




The Rule of Discourse: How Ideas and Institutions Shape China's COVID Policy

Zijing Zhao & Kaiping Zhang


To cite this article: Zijing Zhao & Kaiping Zhang (04 Jan 2025): The Rule of Discourse: How Ideas and Institutions Shape China's COVID Policy, Journal of Contemporary China, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2024.2441859](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2441859)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2441859>

 View supplementary material [↗](#)

 Published online: 04 Jan 2025.



 Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

 View related articles [↗](#)

 View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Rule of Discourse: How Ideas and Institutions Shape China's COVID Policy

Zijing Zhao ^a and Kaiping Zhang ^{a,b}

^aDepartment of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China; ^bHarvard-Yenching Institute, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

ABSTRACT

How do ideas and institutions shape China's policymaking? Drawing on discursive institutionalism, this paper develops a conceptual framework to examine the intricate "discursive engineering" underpinning Chinese governance. We identify four distinct types of discourse—ideological, imperative, directive, and communicative—each serving specific functions, targeting different audiences, and exerting unique forms of power. By analyzing a comprehensive dataset of Weibo posts from state media accounts throughout China's Zero-COVID era, we find that discourse alone explains nearly as much policy stringency variation as all socio-economic factors combined. Our analysis also shows how discourse evolves with shifting policy objectives: imperative discourse secures local implementation, while directive discourse grants flexibility. This orchestrated approach balances top-down control with local autonomy and carefully manages state-society relations. Our findings suggest that discourse functions not merely as a propaganda tool, but as a pivotal institution within contemporary Chinese governance.

KEYWORDS

Political Discourse;
Policymaking; Discursive
Institutionalism; China;
COVID-19

Introduction


Political discourses profoundly shape public policies in every society, influencing the ideational landscape that informs decision-making.¹ The interplay between ideas and institutions not only guides government policy formulation but also empowers influential societal actors to suppress opposing narratives. In China, the power of political discourse is particularly evident due to the centralized policymaking process, the dominance of state-owned media, and the implementation of policies often through mass mobilization.² Rooted in its revolutionary legacy, major policy domains in contemporary China—including the recent Three-Child Policy and the COVID-19 pandemic control—continue to demonstrate the pervasive influence of discourse.³ The strategic use of narratives has been key to articulating policy goals, establishing consensus, mobilizing public

CONTACT Kaiping Zhang  kaipingz@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn  Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, Ming Bldg., Room 245, Beijing 100084, China

¹Colin Hay, 'Constructivist Institutionalism' in RAW Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder and Bert A. Rockman (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions* (Oxford University Press 2006); Daniel Béland, *How Ideas and Institutions Shape the Politics of Public Policy* (Cambridge University Press 2019); B. Guy Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism* (Fourth edition, Edward Elgar Pub 2019).

²Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies* (Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California 1992).

³Xiaojun Yan and La Li, 'Greasing the Wheels of Policy Reversal: Discursive Engineering and Public Opinion Management during the Relaxation of China's Family Planning Policy' (2024) 37 *Governance* 179; Elias Klenk and Julia Gurol, 'The Role of Narratives for Gaining Domestic Political Legitimacy: China's Image Management during COVID-19' (2024) 29 *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 337.

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2441859>.

support, and smoothing policy implementation, all in the pursuit of critical political and social objectives.⁴ Yet, despite its significance, China's discourse engineering project—and its far-reaching impact on policy formulation and implementation—remains underexplored. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the impact of discourse in influencing China's COVID policy, unveiling its critical role in contemporary governance.

China's COVID policy, initially successful in curtailing virus transmission, remained in place until the end of 2022, as the Omicron variant led to reduced mortality rates. Contrasting many countries that relaxed their control measures, China's pandemic control policy demonstrated unwavering stringency and stability (Figure 1). By mid-2022, the continued enforcement of the Zero-COVID policy has raised concerns about its sustainability,⁵ triggering growing frustration and mounting economic consequences by November 2022.⁶ Scholars have observed that the discourse surrounding science, coupled with the mobilizational nature of local policy implementation, contributed to the prolonged enforcement of the Zero-COVID policy.⁷

How do ideas and discourses shape China's policymaking and, at times, lead to policy stagnancy? Adopting a discursive institutionalism framework,⁸ we argue that discourse operates as a form of governance, exerting control by transmitting central directives to local governments while also structuring the relationship between the state and society. Its versatile nature makes discourse a vital instrument for adapting to shifting governance goals, yet its interpretative flexibility can introduce uncertainties in local implementation. In light of this, we propose a conceptual framework to depict China's multifaceted discourse strategies. This typology comprises four levels of political discourse, each serving distinct functions, targeting specific audiences, and wielding its unique form of power. We test our theory by analyzing COVID-related posts from Chinese state-owned media on Sina Weibo between November 2021 and November 2022 covering the entire duration of the Zero-COVID policy. Our study reveals that Chinese political discourse is an integration of ideological, imperative, directive, and communicative narratives, which evolves to accommodate shifting policy goals over time. In circumstances where diverse discourses compete, imperative discourse played a pivotal role in sustaining the local implementation of the Zero-COVID policy, while directive discourse provided leeway for local adaptation. The striking finding that discursive variables account for nearly as much explanatory power as all socio-economic factors combined underscores the significance of discursive governance in China, especially during a health crisis when the rule of law is weakened.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on Chinese politics, political communication, and discursive institutionalism in three key aspects. First, we seek to unpack the central role of discourse in China's governance by developing a comprehensive theoretical framework grounded in discursive institutionalism. Recognizing China's longstanding tradition of wielding narratives for mobilization,⁹ this paper highlights the persistent adaptation of discourse in contemporary policy processes, where

⁴Xiaojun Yan, La Li and Zhenyu Zhang, 'Politicization as a Policy Instrument: China's Politicized Policy Narrative of Environmental Protection and Control of Its Social Resonance' (2024) 0 *Journal of Contemporary China* 1.

⁵Ravi Agrawal, 'Fauci: China's COVID-19 Situation a 'Disaster'. (*Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2022) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/04/anthony-fauci-pandemic-china-lockdowns/>> accessed 9 October 2024; 'WHO: Omicron makes China's "Zero-COVID" policy unsustainable' (*AP News*, 18 May 2022) <<https://apnews.com/article/covid-health-china-pandemics-united-nations-c2b99ca8ce5f99f0d2b60aa6dcb8c2d5>> accessed 15 October 2023.

⁶Yue Guan and others, 'The Rally Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the White Paper Movement in China' [2024] *Journal of Contemporary China* <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2024.2356863>> accessed 13 July 2024.

⁷William C. Kirby, 'Zeroing out on Zero-COVID' (2022) 376 *Science* 1026; Hai Guo, 'Human Security and the Party-State-Society Triangle: Rethinking the CCP's Legitimacy Management in COVID-19' in Chi Zhang (ed), *Human Security in China: A Post-Pandemic State* (Springer 2022); Shu Keng, Lingna Zhong and Fang Xie, 'Why Did China's Zero-COVID Policy Persist? Decision Urgency, Regime Type, and Political Opportunity Structures' (2024) 33 *Journal of Contemporary China* 206.

⁸Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse' (2008) 11 *Annual Review of Political Science* 303; Martin B. Carstensen and Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in Ideas: Conceptualizing Ideational Power in Discursive Institutionalism' (2016) 23 *Journal of European Public Policy* 318.

⁹John Wilson Lewis, *Party Leadership and Revolutionary Power in China* (Cambridge University Press 1970); Schoenhals (n 4); Nicholas Hope, Dennis Yang and Mu Li, *How Far Across the River?: Chinese Policy Reform at the Millennium* (Stanford University Press 2003).

