

Article

## How Do Chinese Media Frame Arab Uprisings: A Content Analysis

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### Abstract

Employing content analysis, this study compares the coverage of the Arab uprisings by the *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China) and *Caixin Net* (a typical commercial media) with statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry in the last decade. It shows that the overall attention given to Arab uprisings in the *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net* declined during the period, but there were shifts in the framing of the conflicts, presentation of issues, and positions. The article demonstrates and analyses how the approach and outline of the conflicts in the *People's Daily* changed from disaster to criticism, and then to comparison—its position towards the events generally negative—and how *Caixin Net* moved from a disaster to a contextual framing of the events, its position tending to be neutral.

### Keywords

Arab uprisings; Chinese media; content analysis; news framing

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

As Halbwachs (2020) said:

Memory is not to preserve the past, but to reconstruct the past with the help of material relics, rituals, scriptures, and traditions left by the past, and with the help of recent psychological and social materials, that is to say, the present.

Ten years passed since the Arab uprisings broke out, making it possible to look at this critical event objectively and rationally. Baum and Potter (2008, p. 49) said that “the media play a vital role in collecting, constructing, and disseminating information” and, as “the main link between leaders and the public, [they play] the core role in the foreign policy market.” Cohen (2015, p. 13) said that “the [media] may not be able to tell readers what to think successfully, but it is surprisingly successful in telling readers what to think”; especially when readers don't have

foreign contacts or do not understand important external context, they are more significantly influenced by the media (Kelly & Smith, 2013). Research shows that the media played a vital role in the Arab uprisings of 2011 and subsequent social movements (Cottle, 2011), being held responsible for escalating unrest and for giving different explanations of the uprisings (Karyotakis et al., 2017).

According to Entman (1993, p. 52), “framing essentially involves selection and salience.” Several studies have attempted to examine differences in how China and the US frame international issues (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998; Wu, 2006; Yin, 2007). Although some studies have examined differences between Chinese and Western media coverage of the Arab uprisings over some time (Du, 2016; Ha & Shin, 2019; Karyotakis et al., 2017; Tzogopoulos, 2014), there is a lack of rigorous and in-depth analysis of China's views on Arab uprisings. In this article, we analyse how the *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China) and *Caixin Net* (a typical commercial media) covered

the Arab uprisings. Since the political and social environment of a country inevitably influences its media, we propose Chinese official foreign policy tendencies as essential background, which expands the analysis beyond the Global North and reconstructs the disruptions while challenging normative models of media systems (Rodny-Gumede, 2020).

This study is of merit for several reasons. First, ten years have passed since the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the world has witnessed a great change, so it is time to reconsider the event. This is particularly true given that there has been an over-emphasis on the role of the state, ruling elites, and traditional political and civil society actors, which—it is assumed—operate to the detriment of societal forms of unstructured mobilisation such as non-traditional, leaderless, and horizontal social and political actors (Aarts & Cavatorta, 2013). This research focuses on how *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net* had organised the coverage on the Arab uprisings during the past ten years. Results demonstrate that the framing of *People's Daily* changed from disaster to criticism and then to comparison, and that its position towards the events was generally negative. The framing of *Caixin Net*, on the other hand, changed from disaster to contextual framing, and its position tended to be neutral.

Second, this study also provides another perspective from which to view the uprisings. A study that conducted a keyword search of “Arab uprising” in Arabic, English, and French (excluding blogs, newspapers, and books), showed that the majority of articles on the Arab uprisings were produced outside the Arab world, with most of them being written in English (AlMaghlouth et al., 2015). Our research coming from China offers a diverse perspective and frame from the Global South.

Third, scholars have found that media framing cannot be detached from socially and politically dominant ideologies and rather tends to reflect the prevailing values of its society (Tuchman, 1978). This study explores several factors that may influence the framing of the Arab uprisings in the context of social media: ideology, geopolitics, and the particular media environment. Therefore, our research also contributes to a continuous observation of the changes in “framing” in social media environments.

## 2. Literature Review

Goffman (1974) defined “the frame” as the organising principle of news; it can be understood as an ideological and interpretive frame that enables journalists to report on issues or as a way for media to report on certain events, groups, individuals, or institutions with positive or negative attributes (Fourie, 2001). The news frame affects the definition of problems, provides causal explanations, and puts forward moral evaluations and suggestions (Entman, 1993). Some believe that the frame is also regarded as an essential “central idea” in understanding and describing the relevant events of a problem and indirectly suggesting how it should be dealt with (Gamson

& Modigliani, 1989). The media frame specifically refers to “continuous cognitive, interpretive and presentation patterns, including selection, emphasis, and exclusion, through which news editors usually organise discourse” (Gitlin, 2003, p. 7). Therefore, news frames are susceptible to ideology and one-sided news/media organisations (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Newspapers are considered a suitable medium for framing analysis (Linstrom & Marais, 2012) and the portion of the media most responsible for a society’s culture and emotion (Reah, 2002) as well as for the discourse that power holders (Fairclough, 2013) use to express the culture and events of a specific society. Newspapers construct and disseminate various news through frames to enhance readers’ social and political awareness (Fowler, 2013; Van Dijk, 1993).

### 2.1. Media and the Arab Uprisings

The Arab uprisings refer to a series of anti-government movements with the themes of “democracy,” “people’s livelihood,” “citizen empowerment,” and “overthrowing authoritarian governments” in Arab countries in the early 2010s, which has had a far-reaching impact on the Arab world, as well as the international geostrategic pattern (Badr, 2021; Derichs & Demmelhuber, 2014; M. Lynch, 2013). The political power of some relevant countries is still in turmoil, and everything has not yet completely ended.

