News Media Representation of China's Family Planning Policy in *China Daily*: A Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

China has implemented the universal two-child policy and three-child policy in response to the demographic challenges brought about by the aging population and low fertility rate. The implementation of these policies relies on the support of various societal subsystems, with newspapers playing a significant role in their publicity and interpretation. However, little attention has been paid to how these policies are linguistically represented in Chinese English-language newspapers. Therefore, the present study intends to conduct a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis by identifying the topics surrounding the news articles and unveiling the ideological implications embedded in the news articles. 1520 news articles from *China Daily*, the official English-language newspaper in China, were collected and analyzed through keyword analysis and concordance analysis. The findings reveal that three topics exist in the news articles, with *social & economic matters* ranking first, followed by *national/regional entity* and *social identity*. It is also found that three ideologies, including collectivism, gender-essentialism and economic development centered ideology are manifested in the coverage of China's family planning policy. This study sheds light on the ideological underpinnings on the reportage of the policies and how these policies are represented to address the population issues, revealing how language used in newspapers facilitates the promotion of national policies and reinforcement of official ideologies through topic selection and presentation.

Keywords: family planning policy; corpus-assisted approach; critical discourse analysis; topics; *China Daily*

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INTRODUCTION

Population is one of the most important factors affecting economic and social development. As the most populous country with a total population of above 1.4 billion (Office of the Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census, 2021), China has always been attaching great importance to the issue of population. After entering the new century, new population issues have emerged in China, including low fertility rate, skewed sex ratio, rapid population aging and shrinking labor force (Alpermann & Zhan, 2019). This population situation has become a major concern for the Chinese government (Yang, Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2022). According to the National Population Census of China, the average annual growth rate of population has shown a downward trend in nearly forty years, from 2.09 in 1982 to 0.53 in 2020 (Office of the Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census, 2021). Besides, the total fertility rate of China has fallen to 1.3 children per woman (Yang, Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2022), far below the replacement level (an average of 2.1 children per woman), threatening the sustainable and balanced development of population. Therefore, the Chinese government put an end to its decades-long birth control measures and made adjustments of its family planning policy to the universal two-child policy in 2015 and the three-child policy in 2021 to mitigate the demographic and socioeconomic challenges.

In this process, news discourse plays a significant role in the publicity and interpretation of the national policy and the expansion of the scope of policy transmission (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). However, news discourse does not represent social realities in a totally impartial way. Instead, what is presented in the news discourse is based on certain values and aligns with certain interests (Fowler, 1991; Richardson, 2007; Jäger and Maier, 2009; Kim, 2014). News discourse acts as a major channel for influencing, shaping and normalizing "public knowledge and information, beliefs, values and attitudes" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 468). Compared with other news media, newspapers have the advantages of easy accessibility, wide readership and ample space for in-depth coverage and discussion of various issues, especially with their availability through online platforms (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008; Han 2011; Wu et al. 2022). Therefore, this study focuses specifically on newspaper articles.

While the newspaper representation of China' family planning policy has been widely discussed in academic literature, most studies focus on Chinese language newspapers (Liu, 2017; Zhu, 2020), with little attention paid to how the policy is represented in China's English-language newspapers. This gap is particularly important considering the role of English-language press in informing international communities of the policy and communicating the Chinese government's positions to international audiences. Besides, previous studies mainly concentrate on the earlier one-child policy or two-child policy (Xu, 2018; Li, 2020), leaving the discursive representation of the recent three-child policy underexamined. This study, therefore, is timely to understand how language is used to publicize and interpret the universal two-child policy and three-child policy in China's English-language newspapers.

China Daily, a state-owned and government-led newspaper operating under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, is the leading official English-language newspaper in China (Chen & Wang, 2020; Guo & Huang, 2002). With a readership of more than 350 million around the world (China Daily, 2025), it serves as an important medium for China to reach out to the world and for the world to know more about China (Jia, 2022). Besides, it also plays a vital role in conveying the political viewpoints and reflecting the ideology of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government to the global community (Song, Lee & Huang, 2019). Therefore,

China Daily is selected to explore how the universal two-child policy and three-child policy are constructed and represented by conducting a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis.

This study intends to achieve two research objectives: (1) to identify topics in the news articles on China's family planning policy in *China Daily* and (2) to reveal the ideological implications of the news articles on China's family planning policy in *China Daily*. This study can enrich the study of news discourse from a linguistic perspective and offer insights into how language is used to communicate public policy and disseminate official ideologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, a brief introduction to corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis as well as previous studies on the representation of China's family planning policy in news discourse are given.

CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The present study is situated within the corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS) (Partington, 2006) by integrating corpus linguistic approach and critical discourse analysis. The corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis characterizes the emphasis on the balanced synergy of methods and theories in corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008).

