

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

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ABSTRACT

Since 2021, China has implemented the three-child policy to address the demographic problems arising from an ageing population and a low birthrate. The representation of the policy in newspapers holds an important position in its communication and interpretation. However, critical discourse analysis of the newspaper coverage on this policy remains scarce, especially when approached through a corpus-assisted methodology. Therefore, this study conducts a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of the representation of China's three-child policy. Four hundred twenty-one news articles were collected from China Daily, and keyword analysis and concordance analysis were conducted to identify the topics of the news articles and the argumentation strategies adopted. The findings reveal three main topics within the news articles, namely social and economic matters, national/regional entity and social identity, along with a variety of topoi used to legitimise the stated claims. This study provides insights into how the three-child policy is represented in China's English-language newspaper.

Keywords: three-child policy; corpus-assisted approach; critical discourse analysis; topics; topoi

INTRODUCTION

The population issue has always been a major concern of the government, society and public, affecting the political, economic, and social development of a country. A reasonable population structure can bring the country a driving force for sustainable development. As a country with a population of over 1.4 billion (Office of the Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census, 2021), China has been consistently placing a significant focus on the population issue and family planning. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the population problems faced by the country have seen a transformation from overpopulation and great economic pressure to birthrate decline, rapid population ageing and imbalanced sex ratio (Yu, Chan & Huang, 2023).

Statistical evidence has shown a substantial decline in China's population growth rate and total fertility rate. According to the Seventh National Population Census of China, the average annual growth rate of the population has declined significantly 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). In addition, since the 1990s, the total fertility rate of China has remained below the

replacement level of 2.1 children per woman (S. Chen, 2022), a level that is generally regarded as essential for a nation's population to maintain stability. As estimated by the China Population and Development Research Centre, the total fertility rate of China was 1.09 in 2022, which was much lower than the replacement level (Sun, 2024).

Alongside the changing demographic situation, China's family planning policies have undergone changes and adjustments. In October 2015, 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 (Jiang & Liu, 2016). This announcement officially put an end to the one-child policy, which had been in place for over three decades (Kim, 2014). Later in May 2021, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China decided to adopt the three-child policy, allowing a couple to have three children and providing supportive measures in order to further optimise the family planning policy and deal with the worsening demographic situation (Zhang, 2025).

In the process, news media serve as an indispensable and influential channel for the public to know about the policy and play a crucial role in the dissemination and interpretation of the policy. However, news discourse does not represent social realities in an entirely unbiased or objective manner (Jäger & Maier, 2009). Instead, news media play an important role in facilitating, influencing and reinforcing "public knowledge and information, beliefs, values and attitudes" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 468). As the first and most influential national English-language newspaper in China (Pei et al., 2022), *China Daily* acts as a significant medium for China to communicate its political agendas, economic progress and cultural practices to the world and for the world to gain a better and more comprehensive view of China. Moreover, it is also a primary source to reflect the views, attitudes and ideologies of the Communist Party of China and its government to the international community (Du, 2021). Therefore, *China Daily* is chosen as the source of data for the present study to explore the discursive representation of the three-child policy through corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis.

Corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis enables researchers to quantitatively process a large volume of data using computer-assisted corpus analytic tools and explain and interpret the socio-political context of data from a critical perspective. In recent years, corpus-assisted critical discourse studies have been conducted on a diverse range of topics in Chinese news media, such as China's national image (Yu, Tay & Yue, 2023), COVID-19 (Yang & Chen, 2021), climate change (Fu & Wang, 2022) and 'Little Fresh Meat' phenomenon (Yu, Li & Chan, 2023). However, China's three-child policy remains underexplored from the perspective of corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis in existing academic literature. Therefore, the present study is timely to examine how China's latest three-child policy is represented in Chinese news media. This study draws on the discourse-historical approach (DHA) within critical discourse analysis (CDA). The discourse-historical approach, proposed by Wodak (1990), is one of the most acknowledged approaches in critical discourse analysis. A discourse-historical analysis of a text is conducted in three stages: (1) themes or topics, (2) discursive strategies, and (3) linguistic means and realisations (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016).

Drawing upon the framework of DHA, this study intends to answer the following two research questions: (1) What topics are manifested in the news articles on the three-child policy in *China Daily*? (2) What argumentation strategies are adopted in the news articles on the three-child policy in *China Daily*? This study contributes to the exploration of news discourse from a linguistic perspective and sheds light on how news media language facilitates the communication of public policies through the selection of topics and the adoption of argumentation strategies.

CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The present study integrates corpus linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis through the adoption of a corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) approach (Partington, 2006). Corpus-assisted CDA employs a synergy of quantitative techniques from corpus linguistics and qualitative tools from critical discourse analysis, enabling researchers to examine the linguistic patterns in a wide range of texts and at the same time analyse the linguistic data in the social, political, cultural and historical contexts from a critical perspective. The term “corpus-assisted” does not imply an unequal status between CL and CDA. Instead, CL and CDA contribute “equally and distinctly to a methodological synergy” (Baker et al., 2008, p. 274).

CDA views discourse as a form of social practice and regards discourse as both socially constructed and constitutive (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), which means that discourse is an integral part of social interactions. According to this perspective, discourse is not merely a mirror of social reality. Instead, it plays an important part in shaping, constructing and reproducing social reality. Therefore, the main task of CDA is to explore the “hidden, opaque, and visible structures of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 12). On the one hand, it intends to reveal how ideology is hidden and how it originates from social structure and power relations; on the other hand, it aims to find out how discourse could remain, reshape and to some degree change the social structures and practices.

However, CDA is often questioned and criticised for its subjectivity and researcher bias because of its limited number of texts being studied and its subjective selection of data for analysis (Stubbs, 1997; Widdowson, 2004). The incorporation of the corpus linguistics method makes up for these inadequacies because the corpus linguistics method “offers a high degree of reliability and validity to linguistic research” (Baker, 2010, p. 111) and provides entry points for further qualitative analysis (Bayley & Bevitori, 2009). CL draws upon naturally occurring language as the source of data to uncover the patterns and trends of the ways language is actually used (Liu & Kesumawati, 2024). Through the use of a corpus, a more quantitative statistical calculation could be applied to large collections of data, ensuring a quick identification of linguistic patterns that would be hard or even impossible to recognise manually. The statistics generated through the corpus analytic tools provide a solid basis for drawing reasonable interpretations from the CDA perspective. At the same time, CDA allows these statistical results to be examined and interpreted in depth, answering “socially inspired research questions” beyond the lexical and grammatical level (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019, p. 19) and thus ensuring an effective and useful methodological integration.

CHINA’S FAMILY PLANNING POLICY IN NEWS DISCOURSE

As has been mentioned, China’s family planning policy has undergone several changes from the one-child policy to the universal two-child policy and then to the current three-child policy. These policies have inspired a wide range of research in fields such as demography, economics, sociology and linguistics. Researchers in linguistics put an emphasis on how media representations may influence public perceptions and understanding of the policies and the ways in which these representations may support or challenge the government’s narratives surrounding the policies. Previous research on news media representation of the family planning policies can be roughly grouped into three major categories.

The first category focuses on the news framing of the family planning policy-related news. Taking the news reports on family planning policy issues of *People's Daily* from 1978 to 2018 as samples, H. Y. Zhu (2020) analysed their news framing across different periods based on Van Gorp's "frame package". It was found that the news frames of family planning policy news reports in *People's Daily* had gradually shifted from "Changing Circumstances" and "Vigorous Policy Implementation" to "Policy Improvement" and "Social Issues".

The second type of analysis is devoted to the communication models or themes of news articles on the family planning policy. For example, Dai and Jiang (2018) conducted a qualitative content analysis to examine how three Chinese mainstream newspapers discussed the two-child policy. Four major themes emerged from the media coverage, including economic and population growth, health services, women's working conditions, and supportive or hortative policies. The results reflected the key areas of focus in news media discourse surrounding the implementation of the two-child policy and shed light on health care services and women's reproductive autonomy.

The last category is the (critical) discourse analysis of news coverage of the family planning policy. For instance, Z. Y. Wang (2022) analysed the macro and micro discourse changes of the news reports on the family planning policy in *China Women's News* from 1984 to 2021 by using content analysis and critical discourse analysis based on van Dijk's theory. It was found that the themes of the reports shifted from propaganda-oriented to information-oriented, and the style of the reports became more emotionally oriented in terms of the macro-structure of the news discourse. Considering the micro discourse changes, the gentler verb usages, increased coherence of discourse, and richer underlying meanings of discourse, could be observed.