There are two kinds of research on media and the Arab uprisings: One kind discuss media and mobilisation. Some argue that digital media technology has played an essential role in the communication, coordination, and guidance of this rising tide of opposition (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2015; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Papacharissi, 2016). Others argue that the role of social media should not be overemphasised, and the impact of social media must be related to how such media platforms adapt to the broader media ecology and social and political structures (Hamanaka, 2020; Robertson, 2015). Some studies have found that the changes in the information environment have changed individual competencies, the ability to organise for collective action, and the transmission of information from the local to the international level. The new and old media are interrelated (M. Lynch, 2013), and the coverage transferred the issue’s salience from new media into mainstream media, thus reaching wider non-politicised audiences (Badr, 2021). The long-term evolution of a new kind of public sphere may matter more than immediate political outcomes (M. Lynch, 2011).

Another strand of literature identifies reporting on the revolutionary movement and studies how different countries and media have framed Arab uprisings (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). The state as a frame of reference is important for understanding the nature of political change (Derichs & Demmelhuber, 2014). The results show that different media have

chosen different reporting frames (Bruce, 2014). Some examine how traditional and non-traditional media reported on Egyptian protests to determine whether the media influenced the protests (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). Others explore the differences between media in Western countries and that in other regions regarding how they covered news on Arab Uprisings and what frames they used.

## 2.2. China's West Asia and North Africa Policy and Chinese Media

Echoing China's cultural tradition of having a peaceful and harmonious civilisation (Qin, 2018) and the peaceful rise strategy, the core idea of China's foreign policy is guided by principles of trust, forbearance, reciprocity, and equity. China still adheres to the basic principle of non-interference in its foreign policy (J. Zhang, 2015). In the era of President Xi Jinping, the "One Belt, One Road" initiative has become one of China's major diplomatic strategies (S. I. Chan & Song, 2020). There is widespread cooperation between China and West Asia and North Africa (WANA). The conflicts in the Arab world put China's political relationships at risk and threaten its economic interests (Singh, 2016).

The WANA region has always been a key strategic focus of the US, Europe, and Russia, while to China, it is not as crucial as its neighbours in the Asia-Pacific and other regions (Chaziza, 2013). Although China's foreign policy towards WANA has undergone several significant changes since 1949 (Horesh, 2016), the country's relationship with states there is now pragmatic. China's WANA policy highlights the country's persistence in identifying as a state of the Global South (Liu et al., 2020) and has played as a regional conflict mediator (Chaziza, 2018). China has always stood for a non-interference policy, advocating political dialogue and the peaceful settlement of relevant issues (Bai, 2012). This kind of intervention in WANA conflicts is mainly related to keeping the peace, managing conflict, and securing regional security (Shichor, 2013).

For a long time, reporting on international issues has often been regarded as a barometer of China's internal affairs and diplomacy, highly tied to national diplomacy and external publicity (Shen, 2004; Shirk, 2007; H. Wang, 2003; J. Wang & Wang, 2014; S. Zhao, 2013). Although it has been loosened in recent years, its characteristics have not changed. In addition, Chinese media reports on WANA are deeply influenced by ethnic groups, religions, class struggles, international relations, and revolutionary theories. They are related to geopolitics, economy, and regional security (Cheng & Shi, 2009; d'Hooghe, 2007; Meidan, 2006; Sun & Zoubir, 2018).

## 2.3. Chinese Media and the Arab Uprisings

Literature on China's media system and communication process include the Chinese system of propaganda

and media control (Brady, 2009; Qiu, 1999; Shambaugh, 2017), the fusion of party–state powers and market rationality in the Chinese media (Barmé, 1999; T. V. Lee & Li, 2000; Y. Zhao, 2009), the emergence of China's "civil society" and the pursuit of news specialisation (J. M. Chan et al., 2004; D. C. Lynch, 1999; Pan & Chan, 2003; Pan & Lu, 2003), etc.

According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (2017), Chinese media are regulated by the government to some extent (Guo, 2019). Official news venues such as the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency are the mouthpieces of the Communist Party of China, representing the views of national leadership (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). *People's Daily* is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Because of this status and the special relationship between government and Central Committee, documenting the frequency and content of articles in the *People's Daily* is considered an effective means of gauging the current leadership's level of interest and views on a particular topic (Hoddie, 2006).

Business portals and social media generally have national audiences and are not very different from news websites and social media in other parts of the world (Kilgo et al., 2018). Since 2010, major commercial news sites have expanded their editorial teams by recruiting many senior editors and journalists from traditional media. Editors of commercial news websites publish or report on user-generated content from other online platforms or contribute original news stories by directly interviewing online users. Due to the financial independence (S. I. Zhang, 2012) of these portals and social media platforms, their news reports may deviate from official discourse to some extent (C. C. Lee et al., 2007). *Caixin Net* is a well-known financial and economic news website that is supported by subscriptions and professionally operated to satisfy the social elites' information needs (Ji et al., 2016). *Caixin Net* was founded by Ms Hu Shuli and officially launched in 2010. Publicly available information shows that the largest shareholder of *Caixin Net* is a private enterprise, accounting for about 23.4% of its shares (Tianyancha, 2021).