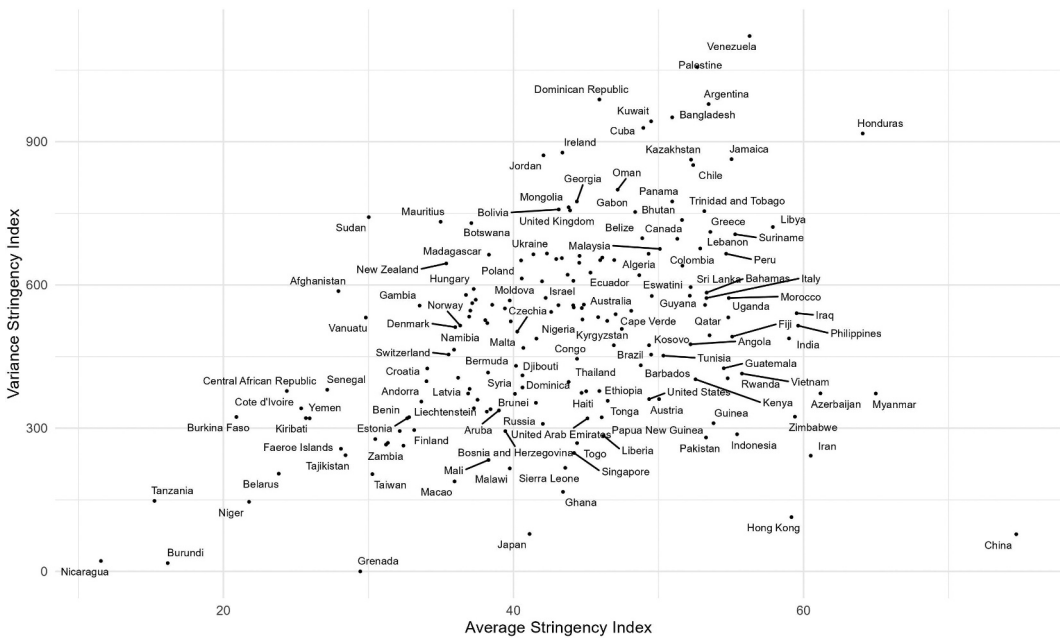


Figure 1. Mean and variance of the stringency index for COVID-19 response worldwide. *Note:* Stringency Index was obtained from the Oxford University COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OXCGR) database. Some labels on the figure have been omitted to enhance clarity.

it is continually reshaped to address increasing governance challenges, shifting demographics, and rising societal demands. The blend of various discourses underscores that as governance goals grow increasingly complex and, at times, contradictory, discourse serves as a crucial mechanism for balancing conflicting objectives and reconciling these inherent tensions. Second, our framework aims to advance the understanding of political communication strategies as part of a broader, highly refined information engineering approach that China has developed over decades. Scholars of political communication have faced criticism for overly focusing on the media's role in shaping attitudes, often neglecting the intricate interplay with political institutions.¹⁰ This study positions discursive engineering as a vital instrument through which the Party shapes the ideational landscape to manage state-society relations.¹¹ By viewing the media not merely as a conduit for information but as a key actor in reinforcing state power, this paper underscores the systematic persuasive efforts made by the party-state, which go far beyond mere information control. Through this lens, we demonstrate how China's discursive strategies have become central to contemporary governance, extending their influence over both policy formation and implementation.

While this study focuses on the Chinese case, it should be understood as a broad contribution to discursive institutionalism theory. Discursive institutionalists have explored the relationship between ideas and power structures, yet they have not fully emphasized the role of securitizing discourse across various institutional contexts.¹² The study aims to address this theoretical gap by highlighting how political discourse operates within a centralized power structure, offering comparative insights into this complex dynamic. Methodologically, it introduces an innovative approach that integrates positivist methodology into the post-positivist and qualitative approaches commonly employed in

¹⁰Annelise Russell, Maraam Dwidar and Bryan D. Jones, 'The Mass Media and the Policy Process', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2016).

¹¹Michelle Wolfe, Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner, 'A Failure to Communicate: Agenda Setting in Media and Policy Studies' (2013) 30 *Political Communication* 175.

¹²Carstensen and Schmidt (n 8).

discourse research. Our models explore the role of political discourse while considering broader socio-economic factors. This innovative approach seeks to address a longstanding methodological challenge—distinguishing policy variations driven by discourse from those influenced by objective socio-economic conditions, all while accounting for the serial correlation between discourse and policy. By bridging these methodological divides, this study offers an understanding of the interplay between discourse and policy in China's governance.

Discourse, Media, and Policymaking

Departing from a behavioral approach, the new institutionalism approach views institutions as the cumulative consequences of social transformations, rather than merely arenas where political behaviors unfold.¹³ Among the early formulations of this approach, historical institutionalism accounts for both actor agency and cultural and social meanings embedded within ideas.¹⁴ While acknowledging political institutions' imprints on the policy process, this approach tends to yield a deterministic view of policy change.¹⁵ As a progression from historical institutionalism, Schmidt introduced discursive institutionalism, arguing that ideas and discourses play a central role in shaping policy change, with political institutions primarily influencing why actors strategically deploy specific narratives.¹⁶

Discursive institutionalism facilitates an understanding of the ideational factors underpinning specific narratives. Schmidt argues that the institutional context serves both as a 'meaning context' that shapes the interpretation of ideas and discourses within it, i.e. what kinds of discourse are deemed rational and correct, and as a 'forum' within which discourse unfolds.¹⁷ Carstensen and Schmidt identify three key forms of power related to ideas.¹⁸ Power *through* ideas refers to actors utilizing persuasive elements to promote their ideas. Power *over* ideas grants actors the authority to impose their thoughts on others or resist alternative ideas without requiring persuasion. Moreover, power *in* ideas signifies that ideational power is ingrained within knowledge systems and institutional settings, potentially even manifesting as habitus. This type of ideational power can be especially potent, as other participants might not even be conscious of its subtle influence.

Discourses reflecting these ideas operate throughout the policy processes. As Campbell notes, policy paradigms and public sentiments reside in the background, while programs and frames operate in the foreground of policy processes.¹⁹ Scholars within the narrative policy framework typically distinguish three levels of ideas or narratives.²⁰ Swinkels defines the role of ideas at different levels: micro-level ideas as 'sense-making heuristics', meso-level ideas as 'strategic tools', and macro-level ideas as 'institutional frameworks'. He further highlighted key mechanisms at each level, such as social learning, persuasion, and socialization.²¹ At the micro-level, ideas guide individual actions, with cognitive science and psychology being the dominant paradigms. Campbell argues that persuasion can operate in both forms: programs, which emphasize the salience of public policies, and frames, which encompass symbols and concepts to promote specific policy ideas.²² Schmidt

¹³James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, 'The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life' (1983) 78 *American Political Science Review* 734.

¹⁴Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor, 'Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms' (1996) 44 *Political Studies* 936; Béland (n 1).

¹⁵Béland (n 1).

¹⁶Schmidt, 'Discursive Institutionalism' (n 8).

¹⁷Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Speaking of Change: Why Discourse Is Key to the Dynamics of Policy Transformation' (2011) 5 *Critical Policy Studies* 106.

¹⁸Carstensen and Schmidt (n 8).

¹⁹John L. Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization* (Princeton University Press 2004).

²⁰Elizabeth A. Shanahan and others, 'The Narrative Policy Framework' in Christopher M. Weible and Paul A. Sabatier (eds), *Theories of the policy process* (Fourth edition, Westview Press 2018).

²¹Marij Swinkels, 'How Ideas Matter in Public Policy: A Review of Concepts, Mechanisms, and Methods' (2020) 2 *International Review of Public Policy* 281.

²²Campbell (n 19).

discerns cognitive arguments for persuasion, which focus on facts and logic, and normative arguments, which appeal to values and ethics²³; as well as coordinative discourse versus communicative discourse.²⁴ At the meso-level, policy actors deploy discourse to construct the meaning of public policies through social interactions and aligning specific societal groups.²⁵ Policy entrepreneurs build alliances to advocate for social change²⁶ and influence policy formulation.²⁷ At the macro-level, ideas serve as more stable values shared by the entire society and are referred to as 'blueprints', 'philosophies', 'belief systems', or 'paradigms'.

The media, as a social setting, operates within an institution where power structure and social norms wield significant influence. Comprehending the institutional role of the media in the policy process necessitates a closer examination of its intricate interplay with institutions.²⁸ Prior to policy implementation, the media can shape the issue attention cycle by defining policy priorities for the public and elites.²⁹ During the consensus-building phase, media emerges as a pivotal player in shaping what the public thinks about political issues, even impacting final voting choices.³⁰ During the policymaking process, the media can broaden the scope of issues, mobilize policy entrepreneurs, and influence the pace of policymaking.³¹ As such, media wields a significant influence on policymakers and the public, thereby extending its reach throughout various stages of the policy process.

Expanding on this consideration of the institutional context, research has adopted Schmidt's typology of simple and compound polities to investigate variations in discourse across diverse political contexts.³² The conceptual framework of discursive institutionalism is well-suited to the current study as well, as its focus on ideas and discourses as institutions that reveal nuanced influences of discourse across different institutional settings. Furthermore, the theoretical framework facilitates the analysis of discourses across various levels of abstraction, encompassing rhetoric, narratives, stories, ideas, and beliefs. In the following section, we apply discursive institutionalism to conceptualize the role of discourse in shaping policymaking within the Chinese party-state. In positioning our study in the framework of discursive institutionalism, we focus on the meso-level discourse,³³ specifically how political actors and coalitions employ discourse as strategic tools to influence the ideational landscape,³⁴ thereby setting the foreground of policymaking and facilitating policy implementation.³⁵

²³Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Does Discourse Matter in the Politics of Welfare State Adjustment?' (2002) 35 *Comparative Political Studies* 168.

²⁴Ibid; Schmidt, 'Discursive Institutionalism' (n 8).

²⁵Swinkels (n 21).

²⁶Hank C. Jenkins-Smith and Paul A. Sabatier, 'Evaluating the Advocacy Coalition Framework' (1994) 14 *Journal of Public Policy* 175; Craig Parsons, 'Ideas and Power: Four Intersections and How to Show Them' (2016) 23 *Journal of European Public Policy* 446.