Although existing studies on China's family planning policy news discourse have made valuable contributions to the understanding of how the policy is constructed and represented in newspaper coverage from various perspectives, limitations do exist. First, most of these studies have relied on restricted datasets, which may lead to a partial understanding of the representation of the policy, and the results may not be applicable to larger contexts, as the analysis of a small number of texts cannot be expected to reveal helpful patterns or insights into their frequency or distribution (Stubbs, 1997). A corpus-assisted CDA can provide empirical insights into linguistic patterns across large datasets. However, this approach has been largely overlooked in previous studies. Besides, most previous studies focus on the representation of the one-child policy and two-child policy in newspaper discourse, leaving the representation of the three-child policy underexplored. In view of the above, a corpus-assisted approach to critical discourse analysis is adopted to examine how the three-child policy is discursively constructed in *China Daily*.

METHODOLOGY

Situated within the CADS approach by synergising corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, the current study examined the representation of the three-child policy in *China Daily*, China's official English language newspaper widely read by both domestic and global audiences. Through conducting keyword analysis and concordance analysis, this study analysed the topics of the news articles on the three-child policy and the argumentative strategies used to legitimise the arguments through various topoi.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for this study were comprised of newspaper articles on China's three-child policy sourced from *China Daily*. With its target audience consisting of readers from English-speaking countries and those proficient in English (Chan & Yu, 2023), *China Daily* enjoys a broader global readership compared to Chinese-language newspapers (Yu & Nartey, 2021). Its primary goal is to inform international audiences of China's most recent development and policies and show the official positions and stances of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government (F. Chen & Wang, 2020; G. Wang & Ma, 2021). Through searching the following terms, the news articles on the three-child policy in *China Daily* within the timeframe from May 31st, 2021, to December 31st, 2023, were extracted from LexisNexis, an online provider of databases of various fields, including legal resources, financial data, news, academic journals and papers.

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 time span was set from May 31st, 2021, because the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China decided to adopt the three-child policy on that day (Zhang, 2025). The time frame concluded on the date of data collection. After the news articles were collected, they were double-checked to ensure that they were related to the three-child policy. Duplicate articles or those that did not focus specifically on the three-child policy were eliminated manually. Details like the author's name, publication date and length were removed, leaving only the article's title and main content. These data were subsequently converted into plain text (.txt) files to allow them to be read, processed and analysed by the corpus analytic software. A tagging process was then carried out through TagAnt (2.0.5), a free part of speech (POS) tagging tool which could label each word in a given text with its grammatical categories, such as *economy* (NN), *encourage* (VB) and *financial* (JJ). The collected data built a specialised corpus named CTCPC (China's Three-Child Policy Corpus). The corpus consisted of 421 news articles, with a total of 16,628 word types and 308,791 word tokens.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

After the specialised corpus CTCPC was built for this study, it was uploaded to Antconc (4.2.0), a free corpus analysis toolkit for conducting corpus linguistics research. Keyword analysis and concordance analysis were performed to examine the topics of the news articles on the three-child policy and the argumentation strategies adopted in these news articles. A list of keywords was obtained through the keyword tool in Antconc (4.2.0). Keywords are words that are "statistically more frequent in one set of data when compared against each other" (Baker et al., 2013, p. 258). To identify keywords, a statistical comparison between a target corpus and a reference corpus was drawn. The reference corpus in this study was the British National Corpus (BNC) Baby edition, a subset of the British National Corpus with around four million words. The BNC Baby edition covers fiction, news, academic writing and spoken conversations, offering a balanced and representative sample of both written and spoken English. Considering the small size of the studied corpus, the BNC Baby edition was an appropriate reference corpus for this study.

Through the keyword tool in Antconc (4.2.0), the keywords were ranked by their keyness scores and put into a keyword list. Keyness is defined as the “statistically significantly higher frequency of particular words or clusters in the corpus under analysis in comparison with another corpus” (Baker et al., 2008, p. 278). The higher the keyness score, the more statistically significant the word is. Keywords help to reveal the “salient themes” and reflect the “aboutness” of a text, functioning as “indicators of expression and style as well as content” (Hunt & Harvey, 2015, p. 139). In this study, keyness was measured using the log-likelihood statistical test, which assigned a keyness score to each word in the studied corpus. As suggested by Gabrielatos (2018), $p < 0.01$ was used as the statistical threshold, providing a 99% confidence that the observed differences did not occur due to chance. Another important parameter set in keyword analysis was the cutoff point for minimum frequency, which was used to filter out words that were considered unusual only because they occurred rarely in the reference corpus. The minimum frequency threshold in this study was set at 10, following the common practice, in order to concentrate on words that appeared frequently enough to reveal meaningful language patterns (Culpeper, 2009).

