ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reactive Management of University Reputation During the COVID Crisis: Governance and the Control of Public Narratives in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract

Reputation management (RM) is initially applied within business research, whereas under the premise of commercialisation of higher education (HE), this concept has been widely studied in HE realm. China, as one of the emerging countries in global competitions, RM was initially borrowed from Anglo-Saxon HE, and it gradually developed in Chinese HE. However, most of the studies focussing on promotion strategies, which implies crisis management could be dismissed; thus, further studies are needed to develop the holistic picture of RM in Chinese universities. Particularly, how COVID-19 casts an impact on RM in Chinese HE and its link to governance is rarely discussed. This study adopts an active/reactive RM framework to explore the practices of Chinese universities from practitioner's perspective. The findings suggest that RM in Chinese HE is underdeveloped and overly focussed on external audiences. In response to crises, Chinese universities rely on public narrative control, known as 'Yuqing' management. 'Yuqing' directly translates into public opinions, yet it has political impact and reflects the generalisation of prevalence societal opinions and political attitude of people. The rationale of this is deeply rooted within the how Chinese universities are governed, i.e. the financial and political harness.

Keywords Reputation management · Chinese higher education · Crisis management · Chinese university governance

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Introduction

COVID-19 posts great challenges in the HE sector, including teaching and learning methods, university revenue productivity and management strategies (Tang, 2023). Moreover, RM in higher education institutions (HEIs) is more complicated compared with other public institutions, because the various stakeholders are involved, and education per se is intangible (Suomi et al., 2014; Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). However, recent literature regarding RM in Chinese HE mainly discusses how Chinese universities promote themselves, the crisis management remains understudied. Especially, the literature engaged with crisis management (CM) in Chinese HE since the outbreak of COVID-19, they focus on the general steps of coping with the pandemic and transformation to online teaching. The current literature mainly discusses how to prevent and control the spread of the pandemic, how international students are supported during this time, the positive aspect regarding the measures that are taken, development of various online teaching platforms and Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) (O'Shea et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2021; Coates et al., 2022). Without elaborating its connection with RM, furthermore, critical review the governance mode reflected is rarely found. On top of that, the linkage between Chinese universities' governance and RM has not been discussed, which means how they cope with crises from the RM perspective remains covered. However, the impact of COVID-19 is multifaceted, Lupton and Willis (2021, p.4) pointed out that 'it is a crisis on every level: social, cultural, environmental economic'. Therefore, the challenges Chinese HEIs faced are unique, and the distinction of Chinese HEIs' praxis should be highlighted given the literature discusses CM in Chinese HE may not be generally applicable.

The active/reactive RM framework (Sun and Lim, 2023) is applied as the framework to examine how the selected university approaches and practices RM. This framework is proposed based on the review of the current English and Chinese literature on the topic of RM in HE, with a specific focus on the praxis of Chinese HEIs (ibid). They also differentiate the impacts of external and internal audiences, which construct the rationale and shape the behaviours of Chinese universities' RM. Additionally, they pointed out the lack of theoretical and empirical evidence on Chinese universities RM, especially on crisis management, which refers as reactive RM in the framework. There are two segments of this framework: the active segment refers to the promoting strategies and publicity activities universities may conduct to raise the reputation; the reactive segment means how universities cope with emergencies and other negative events that may undermine the reputation of universities. The involved stakeholders are referred to as 'audience' in this framework, given the nature of activities.

conducted by the university cater to different audiences' needs and interests. In doing so, the motives of Chinese universities managing their reputation, and the reasons for the employed approaches regarding RM can be discovered, also the feasibility of the active/reactive RM framework is tested, and empirical gap on this topic can be filled.

This study aims to uncover RM in Chinese HE, with a focus on reactive RM, also to examine the principles and processes of university governance especially with respect to how universities reacted to the global pandemic.

Literature Review

Introduction of RM

The definitions of reputation in HE studies are not homogenous (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2022); they tend to emphasies different aspects on this notion. In this paper, I employ the definition of Rayner (2003, p. 1) because its inclusivity, i.e. it includes all potential stakeholders and time periods, which aligns with my proposition. In which he pointed out that

> "Reputation is a collection of perceptions and beliefs, both past and present, which reside in the consciousness of an organisations' stakeholders."

