician who dedicated decades to cultivating superior watermelon varieties and remained committed to her breeding cause despite suffering from Alzheimer in her later years. Video 2 reflects on the military career and the honest and public-spirited life after retirement of Teng Xiyuan, a veteran of the War of Resistance Against Japan. Video 3 mourns the death of Dr. Chen Zhongwei, who was tragically killed by a patient after more than thirty years of medical, teaching, and research work. Video 4 commemorates the heroic sacrifice of all members of the Fifth Brigade of the Tianjin Port Fire Department in the “8·12 Tianjin Binhai New Area Explosion Incident.” Video 5 tells the story of Wu Jingbiao, a national weightlifter who won a silver medal at the 2012 London Olympics but tearfully apologized for missing the gold medal.

In the “contribution-destiny” heroic narrative mode, the hero’s “contribution” is the core thread, and it is the decisive factor in determining whether an individual can be deemed a hero. The relationship between “contribution” and “destiny” serves as the intrinsic logic that evokes empathy from the audience. The narration of “destiny” is an important element in deepening the audience’s impression of the character. When the character’s destiny leans towards tragedy (Stokes-Parish, Elliott, Rolls, Massey, 2020), the simple sentiment of “goodness is rewarded” conflicts with reality, prompting feelings of regret in the audience while also enhancing their admiration for the hero’s deeds (Kelsey, 2020). The diseases of Wu Mingzhu’s later years, the sacrifice of the Fifth Brigade of the Tianjin Port Fire Department, the misfortune of Chen Zhongwei, and the regret of Wu Jingbiao cast a somber hue over the heroes, yet also highlight their greatness.

This heroic narrative mode, focusing on the motifs of “contribution” and ‘destiny’, is more concise and better suited to the fast-paced information intelligence era compared to classic narrative patterns such as “the hero’s return” (Li, 2024). Consequently, the audience can quickly grasp the hero’s key deeds, swiftly form an identification with the hero, and empathize with the hero’s destiny, thereby deepening their impression and provoking further thought and discussion.

III. ACCESSIBLE AND APPROACHABLE NARRATIVE CHARACTERS

Under the influence of the heroic narrative mode prevalent in social media, the connotation of narrative characters has

evolved. The heroes depicted in social media narratives are exemplary individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the nation and its people, embodying ordinariness and a collective identity. In contrast to Campbell's model of the hero's journey (Campbell, 2004; Cree & Caddick, 2019), which involves separation from the community, trials, and a return, the heroes in social media narratives are characterized by their integration within the group. The traditional narrative often portrays heroes as remote and unattainable, leading to a sense of alienation among the audience.

However, in the heroic narratives of social media, heroes are part of the collective, usually engaged in ordinary professions. Their heroism stems from their contributions to the country and its people. The professions of the individuals in Videos 2, 3, and 4 are relatively common, and the audience has likely encountered doctors, firefighters, and veterans in their daily lives. Although the academician in Video 1 and the Olympian in Video 5 are not figures the audience encounters regularly, the watermelons cultivated by the former are a familiar fruit to all, and the silver medal won by the latter allows the audience to share in the honor and joy, thus creating a natural sense of familiarity with the heroic figures presented in social media.

Heroes are no longer possessors of extraordinary abilities but are individuals who diligently perform their duties to the utmost in their respective roles. This attribution of ordinariness and collective identity brings the hero closer to the audience, making them more accessible and within reach, suggesting that anyone in the general public has the potential to become a heroic figure. Social media narrative videos have expanded the meaning of heroism, aligning it with the characteristics of the times, and provide insights for a broader heroic narrative.

IV. DIVERSE AND DYNAMIC NARRATIVE VOICES

The subjects of heroic narratives on social media include creators, users, and the platforms themselves. The collaborative efforts of these three entities contribute to the richness and adaptability of heroic narrative voices in both substance and form. Their interplay fosters mutual corroboration, which helps to minimize discrepancies in information, perspectives, and editorial decisions reflected in narrative outputs (Huang, 2019; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2021). These dynamic voices ensure a more cohesive and credible representation of heroic stories.

4.1. Creators as leaders of the narratives

Within social media, creators act as the principal agents of heroic narratives, with their subjective ideas determining the narrative style, story arrangement, and character selection of the videos. The content of the videos indirectly reflects the creators' conception of heroism. The crux of creators' creation of heroic narratives lies in a profound understanding of the moral qualities that constitute heroism. The audience's admiration for a particular hero is superficial; the essence is the pursuit of noble heroic qualities, with specific heroic figures serving as the vessels for these abstract qualities.