After the keywords were extracted, manual removal of punctuation marks and stop words was performed, leaving only content words which had distinct meanings in the corpus, because stop words such as pronouns, modals and auxiliary verbs had little semantic value (Che Abdul Rahman et al., 2021; Taufek et al., 2022). Stop words were identified based on the default stop word list from the MyISAM search indexes in the MySQL open-source database. Based on the findings of Pojanapunya and Watson (2018), which showed that researchers typically selected an average of 100 keywords for analysis, the current study determined to select the top 100 keywords for further examination.

The analysis of keywords was supplemented with the examination of their (expanded) concordance lines because keyword analysis itself did not provide contextual information about how these words were used within specific contexts. A concordance refers to “a list of all of the occurrences of a particular search term in a corpus, presented within the context that they occur in; usually a few words to the left and right of the search term” (Baker, 2006, p. 71). Concordance analysis allows researchers to examine keywords in their surrounding context and helps researchers to understand how keywords are used and what they actually mean in specific contexts. Within the framework of the DHA, the findings were examined qualitatively to identify topics and topoi in the news articles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based upon the analytical methods and procedures outlined above, this section elaborates on the keyword analysis and concordance analysis through which the topics of the news articles on the three-child policy are identified and categorised, and the argumentative strategies which legitimise the representation of the three-child policy via specific topoi are examined. Topics represent what the discourse is about and indicate the semantic macrostructures built upon the microstructure of meaning (Wodak, 2011). The topics constructed out of discourse play a significant role in conveying the subject matter or focus of information to the audience, serving as an essential element for understanding the thematic focus of discourse and offering a perspective through which the socio-political and ideological dimensions of discourse are examined. The categorisation of keywords in the present study is informed by Baker et al. (2013), which identifies six thematic categories: conflict, religion, culture, ethnic/national identity,

characterising/differentiating attributes and group/organisation. Since the study of Baker et al. (2013) focuses on the representation of Muslims in the British press, which is different from the present study on the three-child policy, some categories are not applicable here, and other categories, which better suit the current study, are identified. Topoi are defined as “content-related warrants or ‘conclusion rules’ which connect the argument or arguments to the conclusion” (Wodak, 2011, p. 42). They serve as the foundation on which certain conclusions can be drawn. The identification of topoi in this study draws upon Reisigl and Wodak (2005) and Wodak (2011). Their studies identify a range of topoi to support claims and persuade the audience, including but not limited to usefulness, consequence, definition, threat, justice and burdening.

TABLE 1. Topics and sub-topics in three-child policy news articles

Topics and sub-topics	Keywords	Distribution in terms of frequency
Social & Economic Matters		55.78%
▪ Economy/Finance	economy, yuan (NNS), market, consumption, income, yuan (NN), enterprises, financial, economic, demand, employment, labor	8.62%
▪ Social Services & Welfare	services, education, care, housing, maternity, subsidies, childcare, leave, healthcare	6.85%
▪ Development & Initiatives	development, efforts, modernisation, improve, promote, urbanisation, boost, new, encourage	7.49%
▪ Social Issues	social, resources, burden, challenges, marriage, society, raising	4.99%
▪ Population & Demographics	population, fertility, aging (VBG), demographic, birth, births, aging (NN), childbirth, age	11.58%
▪ Technology	technologies	0.27%
▪ Social & Economic Metrics and Trends	rate, high, percent, year, years, total, sector, declining, decline, increase, growth, quality, trend	15.98%
National/Regional Entity		29.64%
▪ Area/Country	china, country, cities, xinjiang, rural, beijing, province, shanghai, guangdong, areas, provinces, nation, urban, countries, national, chinese, global	19.87%
▪ Governance	policy, policies, government, system, bureau, authorities, cpc, national (NNP), development (NNP), security, measures, reform, population (NNP)	9.77%
Social Identity		14.58%
▪ Age/Sex	children, child, elderly, women	7.41%
▪ Family/Relationship	family, families, couples	3.24%
▪ General	people, residents	3.46%
▪ Individual	xi	0.47%

Following the criteria and parameters set in the methodological section, the top 100 keywords ranked by their keyness score were identified and subsequently categorised into three topics: *Social & Economic Matters*, *National/Regional Entity* and *Social Identity*. Table 1 presents the topics and sub-topics as well as their associated keywords. The left column lists the topics and their sub-topics, the middle column presents the keywords related to each topic, and the right column shows their corresponding proportion in terms of frequency. As displayed in Table 1, the topic *Social & Economic Matters* occupies the highest rank, followed by *National/Regional Entity* and *Social Identity*. The topics, sub-topics and their corresponding proportions are shown in Figure 1. In what follows, each topic, together with its representative examples and the topoi employed in these examples, will be discussed in detail.

