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Doing Discourse Research in Chinese Studies: Methodological Reflections on the Basis of Studying Green Consumption and Population Policy

Björn Alpermann and Franziska Fröhlich

Summary

As Chinese Studies and other Area Studies have become increasingly sophisticated in the methodologies they use, more in-depth discussions on researchers' discourse-analytic practices seem desirable. This article is thus a methodological reflection, coming as part of the authors' own ongoing research projects. It describes some of the characteristic ways in which discourse fields in the Chinese context are structured, as well as the underlying rules at work. Specifically, discourses in China are politically constrained through "soft steering under the shadow of hierarchy," structured in a top-down manner through the "follow the leader imperative," and bloated due to a bandwagon effect. It is argued that these specificities of the Chinese discourse context pose a challenge for researchers doing discourse research on the country. The article therefore offers examples from two research projects on green consumption and eco-motivated diets and on population policy in China so as to present the strategies that the authors have applied in their own research to deal with such challenges.

Keywords: discourse analysis; discourse research; sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis (SKAD); Chinese Studies; green consumption; food consumption; population policy

Björn Alpermann is Professor and Chair of Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Würzburg. One of his current research interests is population policy, in particular aging and eldercare.
bjoern.alpermann@uni-wuerzburg.de, ORCID: 0000-0002-2493-3011

Franziska Fröhlich is a doctoral researcher at the Chair of Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Würzburg. In her research, she focuses on discourses about ecologically motivated dietary practices and green consumption in China.
franziska.froehlich@uni-wuerzburg.de

Introduction: Discourse analysis in Chinese Studies

Social Science research on China, like any field of Area Studies, often has a difficult standing vis-à-vis the so-called disciplines like Sociology, Political Science, Anthropology, among others. Because Chinese studies do not possess their own set of methods but borrow from a range of disciplines, they are often seen to be less rigorous and sophisticated, when their interdisciplinarity could instead be considered an asset. In reaction to such challenges, the methodological debate within Chinese studies has intensified in recent years (Carlson et al. 2010; Guo 2013; Heimer and Thøgersen 2006).

As the methodological development within Chinese studies has continued, more and more China scholars have been attracted to employing different methods and approaches to make the most of the training they received and to become compatible with trends in "their own discipline" (O'Brien 2011: 539). Methodological plurality is, of course, desirable. In employing state-of-the-art methods to Social Science research on China, however, scholars need to pay sufficient attention to the specifics of this society in cultural, linguistic, but also political terms.

On a similar note, we see a growing body of research using discourse analysis (or at least discussing prevalent social discourses) in Chinese studies (Dippner 2016; Eberhardt 2015; Kolås 2014; Schneider 2015; Yeh 2005). Due to strict limitations of space when publishing in journals, however, questions of how discourse analysis is practically implemented are often left unanswered. Björn Alpermann (2009) has argued elsewhere that Chinese studies are in a process of methodological diversification that affects quantitative and qualitative approaches alike. In the face of the increasing methodological sophistication of their quantitatively inclined colleagues, qualitative China scholars are under growing pressure to enhance their methodological skills in order to demonstrate the rigor of their work (Berger 2015). Therefore, we see great potential in developing the use of discourse analysis in this field and encourage scholars using discourse-analytic approaches to engage in methodological reflections about their practices, their strategies of data collection, and their data analysis.

Against this backdrop, we argue that discourses in China are shaped by its unique political system and social context in ways that present specific challenges for doing discourse research. Thus, discourses in China are politically constrained through "soft steering under the shadow of hierarchy," structured in a top-down manner through the "follow the leader imperative," and bloated due to a bandwagon effect. To further illustrate these points, we describe strategies we have applied in our own research to account for the specificities of the Chinese discourse context. The article is thus a methodological reflection, coming as part of the authors' own ongoing research projects, and also an invitation to critique our approach and contribute to its improvement.

We are convinced that the discourse-analytic practice in Area Studies can benefit from such reflexive endeavors in terms of methodological sophistication and rigor. The article is therefore mainly aimed at scholars engaged in Social Science research on China. It might of course also be of interest to researchers working in other cultural contexts, as an opportunity to look at how their methodological approaches and related methods might fare elsewhere — since they may learn about the cultural contingencies of their own methods (Kruse et al. 2012).