²⁷Michelle Wolfe, 'Putting on the Brakes or Pressing on the Gas? Media Attention and the Speed of Policymaking' (2012) 40 *Policy Studies Journal* 109.

²⁸Wolfe, Jones and Baumgartner (n 11).

²⁹Frank Baumgartner and Christine Mahoney, 'Forum Section: The Two Faces of Framing Individual-Level Framing and Collective Issue Definition in the European Union' (2008) 9 *European Union Politics—EUR UNION POLIT* 435; *ibid*; Fabrizio Gilardi, Charles R. Shipan and Bruno Wüest, 'Policy Diffusion: The Issue-Definition Stage' (2021) 65 *American Journal of Political Science* 21.

³⁰Tamir Sheaffer and Gabriel Weimann, 'Agenda Building, Agenda Setting, Priming, Individual Voting Intentions, and the Aggregate Results: An Analysis of Four Israeli Elections' (2005) 55 *Journal of Communication* 347.

³¹Thomas A. Birkland, 'Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting' (1998) 18 *Journal of Public Policy* 53; Eric Jenner, 'News Photographs and Environmental Agenda Setting' (2012) 40 *Policy Studies Journal* 274.

³²Vivien A. Schmidt, 'The Politics of Economic Adjustment in France and Britain: When Does Discourse Matter?' (2001) 8 *Journal of European Public Policy* 247; Schmidt (n 23); Mat Hope and Ringa Raudla, 'Discursive Institutionalism and Policy Stasis in Simple and Compound Polities: The Cases of Estonian Fiscal Policy and United States Climate Change Policy' (2012) 33 *Policy Studies* 399.

³³Swinkels (n 21).

³⁴Schmidt, 'Discursive Institutionalism' (n 8).

³⁵Campbell (n 19).

The Rule of Political Discourse in China

The institutional context of discourse is constituted by laws, formal and informal rules, along with social and political norms. In the Chinese context, political discourse operates within an institution where policy formulation is conducted by the Party and government officials under the principle of 'from the masses, to the masses'. While China engages in consultation and deliberation to solicit public opinion, decisions remain concentrated in the hands of authorities.³⁶ State media, regarded as the mouthpiece of the party-state, is frequently used to forge a unified narrative and build consensus.³⁷

In addition to its role in persuading the public, political discourse functions as a communication channel between central and local governments. Previous research finds that China operates under the 'rule of mandates system', where local governments tend to prioritize specific goals mandated by their superior leaders rather than uniformly implementing all policies.³⁸ As a result, central directives can fail to be fully implemented at the local level,³⁹ with the relationship between central and local governments characterized by loose coupling.⁴⁰ Given that information losses can occur within any bureaucratic system due to the principal-agent problem, political discourse functions as a crucial signal for conveying central directives to localities. As local governments often negotiate with the central government, the central government issues vague goals and directives to allow local flexibility in policy implementation, thereby minimizing the risk of policy failures.⁴¹ This creates space for political discourse to clarify the central government's policy intentions while leaving leeway for local adaptation. Therefore, local authorities must 'comprehend' the underlying spirit of central directives, often by closely following official media channels. Subtle changes in the discourse of official media can signal significant policy shifts, as demonstrated during the period of the opening-up reforms.⁴²

The Chinese Communist Party has long recognized the power of words, a legacy dating back to the revolution era.⁴³ Perry argues that early CCP leaders strategically aligned revolutionary narratives with Chinese culture, using slogans, signs, and symbols to mobilize the workers.⁴⁴ In the early years of the PRC, ideological appeals were frequently employed in political campaigns during the Mao era to facilitate top-down mobilization.⁴⁵ In the post-Mao era, political and economic reforms began from Deng Xiaoping's call to free thinking and 'seeking truth from facts'.⁴⁶ This tradition of using discourse for consensus-building persists in contemporary China, evident in Jiang Zemin's 'Three

³⁶Baogang He and Mark Warren, 'Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development' (2011) 9 *Perspectives on Politics* 269 (n 3).

³⁷Wei Li and Christopher M. Weible, 'China's Policy Processes and the Advocacy Coalition Framework' (2021) 49 *Policy Studies Journal* 703.

³⁸Mayling Birney, 'Decentralization and Veiled Corruption under China's "Rule of Mandates"' (2014) 53 *World Development* 55.

³⁹Sheng Cao, '政府信息失真对政府权能的影响及其对策探析'[The Influence of Government Information Distortion on Government Capacity and its Counter measures], *中国行政管理* [Chinese Public Administration] 7, (2009), p. 18.

⁴⁰James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations* (Scandinavian University Press 1979); Xueguang Zhou and Wei Zhao, '英文文献中的中国组织现象研究' [Social Science Research on Chinese Organizations in the English literature], *社会学研究* [Sociological Studies] 24, (2009), p. 145.

⁴¹Yongshun Cai, 'Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China' (2008) 38 *British Journal of Political Science* 411; Anna L. Ahlers and Gunter Schubert, "'Building a New Socialist Countryside" – Only a Political Slogan?' (2009) 38 *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 35; Jing Zhan, 'The Art of Political Ambiguity: Top-down Intergovernmental Information Asymmetry in China' (2017) 2 *Journal of Chinese Governance* 149.

⁴²Haifeng Huang, 'Signal Left, Turn Right: Central Rhetoric and Local Reform in China' (2013) 66 *Political Research Quarterly* 292.

⁴³Lewis (n 9).

⁴⁴Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (University of California Press 2012).

⁴⁵Xing Lu, 'An Ideological/Cultural Analysis of Political Slogans in Communist China' (1999) 10 *Discourse & Society* 487; Michael Schoenhals, 'Demonizing Discourse in Mao Zedong's China: People vs Non-People' (2007) 8 *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 465.

⁴⁶Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict* (Rowman & Littlefield 2008); Nina P. Halpern, 'Economic Reform, Social Mobilization, and Democratization in Post-Mao China' in Richard Baum (ed), *Reform and Reaction in Post-Mao China: The Road to Tiananmen* (Routledge 2018); Tuvia Gering, 'A Xinderella Story: Turning the Chinese Dream Into China's Master Narrative' (2023) 59 *China Report* 243.

Represents', Hu Jintao's 'Scientific Outlook on Development', and, more recently, Xi Jinping's vision of 'the Chinese Dream,' the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation, and 'Common Prosperity.'

Despite this continuity of legacy, the use of political discourse in Chinese governance has evolved over time. The party-state has reduced its reliance on propaganda as the primary means of persuasion and has instead adopted a wide range of media strategies including agenda-setting, framing, and attention-shifting.⁴⁷ For instance, in the expansion of the social welfare program from urban to rural China, discourse among key officials shifted from an urban-first rhetoric to an urban-rural integration rhetoric.⁴⁸ Another example is a reversal of China's One-Child Policy in 2015, when the state strategically adopted two contrasting propaganda styles: overt vs. covert and sentimental vs. rational, to 'grease the wheels'.⁴⁹ More recently, the party-state has increasingly embraced a bottom-up approach in responding to public discourse. While the state continues to dominate the public sphere, it increasingly pays attention to public discourse, incorporating it into policymaking.⁵⁰ The regime has also harnessed the emotional appeal of 'soft' propaganda albeit achieving mixed effects.⁵¹ In summary, the CPC has developed an adaptive, multi-layered discourse engineering system, reviving its legacy to meet evolving governance goals. Far from being monolithic and rigid, the Chinese government employs various types of political discourse to serve different purposes.

A Multi-Layer Discursive Engineering Project in China

In this section, drawing on the insights of Carstensen and Schmidt,⁵² we propose a comprehensive theoretical framework that situates the functions of political discourse within the power dynamics of the Chinese party-state. We refer to this theory as 'the rule of discourse' or 'discursive governance'. In contrast to 'the rule of law', this form of governance emphasizes the central role of state-dominated narratives and communication in guiding behavior, shaping policymaking, and maintaining social stability. In China, discourse functions as a key instrument of governance, with the party-state employing it to guide bureaucratic behavior, justify policy decisions, and mobilize public support. These discourses are widely propagated in state media, official speeches, government documents, and campaigns, ensuring the society aligns with the Party's objectives.

This discursive engineering allows the party-state to adjust its discourse to reflect changes in governance goals, economic priorities, and international relations. For example, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' rallies public support behind evolving state objectives while preserving ideological continuity. As governance goals become increasingly complex—and sometimes contradictory, such as balancing economic growth with social stability—the Party uses discourse to reconcile these tensions. By presenting itself as both innovative and traditional, authoritative yet responsive, the Party navigates contradictions without appearing inconsistent, thereby maintaining public trust. Moreover, the state exercises control over the dissemination of information to ensure the dominance of the mainstream narratives. The rise of digital technologies and social media platforms has further expanded the state's capacity to monitor and influence public discourse in real time.