Institutional reputation in HE is dependent on stakeholders' assessment, highlighting the importance of their opinions, and RM in HE involves the collective efforts of multiple departments to satisfy stakeholders (Kuoppakangas et al., 2019). With the continuous competition for resources and reduced public funds, attracting various stakeholders have become crucial for universities worldwide (Ivy, 2001). Stakeholders in HE can be categorised as internal and external, requiring different RM strategies (Melewar and Akel, 2005). Internal stakeholders include students, parents, alumni, and faculty, whilst external stakeholders include peer universities, government, and the public (Kotler and Fox, 1995). However, existing studies have predominantly focussed on western contexts, leaving Asian countries such as China underrepresented in the discussion.

In addition to attract various audiences, CM forms another segment of RM in HE context (Yu and Zhao, 2022). Crisis events not only can compromise universities' future student recruitment, but also destabilise the reputation within the campus (ibid.). On this note, Rayburn et al. (2021) denoted that given the potential little resources, they possess, including financial and human resources, HEIs tend to be vulnerable facing crises. Hence, CM is crucial for the continuity of universities. Zdziarski (2006) defined 'crisis' in HE as 'an event, often sudden or unexpected, that disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threatens the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources, and/ or reputation of the institution' (p. 4). Consequently, CM should involve the three aspects of protection from university administrative staff: personal safety, financial security, and university's overarching reputation.

However, current Chinese literature mainly discusses the impact of public opinion can cast on HEI's reputation, with a special focus on COVID-19, which implies the risk of neglecting other types of crises, and it fails to recognise the distinctiveness of COVID-19 compared with other types of crisis. For example, Yu and Zhao (2022) explored the potential tactics that can be adopted to direct public opinion

after COVID-19; Wang et al. (2020) examined the role of political and ideological education in directing public opinion during COVID-19. Furthermore, all the discussions are carried out from a theoretical perspective, no empirical research is conducted, which indicates the necessity of this study. Additionally, Zdziarsk (2006) suggested crises can be categorised as: environmental crisis, facility crisis and human crisis. In this case, human crisis is centralised in Chinese studies.

Regarding the tools that can facilitate RM, McNeil (2012) pointed out that social media (SM) and social network sites (SNSs) are playing an increasing significant role in HE, which refers to the convenience of it including greater accessibility compared with traditional media outlets and creating a 'safe' space for expressing opinions for the public. Especially, online teaching has contributed significantly to upholding HEIs' reputation when they face the drastic decline of international students and challenge of social distancing (Chan et al., 2021). Because online resources allow universities to enrich their pedagogical experiences, diversify their teaching practices, addressing students' and faculty's concerns (ibid.). Tomyuk et al. (2022) suggested that under the premise of post-pandemic environment, SM can promote universities' reputation in branding, evaluating their online presence regarding educational and scientific provisions. Additionally, SM assists HEIs in diversifying and appealing to audiences (Carrillo-Durán and García García, 2020). However, it also carries the risk of reputation damage, especially involving faculty, students, and alumni (Van den Berg and Struwig, 2016). Implementing policies to leverage social media for positive reputation management are crucial (Carrillo-Durán and García García, 2020). Chinese-specific studies are needed to fill the research gap in this area.

RM and university governance

To maintain or enhance a university's reputation, strong institutional governance is crucial (Downes, 2017). In Anglo-Saxon countries, academic governance is gradually being replaced by corporate governance (ibid.). The shift towards market oriented HE governance is influenced by intensified competition (ibid.; Schwaag Serger et al., 2015). Whilst the ramifications of this shift have been extensively discussed in Western contexts, there is a lack of research in the Chinese context (Lawrence and Wu, 2021; Schwaag Serger et al., 2015). Furthermore, the literature on RM and governance in HEIs is limited compared to other organisations (Downes, 2017). Therefore, further research is needed to understand RM and governance in HEIs, considering diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts.

Christensen and Gornitzka (2017) pointed out that modern universities are socially embedded given more stakeholders are involved. Hence, how they present themselves to different stakeholders entails the development of RM (ibid.). Therefore, Chinese government can be regarded as one of the greatest stakeholders to Chinese HEIs. Furthermore, as one of the practitioners of national agenda, their reputation can reflect national image (Wang, 2008; Lo and Pan, 2021). Christensen and Gornitzka (2017) further argued that institutional reputation is associated with national context, which denotes the close connection between Chinese HEIs' RM

and their integrated milieu. However, Lawrence and Wu (2021) suggested that the governance system in Chinese universities is unique from the global perspective, i.e. they are dictated by the government to execute the institutional and national objectives. This suggests the necessity of conducting China-specific studies on RM and governance in HE environment.