To achieve these goals, the text is structured as follows. In the next section, we first briefly sum up the general assumptions and goals of discourse analysis. We then use the remainder of that section to describe some of the characteristic ways in which discourse fields in the Chinese context are structured, as well as the underlying rules we see at work. We suggest that these peculiarities of the Chinese discourse context pose a challenge for researchers doing discourse research on the country. The subsequent section therefore offers some fresh perspectives and presents the strategies that we have applied in our own research to deal with the challenges we identified.

The structure of discursive fields in China

A broad tradition of different approaches to doing discourse analysis exists (Keller 2013: 5 ff); they are, however, united by their common basis in social constructivism and structuralism (Ibid.: 4). Discourse-analytic approaches hypothesize that humans' relationships to the material and social worlds are mediated by collectively constructed meaning systems. The latter consist of signs which (pre)structure our perception and instruct both our interpretation of and communication about those worlds. The meaning of material and social phenomena and the human being's societal reality is thus substantially constructed in practices of sign usage. Individual signs form part of larger knowledge structures that can be reconstructed. In discourse research, scholars analyze one portion of this knowledge in its manifestation as discourse. They reconstruct the rules and patterns that order discursive statements through the application of interpretive-hermeneutic methods.

We see the specificity of discourses in China as lying chiefly with the ways in which discourse fields are structured there. China is an authoritarian one-party state. Even though its authoritarianism is fragmented, the state plays a categorically different role in structuring discourse fields in China than it does in liberal-democratic societies. The Chinese party-state's influential role consists in its outstanding capacity to shape the rules according to which discourses are produced: to incentivize the sometimes overly prolific formulation of certain discourse statements while curbing or completely precluding the formulation of others. We therefore want to sketch out some of the recurring characteristics of discourse fields in China that we observe, and to lay out some of the rules that we see at work — ones both enabling and restricting forces of discourse production. The rules we describe are of course not uniformly at work in all discourse fields, and every discourse field has its very own logic (Keller 2011: 231); but, some rules are so binding that to not follow them means taking a significant risk.

Political constraints on discourses in China: Soft steering under the shadow of hierarchy

Discourse production in contemporary Chinese society is prolific. Volume does not equal discursive plurality, however. Controlling what people think or how they talk about certain issues continues to be of ultimate importance to upholding the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) grip on power (Holbig 2013). Therefore, the Chinese authorities expend a great amount of effort on maintaining the upper hand in public discourse fields — especially those that touch upon vital interests of the ruling CCP. Where an issue is particularly sensitive, they might even encroach on technologically mediated private communication (Qin 2017; Repnikova 2017). In a time in which the commercialization of the media and the evolution of the internet has dissolved the Party's exclusive claim to positions of legitimate speaking and pluralized access to public discourses, this control can no longer be attained by using only insipid propaganda slogans. In response, the CCP has developed much more nuanced and indirect ways to steer public opinion instead (Brady 2008).

Building on the body of work of political-steering theory (Schubert and Alpermann 2019), we propose to call this approach by the Party soft steering under the shadow of hierarchy. The concept of "soft steering" was first developed to describe a general approach to the governing of behavior, and it aptly captures how the CCP regulates the production of discourse statements. The steering is "soft" in the sense that political authorities prefer to use discursive strategies to guide the population toward desired behaviors (Arndt and Richter 2009); the looming "shadow of hierarchy" (Scharpf 2000) is always present, however. The party-state reserves for itself the option to intervene whenever a certain line of the permissible is overstepped, creating ripple effects way beyond the immediate targets (Stern and Hassid 2012). Speakers may then easily face jail or extralegal disappearance — and such cases have been significantly on the rise in recent years (Reporters Without Borders 2017).

The strength of political constraints on public utterances — how likely intervention is, and how severe repression will be — varies considerably from one issue area to the next. But it also differs across time and space, and what might be safe to say in one specific context may be quite dangerous to articulate in another (Stern and O'Brien 2011). Thus, researchers need to be attuned to these fine details of context in order to understand discourse dynamics and their implications for discourse statements in China.