⁴⁷Alex Chan, 'Guiding Public Opinion through Social Agenda-Setting: China's Media Policy since the 1990s' (2007) 16 *Journal of Contemporary China* 547; Yingfei He, Guoliang Zhang and Lijuan Chen, 'Analysis of News Coverage of Haze in China in the Context of Sustainable Development: The Case of China Daily' (2020) 12 *Sustainability* 386; Jennifer Pan, Zijie Shao and Yiqing Xu, 'How Government-Controlled Media Shifts Policy Attitudes through Framing' (2022) 10 *Political Science Research and Methods* 317.

⁴⁸Haomiao Zhang, 'Discourse Change and Policy Development in Social Assistance in China' (2012) 21 *International Journal of Social Welfare* 433.

⁴⁹Yan and Li (n 3).

⁵⁰Junyan Jiang, Tianguang Meng and Qing Zhang, 'From Internet to Social Safety Net: The Policy Consequences of Online Participation in China' (2019) 32 *Governance* 531.

⁵¹Daniel C. Mattingly and Elaine Yao, 'How Soft Propaganda Persuades' (2022) 55 *Comparative Political Studies* 1569.

⁵²Carstensen and Schmidt (n 8).

Table 1. A multi-layer discursive engineering project in China

Discourse Type	Function	Direction	Target	Mechanism	Example
Ideological	Strengthen ideology Maintain legitimacy	Top-down	Intra-Party Local government Public	Power <i>in</i> ideas	Leaders' speech Party papers
Imperative	Informing policy decisions Urge policy implementation	Top-down	Mainly local governments	Power over ideas	Policies Regulations
Directive	Provide guidance Allow flexibility	Top-down	Mainly local government Partly to the public	Power <i>over</i> ideas Power <i>through</i> ideas	Guidance Initiatives
Communicative	Consult the public Policy deliberation Respond to public demands	Horizontal Bottom-up	Public	Power <i>through</i> ideas	Citizen hotline Online forums

Below, we elucidate four distinct types of political discourse—ideology, imperative, directive, and communicative—each tailored to specific governance contexts yet integrated. These discourses vary in their functions, directionality, and audience (Table 1). We will illustrate each type of discourse using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study.

Ideological Discourse

Ideology is widely regarded as the primary vehicle for guiding policymaking by exerting the what is termed 'power *in* ideas'.⁵³ *Ideological discourse* seeks to establish legitimacy, defined as the 'degree to which institutions are valued for themselves, and considered right and proper'.⁵⁴ This discourse translates party ideology into a consensus shared by society. As Gramsci has noted, the ruling class maintains control through 'intellectual and moral leadership' or 'hegemony',⁵⁵ with ideology disseminated via education, media, and cultural institutions.⁵⁶ Socialist regimes, including China, place significant emphasis on political ideology rooted in Marxism-Leninism.⁵⁷ In China, political discourse permeates the entire party-state, embedding socialist principles into the political and social fabric of the nation. By disseminating party discourse among CPC members and the broader public, the party-state integrates society into the party-state structure. Previous studies have shown that ideologies are powerful in legitimizing policies, mobilizing campaigns, and consolidating authority.⁵⁸

During periods of crisis—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—discourse becomes an essential governance tool. The Party uses discourse not only to manage the health crisis but also to reinforce its legitimacy. As the pandemic posed significant challenges to public health, China strived to maintain performance legitimacy by demonstrating its ability to effectively control the spread of the virus. With the enforcement of quarantine policies requiring social distancing and mask-mandates, the Party needed to justify these strict policies to foster public trust in the government during the crisis and ensure compliance. This was achieved by appealing to ideological discourses such as 'people-centered' and 'people first'. For instance, the Chinese media frequently used the

⁵³Bruce Gilley and Heike Holbig, 'The Debate on Party Legitimacy in China: A Mixed Quantitative/Qualitative Analysis' (2009) 18 *Journal of Contemporary China* 339; William A. Joseph (ed), *Politics in China: An Introduction, Third Edition* (Third Edition, Oxford University Press 2019).

⁵⁴Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy' (1959) 53 *The American Political Science Review* 69.

⁵⁵Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (International Publishers 1971).

⁵⁶Omer Moussaly, 'The Lessons of Gramsci's Philosophy of Praxis' (2020) 1 *Dialogue and Universalism* 119.

⁵⁷Sujian Guo, *Chinese Politics and Government: Power, Ideology and Organization* (Routledge 2012).

⁵⁸*Ibid*; Joseph (n 60); Elizabeth J. Perry, 'From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: "Constructing a New Socialist Countryside"', *Mao's Invisible Hand* (Harvard University Asia Center 2011).

phrase ‘people’s lives above all’ to highlight the strict control policies that were implemented to protect people’s lives. This narrative frames the government’s actions as a commitment to safeguard public well-being, thereby justifying the stringent control measures and gaining public support. This leads to our first hypothesis.

H1: Ideological discourse advocating the CPC’s policy goals is positively correlated with the strict enforcement of the Zero-COVID policy in localities.

Imperative Discourse

Local governments, which play a crucial role in policy implementation, are often accountable to their immediate superiors due to the hierarchical nature of bureaucracy.⁵⁹ Thus, the central government uses *imperative discourse* to mobilize lower-level officials, ensuring that their policy priorities align with central directives. State media act as ‘trial balloons’ for policies, helping local bureaucrats comprehend and implement central policies effectively. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments were heavily responsible for enforcing the Zero-COVID policy despite facing significant fiscal burdens and social resistance. Therefore, the central government urges local authorities to implement prevention efforts utilizing imperative discourse such as ‘staying committed to dynamic zero-COVID without wavering’, ‘must admit all who need to be admitted’, and ‘must test all who need to be tested’. Hence, the second hypothesis is:

H2: Imperative discourse conveying central directives on the Zero-COVID policy is positively associated with the strict enforcement of the policy in localities.

Directive Discourse

During policy implementation, various regional government departments and organizations often negotiate multiple, often competing, interests—a phenomenon that Lieberthal and Oksenberg termed ‘fragmented authoritarianism’.⁶⁰ This process of governmental negotiation was notably observed during the early outbreak in Wuhan, for instance.⁶¹ As a result, in addition to issuing imperatives, the central government often provides directives and guidance that allow for flexibility in policy implementation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, economically developed coastal regions had a stronger incentive to resume economic activities as soon as the virus became under control. To address these variations, the central government emphasized the dual priorities of social stability and economic recovery, which at times appeared contradictory. Recognizing the negative economic impacts of strict measures, the central authority employed directive discourse to balance the imperatives, allowing flexibility in resuming economic activities. Therefore, while Zero-COVID was a top-down mandate, directive discourse such as ‘achieving better coordination of pandemic control and socioeconomic development’, ‘steadily promote the resumption of work and production’, granted local governments a certain level of autonomy in policy implementation.⁶² Local governments may opt to implement the Zero-COVID policy based on local conditions, using central directives as a form of legitimate endorsement. Thus, the third hypothesis is:

⁵⁹Dali L. Yang, ‘China’s Troubled Quest for Order: Leadership, Organization and the Contradictions of the Stability Maintenance Regime’ (2017) 26 *Journal of Contemporary China* 35.

⁶⁰Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China* (Princeton University Press 1988).

⁶¹Dali L. Yang, *Wuhan: How the COVID-19 Outbreak in China Spiraled Out of Control* (Oxford University Press 2024).

⁶²Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds), *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Harvard University Asia Center 2011).

H3: Directive discourse emphasizing the need for economic recovery is negatively associated with the strict enforcement of the Zero-COVID policy in localities.

Communicative Discourse

Social stability remains a key priority for the Chinese party-state, resulting in a substantial investment in domestic security apparatus over the years. Collective actions continue to serve as a veto factor in the performance evaluation of local officials.⁶³ Consequently, the Chinese government increasingly emphasizes the development of a service-oriented government, highlighting responsiveness to public demands through policy making.⁶⁴ In certain policy arenas, deliberative practices are allowed, fostering persuasion-based influence in the policymaking process.⁶⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese public expressed growing dissatisfaction with the escalating measures implemented by local governments, particularly due to the unaffordable social, economic, and psychological consequences. In response, the party-state instructed local governments to maintain social stability, simultaneously incorporating communicative elements into its discourse, for instance, ‘for those in difficult circumstances, we must pay extra attention, show extra care, and provide extra concern, helping them solve their problems and alleviate their worries’.⁶⁶ Hence, state media also played a crucial role in addressing public concerns, shifting the communication discourse to a more bottom-up approach, with ‘power through ideas’ as its primary form of influence. Therefore, we propose the fourth hypothesis:

H4: Communicative discourse responding to public demands is negatively correlated with the strict enforcement of the Zero-COVID policy in localities.