On top of that, Christensen et al. (2018, p. 13) stated '…organisational environments to shape and create variation in RM.', which indicates the influence of the governance system can exert on institutional RM.

Governance model in Chinese universities

Schwaag Serger et al. (2015) suggested that the governance of Chinese universities distinguishes itself from the western model, because its complexity in political and economic grounds. Governmental financial support accounts for a significant part for most of the Chinese public universities: if they are affiliated with Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MoE), they are directly funded by MoE; if they are affiliated with provincial department of education, they are funded by provincial governments (ibid.). In other words, they all are dependent on government financially to various extent. Politically, HEIs are governed by a system of presidential responsibility under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee is legally established in 1995 (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2005). This means universities directly under the governance of MoE, they are under governance of the central CCP committee (Li, 2020). This condition also applies to the universities funded by provincial/local government. Therefore, a two-fold governance structure exists in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs), which refers to the CCP university committee and the president (ibid.). In addition, it is a common phenomenon that the latter is a member of the former (ibid.), which means the substantial governance body is the CCP university committee.

Apart from the political power over the Chinese HEIs, the economic control is highlighted by Schwaag Serger et al. (2015), in which they stated that MoE in China is dedicated to allocating a significant amount of funding to certain universities to increase the national competitiveness (MoE, 2005); hence, they launched the 'Project 985' and 'Project 211'. It means that certain elite universities are chosen to be heavily invested, which entails the potential competitions amongst universities. This is in line with Wang (2010), in which he denoted the national and provincial control is manifested through the allocated resources to the universities, and this is based on the universities' performance. It not only includes the direct funding support, but also other financial benefits that could be brought to universities because of the political favouring, such as land use approval or allocated governmental contracts. Therefore, the economic control manifests from two aspects: how universities attract more public founding, also adhere to the political governance from the government and CCP thereby gain fiscal advantages. Qi and Chen (2001, p. 60) commented it as '…colleges and universities are managed as state administrative sectors.', which further denotes the centralised management. Especially, second-tier Chinese

universities tend to rely heavier on governmental funding compared with top-tier universities, considering that they have less capabilities to diversify their funding recourses, such as industrial or private funding (Zhang et al., 2022; Zeng, 2023). Consequently, how universities are not 'elite' manage their reputation is highlighted in the competition. Despite a greater autonomy has been allowed to the Chinese universities and the funding resources are diversified (Liu and Yan, 2019), the second-tier Chinese universities are closely connected by the administrative and political power from the government, the hierarchy remains the same.

RM studies in China

Most China-specific studies on it are theoretical, such as promotion strategies for students, approaches to manage reputation from the institutional level and the interpretations of the concept 'RM' (He, 2007; Wang and Chen, 2006; Zhao, 2015). However, no empirical study is conducted, which undermines the reliability of the literature. They suggested that RM in the institutional context refers to how the public views the university, based on its academic excellence, the quality of education and contribution to the society, it empowers the university with credibility and social impact. Nevertheless, all their definitions are borrowed and not exclusively generated in Chinese context, which means it could require empirical study to prove the feasibility in Chinese HE. Regarding the relationship of the governing system and institutional reputation, Yu and Zhao (2022) pointed out that political power is the guarantee of the university reputation; political structure manifests the protection of university reputation, yet without providing further explanation.

Tu (2016) stated that reputational risk can negatively influence universities, which means the possibility of a rapid decline in the credibility or influence of a university due to various risk factors (financial, the quality of education, safety concerns, etc.), or due to the negative publicity of unexpected events. Despite she pointed out the significance of CM in universities, she failed to associate CM with the broader governing system, also the approaches regarding cope with crises remain undiscussed. Downes (2017) analysed serval scandals and their impacts on universities' reputation, yet they are all limited with in Anglo-Saxon contexts. Hence, the solutions she identified regarding coping with crises including administrative changes or investing in insurance may not be well suited in Chinese context. Xue and Li (2022) considered CM in Chinese HE as a section of university governance, they stated that it is underdeveloped, 'bottom-up' and in a 'case-by-case' phase. They also stated that Chinese government is the premier party of coping with crises in Chinese HE and other stakeholders should be more active. However, they failed to specify the context, such as the institutional background or the types of crises, which renders their argument less convincing.