The incorporation of corpus linguistic methods into critical discourse analysis is not a new practice. It can be traced back to the mid-1990s when Hardt-Mautner (1995) suggested integrating the corpus approach into CDA, highlighting its capability to uncover the intricate connection between discourse and power within social and cultural contexts and its potential in revealing how specific discourses, embedded in distinct sociocultural environments, shape social reality and social relationships. Later, the publication of Baker et al. (2008) and Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) marked a new phase in the development of research combining CL and CDA. In these two studies, Baker and his colleagues analyzed a 140-million-word corpus of British news reports about RASIM (refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants) spanning a duration of ten years (1996-2005), and argued for the usefulness of adopting corpus approaches in critical discourse analysis. Following Baker et al. (2008) and Gabrielatos and Baker (2008), a lot of research combining CL and CDA has been done and this methodological synergy has been applied to studies on different topics, such as air pollution (Liu & Zhang, 2018), language ideologies (Wright & Brookes, 2018), COVID-19 (Nor Fariza & Adlyn Syahirah, 2020; Yildiz et al., 2022) and climate change (Liu & Huang, 2023).

It has been proven from previous studies that critical discourse analysis and corpus approaches benefit each other, as each compensates for the other's weaknesses. On the one hand, the use of corpus linguistic method enables computational calculations to be performed on collected data, thus ensuring fast and accurate discovery of linguistic patterns which would be hard or even impossible for human eyes to detect. At the same time, it "offers a high degree of reliability and validity to linguistic research" (Baker, 2010, p. 111) and provide entry points for further qualitative analysis (Bayley & Bevitori, 2009). On the other hand, CDA's rich theoretical foundation enables a thorough and detailed analysis of texts, offering theory-informed interpretation which links lexical items to social practices (Marchi & Taylor, 2009).

This study draws on Wodak's discourse-historical approach to critical discourse studies. A discourse-historical analysis of a text is conducted in three stages: (1) contents or topics, (2) discursive strategies, and (3) linguistic means and realizations of discursive strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). This study is particularly informed by DHA in its analytical focus on topics, its conceptualization of ideology, and its emphasis on historical and socio-political contexts. According to Wodak (2011), ideology is hidden in the discourse, and the main task of CDA is to reveal the ideological implications embedded in the discourse. While ideology originates from social structures and power relations, it also reinforces and reshapes the society.

CHINA'S FAMILY PLANNING POLICY IN NEWS DISCOURSE

With the change of demographic structure and social development, China's family planning policy has made corresponding adjustments. Past studies on the family planning policy from the linguistic perspective are conducted mainly on discourses collected from social media (Yu, Chan & Huang, 2023; Wu, Liu & Yuan, 2021) or news reports (Xu, 2018; Zhu, 2020).

In the field of research on news coverage of family planning policies, some studies concentrate on the news framing of family planning news reports. Among these studies, some focus on one specific newspaper, such as *People's Daily* (Zhu, 2020), while others focus on the comparison of different newspapers (Liu, 2017). For example, Liu (2017) explored how *People's Daily*, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, and *The Paper*, three representative newspapers in China, reported on China's universal two-child policy within the framework of framing theory. It revealed that differences existed in news frames from different media outlets when they covered the same issue, due to the variations in their aims, editorial stances, reporting traditions, and geographical locations. There are also past studies examining the communication models or themes of news articles on family planning policies (Cui 2015; Dai & Jiang 2018). For instance, Cui (2015) adopted content analysis to examine the themes and characteristics of news reports on family planning policy in *People's Daily* from 1957 to 2013. The study found that five major themes existed in news reports on family planning policy: the co-existence of family planning and traditional values, wealth and poverty, honor and shame, praise and criticism, and voluntariness and enforcement. The analysis revealed a strong consistency between these news reports and official policies and narratives. Besides, the news articles also exhibited an affirmative stance toward the family planning policy. In addition, CDA on news coverage of the family planning policy have also been carried out (Zeng & Yang, 2017; Xu, 2018; Wang, 2022). For instance, Yang (2015) conducted a comparative critical discourse analysis of news reports on China's population issue in *Time* and *Beijing Review* from 2009 to 2013. Through a multidimensional analysis, it was concluded that differences in transitivity system, modality system, reporting mode and news sources existed between the reports in the two newspapers, and these differences were set deliberately to facilitate the ideological needs behind the news. Despite the contributions made by previous studies, the researchers of the present study have found limited research on the representation of the universal two-child policy and three-child policy in China's English-language newspapers. Therefore, this study offers a timely exploration in this regard.

METHODOLOGY

The current study was posited within corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis to explore how China' family planning policies were represented in *China Daily*, the leading official English-language press of China. It synergized the quantitative corpus linguistic methods and qualitative critical discourse analysis to discover the salient topics revolving around the family planning policy related news articles and reveal the ideologies embodied in these news articles. This section gives a detailed explanation of the research data and procedures.