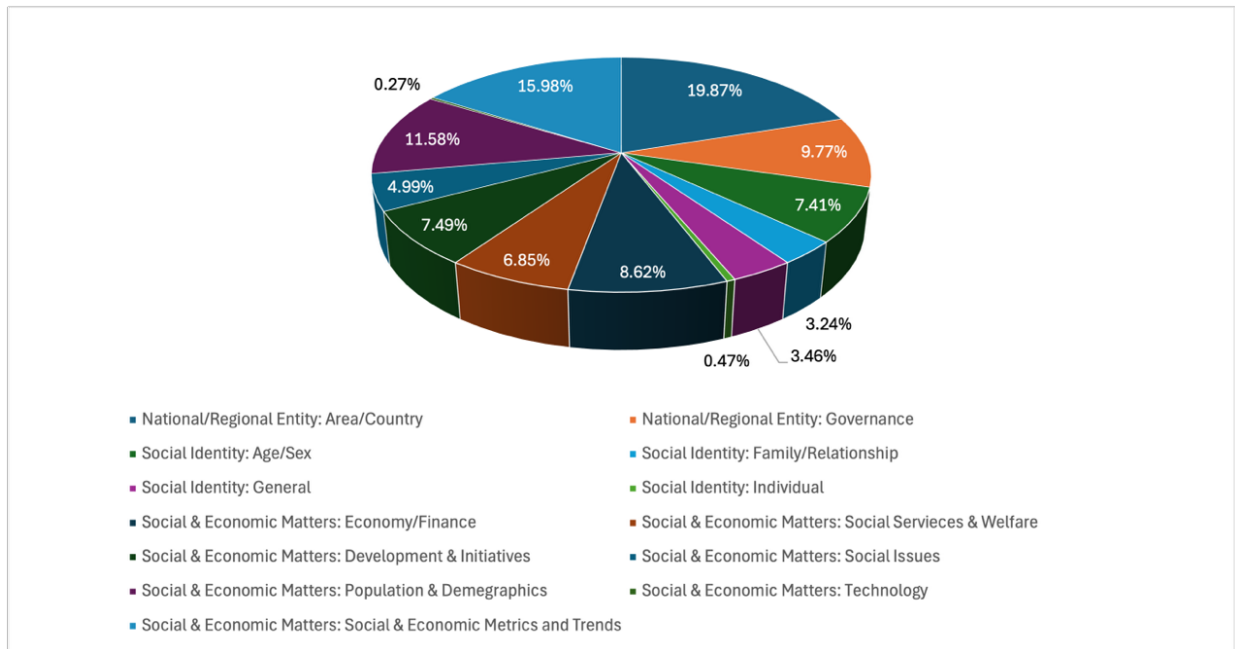


FIGURE 1. Distribution of sub-topics in three-child policy news articles

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC MATTERS

The topic *Social & Economic Matters* ranks first among the three topics with a total frequency accounting for 55.78%. This topic consists of seven sub-topics: *Economy/Finance*, *Social Services & Welfare*, *Development & Initiatives*, *Social Issues*, *Population & Demographics*, *Technology*, and *Social & Economic Metrics and Trends*. The high frequency this topic has obtained manifests that the news coverage of the three-child policy often extends beyond the presentation of demographic situations to cover its economic implications, social welfare concerns, developmental objectives and initiatives, and broader social influences. Besides, the metrics and trends as indicators of demographic, economic and social matters are frequently employed to legitimise policy decisions and provide objective evidence.

Extract 1:

*Perhaps they should focus on how to make the country prosper in a low- or zero-**population growth** environment, as we have seen in developed countries such as Japan, Denmark and Sweden. Zero **population growth** is attained when the **population** is stabilised by balancing the death and **birth rates**. It happens only when **births** and immigration equal deaths and emigration year after year. (OP-ED_20220507_01)*

In this extract, the keywords *population*, *birth*, and *births* are categorised under the sub-topic *Population & Demographics*, and *growth* is categorised under *Social & Economic Metrics and Trends*. It reflects the topos of comparison, responsibility and definition.

This extract compares China to developed countries such as Japan, Denmark and Sweden, which have managed to adjust to the low or zero population growth environment. This reflects the topos of comparison, where the practices of other developed countries are used as a reference to justify the argument that similar approaches could also be applicable to China. It posits the population issue in a global context, indicating that this issue is a common phenomenon that influences both developed and developing countries.