Taken together, local governments operate within an information environment where multiple discourses coexist, sometimes in opposition to one another. Considering the overall effect, discursive institutionalists suggest that crises facilitating institutional change often stem from narratives that have been brewing and evolving over time.⁶⁷ Crisis narrative typically emerges when alternative discourses challenge the existing mainstream ones, leading to policy changes as discursive entrepreneurs use their power and status to legitimize and institutionalize these new narratives. Given that the Zero-COVID policy persisted in China until November 2022, reflecting the dominance of discourses favoring strict control measures, we propose that:

H5: Discourses endorsing the Zero-COVID policy were more dominant than alternative discourses, leading to the continuation of strict control measures.

As we have discussed above, during the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities had to balance pandemic control with economic recovery and social resistance. Provinces responded differently to discourse from the central government due to different local circumstances. We argue that provinces in the less economically developed regions, with limited resources, were more inclined to prioritize social stability, resulting in stricter enforcement of the Zero-COVID policy. In contrast,

⁶³Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner, ‘The Rise of the Chinese Security State’ (2015) 222 *The China Quarterly* 339.

⁶⁴Jidong Chen, Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu, ‘Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China’ (2016) 60 *American Journal of Political Science* 383; Tianguang Meng and Zheng Su, ‘When Top-down Meets Bottom-up: Local Officials and Selective Responsiveness within Fiscal Policymaking in China’ (2021) 142 *World Development* 105443.

⁶⁵He and Warren (n 4).

⁶⁶Yin Zhong, ‘在疫情防控中有力保障改善民生——近三年来统筹疫情防控和经济社会发展的启示①’ [Effectively Guarantee and Improve People’s Livelihood in Epidemic Prevention and Control——Enlightenment from Coordinating Epidemic Prevention and Control and Economic and Social Development in the Past Three Years③] (*People.cn*, 18 December, 2022). <<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2022/12/18/c1003-32,588,946.html>> accessed 17 October 2024.

⁶⁷Hay (n 1).

coastal provinces, driven by a stronger motivation for economic recovery, were less strict in enforcing these measures. This leads to our final hypothesis:

H6: The impact of discourse on the enforcement of Zero-COVID policy varies across regions.

Research Design and Data

Three Stages of China's COVID-19 Pandemic Control Policies

Before introducing empirical strategies, this section provides a brief overview of COVID-19 policies in China. There were three main stages for the worldwide government in fighting COVID-19: the initial outbreak, followed by the periods dominated by the Delta and Omicron variants, respectively. During the first two stages, countries worldwide implemented relatively strict control policies, especially at the onset of the outbreak in early 2020. As [Figure 2](#) shows, these measures sharply decreased within 2–3 months, demonstrating that China's control measures were in line with the rest of the world during these phases (see details in Appendix 1.1).

The divergence between China's control measures and those of other countries began to emerge at the end of 2021, when the Omicron variant began spreading globally, marking the beginning of the third stage. The Omicron variant did not lead to more restrictive policies worldwide due to its lower virulence; however, it led to a fluctuating increase in China's control measure, culminating in the introduction of the 'Dynamic Zero-COVID' policy. On 5 November 2021, Ma Xiaowei, head of the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism and director of the National Health Commission, emphasized that all officials should comply with the goal of Dynamic Zero-COVID in a video conference of



Figure 2. Evolution of the stringency index in China and worldwide.

the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council. The Dynamic Zero-COVID policy features a swift response to outbreaks through massive testing, centralized quarantines, extensive contact tracing, and large-scale vaccination.⁶⁸ The goal of reducing the scale of infections while causing minimum shocks to the economy was a priority, as emphasized by several leading health experts. Since then, Dynamic Zero-COVID became China's core policy and remained in place until the end of 2022 (see details in Appendix 1.2).

Data

To examine the impact of discourses on the Zero-COVID policy, we collected all posts from Weibo accounts of state media between November 2021 and November 2022, covering the entire period of the Zero-COVID policy's implementation. To fully capture the landscape of political discourse, we collected data from 18 central media outlets supervised by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, ministries, or central bureaus. We omitted data from 5 media outlets that restricted their Weibo accounts to be visible only within a six-month timeframe to ensure comparability across all sources. These central media outlets, regarded as the CPC's mouthpieces, wield significant influences across various platforms, including newspapers, magazines, websites, apps, microblogs, and screens, with each potentially hosting distinct Weibo accounts. To create a balanced and representative dataset, we selected one Weibo account from each media organization, considering factors such as the account's establishment time and follower count. In total, we chose 13 central media accounts, including 3 ministerial-level, 6 Deputy Ministerial-level, and 4 Bureau-level media entities.⁶⁹ Additionally, we included the media account of the National Health Commission, the department overseeing COVID-19 affairs. To facilitate a more focused analysis, we segmented Weibo posts into paragraphs and subsequently applied a dictionary to extract content related to COVID-19 (see Appendix 2.1). Following this text processing, a total of 22,188 segmented Weibo paragraphs were retained for analysis (Table 2).

Depicting Chinese Political Discourse: Topic Modeling

We employed a topic modeling approach based on the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to analyze political discourse. LDA is commonly used to uncover underlying topics within a collection of documents and discern topic distribution across documents. Our approach involves meticulous scrutiny of the topics and documents generated by the model, followed by a manual selection of relevant topics to ensure alignment with the focus of our analysis. Specifically, the topic modeling generates the proportion of each topic (θ_i) within each document (D_j). Hence, a document usually contains multiple topics simultaneously. However, if the proportion of a specific topic (θ_i) is too low, that document cannot effectively reflect the content of the topic. To address this, we manually scrutinized these generated topics and documents to ensure accurate reflection of relevant content.⁷⁰ We then aggregated the proportions of each topic (θ_{it}) across all documents (D_j) by week. If the proportions of a topic in a document did not reach the threshold in the manual filtering process, it was excluded from the aggregation.

⁶⁸关于印发新型冠状病毒肺炎防控方案(第九版)的通知' [Notice on Issuing the COVID-19 Prevention and Control Plan (Ninth Edition) (2022)] (*Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism General*, 27 June 2022). <<http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jkj/s3577/202206/de224e7784fe4007b7189c1f1c9d5e85/files/504a946af7e744fb9ad7eb1e0f1f9923.pdf>> accessed 5 October 2024.

⁶⁹The Weibo accounts of 3 ministerial-level media outlets include @People's Daily, @Xinhua News Agency, @ CCTV News; 6 Deputy Ministerial-level accounts include @China Daily, @Guangming Daily, @Science and Technology Daily, @China National Radio (CNR) Online, @CGTN Radio, @CCTV Website; and 4 Bureau-level media entities contain @Farmers' Daily, @China Women's News, @China News Service, @Global Times.

⁷⁰The filtering process proceeded as follows: researchers first sorted all documents in descending order based on their proportions of each topic (i) and manually reviewed them. If the proportion of a given topic (i) in a document (D_j) is too low to meaningfully reflect the content of that topic, this proportion was established as the cut-off threshold, and the remaining documents were excluded from further analysis.

Table 2. Selected accounts and the number of posts (Oct 2021–nov 2022)

Weibo Account	The Number of Paragraphs
@Xinhua News Agency	3620
@Science and Technology Daily	3581
@Global Times	3511
@ CCTV News	2064
@China News Service	1825
@People's Daily	1805
@Healthy China	1574
@China Daily	1362
@Guangming Daily	1325
@China National Radio (CNR) Online	466
@CCTV Website	399
@Farmers' Daily	390
@China Women's News	167
@CGTN Radio	99
Total	22188

Analyzing Effects of Political Discourse: Error Correction Model

Since the data used in this paper are measured on a daily basis and exhibit a high level of autocorrelation, the ordinary least squares estimation is not suitable. Instead, we employ an Error Correction Model (ECM), which can accommodate both non-stationary and stationary time series, simultaneously estimating the long-term and short-term relationships.⁷¹ The basic form of the ECM is as follows:

$$\Delta Y_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Y_{t-1} + \beta_1 X_{t-1} + \beta_2 \Delta X_t + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

In Model (1), the left side of the equation consists of the first differenced term of the dependent variable ΔY_t , which represents the difference between Y_t and Y_{t-1} . The right side of the equation includes the first lagged dependent variable Y_{t-1} , the first differenced terms of the independent variable and covariates ΔX_t , and their first lagged term X_{t-1} . Notably, the inclusion of the lagged dependent variable Y_{t-1} is essential for capturing the long-term dynamics, ensuring the model accounts for prior effects on current changes. The prerequisite condition for the applicability of the ECM is that Y_{t-1} falls within the range of $(-1,0)$ and is statistically significant, indicating the rate at which errors are corrected. If this condition is not met, there is no error correction, and thus no cointegration.⁷²

The advantage of the ECM is simultaneously considering the short-term and long-term relationships among variables, making it well-suitable for policy analysis. The short-term relationship reflects a stable relationship among variables, while the long-term relationship implies that, although the variables may deviate from each other in the long run, they eventually move toward long-term equilibrium, demonstrating the existence of cointegration. Cointegration is confirmed when both Y_{t-1} and X_{t-1} are statistically significant in the ECM. The coefficients for $X_{t-1}/|Y_{t-1}|$ provides the long-run multiplier effect of X . If the coefficients for X_{t-1} is not significant, the coefficient for ΔX_t indicates the short-term effect of X .