DATA COLLECTION

To analyze how China's family policy is represented in news discourse, *China Daily*, as the most authoritative and widely-circulated state-owned English language newspaper in China (Duan & Takahashi, 2017), was chosen as the source of corpus. *China Daily* serves as a significant source for understanding the Chinese government's policies and political positions (Huang & Liu, 2025). News articles on China's family planning policy in *China Daily* were collected from the LexisNexis database (URL: https://www.lexisnexis.com), a well-known database involving wide resources ranging from law cases, newspapers, magazines, academic journals to enterprise information. The following search terms were used to query the data within the time span from 29th October, 2015 to 31st December, 2023.

> family planning policy OR fertility policy OR child policy OR birth policy OR childbirth policy OR demographic policy OR reproduction policy OR population policy OR childbearing policy OR one-child OR two-child OR three-child OR second child OR third child OR fertility rate OR birth rate OR childbirth OR population growth OR population increase OR population decline OR population decrease OR demographic change OR demographic challenge OR demographic shift

The search terms were chosen for their relevance to the research focus and their capture of key aspects of China's family planning discourse. By searching these terms, news articles related to China's family planning policy in *China Daily* were collected and a specialized corpus named CFPPC (China's Family Planning Policy Corpus) was built accordingly. The time span was set from 29th October, 2015 because it was on this day that the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee declared the comprehensive implementation of the universal two-child policy, allowing all married couples to have two children without any restriction. This announcement of the universal two-child policy marked the beginning of changes in family planning policies on the national level under the new demographic dynamics. The time frame ended with the date of the authors' data collection. The time frame covered the implementation of the universal two-child policy and three-child policy in order to see how the family planning policies under the new demographic landscape were represented in the newspaper articles. The corpus of this study consisted of 1520 news articles, with a total of 35,498 word types and 1,161,282 word tokens, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. General Information of the Data

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
No. of News Articles	130	335	207	129	146	93	171	125	184
Types	8467	15235	14228	11856	12985	7692	10264	9932	10377
Tokens	86148	202433	173864	125472	153285	66754	119849	102751	130726

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

During the data pre-processing stage, all news articles were further scrutinized to ensure that they were related to the universal two-child policy and three-child policy after being downloaded from the LexisNexis database. Duplicate or irrelevant materials, such as news articles discussing smoker population decrease, were removed manually. These data were then converted into plain text (.txt) files for the corpus analytic tools to read. Then the unwanted information, such as the publication date, author's name, copyright, length and publication type was removed by the researcher, leaving only the title and body of the article. Subsequently, a tagging process was conducted using TagAnt (2.0.5), a simple freeware tagging tool which can assign part-of-speech (POS) tags to input texts by tagging each word in the corpus with its part of speech, such as *child (NN)*, *economic (JJ)* and *promote (VB)*. POS tagging was performed because a word with different grammatical functions may serve different roles and be assigned to different topics. For instance, the proper noun *development* was categorized under *governance* while the noun *development* was categorized under *development & initiatives*.

After data pre-processing, the data were uploaded to the Antconc software (4.2.0), a freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis. The keyword tool was used to obtain the keywords. Keywords are words which are "statistically significantly more frequent in one of these datasets when compared against another" (Baker, Gabrielatos & McEnery, 2013, p. 27), which means that keywords are identified through a comparison of the target corpus and the reference corpus. This comparison is based on an examination of the frequency of words in the target corpus relative to that in the reference corpus to identify statistically salient use of words in the target corpus.

In this study, the British National Corpus (BNC) Baby edition was chosen as the reference corpus given the small size of CFPPC which contains only a little over one million word tokens. The BNC Baby edition consists of four genres: fiction, newspapers, academic writing and spoken conversation. This study selected the full BNC Baby edition rather than its sub-genres to retain the diversity of genres of the original BNC and ensure the balance and representativeness of the reference corpus. This choice facilitates broader discursive comparison and highlights how policy newspaper discourse differs from general language use across diverse genres, as policy newspaper discourse is characterized by its political and ideological alignments (Nasim Omidian Sijani, 2023).

By using the keyword tool, the keywords were put together into a keyword list based on their keyness values. According to Scott and Tribble, keyness is "a quality words may have in a given text or set of texts, suggesting that they are important, they reflect what the text is about" (2006, p. 64-65). The higher the keyness score, the more salient the word is. The keyword list offers "a measure of saliency" (Baker, 2006, p. 125) and helps researchers to identify statistically salient lexical items that deserve further analysis. A keyword analysis not only helps identify the

aboutness of the target corpus, but also provides insights into the underlying ideologies (Scott & Tribble, 2006).

In this study, keyness was measured by the log-likelihood test, with the threshold being set at p < 0.01 (6.63 with Bonferroni). As suggested by Gabrielatos (2018), "the threshold is usually p = 0.01 at the most" (p. 13). This indicated that there was less than a 1% probability of the results occurring by chance. Another parameter determined was the cutoff point for the minimum frequency of keywords. The set of this parameter was to avoid including words that were identified as key only because of their absence or infrequent occurrence in the reference corpus. The minimum frequency threshold was set at 10 because it was a common practice (Culpepper, 2009). When describing the frequency of words appearing in the corpus, the study used normalized frequency because it allowed the findings to be presented in a clear and standardized way, thus enhancing the credibility and interpretability of data and providing a consistent basis for analysis. The base of normalization, in this case, was set as 1,000 words, meaning that the frequency of any word in the corpus was normalized per 1,000 words.