Some argue that from the very beginning, Beijing tried to curb the spread of information to its people through the Internet, which is interpreted as the government's efforts to prevent what was happening in the Arab uprisings movement from happening in China (Ha & Shin, 2019). However, the frames of the Chinese media seem to be inconsistently portrayed in many studies. One study showed that mainland Chinese media chose not to take a news perspective that was favourable toward the Arab uprisings (Du, 2016). Another piece of research showed that compared with Al Jazeera and the BBC, China Daily's website, without relying exclusively on the content of the official press agency of the People's Republic of China, Xinhua News Agency, acted like a Western-type news media (Karyotakis et al., 2017). A study stated that China Daily used the protest paradigm to belittle

the importance of the Arab uprisings (Ha & Shin, 2019). These different conclusions make this study even more valuable, begging the question: Why do Chinese media have such different views on the Arab uprisings? Are there political considerations behind these views?

### 3. Study Aim and Research Questions

As Graber (2003, p. 140) pointed out, “many extensive and clear judgments about the substantive content of mass media are still made without analysing the actual content of these media.” This study investigates the frame used to report the uprisings in the past ten years. It discusses the position of this topic in the public discourse system and how the frame represents Chinese media, Chinese people, and the Chinese government. Based on the above information, the research questions we posed are:

1. How did selected Chinese media frame the Arab uprisings?
2. What are the differences between *People’s Daily’s* and *Caixin Net’s* reporting on the Arab uprisings?
3. How have Chinese “media frames” changed over the decade, from 2011 until 2021?
4. What is the relationship between Chinese media coverage of the Arab uprisings and the Chinese government’s WANA policy?

### 4. Methods

#### 4.1. Media and Material Samples

The material samples include all journalistic articles such as news stories, editorials, interviews, feature stories, columns, and commentaries published from *People’s Daily* and *Caixin Net*, and statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry from December 2010 to March 2021. Using the words “Arab uprisings,” “Tunisia,” “Egypt,” “Mubarak,” and “protest” as keywords, we searched the *People’s Daily* database and obtained valid samples ( $n = 77$ ). We searched the *Caixin Net* database and acquired valid samples ( $n = 148$ ). We analysed relevant statements by the Chinese Foreign Ministry to explore the government’s foreign policies and practical actions in the WANA during the Arab uprisings. We chose Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria as related countries because Tunisia experienced the first outbreak of the Arab uprisings, followed by Egypt, one of the most prominent countries in the WANA region. Since 2011, Syria and Libya have been in an ongoing armed conflict and civil war. Searches for the four countries were conducted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, and valid samples ( $n = 131$ ) were obtained after screening.

#### 4.2. Coding

Two researchers screened and categorised articles according to coding themes. The coding book contains

variables that considered the basic data of the articles, e.g., the frame, issue, news type, news source, subject, and position of the articles, making a total of six variables. Each story was coded as one of 4–5 possible categories outlined in previous studies (Groshek, 2008; Natarajan & Hao, 2003; Weaver et al., 2009). The variables and categories are shown in Table 1.

According to the coding book, the coding results of *People’s Daily* and *Caixin Net* are described in Table 2.

Concerning statements by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, we chose the policies, subjects, issues, and propositions of the material, making a total of four variables as shown in Table 3. In short, policies include positive, neutral, and negative ones; subject included international organisation, the ruling party, the opposition, and the political situation; issues included the economy, politics, security, and people’s livelihoods; propositions included peaceful settlement, political consultation, mediation, anti-violence, and rebuilding.

#### 4.3. Reliability

Two coders were trained before jointly coding the first 20% of the materials and used a formula to test the reliability. Intercoder reliability scores were calculated using Holsti’s coefficient of reliability (Holsti, 1969) for coding outcomes. The scores ranged from 90% to 100%, with Holsti’s, indicating high coding reliability. When different codes appeared, the coders chose a more suitable code after discussion and modification.

### 5. Findings

#### 5.1. Declining Media Attention to the Influence of Arab Uprisings

Overall, the attention of the Chinese media to Arab uprisings has declined over the past ten years. The number of sources in the three groups all showed downward trends (see Figure 1). The number of sources from *Caixin Net* and the Chinese Foreign Ministry showed the most obvious decline. The number of reports from *Caixin Net* ( $n = 148$ ) is almost twice that of *People’s Daily* ( $n = 77$ ).

*People’s Daily* emphasised the grand narrative of the change in the Arab region and attributed the movement to politics, economy, and human rights (see Figure 2). It mainly reported on Arab uprisings using disaster framing (37.66%) and contrasting framing (23.38%), with small variations over time in the number of articles using these types of framing. *People’s Daily* hardly described the mass movement directly in the first two years. On August 29th, 2011, the first report in *People’s Daily* that directly mentioned “Arab uprisings” used “uncertainty,” “impossible to predict accurately,” and “worrying” to express concern about this mass revolutionary movement (Zhong, 2011). When discussing the practical significance of political system reconstruction in WANA, *People’s Daily* took the Western-style

“democratic system” as contrast and put forward the viewpoint that “a specific political system is the product of a specific cultural soil” (Zhong, 2011, p. 3).

*Caixin Net* used the movement as the background. Over the past ten years, *Caixin Net*’s reporting has mainly used contextual framing (79.05%), followed by disaster framing (12.84%). In contrast, *Caixin Net* reported the Arab uprisings from a specific and personalised perspective and attributed the mass movement to “people’s dissatisfaction with living standards, police violence, high

unemployment rate, and poor human rights situation” (Yu, 2011, p. 1).