Measurements of Variables

The dependent variable of our study is the provincial-level average of China's Stringency Index, which was obtained from the Oxford University COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OXCGR) database. To capture local variations in the implementation of the Zero-COVID policy, we aggregated the Stringency Index at the provincial level. To avoid excessive variation and improve model fit, we

⁷¹Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier and others, *Time Series Analysis for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press 2014).

⁷²Ibid.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

	Stringency Index	New Cases	New Deaths	Vaccine Rate	New Vaccine Rate	Pressure on Medical Resources
nbr.val	54	54	54	54	54	54
min	53.949	0.003	0	161.567	0.001	421.571
max	66.631	5.744	0.02	241.303	0.14	874.714
median	59.553	1.691	0.004	235.231	0.012	552.286
mean	60.507	1.708	0.004	223.012	0.023	574.652
std.dev	3.99	1.625	0.005	23.368	0.034	104.71

used weekly averages for analyses.⁷³ The independent variables are the types of political discourse identified and clustered through LDA.

We also incorporated key public health variables sourced from the OWID database as covariates, including: *New Cases* (per 100,000 people), *New Deaths* (per 100,000 people), *Vaccination Rate* (total number of COVID-19 vaccination doses per 100 people), and *New Vaccination Rate* (daily number of people receiving their first vaccination dose per 100 people). For socio-economic indicators, traditional measures like government healthcare expenditure and debt are typically reported monthly, which are incompatible with our weekly data. To address this, we used social and behavioral data as proxies, considering the utilization of COVID-19 related expenditure and health resources by the public. To capture public attention directed toward the pandemic, we utilized Baidu Search, the Chinese equivalent of Google Search. To measure the pressure on medical resources, we employed the combined Baidu search index for the terms ‘fever’ and ‘fever clinic’. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Results

COVID-19 Discourse on Chinese Official Media

Through a combination of visual exploration and multiple iterations, we selected 125 topics for modeling. From these, we ultimately obtained 16 topics, which account for 13.09% of all documents, as shown in Table 4.⁷⁴ These 16 topics were further classified into four distinct categories of discourses: ideological, imperative, directive, and communicative. Column 2 presents subtopics that belong to the same theme under each topic(θ_i) (see Table A. 3 in the Appendix for details). Columns 3 and 4 show total proportions of $topic_i$ before and after the filtering process. Column 5 demonstrates the count of filtered documents for each $topic_i$.

Figure 3 illustrates the evolution of these discourses over time, adapting to shifting objectives during different stages of pandemic control. Ideological discourse consistently accounted for a high proportion of all discourses, with notable fluctuations likely driven by significant mobilization efforts. For example, spikes were observed around the initiation of the Zero-COVID policy before March 2022, marking the initiation of the Dynamic Zero-COVID policy. Another significant resurgence of this discourse occurred around August 2022, probably related to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China scheduled for October 2022, where the successful COVID-19 control was touted as a noteworthy achievement for the CCP and utilized for propaganda purposes. The values of imperative discourse closely trailed behind those of ideological discourse. Its smaller and relatively consistent fluctuations suggested a tendency for this discourse to guide routine local-level COVID-19 prevention policies. Towards late 2022, its values declined, hinting at preparations for relaxing COVID-19 control measures in November 2022.

⁷³Please refer to Appendix 2.2 for daily descriptive statistics.

⁷⁴As an unsupervised learning method, LDA can generate topics that are not always relevant, thus it is not surprising that discursive strategies account for only a small proportion. Irrelevant Weibo paragraphs mainly include COVID-19 related information disclosure and other topics containing COVID-19 keywords.

Table 4. Results of the topic modeling

	Topics	% before filtering	% after filtering	N	θ threshold
Ideological Discourse	Praising Institutional Superiority of the China Model in Combatting COVID-19	0.944%	0.453%	666	0.04
	Showing CPC's Achievements in Combating COVID-19	0.887%	0.410%	391	0.05
	Extolling Chinese Contributions to the Global COVID-19 Prevention	0.721%	0.200%	377	0.05
	Praising China's Actions in International Cooperation	1.276%	0.826%	635	0.05
	Showing Failures in the Western Response to COVID-19	0.885%	0.410%	732	0.04
Imperative Discourse	Reporting Foreign Politicians Getting Infected	0.700%	0.218%	314	0.05
	Disclosing Central Government's COVID Policy	0.602%	0.105%	115	0.05
	Disclose Health Departments' COVID Policy	0.608%	0.056%	116	0.065
	Disclose Punishment for Inadequate COVID-19 Prevention or Illegal Activities	0.722%	0.198%	190	0.1
	Disclose Personnel Changes due to Inadequate Policy Implementation	0.859%	0.264%	337	0.08
Directive Discourse	Urging Resuming Work and Production	0.752%	0.256%	408	0.05
	Urging Economic Development	0.784%	0.290%	411	0.05
Communicative Discourse	Responding to People's Impacted Economic Interests	0.868%	0.395%	912	0.03
	Addressing Social Mental Health Challenges	0.800%	0.288%	752	0.04
	Addressing the Increasing Pressure on Government Expenditure	0.954%	0.514%	646	0.04
	Responding to Public Resistance over Escalating Measures	0.731%	0.258%	329	0.04
TOTAL		13.093%	5.139%	7331	

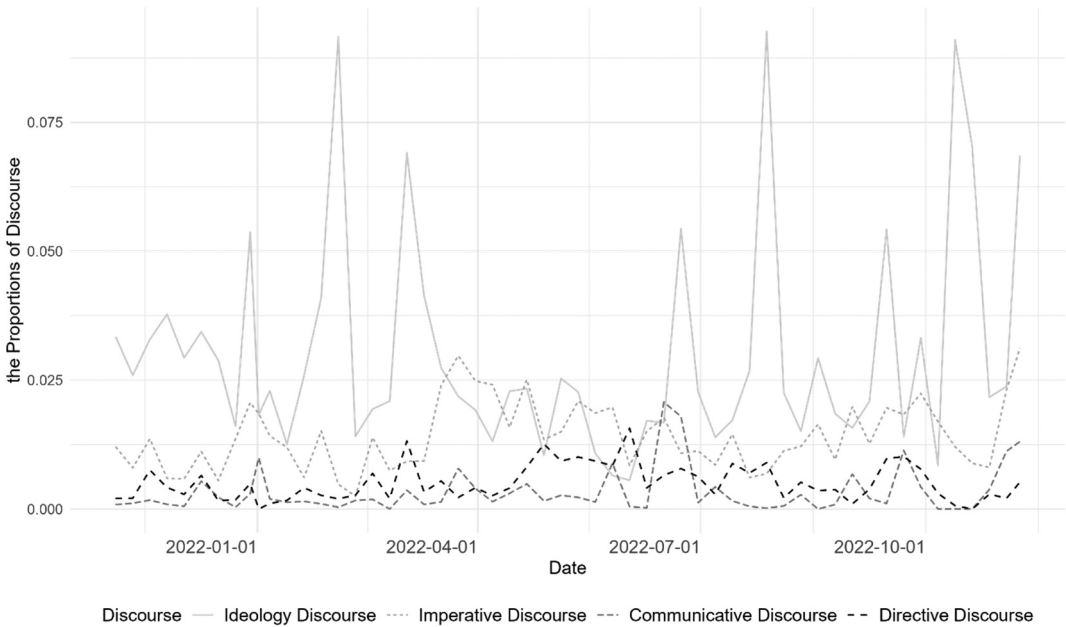


Figure 3. Changes in political discourse per week.

In contrast, directive and communicative discourses exhibited significantly lower proportions. Directive discourse was salient in mid-2022 when the Zero-COVID policy proved effective, and the central government shifted its emphasis toward economic recovery. Communicative discourses appeared the least frequently and sporadically, indicating that the state media primarily addressed public discontent during significant social resistance. The most significant instance occurred in July 2022, when the health codes of depositors from several village banks in Henan were

manipulated, prompting widespread public criticism and responses from official media. However, in other cases, such as rising searches in ‘Unemployment Benefits Eligibility and Standards’ after March 2022 (see Figure A. 7 in the Appendix), public concerns went unaddressed by official media, highlighting the selective nature of communicative discourse. Overall, ideological and imperative discourses advocating strict COVID-19 control were more prominent, while discourses advocating for relaxation were unable to compete with these dominant narratives.

Error Correction Model Results

Table 5 presents the impact of the four types of discourses on the Stringency of China’s Zero-COVID policy. Model 1 serves as a baseline model that includes only a lagged Stringency Index and covariates, specifically public health and socio-economic variables. Models 2 to 5 introduce each of the four discourses—ideological, imperative, directive, and communicative— respectively, and Model 6 incorporates all discourses simultaneously to reflect the real-world setting where diverse discourses coexist.