Through the suggestion that the authorities should pay attention to the low- or zero-population growth environment, the statement implicitly shows the topos of responsibility by encouraging authorities to make active efforts and try alternative measures to deal with the problems of rapid population ageing and labour shortage.

This extract also exemplifies the topos of definition, which is used to clarify the meaning of a concept or an issue being discussed. In this case, a precise meaning of zero population growth is provided with a demographic equation in which the number of births and immigration equals the number of deaths and emigration. This definition lays a basis for the understanding of the proposal of making the country proper in a zero population growth environment.

Extract 2:

*The negative **population growth** will definitely impose a huge challenge to **economic growth**, especially to those heavily dependent on **demographic dividends**. (OP-ED_20230117)*

In this extract, *population* and *demographic* fall under the sub-topic *Population & Demographics*, *growth* under *Social & Economic Metrics and Trends*, and *economic* under *Economy/Finance*. The keyword *economic* sets a connection between birth rate and economic growth, putting the population issue in a broader context of economic development and national prosperity. The connection implies an assumption that a sustainable and strong economy is based on a steadily growing population, which partly explains why population issues have caught so much attention. Since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, China has shifted its focus to economic development (Gan & Bao, 2024). Taking economic development as the central task is seen as essential for addressing the country's problems and building the foundation for national prosperity (Shi, 2022). Therefore, the economic issues are emphasised in the news articles related to population policies. In this extract, the topos of threat can be recognised. It argues that the negative population growth poses risks and obstacles to economic prosperity.

Extract 3:

*Driven by the trend of delaying first **marriage**, there were only about 8.13 million new marriages registered nationwide in 2020, down 12.2 per cent year-on-year, a decrease for the seventh straight year, according to the country's civil affairs bureau. "Rising **education** levels, high cost of **marriage**, fierce societal competition and the changes in attitudes toward **marriage** all contribute to the delay," said Feng Wenmeng, director of the Research Office of the Institute for Public Administration and Human Resource, at the Development Research Centre of the State Council. (N_20220624_01)*

The keyword *marriage* is categorised under the sub-topic *Social Issues*, and *education* is under *Social Services & Welfare*. This extract discusses the social problem of delaying marriage and its contributing factors. Marriage in this extract is depicted as both a private choice and an institutional concern. In this extract, the topoi of numbers, authority, consequence, and finances are identified.

The use of statistical numbers such as “8.13 million” and “12.2 per cent” highlights the severity of the problem of first marriage delay and gets the audience to regard this as an urgent social issue. The topos of consequence is manifested by setting a causal relationship between various social factors and the delay in marriage. By identifying the major social factors such as education, economic burdens, changing attitudes and fierce competition, the discourse posits the issue of delay in marriage within a broader social and economic context. The factor “high cost of marriage” indicates the topos of finances, which suggests that if a certain action costs too much, one should perform actions to help reduce the cost. This statement depicts the high cost of marriage as an obstacle for people to get married, and positions financial support as a possible measure to deal with the problem. Besides, this statement is cited from the director of the Research Office of the Institute for Public Administration and Human Resource, reflecting the topos of authority. By referring to the expert, the reliability of this statement is enhanced.

NATIONAL/REGIONAL ENTITY

The topic *National/Regional Entity* occupies the second position in terms of the total frequencies its corresponding keywords have obtained. Under this category, two sub-topics: *Area/Country* and *Governance* exist. The sub-topic *Area/Country* obtains the highest frequency among all sub-topics, manifesting the significance attributed to it in the discussion of the three-child policy-related matters.

Extract 4:

*In **China**, Chen said that nearly 32.2 million children aged three and under require child care. "More than one-third of all families, and over two-thirds of families in metropolises such as **Beijing**, **Shanghai** and **Guangzhou** in **Guangdong** province are in need of such services," she said. (N_20230721_01)*

In this extract, the keywords *china*, *beijing*, *shanghai*, *guangdong* and *province* categorised under the sub-topic *Area/Country* can be found. As metropolises in China, Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou in Guangdong province play a leading role in the implementation of the three-child policy and its supplementary measures. The demographic situations and the effectiveness of the three-child policy in these areas draw great attention from the government, experts and the general public, which explains the prominence these words have obtained in the corpus. This extract

expresses the need for the government to provide childcare services as part of its policy measures to ease the burdens on families and deal with the issue of the low fertility rate in the country.