## 5.2. Framing and Balance

The two media mainly focused on political issues (see Figure 3). Security issues were the second focus of *People’s Daily*, while economic issues were *Caixin Net*’s second focus. *Caixin Net* consistently focused on political issues, while the focus of *People’s Daily* varied.

**Table 1.** The category and description of coding.

Category		Description
Frame	Contrasting frame	Emphasising the differences between the Chinese and the international systems
	Disaster frame	Emphasising violent regional conflicts and the destruction of people’s lives
	Critical frame	Focusing on an issue that was wrong and needed to be changed or supervised/monitored
	Accountability frame	Emphasising that China should learn from the experiences and lessons regarding certain topics
	Contextual frame	Presenting historical events as a background
Issue	Economy	Involving economic issues, economic conferences held by the government and business enterprises, and daily production and operation activities
	Politics	Involving political reform, political systems, geopolitics, and ideology
	Security	Involving regional wars, armed conflicts, illegal immigrants, and refugees
	People’s livelihoods	Including human rights issues, civil rights, and the fight for the rights of vulnerable groups
News type	News	Which is short in length and reports on events within the last two days
	News story	Including news about influential and famous people and events in local areas in which journalists often report details and changes in Arab uprisings by collecting materials and selecting typical examples
	In-depth report	Involving reporters deeply immersed in the local scenes to investigate and selectively expose the complex relationships among different news reports
	Commentary	Articles written by observers, including the dialogues and interviews of scholars
News source	Foreign government/organisation	
	Foreign media	
	Local people	
	Chinese journalists	
	Scholars/researchers	
Subject	International subjects	
	National subjects	
	Enterprises	
	People	
	Politicians	
Position	Positive	Supporting, affirming, and praising the Arab uprisings
	Neutral	No apparent positive or negative position or the position is impossible to judge
	Negative	Expressing opposition or criticism towards Arab uprisings and arguing that it had adverse consequences

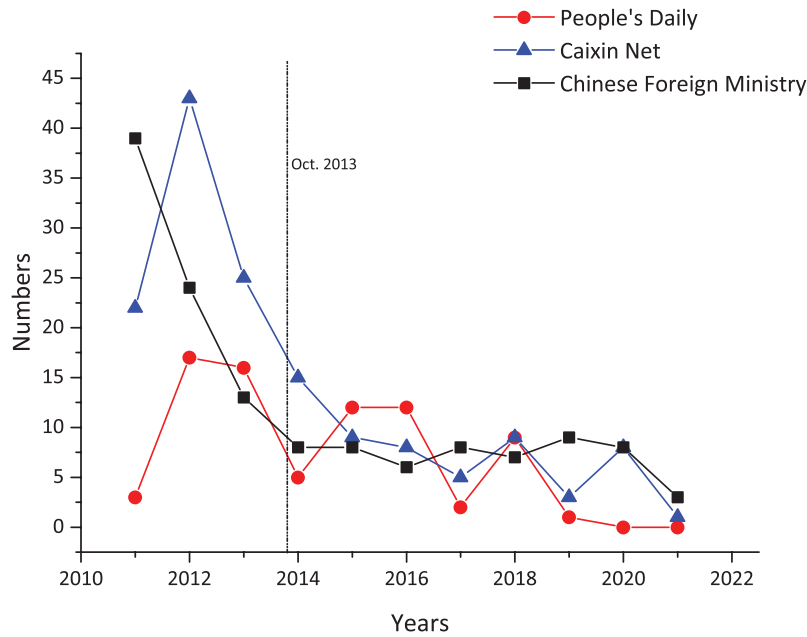


**Table 2.** The coding of data from *Caixin Net* (n = 148) and *People's Daily* (n = 77).

Coding		<i>Caixin Net</i> (number, percentage to the total)	<i>People's Daily</i> (number, percentage to the total)
Frame	Contrasting frame	2   1.35%	18   23.38%
	Disaster frame	19   12.84%	29   37.66%
	Critical frame	1   0.68%	13   16.88%
	Accountability frame	9   6.08%	13   16.88%
	Contextual frame	117   79.05%	4   5.19%
Issue	Economy	32   21.62%	14   18.18%
	Politics	89   60.14%	35   45.45%
	Security	5   3.38%	18   23.38%
	People's livelihoods	22   14.86%	10   12.99%
News type	News	10   6.76%	4   5.19%
	News story	88   59.46%	22   28.57%
	In-depth report	8   5.41%	11   14.29%
	Commentary	42   28.38%	40   51.95%
News source	Foreign government or organisation	43   29.05%	8   10.39%
	Foreign media	4   2.70%	6   7.79%
	Local people	4   2.70%	9   11.69%
	Chinese journalists	61   41.22%	12   15.58%
	Scholars/researchers	36   24.32%	42   54.55%
Subject	International subjects	79   53.38%	35   45.45%
	National subjects	33   22.30%	19   24.68%
	Enterprises	4   2.70%	3   3.90%
	People	16   10.81%	20   25.97%
	Politicians	16   10.81%	0   0%
Position	Positive	3   2.03%	0   0%
	Neutral	102   68.92%	22   28.57%
	Negative	43   29.05%	55   71.43%

**Table 3.** The coding of statements of the Chinese Foreign Ministry (n = 131).

Category		Chinese Foreign Ministry (number, percentage to the total)	
Policy	Positive	50	38.17%
	Neutral	68	51.91%
	Negative	13	9.92%
Subject	International organisations	29	22.14%
	The ruling party	36	27.48%
	The opposition	10	7.63%
	The political situation	56	42.75%
Issue	Economy	5	3.82%
	Politics	104	79.39%
	Security	15	11.45%
	People's livelihoods	7	5.34%
Proposition	Peaceful settlement	34	25.95%
	Political consultation	29	22.14%
	Mediation	17	12.98%
	Anti-violence	26	19.85%
	Rebuilding	25	19.08%



**Figure 1.** Changes in the number of articles from the two media platforms and of statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

The two media platforms consistently but infrequently covered economic issues. Finally, *People's Daily* was more focused on security and livelihood issues than *Caixin Net*.