After obtaining the keywords, punctuation marks and stop words such as prepositions, determiners, pronouns and question words (Anis Nadiah et al., 2021), which carried little semantic meaning, were removed manually, leaving only content words in the corpus. Content words are "the main carriers of information and contribute more to the semantic construction and communication" (Lam 2018, p. 200). These words are more relevant to the identification of topics and ideologies. The identification of stop words was based on the default stop word list used for MyISAM search indexes in the MySQL open-source database. Then the top 100 content keywords were collected, based on Pojanapunya and Todd's review which showed that the average top N keywords selected by researchers was about 100 (Pojanapunya & Todd, 2018).

However, relying solely on keyword analysis without considering the context may lead to partial or even incorrect conclusions about their usage or meaning. Therefore, concordance analysis was used to complement the keyword analysis. A concordance shows the "instances of a word or cluster in its immediate co-text" (Baker et al., 2008, p. 279). The qualitative concordance analysis allows researchers to refer to the larger context and incorporate contextual information into analysis, thus enhancing the understanding and interpretation of the data. Besides, an analysis of the concordances of keywords also contributed to the categorization process of keywords into different domains, as the contextual information from the surrounding co-text helped reveal how the keywords were used. Therefore, the examination of keywords, together with concordance analysis, was used to provide useful indications of the topics covered in the news articles and the ideologies behind them.

To ensure the reliability of topic identification, an inter-rater reliability test through Cohen's Kappa coefficient test was conducted using Python. Two raters first discussed the possible topics in the data, after which they independently coded the top 30% of the keywords. The two raters are a PhD candidate in English language studies specializing in critical discourse analysis and a corpus linguistics specialist. Cohen's Kappa coefficient test was carried out to compare the coding results and it showed a resulting value of 0.728, representing a substantial level of agreement between the two researchers (Cohen, 1960). Disagreement was then discussed until a consensus was achieved. Based on the first stage of coding, the first author continued coding the rest of data. Subsequently, the authors worked collaboratively to discuss and interpret the ideologies embedded in the news articles, ensuring a shared analytical understanding for the interpretations. Figure 1 shows the process of keyword coding and ideological interpretation.
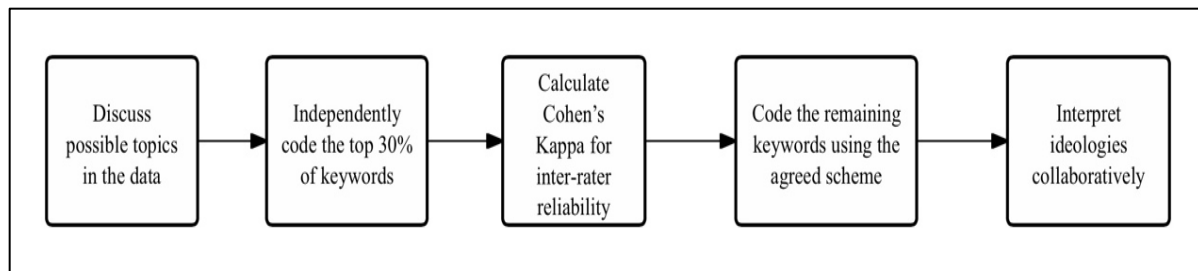
FIGURE 1. Keyword Coding and Ideological Interpretation Process

RESULTS

Based on the analytical procedures explained in the previous section, this section focuses on the analysis of keywords and their concordances for the identification of topics of the news articles on China's family planning policy. This section is divided into two main parts. The first part outlines the findings from the keyword analysis, and the second part presents the categorization of topics and sub-topics through keyword analysis and concordance analysis.

KEYWORDS IN FAMILY PLANNING POLICY NEWS ARTICLES

Following the parameters outlined in the previous section, the top 100 keywords were obtained. The word with the highest keyness score is *china*, which stands as a proper noun. At the same time, it is also the most frequently occurring word in the corpus. This is not surprising, as these news articles are talking about China's polices and they're collected from the English-language newspaper in China. As a result, it makes sense that the word *china* has the highest saliency and frequency. The word *china* is mostly used to talk about China's population situation, China's policies, China's socio-economic development, and China's initiatives to cope with demographic and socio-economic issues.

Another keyword that is found in the keyword list is the word *population*. It ranks second in terms of both keyness value and frequency. It is not difficult to understand that the population situation and issues are frequently discussed in the news articles on family planning policy. After examining its concordances, it can be observed that the population situation of the country as a whole and in specific provinces or cities are discussed. Besides, the population structure, such as the elderly population, working-age population and migrant population, as well as the demographic issues, such as aging population, shrinking population and negative population growth are also discussed to prove the necessity of the implementation of the universal two-child policy and three-child policy.