Creators are the sole proprietors of narrative videos and possess the authority to manage user feedback. They have the right to prompt viewers to like, share, or comment on the video at appropriate junctures, such as the beginning, end, or highlight reels, or to set relevant categories and tags to enhance the video's visibility, thereby achieving better dissemination. After video production, creators can guide the direction of heroic narratives in the comment section and through bullet screens by means of pinning, liking, replying, and deleting. Creators benefit from the traffic of narrative videos, with the dissemination data of heroic narratives directly translating into material incentives for them.

In creating heroic narrative videos, "Amazing Chinese People" pays attention to both the heroic individuals highlighted in current events and those with heroic qualities who have not been previously publicized, thus maintaining a good update frequency and establishing a stable fan base. Within the feedback mechanisms of social media, creators' enthusiasm for creation remains high, and the communication effect of heroic narratives are sustained.

4.2. User-collaboration in the narratives

Digital interactive technology has restructured the relationship between narrators, readers, and texts (Li, 2021), allowing users to engage through methods such as posting bullet screens and writing comments, thereby assisting creators in refining heroic narratives. On one hand, users can enhance the authenticity of heroic narratives. Video 4, for instance, recreates the severity of a fire through historical footage and voice-overs, with users adding details through bullet screens, such as "glass shattered 15 kilometers away" and "toxic substances produced by the fire", highlighting the terrifying nature of the fire and further underscoring the bravery of the heroes of the Tianjin Port Fire Brigade Fifth Squadron.

On the other hand, users can fill gaps in the creators' narratives or supplement content that may have been omitted due to length constraints. Video 1 primarily

narrates the achievements of Academician Wu Mingzhu in watermelon breeding, while a user adds to the narrative in the comments section by mentioning her outstanding contributions to the breeding of Hami melons and muskmelons. Such comments provide a broader basis for other viewers and creators to identify with the hero.

4.3. Platform-standardization of the narratives

The existing community guidelines of the Bilibili platform constrain the narratives of both creators and users, fostering an overall atmosphere of objectivity, rationality, and politeness. Before publication, creators' videos must undergo strict platform review, and any non-compliant content will be rejected. In other words, the platform necessarily participates in the creators' heroic narrative process (Paul, 2009). Bilibili, as a social media platform, has a unique "membership system", requiring users to answer a questionnaire and score above "pass" to become "members" with the privilege to comment and post bullet screens. The questionnaire assesses not only users' interests and hobbies but also their understanding of etiquette, norms, and laws. Under the influence of the "membership system", Bilibili maintains a positive narrative environment. Video 5 addresses the issue of cyberbullying against Liu Xiang due to his performance, and within its comment section, highly up-voted comments include "keyboard warriors will not fare well" and "a warrior who falls remains a warrior", reflecting positive viewpoints. It is evident that the majority of Bilibili users disapprove of cyberbullying and are willing to engage in positive heroic narratives and criticize behaviors that tarnish the image of heroes. Social media platforms can create special columns for heroic narrative videos, providing additional promotional incentives and attracting more creators to the production of such videos. In a favorable platform environment, users maintain a positive and proactive attitude towards heroic narratives, while creators are encouraged to continue their creative endeavors.

V. CONCLUSION

As the media ecosystem continues to evolve alongside advancements in intelligent technology, social media is poised to further capitalize on its strengths in narrative modes, character portrayal, and thematic voices. The "contribution-destiny" heroic narrative framework enhances the effectiveness of storytelling, identity construction, and the elicitation of empathy. Innovations in defining heroic characters provide fresh creative perspectives for social media, while the diversity and interactivity of narrative agents ensure the quality and resonance of heroic narratives.

To comprehensively elevate the standard of heroic storytelling, social media can collaborate with mainstream media to establish a robust narrative ecosystem. By leveraging diverse source materials and obtaining firsthand accounts through interviews and field research, narratives can incorporate a greater proportion of stories told by heroes themselves or their relatives, thereby enriching content and bolstering credibility. As social media's role in heroic narration grows increasingly prominent, platforms, creators, and users alike should actively participate in crafting narratives that highlight the ordinary and the collective. Through such efforts, they can promote the spirit of heroism and ensure the enduring legacy of heroic ideals.

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