In the baseline Model 1, only the coefficients of ‘D. New Vaccination Rate’ and ‘D. New Cases’ are statistically significant. Notably, a 1% increase in the new vaccination rate leads to a short-term increase of 45.6% in the COVID-19 policy Stringency Index—which differs from trends observed in other countries. By February 2022, the vaccine coverage in China had exceeded 220 doses per 100 people, indicating a high level of vaccine coverage. Under such conditions, an increase in the marginal number of additional vaccinations would typically be expected to reduce the stringency of COVID-19 policies. Similarly, the decrease in new confirmed cases did not lead to a corresponding decrease in the stringency. Furthermore, the coefficients for ‘Pressure on Medical Resources’ were insignificant either, suggesting that there were no long-term relationships between medical resource pressure and policy stringency. Results from the baseline model suggest that, in general, socio-economic factors alone are insufficient to explain the stringency of China’s COVID control measures.

Models 2 and 5 show that neither ideological nor communicative discourse has a significant effect on policy stringency, either in the short or long term, thus rejecting H1 and H4. In Model 3, the p-value for Y_{t-1} of imperative discourse is 0.131, slightly above the 0.1 threshold but close enough to warrant cautious interpretation. This result could be attributed to the interconnected nature of discourse in practice. Model 4 shows that for every 1% increase in directive discourse, the Stringency Index experiences a long-term decrease of 1011.448% ($173.969/|-0.172|$) and a short-term decrease of 150.077%, thereby confirming H3.

Since different types of discourses can interact, making it challenging to disentangle their individual effects within a single model, we included all types of discourse in Model 6 and carefully evaluated their impact through an analysis of heterogeneous effects. The results suggest that, with all covariates controlled, both directive and imperative discourse show significant long-term and short-term effects on the Stringency Index. For every 1% increase in imperative discourse, the Stringency Index experiences a long-term increase of 398.48% ($121.535/|-0.305|$) and a short-term increase of 106.390%. For every 1% increase in directive discourse, the decreases are 595.91% and 112.009% respectively. Neither ideological nor communicative discourse significantly influences the Stringency Index. It is possible that the influence of imperative discourse is already captured by ideological discourse, while communicative discourse has only a minor impact.

Notably, the adjusted R^2 for the baseline model, which includes only socio-economic variables, is 0.211. When all discursive variables are included together, the explained variance reaches 35.3%, with discursive variables accounting for 40% of the total variance explained. This suggests that discursive variables have nearly as much explanatory power as socio-economic indicators, confirming their influence on shaping policies.

Table 5. ECM estimations on the Stringency Index

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
L. Stringency Index	-0.149* (0.055)	-0.140* (0.066)	-0.158 (0.131)	-0.172** (0.024)	-0.159** (0.043)	-0.305*** (0.008)
L. Ideological Discourse		8.181 (0.547)				2.369 (0.860)
D. Ideological Discourse		-9.707 (0.280)				-13.189 (0.137)
L. Imperative Discourse			13.435 (0.831)			121.535* (0.092)
D. Imperative Discourse			49.608 (0.247)			106.390** (0.023)
L. Directive Discourse				-173.969** (0.044)		-181.752** (0.045)
D. Directive Discourse				-150.077** (0.020)		-112.009* (0.092)
L. Communicative Discourse					-85.931 (0.182)	-95.710 (0.187)
D. Communicative Discourse					-31.171 (0.528)	-76.848 (0.155)
L. New Cases	-0.446** (0.043)	-0.393* (0.082)	-0.453* (0.056)	-0.369* (0.086)	-0.364 (0.111)	-0.375* (0.098)
D. New Cases	-0.171 (0.691)	0.005 (0.992)	-0.248 (0.571)	0.258 (0.568)	-0.216 (0.619)	0.147 (0.746)
L. New Deaths	50.289 (0.466)	42.048 (0.533)	38.238 (0.584)	82.019 (0.236)	51.887 (0.454)	60.270 (0.381)
D. New Deaths	39.736 (0.723)	35.800 (0.750)	68.310 (0.577)	89.787 (0.410)	4.823 (0.967)	161.285 (0.183)
L. Vaccination Rate	0.052 (0.180)	0.053 (0.161)	0.049 (0.211)	0.065* (0.084)	0.055 (0.164)	0.052 (0.151)
D. Vaccination Rate	0.054 (0.878)	0.039 (0.909)	-0.018 (0.964)	0.066 (0.846)	0.074 (0.836)	-0.353 (0.353)
L. New Vaccine Rate	13.321 (0.406)	15.662 (0.317)	12.653 (0.432)	21.982 (0.164)	14.040 (0.384)	23.629 (0.124)
D. New Vaccine Rate	45.628* (0.060)	48.496** (0.042)	38.760 (0.122)	51.085** (0.035)	46.906* (0.054)	48.340** (0.049)
L. Pressure on Medical Resources	0.003 (0.284)	0.004 (0.175)	0.003 (0.290)	0.003 (0.329)	0.004 (0.242)	0.003 (0.310)
D. Pressure on Medical Resources	0.003 (0.410)	0.003 (0.372)	0.002 (0.532)	0.002 (0.465)	0.003 (0.449)	0.002 (0.467)
Constant	-4.126 (0.641)	-5.688 (0.521)	-2.851 (0.775)	-4.993 (0.555)	-4.232 (0.634)	5.115 (0.606)
N	53	53	53	53	53	53
R ²	0.378	0.448	0.410	0.464	0.407	0.589
Adjusted R ²	0.211	0.264	0.214	0.285	0.209	0.353
F	2.261	2.431	2.086	2.592	2.056	2.492
$Y_{t-1} \in (-1,0)$ and significant	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

Notes. P-values are in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. The "L." and "D." represent the lagged and first-difference term of the variables.

Heterogeneous Effects of Discourse

We further tested the heterogeneous effects by grouping the sample into four regions: Western, Eastern, Central, and Northeast China. Figure 4 reveals distinct patterns in the stringency of implementing Zero-COVID policy across regions. Specifically, the stringency in the eastern and the northeast regions exhibited a similar pattern, with an upward trend beginning around February 2022, reaching its peak in April, followed by a gradual decline and then a subsequent rise in August. Provinces in Central China displayed a more consistent upward trajectory throughout the period. In Western China, the stringency remained relatively stable until August, experiencing a sharp increase thereafter.

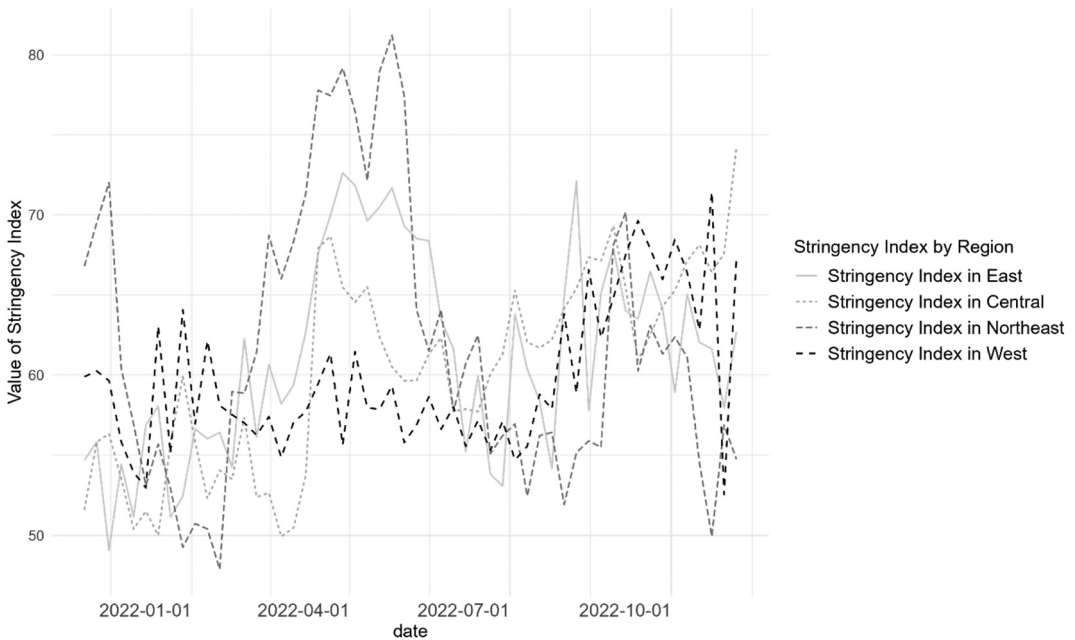


Figure 4. Evolution of the stringency index in different regions in China.