The word *family* is seen to co-occur with *planning*, *policy* and *policies*, which also appear in the keyword list, to refer to the family planning policy/policies adopted in China. This also explains the importance of *planning*, *policy* and *policies* appearing in the keyword list. Besides, *family* and *planning* also collocate with words such as *law*, *regulation* and *rule* to refer to the policy itself, or with words like *officials*, *staff* and *workers* to denote those involved in the family planning related work.

The word national appears in the keyword list in two forms: as a proper noun and as an adjective. When functioning as a proper noun, the word *national* usually appears in conjunction with other proper nouns to denote China's government agencies and state bodies, such as the former National Health and Family Planning Commission, the current National Health Commission and National Development and Reform Commission, or China's supreme state power organ – the National People's Congress. In these usages, *national* does not function independently. Instead, it constitutes part of state-level institutions which manifest China's governance framework, with each fulfilling distinct roles in policymaking, regulation, administration or legislation. When *national* serves as an adjective, it usually co-occurs with words like *census*, *security* or *development* to highlight affairs at the level of the whole country.

TABLE 2. Topics and sub-topics in family planning policy news articles

Topics and sub-topics	Keywords	Total normalized frequency
National/Regional Entity		33.268
▪ Area/Country	china, beijing, country, province, cities, rural, xinjiang, shanghai, areas, national, nation, countries, urban, global, chinese (NNP), chinese	21.935
▪ Governance	policy, government, planning, policies, national (NNP), measures, party, system, authorities, commission, development (NNP), cpc, reform	11.333
Social Identity		19.745
▪ Age/Sex	child, children, women, elderly, babies	9.279
▪ Family/Relationship	couples, family, families, parents	5.105
▪ Occupation/Role	experts	0.35
▪ General	people, residents	3.536
▪ Individual	wang, zhang, li, xi	1.475
Social & Economic Matters		54.116
▪ Economy/Finance	economic, labor, yuan (NNS), market, economy, income, yuan, enterprises, consumption, products, demand	7.692
▪ Social Services & Welfare	services, education, care, health, medical, maternity, healthcare, leave	6.851
▪ Development & Initiatives	development, improve, efforts, promote, innovation, increase, opportunities, new	6.852
▪ Social Issues	social, public, challenges, rights, marriage, society, resources, poverty	5.432
▪ Population & Demographics	population, fertility, aging, birth, demographic, age, births	8.868
▪ Digital Practices	online	0.306
▪ Communication	report	0.712
▪ Social & Economic Metrics and Trends	percent, year, second, years, high, sector, decades, number, rate, growth, quality	17.403

TOPICS IN FAMILY PLANNING POLICY NEWS ARTICLES

The analysis of topics constitutes one key dimension of Wodak's discourse-historical approach. Within this framework, topics represent what a discourse is written or spoken about (Wodak, 2011) and embody the most important information of a discourse (van Dijk, 2001), meaning that topics represent the thematic focus or core subject based on which discourses are organized. After their concordances were examined, the 100 keywords were grouped into three topics: *national/regional entity*, *social identity* and *social & economic matters*. It should be mentioned that the categorization of topics in this study draws on the categorization distinguished in Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013). However, due to the differences in the subject matter of news articles, some categories are not applicable for the current study and other categories need to be introduced to align with the current study. It should also be noticed that the categorization of topics in this study relies more on the contextual meaning of the words rather than their dictionary meaning. The three topics and their sub-topics, together with their related keywords are listed in Table 2. The left column shows the topics and their respective sub-topics; the middle column lists the specific keywords corresponding to the topics; and the right column contains the total normalized frequency associated with the topics and their sub-topics. Table 2 shows that the topic of *social and economic matters* ranks first, followed by *national/regional entity* and *social identity* in terms of frequencies of the keywords associated with the topic. Regarding the sub-topics, the top 6 are *area/country*, *social & economic metrics and trends*, *governance*, *age/sex*, *population & demographics* and *economy/finance*. The sub-topics along with their respective proportions are illustrated in Figure 2. What follows is a discussion of the topics.

TOPIC: NATIONAL/REGIONAL ENTITY

The topic *national/regional entity* includes two sub-topics: *area/country* and *governance*, with a total percentage of 31.05%. As has been mentioned, the sub-topic *area/country* ranks first among all sub-topics, which suggests that prominence is given to the demographic situation, the implementation of the family planning policy, and other affairs of the country as a whole as well as those of specific areas, such as *beijing*, *shanghai* and *xinjiang*.