In summary, the relationship between institutional governance and RM is rarely discussed including English and Chinese literature, or discussed without elaboration, especially respecting reactive RM, which indicates further investigations are needed. Thus, the research questions are proposed:

1. What are the perceptions of the concept 'RM' in Chinese HE?
2. How do Chinese universities reactively manage their reputation?
3. How do the coping strategies reflect university governance in Chinese HE?

Research Methodology

The case study method was applied to fill the gap regarding empirical studies in Chinese universities' RM, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted to develop a comprehensive picture of a second-tier Chinese university actively and reactively manage reputation. Purposive sampling was employed to gather informative data, and NVivo was adopted to conduct content analysis (CA). Given the research aim of this study is to seek a deeper understanding of RM of Chinese universities, including the understanding and praxis of it, how do they cope with crisis and the governance manifested, thus, qualitative research is suitable to reach the goals.

Sampling

Purposive sampling allows researchers to choose participants based on their suitability for the research objectives (Guest et al., 2013). In this study, the inclusive criterion for selecting interviewees is that they are administrative staff involved in RM in Chinese universities, with no restrictions on gender, race, or age (Robinson, 2014). The exclusive criterion focusses on second-tier Chinese universities, as per the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) rankings 2020–2022. The rationale for this is that second-tier universities in China tend to invest more in developing their reputation nationally and internationally to secure funding (Chen and Zhao, 2021; Fang and Cheng, 2020; Li and Wang, 2021; Lu and Bu, 2021; Qing, 2020).

As a result, I chose university A as the case in this study given the following justifications. Firstly, based on the selecting criteria, university A ranks 750–500 on ARWU rankings in recent years, which denotes its position in the ranking table is 'in the middle'. Secondly, on the university website, it labelled it joined 'Project 211' in the 1990s, whereas 'tier one' is not presented. Thirdly, after attempted to contact more than twenty universities qualify the selection criteria, the largest number of consents is gained in the university A, which means 13 interviewees were located. Due to the consideration of anonymity the participants, their age, working periods and other identifiable information are not disclosed in this study, only their working offices are demonstrated (Appendix).

Data collection

Before collecting data, I applied the ethical approval from University of Manchester. To further locate the interviewees, I accessed university A's website. From the university website, there are three bureaus are identified that are responsible for RM: publicity department of the Party Committee, international cooperation and

exchange, development planning office. There are dual duties of the publicity department of the Party Committee: the propaganda department of the Party and the centre of integrated media. The former is responsible for assisting the Party Committee in organising the political and theoretical study of the faculty and staff at both levels. The latter is for carrying out news publicity for important school activities and events; supervising and guiding the work of the school's propaganda media. The international cooperation and exchange office aim to implement the university's internationalisation strategy, including coordinating the university's international exchange and cooperation programmes and activities. The development planning office is responsible for organising the formulation of school development plans and for the coordination, assessment, and evaluation. Therefore, given the different offices that are related to RM in this university, 13 interviewees are selected to explore the various layers of how university A 'actively/reactively' manage their reputation. All the contact information of the interviewees is found and verified on university A website, which confirms their eligibility, also affirms the reliability of their statements (Noble and Smith, 2015). It is noteworthy that given interviewees from publicity department of the Party Committee may have been exposed to more political related work, thus, their viewpoints could be influenced by this characteristic.

Regarding the interviews conducted in this study, Edwards and Holland (2013) pointed out that the dialogues are prompted in semi-structured interviews based on the interview questions, which prevents loose structure of the interviews and deviations from the proposed research questions. Therefore, dual freedom is conferred to the participants: the content and the formality of their responds to the interview questions. In addition, Zoom was chosen based on the following justifications. Due to the travel restrictions in China since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, causing difficulties for me to go to China to conduct face to face interviews when the interviews were conducted. Furthermore, the confidentiality of the interviewees is protected by anonymisation of responses, use coded data, secure storage, and data can only be accessed by me (Kaiser, 2009). The process is ensured by following the ethics review of University of Manchester.

Data analysis

Before the analysing starts, I needed to transcribe the audios into textual files regarding research involves interviews (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015). After transcribing, the anonymisation is required before I input the transcriptions in the NVivo. Given NVivo is implemented to assist analysing interviews, the five-stage process proposed by Braun et al. (2016) is followed. The first stage is to familiarise with data, which was achieved during transcribing, Next, is creating codes, which are presented as 'nodes' in NVivo. In this process, I used with the original transcribes of interviewees' responses, i.e. whole sentences or paragraphs were coded. For example, 'it is the perception of the university by people from all walks of life' was coded as 'understanding of RM'. After establishing the emerging nodes and reviewing, three codes are presented based on active/reactive RM framework,

research questions and the interview questions, which are 'understanding of RM'; 'foci of RM' and 'crisis management'. Investigating the findings is the last stage, which is elaborated in the following chapter.