Of course, discourses are never completely free from limitations enforced by more powerful discourse actors or discourse coalitions, but we argue that the Chinese party-state has a greater determination and is better organized in terms of access to resources to take on any challenges to the messages that it wants to propagate: it can use the full array of propaganda instruments at its disposal. Since this is not the place to review the whole set of organizations and institutional arrangements involved, suffice to say that from the very elite level (Central Leading Group on Ideology and Propaganda) the reach of the Party extends downward through its Propaganda Departments on each administrative level. These Propaganda Departments, especially the central one, are very powerful players whose sole purpose is to provide guidance on what constitutes permissible public utterance and to police its limits, or to use Michael Schoenhals's expression: "to proscribe some formulations while prescribing others" (1992: 3).

Crucially, the Propaganda Departments not only react to violations but actively try to steer the public debate by disseminating certain formulae (提法 *tifa*) for issue areas deemed of key relevance — formulae that all news outlets are thereafter required to use. The use of these *tifa* has a long tradition in China, involving the highest-ranking politicians personally — and continues to do so (Repnikova 2017; Schoenhals 1992: 6). While the party-state thus creates a distinguished speaking position for itself and ensures that its own discourse statements bypass conventional media selection processes, it curtails other actors' access to such positions. The researcher needs to keep in mind that any publication that deviates from a prescribed formulation or from Propaganda Department guidelines risks censure. Prescribed formulations and official guidelines therefore have repercussions even beyond their direct application: faced with censure and potentially more severe forms of repression, many Chinese authors — both professionals and amateurs writing online — practice self-censorship.

The latter might not even be practiced by authors themselves; editing boards and publishers may make editorial or publishing decisions amounting to self-censorship in order to avoid having a publication reflect back negatively on them (Tong 2009). In the absence of more diverse views, many discursive fields have been quite amenable to official efforts at steering mainstream public opinion. Scholars and academic publications are also monitored, although given the smaller readership of scientific publications greater leeway exists in making (veiled) criticism even in politicized fields compared to in the mass media (Alpermann and Yang, 2020).

Online discourse fields are similarly structured, with the party-state using a mix of inundating discursive spaces with officially sanctioned statements and curtailing statements that are considered too dangerous. Reacting to the rise of the internet and social media, the party-state has considerably expanded its censorship and developed related technological skills to rapidly delete news or comments (including pictures) that are deemed a threat. Moreover, the practice of "guiding public opinion" (舆论引导 *yulun yindao*) has been significantly reinforced by using a great number of internet trolls — the so-called Fifty-Cent Party (五毛党 *wumaodang*), given their alleged pay per entry — among other things, to sway the public to adopt the officially preferred frames of interpretation. Irrespective of whether these interventions suffice to create the desired effect (Clark and Zhang 2017; Han 2015a; Shi-Kupfer et al. 2017), the existence of such a large — though not precisely known — number of internet trolls greatly complicates the analysis of online material, since it is hard to distinguish state-sponsored contributors to online discussions from those who might be defending the regime out of genuine conviction (Han 2015b). Furthermore, while dissenting voices are sometimes tolerated to a remarkable extent (Shi-Kupfer et al. 2017) they will likely be silenced whenever they seem to threaten a spillover into offline protests (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). In sum, it can be said that:

> The CCP still censors, but it also does the opposite of censorship. It floods the mass media with competing information, thereby adding uncertainty (Hassid 2008). It muddies the water so to speak. Or in systems-theoretical terms, it increases the variety from which the public must select meaning.
> (Clark and Zhang 2017: 792)

Top-down structure of discourses: Follow the leader imperative

Because of the above, discursive fields in China often display a particular top-down structure. This most strongly manifests itself in politics of course, where the existence of discipline inspection commissions, nomenklatura lists, cadre responsibility contracts, and the ever-looming threat of corruption charges all ensure that the staffing of (speaking) positions is tightly controlled by Party superiors (Edin 2003; Heilmann 2004). China scholars have long recognized the logic that lies behind the processes of policy deliberation. As Schoenhals remarks: “A survey of the history of the PRC suggests that Chinese political discourse is restricted not so much with respect to content as with respect to form” (1992: 20). Susan Greenhalgh, meanwhile, describes it in this way:

> Under the “follow the leader imperative,” neither subordinate leaders nor anyone else is allowed to speak differently or think differently. The rules of the political game require that others always remain within the “speech space” of the top leader, using his words to express their thoughts. They may extract his words from their original context and stretch, rework, or even twist their meaning, but they must express their views in his formulations. In a system in which political formulations are either “correct” or “incorrect”—absolutely right or dead wrong—violation of correct language has been a serious and dangerous political offence. (2008: 51)

This explains why central documents (those issued by either the Party center or national government, or both together) have such an important role to play. They present political narratives and legitimize specific policies (Van Gerven 2019). Generally speaking, central-level policy documents all follow a set line of argumentation: First, they hail the success of previous policies. Second, they discuss areas where there are still problems or new challenges. Finally, they present the solutions to these: either new policies or a reiteration of previous ones, which at times can be hard to distinguish from one another (Alpermann and Zhan 2019). Because the party-state would never admit to having been wrong, except for in truly exceptional cases, shifts in policy stances can only be gleaned by very close reading — in fact, often “between the lines” — of official statements. In the highly formalized language of Chinese politics even slight changes in formulations may hint at much larger modifications in implied meanings. The same is also true for political slogans intended for public consumption.

Since China is a huge country with a high level of diversity socioeconomically, demographically, and in other respects, central-level documents — for all their importance — cannot but be rather vague. As Kenneth Lieberthal concludes, “most Politburo decisions are intended to be followed in spirit rather than in letter” (1978: 77). Central-level policy documents thus leave enough room for interpretation for lower-level administrations to decide what fits their own local conditions best. Instead of stating clear requirements for local governments, they oftentimes will only drop oblique hints and leave it to local officials (as well as researchers) to figure out what they mean exactly. Even when specific policy targets are announced, the measures to be employed in order to meet these will usually be left unspecified. Alternatively, the documents may mention several concrete measures alongside each other, leaving it up to local governments to choose the right ones.

Party-state-related discourses are also affected indirectly by this phenomenon of following the leader. Even in less politicized fields and when no *tifa* has been issued, Chinese authors (academics, journalist, and other writers) are highly attentive to the terminology being used by political leaders or authoritative publications — meaning those carrying the opinions of the leadership, such as the flagship newspaper *People’s Daily*. Again, following fashions in using concepts or expressions is certainly not a behavior unique to China. The difference lies in the scale of this phenomenon, the monocentric nature of hierarchy implied in the process, and the uniformity that it engenders: once a certain formulation has an official imprimatur, it is eagerly taken up by all kinds of authors who use it to publish their own take on the concept — within the limits of the permissible, of course. Many politically tinged concepts are at first deliberately left unspecified (or at least underspecified), which leads to an outpouring of publications all trying to give meaning to this phrase, though rarely agreeing on its content. In many instances, political leaders use this process to farm out the meaning-making to academics and later pick the interpretations they like the most and standardize them — rendering all other readings void (Holbig 2018). At times, earlier formulations are even dropped or replaced altogether; Chinese authors will quickly fall in line. Most often, this process of farming out the meaning-making for official slogans is conducted within academia, for instance via think tanks or specific project tenders (Holbig 2014).

Bloated discourses: The bandwagon effect

A third peculiarity we want to elaborate on here pertains to the volume and nature of discourse statements in China. The sheer quantity of discourse materials encountered can be intimidating, but often much of that is produced by simple reduplication. We see several reasons for this being the case. First, and related to the follow the leader imperative, in politicized discourses repeating what the leadership has said serves to signal allegiance: what counts here is not the content (much less the originality) of what is being said, but rather the exact repetition of the phrases adopted by the leadership to demonstrate that one toes the Party line. To quote Schoenhals, "formalized language [serves] as a form of power" (1992: 1–29).

Second, we argue that through the deeply entrenched practice of following *tifa* noted above, such a "bandwagon effect" has expanded even to less politicized fields like academic discourses. This explains why the pattern of policy documents — praise for successes so far, listing of remaining problems, proposals for policy solutions — is also followed by many, if not most, Chinese academic articles. The bandwagon effect occurs when a topic is introduced as a new political priority, or when subject matters or concepts previously considered taboo are suddenly rendered safe by their receiving of official backing. Once a topic has been officially opened up, it becomes safe to explore — as long as one does not stray (too far) from the authorized reading and phraseology. But it also means that as a researcher using discourse analysis, one must find out where the clues come from that everyone else is following, in order to discover what these discursive strategies ultimately aim at.