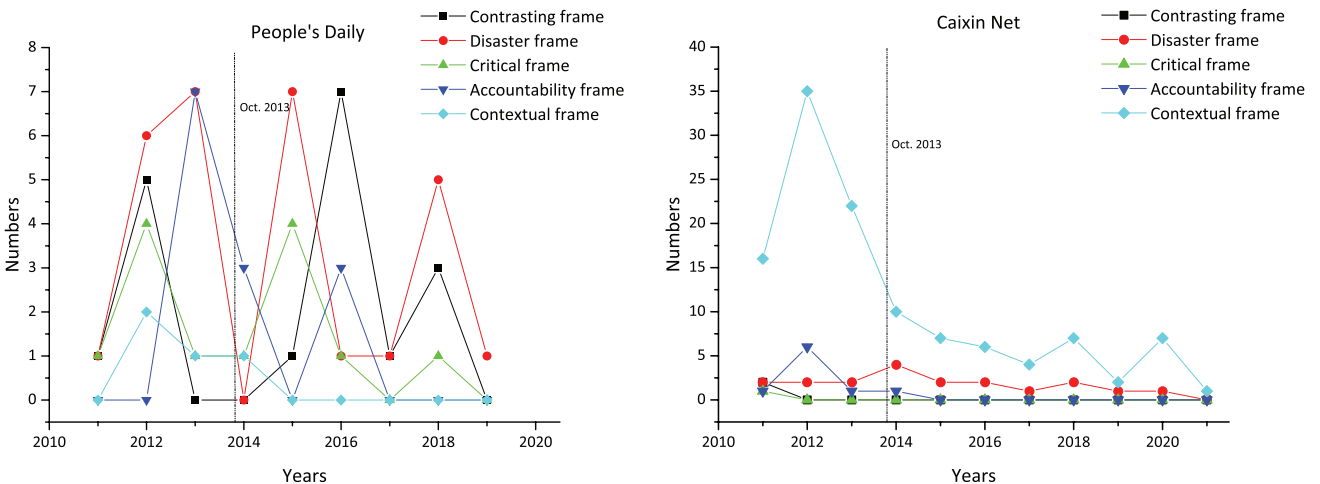
*People's Daily* emphasised the regime's subversion by the Arab uprisings and the breaking of the Arab world's original regional and political order. The security issues (23.38%) show more concern about the chaos and bloodiness of the movement. People's livelihood issues (12.99%) mainly describe the difficulty of life from the residents' perspectives.

In contrast, *Caixin Net* reports on the political issues (60.14%) of the Arab uprisings mainly focus on two aspects. The first is as the background element of the evolution of political patterns in the WANA region. The second is a tool to measure the positions of global

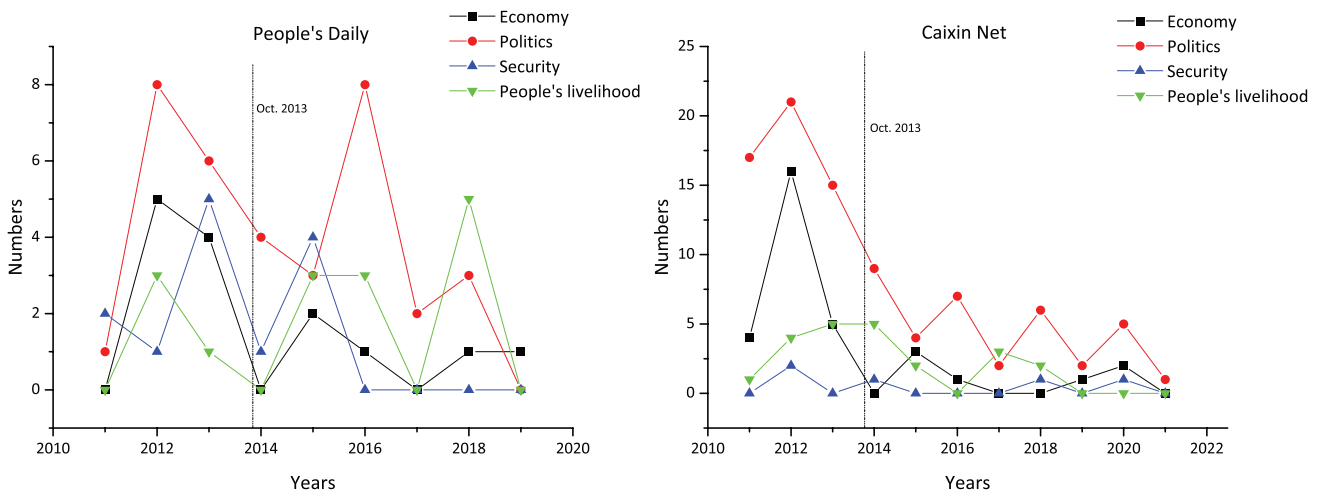
politicians. The second issue is the economy (21.62%), which mainly involves global energy problems and economic recession. In addition, it also reports the gap between the rich and the poor and income problems within Arab countries.