After coding, I chose directed CA for the following reasons. Firstly, it is a deductive approach given it can be guided by theories, and it can be supplementary to the prior theory (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). In this case, active/reactive RM framework guides the initial coding, and this theory needs empirical evidence to be enriched. Secondly, directed CA is a more structured analysing manner compared with other forms of CA, which means the primary codes/theme can be extracted from the theory awaiting to be extended (Heish and Shannon, 2005).

Findings

There were 13 interviewees in total that participated in this study. They were all from the three departments described before in university A. Findings are categorised based on predetermined interview questions, active/reactive RM framework and emerged interview results: perceptions of RM, reactive RM under the influence of COVID-19, reflected governing strategies regarding RM.

Reputation and RM

Firstly, reputation is perceived as an exterior impact by the interviewees. They frequently used the word 'influence', 'impact', 'image' to describe their understandings of reputation management. This is partially in line with Rayner (2003), in which he stressed the importance of 'perceptions;' however, the interviewees believe the perceptions outside the university are more important compared with the inside opinions. For example, Mark said, 'it is the impression that people from outside, other than the university staff and students, have of the university.' He also mentioned RM entails 'proactively create a positive impact on the outside world'. This is similar to Daisy, she believed RM is 'the image and influence that university presents to the outside world'. Only one participant suggested the importance of people inside the university, Ella said, 'it is the recognition of the university, including the external community and the staff and the students within the university, which in turn includes peer universities, major companies, parents of students'. In a nutshell, most of the interviewees stresses the value of people outside the university, whereas the people within the university are relatively neglected in the discussion of RM. Considering university A may not represent the who landscape of Chinese HEIs, yet its value in representing second-tier Chinese universities is undeniable. Furthermore, given the RM literature in Chinese context fail to elaborate what RM means in Chinese HEIs (He, 2007; Wang and Chen, 2006; Zhao, 2015), the aforementioned statements could fill the gap.

Apart from that, serval interviewees' perceptions regarding RM largely align with the active/reactive RM framework. Ben said, 'I think it includes two aspects, the first

one is the promotion of the university, … the second aspect is the handling of public opinion.' The first part of his statement is in line with previous understandings of RM, the second part corresponds to the reactive RM. Fiona also confirms the duality of RM by saying 'it is the perception of the university by people from all walks of life, the label that a university has, including how both positive and negative events influence the label of the university'. This statement not only reinforces the emphasis on the perceptions outside the university, but also suggests two aspects are entailed respecting reputation governance. Their statements align with Tu (2016), in which he acknowledged the CM exists in the Chinese universities. Additionally, the interviewees associate CM with RM.

Secondly, reputation is regarded as social capital and its manifestation. Ella said,

'Since I graduated from Renmin University of China, when I mentioned it to someone else, they will think of the great role this university playing in building Communist party in China, the university image will extend to my personal image. I could feel the aura of the university I graduated from, because they will automatically think I will be very good at what I do, which is inseparable from the social perception of the university.'

From her statement, the university's reputation is not only a social recognition of itself, but also impacts the social perception of the people who graduate from it, which denotes the scope of impact of the university reputation.

The Government as the main audience

Despite the variety of audiences (Kotler and Fox, 1995), all 13 interviewees discussed government and related bureaucracy as the audience, and it encompasses two aspects: political compliance and financial control. For example, respecting the relationship between university and government, Mark commented as 'it is relevant to our national context', 'this is more of a task-based approach'.

Furthermore, Ashley suggested that the rationale of government being the audience of university RM is because of the administrative and political hierarchy. She said,

'Regarding the governmental power over universities, it depends on the status of that university, whether it is a municipal, provincial or MoE-affiliated institution, if it is a top-level institution directly under the MoE, it must serve the national interest.'

Apart from that, the political control is not merely top-down process that the university plays a passive role of being steered, the university governance also guarantees this level of control. This is in line with Shi and Wu (2018), Li (2020), in which they pointed out that the political impact over the Chinese HEIs as well we the executive control. On this note, Kim said,

'… we do strictly implement the policy requirements of the government or direct administrative departments, and there are special authorities in the

university to ensure this, so that we can show that we are on the same side with the government.'