From this extract, it can be observed that argumentation strategies are employed via various topoi to justify the argument that child care services need to be stepped up. The topos of numbers is manifested through the use of specific figures such as “32.2 million”, “one-third” and “two-thirds”. The use of these numerical data stresses the broad scope of the issue and expresses the urgent need for policymakers to take action. This also reflects the application of the topos of urgency.

The widespread need for child care services also illustrates the topos of burdening. The logic of this topos is that one should take actions to eliminate a specific problem if someone is burdened by it (Wodak, 2011). In this case, if the child care services are not provided, families with children will face great burdens and considerable challenges. When one-third of all families and more than two-thirds of families in metropolitan cities are in demand for these services, failure to meet this demand could lead to difficulties not only for the families but also for the whole society.

By quoting the statement of Chen, an official with the commission’s population surveillance and family development department, the topos of authority is reflected. According to Wodak (2011, p. 44), “if one refers to somebody in a position or authority, then the action is legitimate.” Therefore, through referring to a named and authoritative source of information, the argument for child care services gains legitimacy and persuasive strength, because the information provided is grounded in expertise and authority.

Extract 5:

*But the fact is that in the four decades between 1978 and 2018, the Uyghur population in **Xinjiang** has increased from 5.55 million to 11.68 million, accounting for 46.8 per cent of the total population of the region. The latest census data released by the regional statistics bureau said that the population of the Uyghur rose by 1.62 million, or 16.2 per cent from a decade ago, to more than 11.62 million. The Uyghur still stand as the majority, with 44.96 per cent of the overall population of **Xinjiang**. (FC_20210617_01)*

In this extract, the Uyghur population of Xinjiang is discussed. The topos of numbers is employed to enhance credibility and reinforce the statement. Through presenting specific statistical data, such as “5.55 million”, “11.68 million” and “46.8 per cent”, the extract conveys the precise information of the population of Uyghur in Xinjiang district. The use of these numbers is considered to be reliable and free from subjective interpretation and explanation.

By referring to specific timeframes “between 1978 and 2018”, and quoting numerical data from the recent census, the extract presents a factual and impartial description of demographic trends of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, manifesting the topos of reality. The specification of concrete timeframes and authoritative data from the regional statistics bureau proves that the information presented is neither speculative nor prejudiced but firmly grounded in empirical evidence.

Besides, the topos of comparison is used when comparing the Uyghur population between 1978 and 2018, and between “now” and a decade ago. The comparison of the Uyghur population in different time periods shows the demographic changes and trends over time. This data-based comparison shows the facts directly and rejects any alternative interpretations.

Some Western countries, especially the United States, have long been accusing China of depriving the Uyghur people of their rights in Xinjiang and making groundless criticisms of the Chinese government's policies in this area (L. Zhu, 2023). In a report released by The Associated Press (2020), it's 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." In response to these false accusations made by the Western anti-China forces, China has made its efforts to show the real condition of Xinjiang through its English-language media, which explains the prominence of the keyword *xinjiang* in the corpus. In this case, the topoi of numbers, reality and comparison are adopted to show the positive demographic trend and the significant growth in the Uyghur population over time, strengthening the argument about the positive growth of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang and refuting the false accusations towards this area.

The sub-topic *Governance* covers keywords such as *policy*, *policies*, *government* and *authorities*. The following extract shows the context surrounding the keyword *policy*, which has the highest keyness score and frequency under the category *Governance*.

Extract 6:

*Thanks to the new three-child **policy**, the demographic curve should remain relatively stable, and there is little danger of China's population dropping abruptly. However, it remains an issue worth paying attention to as a falling birthrate might hasten Chinese society's ageing process. In order to avoid a "hard landing" of the demographic curve, it is necessary to make a long-term, comprehensive, strategic birth support system and create an environment that is suitable for those planning families. (N_20220119_01)*

This extract expresses the possible benefits brought about by the implementation of the three-child policy and the necessity of building a birth support system to deal with the falling birth rate. In this extract, the topoi of threat, urgency and responsibility are found.

The topoi of threat emphasises that one should do something against certain threats or dangers if they are found (Wodak, 2011). It implies that negative results will occur if certain dangers are not properly dealt with. By stating "a falling birthrate might hasten Chinese society's ageing process", the potential threat of abrupt population decline to the Chinese society is proposed. By emphasising these potential risks, the extract implies that failing to take proper actions could lead to severe social and economic problems, thereby legitimising the introduction of the three-child policy.