As shown in Figure 4, *People's Daily* paid more attention to the impact of the Arab uprisings on local people. *Caixin Net* was more inclined to cover politicians. At the beginning of the Arab uprisings, both media were more likely to publish articles about international subjects than towards the end of the study period, as *Caixin Net's* coverage of such subjects gradually decreased, while that of the *People's Daily* varied.

As shown in Figure 5, *People's Daily* took a negative position towards the Arab uprisings (71.4%), especially after the Chinese government publicly stated its position,



**Figure 2.** Comparing the coverage frames in *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net*.



**Figure 3.** Changes in the number of issues reported on by the *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net*.

emphasising the social unrest and sustained economic decline brought about by the Arab uprisings. *Caixin Net* was more neutral, emphasising that the Arab uprisings had brought about significant changes and greatly influenced life in the Arab world while avoiding obvious positions (68.9%). The only three articles that reported positively on the Arab uprisings were from *Caixin Net* and quotes from foreigners.

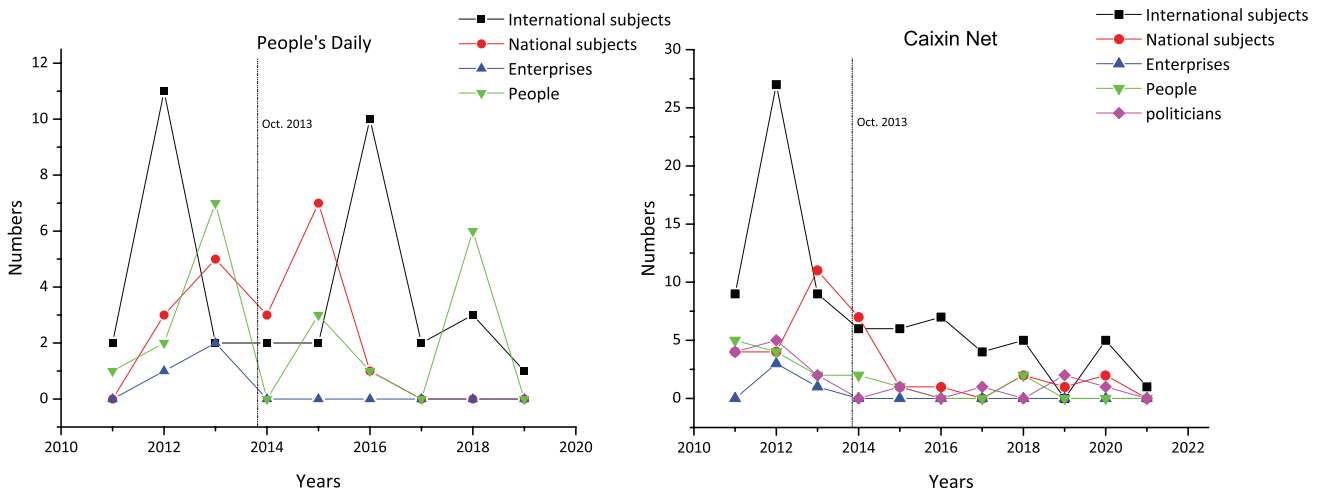
**5.3. The Media Agenda in Relation to Geopolitics in WANA (2011–2021)**

The media agenda is closely related to Chinese politicians' internal affairs, diplomacy, and geopolitics. From the perspective of China, on January 19th, 2012, Premier Wen Jiabao attended the fourth China-Arab Business Conference in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and systematically explained China's neutral policies towards the turmoil in the WANA region for the first time. Both *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net* had similar positions in 2012. From January to March 2012, *People's Daily* published nine articles that took a neutral position

when analysing the Arab uprisings and the reasons for its outbreak.