> Example 1: *Maternity leave in Hainan and Henan provinces has increased to 190 days , and women in Heilongjiang and Gansu provinces are expected to enjoy 180 days of leave. Female workers in **Beijing**, **Shanghai** and some other provincial regions are entitled to have 128 days off when giving birth.* (N_20170710_01)

This excerpt discusses how the maternity leave is extended in different areas in China after the introduction of the universal two-child policy. As major metropolises in China, Beijing and Shanghai often play a leading role in policy implementation and thus obtain greater attention, which can explain the saliency of these two words in the corpus. From this excerpt, it can be seen that the report introduces the extension of maternity leave as one of the supporting measures of the family planning policy to encourage women to have a second child.
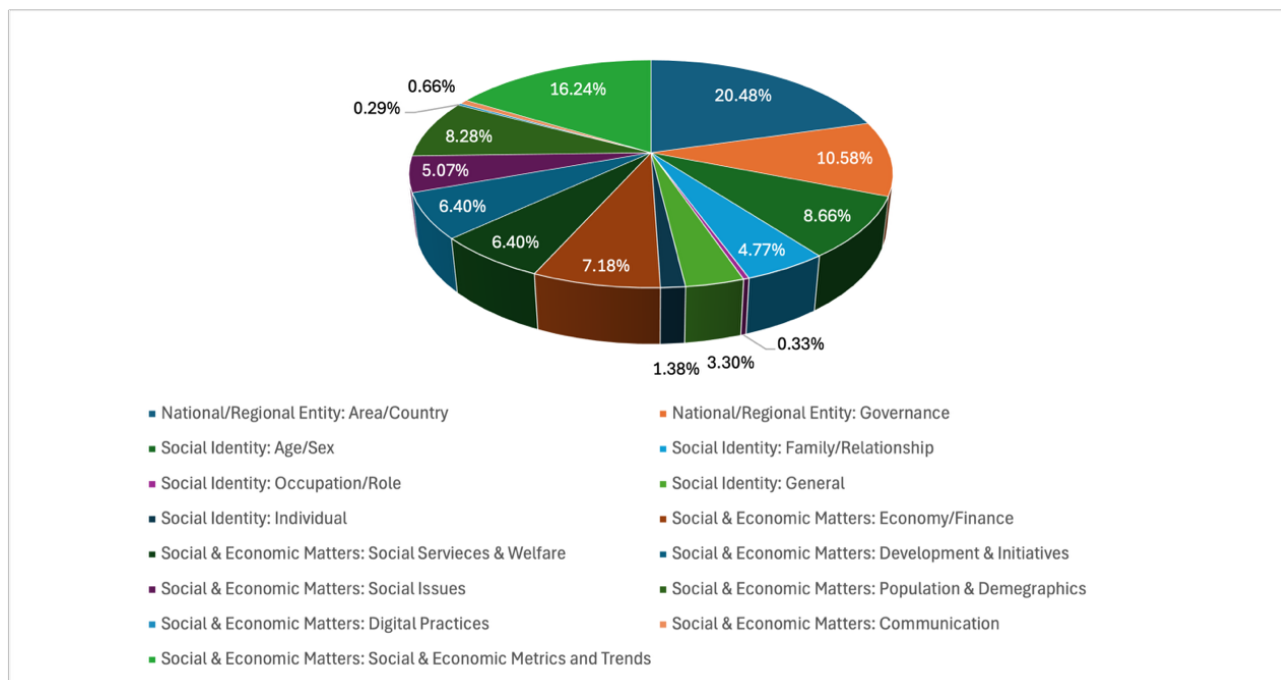
FIGURE 2. Distributions of sub-topics in family planning policy news articles

Example 2: ***Xinjiang*** *was among the regions leading China's population growth over the past decade. According to the regional bureau of statistics,* ***Xinjiang****'s population increased from 21.8 million in 2010 to 25.8 million in 2020, and in that period the population of members of the Uygur ethnic group rose from 10 million to 11.6 million.* (N_20220718_01)

In this excerpt, the population situation of the region Xinjiang is described. Some western countries, particularly the United States, have always been accusing China of depriving its people of human rights, intentionally misrepresenting the human rights situation in Xinjiang and launching baseless criticisms of the Chinese government's policies for the region (Zhu, 2023). The demographic situation in Xinjiang is also a focal point of accusation by some western countries towards China. For example, a report titled *China forces birth control on Uygurs to suppress population* claimed that "the Chinese government is taking draconian measures to slash birth rates among Uighurs and other minorities as part of a sweeping campaign to curb its Muslim population" (The Associated Press, 2020). The English-language newspapers in China shoulder the responsibility of showing an authentic and comprehensive view of China to the world and letting the world know more about China's policies and development trends (Liu & Zhang, 2018). Therefore, the demographic situation in Xinjiang is often talked about, thus explaining the high frequency and saliency of the word *xinjiang* in the corpus.

The topic *governance* covers keywords such as *policy*, *government* and *cpc*. Some of these keywords co-occur with each other and denote institution names, as has been discussed in the previous part. The example below illustrates the context of the keyword *policies* under the topic *governance*.