We see yet another set of rules at work here: officials and scholars all have their own incentives to produce numerous articles and even book publications (Holbig 2018: 350). Chinese academics are under extreme pressure to publish (Fischer 2014: 42). Like in the West, they are often given incentives linked to high-ranking journal publications; unlike international practices, however, their institutions may even stipulate specific word (character) counts for monographs to be written. Beyond these material incentives, scholars may also strive for symbolic recognition, e.g. by being appointed by a (local) government to an expert panel, which in turn lends credibility to the claim to "scientific" policymaking: "Since scholars and governments representatives both strive to secure legitimacy and power, they form highly symbiotic networks, and their claims mutually reinforce each other" (Maags and Holbig 2016: 85).

Furthermore, in another deviation from practices abroad, higher-up officials are also expected to publish in what are considered academic journals (Meinhof 2018: 331). In a country where the scholar-official used to be the idealized elite during imperial times and where technocrats constitute a large part of the contemporary leadership, it is seen as desirable for politicians to have a few publications under their belts. To achieve publication, both groups of authors often jump on an already-rolling bandwagon by taking up what is considered a "hot topic" — even though they may not be able to add any new insights to it at all. In the case of officials, in fact, their contributions may simply rehash public policy. For the researcher using discourse analysis, this means that the discourse is bloated by repetitions, easily creating a frustrating feeling of déjà-vu all over again. We hold that the extent of this reduplication goes far beyond what is to be found in other societies — occasionally the very same article is published twice by an author, just with some cosmetic changes made to the title second time around — and consequently can only be understood by keeping the above-described structures, rules, and incentives in mind.

Pragmatic research strategies for discourse analysis in the Chinese context

Discourse analysis in action 1: Researching green consumption and eco-motivated diets

Here we turn to our own research to discuss how we ourselves dealt with the challenges outlined in the previous section. In her project, Franziska Fröhlich is interested in the persuasive interventions directed at Chinese eaters convincing them to reorient their food consumption practices in light of ecological concerns. The project looks at discourses on sustainable "green" consumption and ecologically motivated forms of food intake, with a particular focus on statements that address dietary practices. It asks how food and diet are ecologically problematized, whether and how consumers are responsibilized to answer to ecological problems through their food consumption practices, and what eco-motivated practices are proposed to eaters. To address these questions, the project draws on a sample that mainly consists of guidebook and lifestyle literature, but these sources are also complemented by informational and advertising materials published by civil society and economic actors.

As the research question is framed in a very open fashion, the author relies on thematic references, key terms, and speaking positions to sample materials. The initial thematic orientation was toward "eco-friendliness" (环保 *huan bao*) and "sustainable consumption" (可持续消费 *ke chixu xiaofei*) of food. However, more key terms accrued as the author became more familiar with the research field: ones such as "green consumption" (绿色消费 *lüse xiaofei*), "organic food" (有机食品 *youji shipin*), "natural food" (自然/天然食品 *ziran/ tianran shipin*), "ecological food" (生态食品 s*hengtai shipin*), "LOHAS" (乐活 *lehuo*) or "low carbon" (低碳 *ditan*) all indicate in some way the eco-relatedness of food products and dietary practices.

At this point, the top-down structure of discourse fields in China was taken into account. Although policy documents are not the primary focus of this research project, the first in-depth analysis consisted of a survey of the party-state's discourse on green consumption. The term has steadily gained currency in the context of China's integration into the global sustainable consumption and production regime and has increasingly been placed into the orbit of China's drive to build an "eco-civilization" (生态文明 *shengtai wenming*). A large part of the Chinese government's understanding of what eaters' ecological responsibilities with regard to their food-consumption practices are is encapsulated by this term. Similarly, the government's concern with a "low-carbon economy" (低碳经济 *ditan jingji*) explains why an idea such as “low-carbon eating and drinking” (低碳饮食 *ditan yinshi*) might ultimately catch on. Understanding the party-state discourse thus helps elucidate why China’s guidebook and lifestyle literature is awash with works on green and low-carbon consumption and living. This example demonstrates that the origins of certain terms, and especially whether they can be considered to have official backing, is crucial for understanding the dynamics witnessed in a given discursive field.