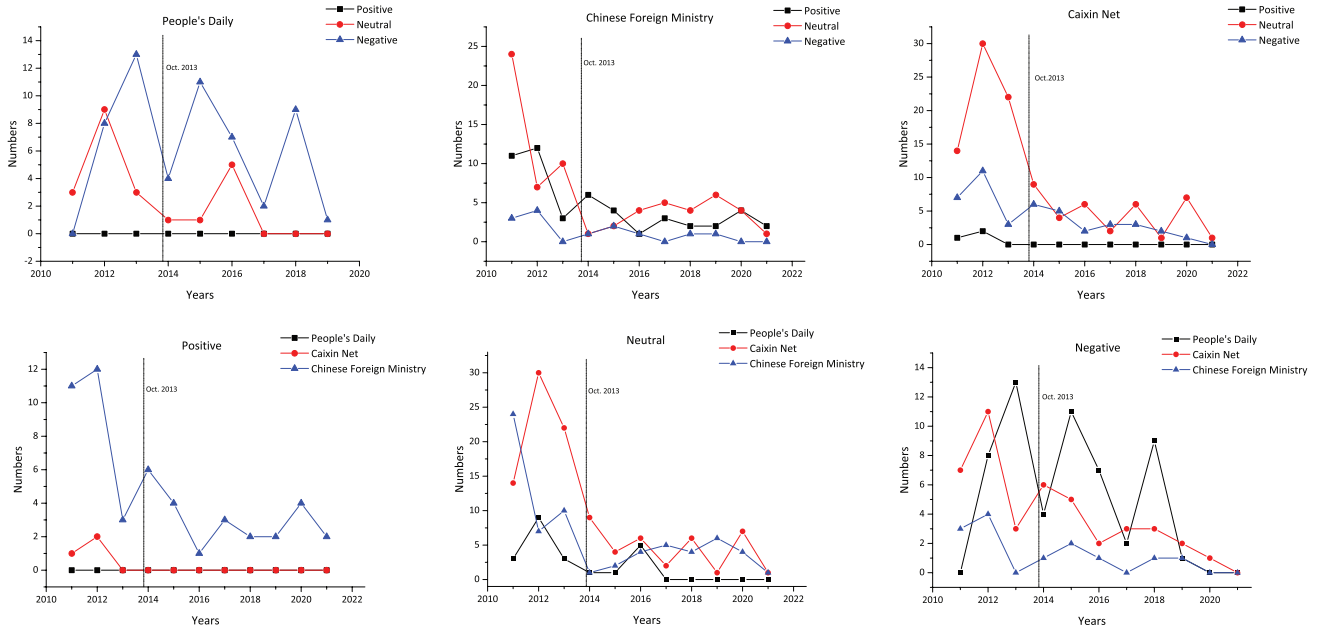
On May 13th, 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab uprisings movement, and met with Tunisian President Essebsi and Prime Minister Essid. Following his visit, Minister Wang Yi accepted an exclusive interview with the media and talked about WANA. This also set the tone for the content of subsequent reports published by the *People's Daily*. China hopes to establish long-term cooperative relations with the Arab region and maintain stable economic exchange.

From an international perspective, a "colour revolution" broke out in Ukraine in 2014. *People's Daily* cited common patterns in these changes and negatively stated international support for these activities. In 2015, coverage of Arab uprisings increased again. The primary reporting frames were disaster and criticism, and the coverage included political and regional security issues. In 2015, a civil war broke out in Yemen, and the Chinese government and the People's Liberation Army carried out a large-scale evacuation of Chinese nationals living



**Figure 4.** Changes in the number of subjects covered by the *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net*.





**Figure 5.** Positions towards the subjects discussed in the *People's Daily*, *Caixin Net*, and statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry from 2010 to 2021.

in the country. The main findings can be summarised as follows: The social movement profoundly impacted the regional situation and political environment, but regional economic development and individual people's lives were not improving.

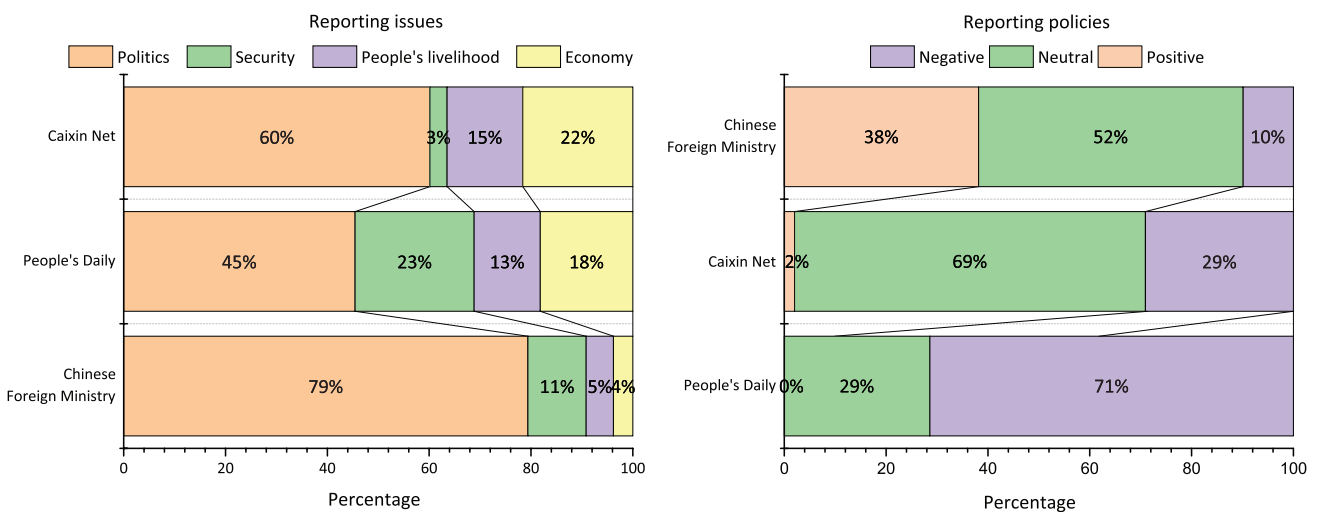
At the end of 2018, US President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of troops from Syria. Syrian refugees living in foreign countries began to return home. Although the reporting frame was still dominated by a disaster and contrast frame during this period, following the war, people accounted for a more significant proportion of the news sources and subjects of news articles, and the Chinese media were more inclined to explore the Arab uprisings from the refugee perspective.

In fact, unlike the strategic contraction of the US and the active involvement of the European Union in the

Arab region, China still adopts a longer-term and more basic strategic means for Arab countries and only wants to maintain friendly relations with countries in the Arab region and expand its right to express its views.