Example 3: *Since China announced the decision to allow couples to have up to three children and released a slew of **policies** to encourage births in May 2021, local governments have rolled out incentives centering on monthly allowances, extending paternity and maternity leaves, and building more nursery care facilities.* (N_20230531_01)

The word *policies* is categorized under the topic *governance*. *Policies* in this example refer to a series of policy measures in supportive of the three-child policy. This example expresses that the local governments have provided incentives in response to the implementation of the three-child policy to encourage births. It shows the collaborative efforts of national and local levels of governance.

TOPIC: SOCIAL IDENTITY

The topic of *social identity* consists of the following sub-topics: *age/sex*, *family/relationship*, *occupation/role*, *general* and *individual*. Under this topic, people generally impacted or involved in the family planning policy can be found in keywords such as *child*, *children*, *women*, *elderly*, *babies*, *couples*, *families* and *parents*. To keep the explanation concise, this topic is illustrated with the expanded concordances of the three keywords with the highest keyness score in this category: *child*, *children* and *couples*.

Example 4: *But the huge costs to raise a **child**, including the high housing prices and big expenditures on education, hinder many **couples** from having a second **child**.* (N_20200117)

The words *child* is categorized under the topic *social identity – age/sex* because it does not only represent a biological age group, but is also connected with its role in society. This example expresses the high expenses of raising a child in housing and education, which has an impact on the family's decision on having a second child. The social importance of a child as a key member of family and a core factor in discussions of the family planning policy is emphasized. The word *couples* fits into the topic *social identity – family/relationship*, emphasizing a social unit. Couples face challenges of raising children and paying high housing prices and education expenses, and they are responsible for making decisions on having a second child. The word *couples* indicates both a relationship between two persons and a key role in the family planning issues.

Example 5: *And to boost the desire of couples to have **children**, the government needs to further improve its public services and increase its input in education, medical care and care for the elderly.* (C_20190107_01)

As the plural form of *child*, the word *children* is also classified under the topic *social identity – age/sex*. The word not only manifests the demographic aspect of children, but also shows their social roles and significance as family members. In this excerpt, the measures that should be taken by the government to enhance people's intention to have more children are suggested.

TOPIC: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MATTERS

The topic of *social and economic matters* accounts for 50.51% in terms of frequency, ranking first among the three topics. It comprises eight sub-topics: *economy/finance*, *social services & welfare*, *development & initiatives*, *social issues*, *population & demographics*, *digital practices*, *communication* and *social & economic metrics and trends*. To avoid a lengthy explanation, discussions on the first five sub-topics are provided.

The sub-topic *population & demographics* consists of keywords such as *population*, *fertility* and *aging* to refer to the population and demographic situation. This sub-topic is closely associated with the background of the changing family planning policies, which have been adjusted and implemented to cope with the demographic challenges such as population aging and birth rate decline. Considering this background, it is reasonable for this issue to receive attention in the news articles.

> Example 6: *Over the next 30 years , the overlapping negative* **population** *growth and* **aging** *in China will profoundly drag on economic and social development.* (O_20221205_01)

The two keywords *population* and *aging* emphasize the demographic challenges – negative population growth and aging population faced by China and their negative influence on the development of China. This partly explains the motivations for the adoption of the universal two-child policy and three-child policy.

> Example 7: *According to the guideline, local authorities will have to* **improve** *childcare* **services** *with financial support from the central government. And subsidies and tax deductions will be introduced to reduce nursery costs, while steps will be taken to* **improve** *the quality of nursery* **services***.* (C_20220826_01)

The word *improve* is categorized under the topic *development & initiatives*. In this case, it indicates efforts that will be spared by local authorities for childcare services and nursery services. The word *improve* appears twice in this example, focusing on the initiatives to enhance childcare services and nursery services, which in turn facilitates the alleviation of parental concerns and the support for higher birth rate. The word *services* in this example falls under the topic *social services & welfare*. Denoting childcare and nursery services, the word *services* plays a part as supporting measures adopted by the government to reduce burdens for families and encourage childbirth.

The sub-topic *economy/finance* comprises keywords such as *economic*, *labor*, *market*, *economy*, *income* and *consumption*. This topic indicates the strong interconnection between demographic situation and economic development, reflecting their mutual influence and the country's pursuit for economic growth and development.

> Example 8: *The government is now counting on the amended policy to help the population grow in a balanced way and reverse a decline in the work force that could upset future* **economic** *growth.* (N_20151102_03)

The word *economic* in this example falls under the sub-topic *economy/finance*. It implies the possible influence of the adjustment of the family planning policy on the growth of work force and economic growth. The word *economic* emphasizes the government's intention to cope with the population decline and facilitate future economic development.

Example 9: *In 2021, the number of Chinese **marriage** registrations fell to 7.64 million, from 14.37 million in 2013; the marriage rate had decreased from 9.9 per 1,000 people to 5.4 during the period.* (O_20230308_01)

The word *marriage* in this example is associated with the sub-topic *social issues*, which consists of keywords such as *challenges*, *rights*, *social* and *poverty*. The word *marriage* represents an important aspect of social issues, as the decline of marriage is closely linked to falling fertility rate and childbirth, shrinking labor force and aging population, which will have a negative impact on the healthy development of China's population and society.