It confirms Yu and Zhao (2022), given they suggested that the tight relationship between bureaucratic bodies and university governing.

In addition, multiple interviewees mentioned 'not to cross the red line' when discussing following the governmental leadership, which means they cannot go beyond the governmental requirements or predetermined limitations. It implies the consequences they might face if this hierarchy is not followed.

Furthermore, financial influence is also pointed out by the interviewees, including state-owned enterprise cooperation, direct funding and favouring policy. For example, Iris suggested that university A serving national interests is because '…we are directly funded by MoE, and because our discipline strength is in the energy sector, we have cooperation with five major state-owned oil companies.' Also, Chad explicitly expressed the financial control from the government by saying 'government funding is the most important source of funding for Chinese universities, unless they are not public one'.

Apart from that, the compliance of Chinese HEIs is also reflected in coping with COVID-19. For example, under the premise of the dynamic zero-COVID policy (GOV, 2020), Chinese universities played a great role in implementing this policy, which indicates the HEIs is responsible for enacting national agenda (Wang, 2008; Lo and Pan, 2021). Chad pointed out

'…if there is an outbreak in a certain city, and there are not enough quarantine places, the student accommodations are the first to be considered for requisition…respecting faculty, who are expected to volunteer in the community of there is an outbreak, especially if they are Party members'.

Therefore, the obedient characteristic is established in the daily governance of HEIs as well as in facilitating executing government policy. It echoes with Lawrence and Wu (2021), in which they denoted uniqueness of Chinese universities' governance, i.e. the closeness between national and institutional objectives.

Foci of RM

From the interviews, I noticed there is a critical change of focus of RM in university A due to the COVID-19, which means the reacting policies of the pandemic are highlighted, the narratives are coherent, which means the changes stated in the following sections are at the institutional level. Also, it confirms the statement of Christensen and Gornitzka (2017), in which they proposed that COVID-19 changes RM for HEIs. The interviews revolve the emphasise on political regulation and Yuqing (directly translate to public opinion), which has been frequently discussed as the governing principal by the interviewees, tightening regulations for faculty has also been pinpointed.

For example, Mark explicitly pointed out that the focus of RM '…gradually changed to regulating students' thoughts, namely promotion of ideologies'. Also, Jenny and Kelly both stated that the university is being stricter with Yuqing.

Especially, Kelly presented an example to demonstrate this change of focus after COVID-19. She said,

'… under the influence of the COVID-19, some students who are not satisfied with the school's management practices may post them online. The university has also strengthened its monitoring and management of Yuqing on the Internet accordingly.'

Her statement shows the increasing stress on Yuqing, and it is implemented from university level, which denotes the reactive element to the pandemic from the active/reactive framework I employed.

Kim also pointed out that the university governance has gradually changed due to COVID-19 by saying 'it has influenced RM work in many ways, such as how quickly and appropriately the university handles cases of infection, and whether it generates Yuqing, especially Yuqing is directly related to the university's external image'. Concisely, Yuqing has been attached great importance since the pandemic, and it is associated with university reputation. Hence, how cope with Yuqing has played an increasing vital role in university A's governing. Moreover, Holly briefly mentioned the cause of this shift "…reflects the university's concern for the safety of students and its response to the central government's policy". It suggested that the regulation of Yuqing not only is part of the institutional governance, but also it is dictated by a broader governance system.

Reactive RM

Reactive RM, which refers to crisis management and manage other potential negative events that may affect university A's reputation. However, when I asked the questions on this topic, most of the interviewees discussed Yuqing management by default, without me specifying which aspect of crisis. In addition, the most common reactive approach mentioned by the interviewees is to control the public narrative. Furthermore, there are two subjects identified and discussed by the participants on reactive RM: principles of crisis management, and praxis of crisis management.

To be more specific, the principles of the crisis management in university A are concluded as: control the spread of negative news, quick respond, demonstrate a positive attitude to the outside world, take preventive measures. In addition, the four principles are interlinked. For example, Ben said,

'Generally, when a negative event happens at the university, firstly we will control the spread of this, control the public narrative, at the same time, we need to keep the facts from being distorted and amplified, which is meant to keep the image of the university…then, regarding the spread information, we will let the public know how we deal with the situation, which shows our determination of saving university's image. At last, we will reflect on it and take precautions to keep that from happening again.'