#### 5.4. Chinese Media and the Statements and Agenda of the Chinese Foreign Ministry

Content of the Chinese Foreign Ministry statements can be identified into four categories: policies, subjects, issues, and propositions. As shown in Figure 6, the issues and policies differed most between the two media. There were five subcategories of propositions, and the statements most frequently covered social movements, including "anti-violence" (21.4%) and "peaceful settlement" (24.4%), which revealed China's consistent



**Figure 6.** The percentage of reporting issues and policies of *People's Daily*, *Caixin Net*, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

position in dealing with foreign affairs. The ministry's statements also discuss specific measures such as political consultations (20.61%) and mediation by international organisations such as the United Nations (12.98%).

Among the four subcategories of the statements' subjects, political situations account for the most proportion (42.75%), followed by the ruling party (26.72%), and international organisations (22.14%), which once again shows that the regional political situation is the focus of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's attention. Only 6.87% of the statements dealt with opposition parties, showing that the Chinese Foreign Ministry has little direct interest in opposition parties in the WANA region.

Concerning issues, political issues were the most commonly discussed (79.39%), followed by regional security issues (11.45%), livelihood issues (5.34%), and economic issues (3.82%). This shows that among the issues in the Arab region, especially from 2011 to 2013, the Chinese government was most concerned with political issues.

Regarding policies, neutral/concerned policies accounted for the most significant proportion of policies expressed in the statements (51.91%), followed by positive (38.17%) and negative policies (9.92%).

Through cross-analysis, one can see that the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the *People's Daily*, and *Caixin Net* had significant correlations in terms of the issues ( $\chi^2(df = 6) = 50.936, p < 0.05$ ) and the policies (total > 320 (356) for 4 df,  $p < 0.05$ ). It shows that Chinese media follow the statements and agenda of the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

To test whether changes in the Chinese government's policies influence the way Chinese media reported on the Arab uprisings, we examined Chinese policies before and after October 2013 when China proposed the "One Belt, One Road" initiative officially, to find that the government responses and news reporting showed no obvious change.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The study selected the most influential official media (*People's Daily*) and one influential commercial media (*Caixin Net*) to analyse China's coverage of the Arab uprisings. We conducted a content analysis of 356 separate documents to identify and categorise the way stories were framed. More specifically, our analyses focused on four aspects: the general way in which the uprisings were framed; the differences between Chinese media reporting on the uprisings; how the frames have changed over a decade from 2011 until 2021; the relationship between Chinese media coverage of the uprisings and the Chinese government's WANA policy.

We found that the number of reports on Arab issues by the two media was correlated. Both them and the Chinese foreign ministry show a decreasing trend over the past decade, focusing mainly on the international and domestic subjects related to political issues. However, there are differences within Chinese media.

First, the *People's Daily* has a small amount of information, which may only account for 20–30% of *Caixin Net*. Second, *People's Daily* used the disaster frame while *Caixin Net* mainly used the contextual frame. Third, the position and tendency of *People's Daily* were close to the official policy and mainstream ideology advocated by the government, and *Caixin Net* is more independent. This difference is mainly due to the reform of the cultural system, especially the transition from cultural institutions (*shiyue*) to commercial industries (*chanye*; see Keane & Zhao, 2014).

Chinese media are different from Arabic and Western media in observing and explaining the Arab uprisings (Du, 2016; Guzman, 2016; Halverson et al., 2013; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). This difference is reflected in the initial characterisation of the movement and the frame and narrative discourse. Specifically, it is mainly reflected in two points:

First, the belief and value shaping in Arab Uprisings are different. CNN and Fox News described the Arab Uprising as involving "people seeking democracy" (Guzman, 2016), some Arab media described it as "forces for social mobilisation and political change" (Halverson et al., 2013, p. 312), whereas Chinese media described it as "causing great damage to the economy" (Jiao et al., 2012, p.23). Frames are powerful because they impart meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). All of them are aimed at making the reports resonate effectively in their regions and strengthening their legitimacy and attractiveness. By choosing some aspects of revolutionary reality, the media text limits the audience's interpretation. Especially in international conflicts, the national media may have different interpretations for the audience.

Second, the scheme descriptions of Arab uprisings are different. Chinese media did not mention the specific strategies of the uprisings. However, social media and independent media from Arabic more clearly described the protest and reform scheme, scale of mobilisation, and specific movement slogan (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). Western media believe that the Arab uprisings is the product of "resentment against the government" (Lim, 2012). This long resentment encourages individuals to get together, protest against the status quo and find a way out. The appeal of this mass movement was constructed as a request for a thorough change in the whole social structure, and there was a political appeal from the beginning (Smith & Fetner, 2009).

As Fenton (2008) thinks, it combines many vital elements, such as cultural resonance, the historical narration of inheriting a common heritage, and efforts to solve the past moral, ethical, and national crises. Media provide communication opportunities, necessary connections, and shared political imagination. We believe that this difference originates from cultural, regional politics, and other factors.

Media representations are complex social constructions (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013), and it is likely that multiple factors, including source selection, first-hand

experience, and political ideology shaped media frames of revolution participants (Guzman, 2016). This study demonstrates that Chinese media portrayals of the WANA region are simultaneously dynamic. The Chinese media's shaping of the Arab uprisings depends on China's diplomatic stance and international political image and is influenced by international public opinion. In the post-Arab uprisings stage, Chinese media are generally pragmatic and more concerned about reconstruction, political stability, social security, and the recovery of people's livelihoods.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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