Table 6 shows that regions exhibit similar patterns, most notably the positive long-term significant effects of imperative discourse, except in the northeast region, which does not meet the cointegration requirement. However, different discourses have varying effects on the Stringency Index across regions. Ideological discourse shows a significantly positive influence in Central China, possibly due to the effectiveness of the pandemic control in Wuhan, which thereby reinforces the implementation of strict measures in this region. Imperative discourse manifests a positive short-term effect in Central China and is nearly significant in Western China ($p = 0.131$). Though both directive and imperative discourses are significant in Model 6, directive discourse alone lacks significance in any individual region. Communicative discourse exerted a negative long-term impact on the Stringency Index only in Eastern China. This finding aligns with expectations, as the governments in coastal provinces had greater incentives to resume economic activities and demonstrated higher responsiveness to public concerns. These diverse patterns observed across regions lend support to Hypothesis 6.

Discussion

As China advances toward modern governance driven by sophisticated digital technologies, discourse—a legacy rooted in its revolutionary phase—remains central to shaping policy-making. Drawing from the discursive institutionalism framework, this paper introduces a theoretical framework, ‘the rule of governance’ or ‘discursive governance’, that illustrates China’s multifaceted discursive engineering project. This project strategically adapts narratives to align with shifting policy goals, manage public opinion, and reinforce state legitimacy, ensuring that discourse serves as a key form for governance in an increasingly diverse society. It encompasses ideological, imperative, directive, and communicative discourses—elements that have evolved yet still carry the revolutionary legacy of the Party. Using the Zero-COVID policy as a case study, we demonstrate that China’s discursive strategy is designed to achieve multiple governance goals while simultaneously balancing central-local

Table 6. ECM estimations on the Stringency Index (by region)

	(1) Stringency Index of Eastern China	(2) Stringency Index of Central China	(3) Stringency Index of Western China	(4) Stringency Index of Northeast China
L. Stringency Index (by region)	-0.521*** (0.000)	-0.190** (0.026)	-0.491*** (0.001)	-0.116 (0.203)
L. Ideological Discourse	53.155 (0.245)	53.066* (0.062)	48.432 (0.208)	-46.062 (0.320)
D. Ideological Discourse	0.619 (0.984)	23.846 (0.230)	20.664 (0.410)	-41.541 (0.189)
L. Imperative Discourse	485.498*** (0.004)	165.221* (0.097)	227.235* (0.058)	19.775 (0.899)
D. Imperative Discourse	133.773 (0.281)	258.312*** (0.001)	167.795 (0.131)	192.402 (0.113)
L. Directive Discourse	209.132 (0.385)	-49.979 (0.728)	-88.560 (0.653)	-202.598 (0.432)
D. Directive Discourse	190.714 (0.365)	-98.967 (0.437)	34.454 (0.842)	-64.947 (0.783)
L. Communicative Discourse	-383.582* (0.080)	116.580 (0.347)	-108.830 (0.521)	13.997 (0.948)
D. Communicative Discourse	9.363 (0.963)	20.804 (0.838)	-224.168 (0.106)	49.898 (0.774)
Constant	23.689*** (0.003)	7.662 (0.102)	25.775*** (0.002)	8.956* (0.084)
N	53	53	53	53
R ²	0.408	0.490	0.608	0.381
Adjusted R ²	0.211	0.320	0.477	0.195
F	2.071	2.886	4.653	2.053
Y _{t-1} ∈ (-1,0) and significant	Y	Y	Y	N

Note: Vaccine-related and Baidu index variables were excluded because only national data can be accessed. *P*-values in parentheses; **p* < 0.1, ***p* < 0.05, ****p* < 0.01. The “L” and “D” represent the lagged and first-difference term of the variables.

relations and managing state-society interactions. The finding that socio-economic factors provide limited explanatory power for the variations in implementing the Zero-COVID policy, while political discourse significantly accounts for this variation, underscores the prominence of discourse in shaping China’s public policy. This underscores the Party’s revival of the conventional measures as a means to mobilize the bureaucrats and the masses, particularly in the face of significant challenges.

This paper contributes to the theory of discursive institutionalism by offering a comparative lens that highlights how power relations among policy actors influence the efficacy of discourse. The multifaceted nature of these discourses reflects the inherent power dynamics within the Party-state. Ideological discourse remains crucial for maintaining policy legitimacy, persuading the public, and justifying the state’s actions. It plays an essential role in framing the government’s narrative, ensuring that policy measures are not only understood but accepted by the public. The interplay between ideological, imperative, directive, and communicative discourses allows the government to maintain a balance between control, responsiveness, and legitimacy, ensuring that state policy objectives are effectively implemented and broadly supported. These findings apply to various policy scenarios and enhances our comprehension of China’s unique politico-policy processes.

Our conceptual framework also seeks to advance meso-level understandings of political communication strategies as part of China's broader information engineering project. As China undergoes rapid economic development and increasing social stratification, relying solely on repression and information control for governance has proven insufficient. This study aligns with previous research showing that political parties often strategically use narratives to persuade the public and advance their policy objectives. It highlights the systematic persuasive efforts of the party-state beyond mere information control, with implications extending beyond the policy domain. By permeating society with political discourse, the Party deeply embeds itself within the state, shaping the ideational landscape and achieving its governance objectives. Despite the Chinese government's increasing responsiveness to public concerns, during crises such as a pandemic, the emphasis on pandemic control overshadowed the impact of communicative discourse, which is intended to address public demands.

Another unique contribution of this study lies in its investigation into the effects of political communication on policy execution, particularly through understanding central-local relations. While much of the existing research focuses on how political communication influences the public, this study highlights how official media conveys central authorities while simultaneously allowing deviations from rigid policy implementation. The analysis sheds light on the role of imperative and directive discourses in mobilizing local bureaucrats, who are responsible for carrying out central government policies. When competing objectives arise—such as 'Zero-COVID', which prioritizes social stability, and 'dynamic' policies, which emphasize economic recovery—localities are granted some flexibility in implementation. This finding resonates with the fragmented authoritarianism literature, highlighting local negotiation in policy implementation.

A key feature of China's discursive governance is its adaptability, allowing it to shift in response to changing policy objectives. The adaptive nature of discourse enables the Party to be flexible in its policymaking without appearing inconsistent. However, the reliance on discourse in governance introduces significant uncertainty, leading to potential misinterpretations between the central government and localities and over-enforcement at each level. The overwhelming influence of ideological and imperative discourse can make timely policy changes difficult, potentially contributing to policy stagnation. In this case, state media emphasized ideological imperative discourse, consistently reinforcing the stringency of the Zero-COVID policy. This emphasis led local officials to adopt one-size-fits-all and increasingly strict measures in implementing the Zero-COVID policy, with some even competing for stricter enforcement. Even when the central government signaled policy relaxation at the end of 2022, not all local bureaucrats responded promptly.

The reliance on discourse in governance may come at the expense of developing the rule of law. Although the Chinese government has increasingly emphasized the rule of law and government responsiveness, discursive engineering ('the rule of discourse') alongside administrative orders ('the rule of documents') continues to play a significant role in driving policy changes and maintaining policy legitimacy, especially during crises. While effective for swift mobilization in times of crisis, discursive governance carries the risk of policy rigidity. Policies can remain tied to prevailing discourses even as socio-economic conditions evolve. This dependence on discourse has its Achilles' heel: when society is inundated with slogans, dominant discourse can monopolize the public arena, making it difficult for alternative policy ideas to gain traction. If discourse remains rigid, it can hinder the consideration of alternative options, leading to prolonged adherence to outdated policies. Policies only tend to change when fiscal burdens and collective actions surpass the resilience of the predominant discourse, which in turn, can erode public trust.

Encouraging open public deliberation that brings in diverse perspectives may help overcome these risks. By fostering a more inclusive policymaking process where multiple discourses can be considered and contested, such deliberation can break the monopoly of dominant discourse, allowing alternative policy ideas to gain visibility and traction. The integration of public discourses into governance creates a platform for constructive debate, where policy options can be evaluated based on a broader range of evidence and

arguments, leading to more adaptive and resilient policymaking. Moreover, incorporating diverse perspectives can enhance the legitimacy of policies by reflecting the interests and concerns of various social groups. It can also serve as a check on top-down decision-making, reducing the risk of policy stagnation and ensuring that policies adapt to changing socio-economic conditions. By encouraging public participation and dialogue, the policy process can become more responsive, and better equipped to address complex challenges.

A key limitation of this study is the reliance on data from state media on Weibo, which minimally and selectively captured bottom-up communicative discourse. Public discourses were more prevalent on other social media platforms, and including such data could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of how official discourse interacts with public discourse. We also acknowledge the inherent challenge of disentangling the influence of discourse on policy change from other factors, particularly the contents of the policies themselves. Recognizing the holistic nature of language, we find it complex to separate discourse from the content it conveys. Drawing on Carstensen and Schmidt's (2016) observation regarding the interplay between power and discourse, we emphasize the intertwined nature of content and rhetoric, which together shape the influence of the speaker. Future studies could further explore the disentanglement of discourse impacts from other institutional factors using advanced methodologies.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was made possible by funding from Tsinghua University Independent Research Grant [2023THZWC17].

ORCID

Zijing Zhao  <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-1794-8865>

Kaiping Zhang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7797-4258>

Data Available Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/6BNEXC>