He illustrated the general process of reacting to the negative affairs, which is contain the spreading of the 'crises' to protect the university's reputation from

further undermining; and the timely respond also manifests the importance university A attached on preserving and potentially restoring the 'good image', i.e. the reputation of the university. This is in line with Chad and Kate's opinions, they said, 'the first thing is to protect the image of the university' and 'keep this kind of news from spreading,' respectively. These three participants work in different offices at university A, yet the same conclusion is drawn, which implies that the controlling of public narrative is an institutional level approach. In other words, the governing strategy at university A regarding reactively managing reputation is to constrain the negative events from being aware to public.

Furthermore, regarding the praxis of CM, there are a series of steps and exterior parties identified by the interviewees. On this note, Ben said, 'The linkage mechanism in our university works very quick, when there is some serious negative news, because we are a public institution, the government will intervene and manage the situation and then, maintain the reputation of the university.'. From his statement, not only university A is responsible for coping with the crisis, but also the government, which is the higher authority of the university, is involved with sustaining the university reputation. Kim further explains on this subject by saying, 'We have predetermined plans and reporting mechanisms for these issues, and there are different levels of response, depending on the severity of the matter, it involves institutional level to provincial and municipal level.' Her statement demonstrates that the university A is liable to higher governing entities, which also means there is higher authorities defending the reputation of university A.

To summarise, the significance of Yuqing has been attached and reinforced after COVID-19, and from the participants' responses, it is connected with the zero-COVID policy from the central government. Given university A prioritises government as their audiences, their RM activities are accordingly adjusted.

Discussion

To answer the research questions, the coding results from NVivo are displayed in Fig. 1. The direct observation of this shows that Yuqing is perceived as a part of RM in university A, moreover, it constitutes a significant segment of CM, which corresponds to reactive RM based on the active/reactive RM framework. In addition, despite the nodes 'verify', 'report', 'government intervene' and 'inspection' are not strictly linked with 'Yuqing', they are discussed as part of percussions or follow-up steps of coping with Yuqing. It indicates that Yuqing is considered as synonymous substitution of crisis.

Summary of findings

The concept of RM in Chinese context

This research explores the holistic picture of RM in Chinese HE, especially in coping with crises by conducting 13 semi-structured interviews; hence, empirical contribution is provided to fill the gap in the present literature. From the coding
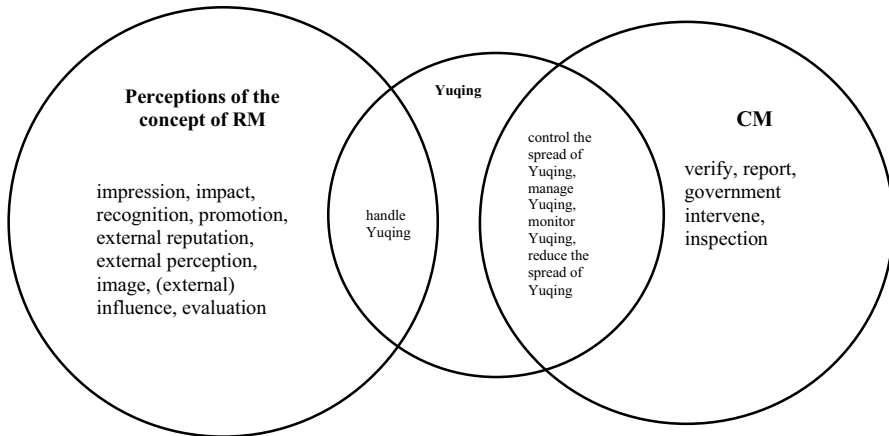
Fig. 1 Categories of the nodes

process, 'influence', 'impact', 'image' are most mentioned terms regarding the interpreting the concept of reputation in Chinese HE settings, and they are all coded under 'understanding of RM'. It suggests that the influence and power university A can project represents its reputation. Furthermore, 'society', 'peer universities', 'potential students' and 'government' are brought up respecting the target group of RM, especially every interviewee mentioned local/central governments. Hence, it implies the tendency of neglecting the internal audiences, and the rationale of conducting RM is for the people outside the university. In other words, the emphasise of external views is predominant, i.e. the external stakeholders are attached with more significance compared with internal counterparts. This contradicts the viewpoints of Melewar and Akel (2005), Kotler and Fox (1995), in which they pointed out that the importance of both external and internal audiences, by differentiating them from their roles and various strategies that can be adopted to attract them.