The topoi of urgency is manifested in the expression "it is necessary to...". This topoi highlights the need for immediate action to avoid negative consequences. By cautioning against the "hard landing" of the demographic curve, the discourse creates a sense of urgency and raises concerns over the need to take immediate measures to keep the demographic curve stable.

The topoi of responsibility indicates that a certain individual, community or organisation has the duty to act in a certain way. This responsibility is usually moral or social, emphasising that actions should be taken to avoid the consequences of failing to fulfil the responsibility. In this extract, the writer argues for creating "a long-term, comprehensive, strategic birth support system" and "an environment that is suitable for those planning families", positioning the encouragement of families to have children as a mutual responsibility of the Chinese government and society.

The implementation of the three-child policy is the Chinese government's reaction to the demographic, social and economic challenges faced by China. With the change of the socio-economic structures, population ageing, shrinking working-age population, and an imbalanced gender ratio have become the new challenges for the Chinese society. The introduction of the three-child policy represents the Chinese government's efforts to deal with these challenges.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

The topic *Social Identity* ranks last in terms of the total frequency its associated keywords have obtained. This topic consists of four sub-topics: *Age/Sex*, *Family/Relationship*, *General* and *Individual*. The keywords under this category include mainly those involved in or influenced by the three-child policy, such as *children*, *elderly*, *women*, *families* and *couples*.

Extract 7:

*According to the revision, it is the legal right of **couples** in the country to have three **children**, and the country should implement finance, tax, insurance, education, housing and employment measures to support **families** raising three **children** to ease the financial burden on them. The fact that it takes the top legislature less than one month to translate the central authorities' decision into law represents its active response to **people's** concerns.*
(N_20210823_01)

In this extract, the keywords *couples*, *children*, *families*, and *people* all fall under the topic of *Social Identity*. It constructs a persuasive narrative and justifies the country's involvement in supporting families to raise children and easing their financial burdens. The topoi of right, responsibility, burdening, and urgency can be identified in this extract.

The topos of right asserts that an action should be carried out if it is required by a law or written regulations (Wodak, 2011). The statement "it is the legal right of couples ..." emphasises the legal right of couples to have three children, revealing the topos of right. The statement argues that the rights of couples to have three children should be protected, reinforcing the legitimacy of the policy.

The statement "the country should implement..." reflects the topos of responsibility. It is stated that the country has the duty to reduce the financial burdens of families with three children and provide support for them. The mention of financial burdens reflects the topos of burdening. It implies that families will be burdened by the financial pressures if proper supportive measures are not provided by the government, thus justifying the need for providing supportive measures.

The rapid translation of "the central authorities' decision into law" by the top legislature within "less than one month" reflects the topos of urgency. This strategy expresses a sense of emergency, indicating that the immediate implementation of the three-child policy and its supportive measures is critical in addressing the societal and demographic issues and responding to public concerns. Through describing the immediate actions taken by the top legislature, the discourse also portrays the Chinese government as responsive, efficient and placing a high priority on public concerns.

CONCLUSION

This study presents an analysis of the representation of China's three-child policy in *China Daily*, the country's official English-language newspaper, through corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis. It analyses the major topics in the news articles and explores the argumentation strategies used to justify arguments through various topoi. Through detailed analysis, it is revealed that three major topics: *Social & Economic Matters*, *National/Regional Entity* and *Social Identity* exist in the news articles on the three-child policy. In terms of the total frequencies the keywords under each topic have obtained, *Social & Economic Matters* takes the top position, followed by *National/Regional Entity* and *Social Identity*. These topics help to ascertain the message the news articles intend to deliver to the audience and exert an impact on how the audience understands and interprets the three-child policy.

The news articles on the three-child policy adopt a range of topoi, including comparison, responsibility, definition, threat, numbers, authority, consequence, finances, urgency, burdening, reality and right. The use of these topoi serves to legitimise and justify the claims in the news articles and enhance their credibility and reliability. Besides, it also helps to shape the understanding and perception of the audience on certain issues and plays a role in their conclusion formation.

The corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis has been proven to be conducive to carrying out research on the representation of the three-child policy in *China Daily*. It reveals the central information intended to be conveyed to the audience and the argumentation strategies through which the information is legitimised and reinforced, offering insights into how news media promote national policies and influence public perceptions. Despite its contribution to the literature on news media representation of China's three-child policy, the study has certain limitations. The study selected a single newspaper, *China Daily*, as the data source and focused exclusively on the latest three-child policy. Future research could explore a wider range of newspapers or expand the data collection timeframe to cover the previous one-child policy and two-child policy to carry out a comparative analysis.

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