DISCUSSION

Ideology is seen as "a perspective (often one-sided), i.e. a worldview and a system composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, values and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific social group" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.25). In this study, the ideological implications of collectivism, gender essentialism and economic development centered ideology can be found. First, the topics surrounding family planning policies reflect a collectivist ideology, where the national goals and interests are prioritized. China is generally considered to be based on a collectivist system and ranks high in collectivism (Steele & Lynch, 2013). This can be reflected in that the implementation of the universal two-child policy and three child policy is consistent with the government's initiatives to encourage childbirth to cope with the demographic issues, boost economic growth, and maintain social stability. Keywords such as *government* and *authorities* reflect the governance of the central government in implementing the policies to achieve the collective and national demographic, economic and social development. For instance, in example 3, the issue of an aging population is constructed as a national concern, which requires both national planning and collective societal actions, prioritizing collective demographic goals and long-term benefits of the nation.

Another ideology manifested in the news articles is gender essentialism, which refers to "the idea that there are certain essential, biologically based or psychologically universal features of gender" (Hepburn, 2003, p. 107). Under this ideology, the childbearing and parenting burdens are largely allocated to and viewed as the major responsibility of women and women are generally confined to their identities as mothers or caregivers (Yu, Chan & Huang, 2023), which reflects the gender inequalities in household responsibilities (Childress et al., 2024). Women are associated with reproduction through keywords such as *fertility*, *birth* and *maternity* to constrain their primary values to childbearing. Expressions such as *women of childbearing age* and *married women of fertile age* emphasize women's reproductive role as their primary value, reinforcing the notion of gender essentialism. Besides, one thing worth noticing is that *man/men* does not appear among the top 100 keywords in the list, despite their supposed role in childbearing and parenting. This further suggests that men are largely left out of these responsibilities in the family planning discourse. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese patriarchal society. It limits women's

role to their biological function and leaves men unaccountable, reinforces the notion that women are "naturally" responsible for childbearing, caregiving and household duties, and leads to social expectations and requirements for women to balance their work and family. The expectations for women to make a balance of their work and household duties and leaving men out of discussions of their childbearing and family roles shows an unfair imbalance and reinforces injustice for women. With the optimization of China's family planning policies, supportive measures, such as maternity leave, reproductive health services and childcare care services have been introduced to protect women's rights, ease their burdens and safeguard the rights of working women (Zhang, 2021). However, the perception of women as the primary actors in childbearing and household matters have not been fundamentally changed, and men have not been assumed an equal role in shouldering these responsibilities. This imbalance may even place a heavier burden on women and pose greater challenges for women in the workplace (Mo, 2022).

The economic development centered ideology can be manifested mainly through the two sub-topics: *economy/finance* and *development & initiatives*. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China made a decision to shift its focus to the economic development and implement the reform and opening-up policy (Gan & Bao, 2024). Through years of development, China has evolved from a poverty-stricken country into one of the world's fastest growing economies (Morrison, 2019; Kroeber, 2020). Since the 18th National Congress, China's economic development has entered a new phase. Prioritizing economic development is considered the key to solving the challenges faced by the country and the foundation of national prosperity (Shi, 2022). The implementation of the universal two-child policy and three-child policy is linked to the nation's socio-economic development. For instance, example 8 expresses a potential negative effect of a shrinking labor force on economic development and frames population policy adjustment as a measure to achieve national economic goals, instead of merely addressing population issues.

CONCLUSION

This article places China's family planning policy in the context of its coverage in China's English-language newspaper. It explores the main topics presented in the reporting and the ideological implications underneath the discourse. It is found that the topic *social & economic matters* is most frequently discussed, suggesting that the newspaper places the narratives of family planning policy within the country's broader developmental goals. By portraying the family planning policy as a national endeavor to achieve national prosperity, economic development and collective welfare instead of just a demographic issue, the news discourse legitimizes the policy implementation through linking individual fertility choices to national interests. However, the frequent association of women with their reproductive and fertility roles in the news articles and the absence of men in the discussion pose a structural inequality between men and women in their participation in the family affairs and the workplace. It is suggested that news media reports place greater emphasis on men's roles in household chores and child-rearing responsibilities in the family sphere.

This study reveals that China's official English-language newspapers serve as both information providers and channels for shaping global perceptions of China's national policies. Through revealing the ideologies underpinning the newspaper coverage of the family planning policy, the study offers critical insights into how news media legitimize national policies and influence global perceptions of China's population governance. The study has its limitations. Only

one newspaper, *China Daily* was selected as the source of data, with a focus on the period covering the universal two-child policy and three-child policy. Future researches could draw on a wider range of sources and extend the data collection period to produce more comparative and comprehensive findings, for example, by investigating the diversity in the construction of China's family planning policy across different news media or time periods.

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