However, in university A, external perspectives and audiences tend to outweigh internal ones, which could potentially illustrate a significant number of Chinese universities on RM given it is chosen as the representative of second-tier universities. This negligence of internal audience could risk the problem of oversimplifying the RM, also it potentially suggests the governance focus (Schwaag Serger et al., 2015); in this case, it emphasises on how they present themselves and what exterior influence they can project. Additionally, given there is no prior empirical Chinese literature on discovering the concept of RM, based on the interviews and the reviewed literature, I propose a comprehensive definition of RM in Chinese HE: it is an activity aimed at promoting the influence of a university and distinguishing itself from others, with a grater emphasise on external audiences, also focus on combating the impact of negative events. This definition fills the gap of no empirical study conducted in Chinese HE context regarding how Chinese HEIs perceive RM, with consideration of the purpose of RM, the audiences of RM and what it entails.

Yuqing and CM

'Yuqing' is commonly referred on the topic of CM in the interviews, and it accounts for the majority part under the code 'reactive RM', which indicates in essence, Yuqing is regarded as CM in this study. The direct translation of the term Yuqing is public opinion, including the perceptions, attitudes and viewpoints of the public; no emotional implications should be attached given public opinion can be positive or negative. However, in this study, regarding the usage of Yuqing in RM, it carries a passive undertone, which means when the interviewees using 'Yuqing', it automatically refers to the crisis. It can be reflected in several instances: firstly, regardless of the variety of crises university A identified on their website, Yuqing is the only kind of crisis the interviewees discussed when I mentioned CM, despite I did not specify the time frame or type of CM, which raises the question: do they have systematic CM before COVID-19? This also contradicts Zdziarski (2006), in which he suggested the various categories of crises. It could imply that in university A, there was no common understanding or practice at the institutional level regarding CM before COVID-19. Combined with the active/reactive RM framework, it signifies that in practice, Yuqing management is effectively carried out as reactive RM.

Secondly, most of the interviewees used the words such as 'control', 'monitor', 'manage' to express their perceptions on how to cope with Yuqing. This not only denotes the possibility of overlooking other crises may occur on campus, but also Yuqing is regarded as a negative situation which potentially requires a series of actions to address. Also, this confirms Liu and Na (2022), in which they suggested Yuqing management is associated with managing students' free expressions during COVID-19 with empirical evidence. Thirdly, from the interviews, solving Yuqing could demand the 'conjoint effort' from the school, the university even the government, given the severity of the incident. It suggests that the rationale of Chinese universities attaching great importance on Yuqing could be governmental requirement.

Conclusion

The interviews suggest that in Chinese HE, RM is perceived as a process to sustain and expand universities' external impact, with relatively less attention on the internal maintenance, and it includes actively promoting and reactively coping with crises. Additionally, the progress regarding the coping mechanism of crises in the selected case ought to be recognised, yet it is only developed for Yuqing. It reflects the priority of their reactive RM, also the potential reactive RM development is needed. This can be explained as the governance model dictates universities' RM activities, which means the political environment, and the singularity of funding resources determines the practice of universities promoting themselves or coping with crises should align with national policy. Especially after COVID-19, according to the participants, the online public narrative control has become the domain approach on reactive RM, this is linked with the implementation of zero-COVID policy nationwide. The CCP committee and the administrative leadership in Chinese HEIs construct the political guarantee to enable institutional policies to align with

the national agenda. It means negative online narratives from the universities could be considered as unsupportive to national policy, which requires universities to monitor and control them to demonstrate their advocacy. The competitions for more funding amongst Chinese HEIs also make the government their main audience in RM. Furthermore, this study confirms the potential of applying active/reactive RM framework.

The number of participants in this study is limited. However, further studies can extend this analysis. In addition, given the selected university is a second-tier Chinese HEI, it is possible that other universities in different tiers may manage their reputation in various approaches. Further research could build up a more systemic view of RM in the large and expanding Chinese HE sectors.

Appendix

Name.	Gender	Bureaus
Mark	Male	Development planning office
Chad	Male	Publicity department of the Party Committee
Ben	Male	Publicity department of the Party Committee
Daisy	Female	International cooperation and exchange office
Kate	Female	International cooperation and exchange office
Fiona	Female	Publicity department of the Party Committee
Kim	Female	Development planning office
Holly	Female	Development planning office
Iris	Female	International cooperation and exchange office
Jenny	Female	Publicity department of the Party Committee
Kelly	Female	Development planning office
Ella	Female	Publicity department of the Party Committee
Ashley	Female	International cooperation and exchange office

Declarations

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interests in this manuscript.

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