However much of the discussion would be lost if only state-endorsed terms were used to search for material, since the relationship between eco-motivated consumer responsibility and food intake may well be framed differently. This consideration highlights the crucial importance of theoretical “sensitivity” (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 32–35), which is best acquired by combining ethnographic immersion in the field with the reading of secondary literature. Research stays in China were used to visit places important to discourse production, so that the author could acquaint herself with the discursive settings, the social actors and social practices involved in discourse production. She visited and participated in farmers’ markets and urban gardens, their community centers as well as talks and events hosted there, ecological farms, events and activities of vegetarian organizations, supermarkets and specialty stores, and in trade fairs for organic, natural, and vegetarian food. This helped her understand why a different part of the guidebook and lifestyle literature was much more focused on naturalness and returning to the land, as well as on a “natural state” (返璞归真 *fanpuguizhen*) of being. Looking at the differences between official and more popular framings of particular issues — and, more importantly, differences in the usage of the same terms — can thus showcase how even state-propagated discourses may face resistance or appropriation by other actors who reshape the meanings conveyed by the relevant terms. Therefore, it is always helpful to at least heuristically distinguish between official (state-endorsed) discourses and popular (societal) ones by looking at the actors associated with a particular discourse (cf. Hsu 2007).

The relatively large number of publications on green and low-carbon living and consumption also evinces the bandwagon effect we explained earlier. To deal with this, the following strategy was applied: using the terms that the author had learnt about through her policy-document analysis and ethnographic immersion, she browsed bookshops, magazine stalls, online sales platforms, as well as public and university libraries. Looking through the blurbs, summaries, and tables of contents — and, if possible, leafing through the books — helped decide whether an item was relevant to the research. Sometimes availability was an issue: Books that answer to faddishly popular political slogans such as “low-carbon lifestyle” might be published in small editions because the publishing house wanted a book with that title or the author wished to make a notch in that specific field vis-à-vis their publications list. These books can go out of stock quickly and will not be reprinted.

For more in-depth analysis, two alternative criteria were relied upon: the popularity of a book as well as it having a distinguished speaking position. Publications were included in the sample that were displayed more prominently in bookshops and on magazine stalls, that went into renewed editions, and that had a longer-lasting availability in stores and on online platforms. Additionally, the authors of the books were looked up to determine their institutional backing; thus, for example, works enjoying support from ministries or municipal governments were included in the sample to see how the government discourse plays out in concrete advice addressed at consumers.

One strategy to deal with the soft steering of discourses in China was drawn from Adele Clarke (2005). The latter suggests that it is necessary to not only scrutinize the material for the positions that are represented, but to always ask for those that are not present too. She offers a heuristic tool that she calls “position maps” to increase sensitivity toward “empty positions” in the material, achieved by making the researcher think outside the box and compare the situation encountered in China to that found in other countries. Ecological-related food consumption practices are not among the most sensitive topics in China, which is why no overt censorship happens to the best of the author’s knowledge. Drawing on the idea of soft steering, it becomes clear that non-state actors might not directly refer to those they want to distance themselves from and criticize should they be state agencies. A smaller study on discourses of alternative food networks, for example, showed that official agricultural policy and state support for large agribusinesses were not addressed, even though the discourses clearly constituted themselves in contrast to those two things (Fröhlich 2018). Having considered potential constraints on the discourses under investigation, the follow-up questions will then be: Why are those positions missing? What are the rules at work here?

Discourse analysis in action 2: Researching population policy

In his project on population policy, Björn Alpermann compares official and academic discourses to examine how policy thinking has evolved from a focus on restricting to encouraging births, and furthermore from birth-control to aging-related policies in general (Alpermann and Zhan 2019; Alpermann and Yang, 2020). In contrast to what was the case in previous decades, official texts (such as policy documents, leadership speeches, and similar) are nowadays relatively easy to find over the internet — except for internal documents of course. This does not mean that availability has completely ceased to be an issue, but the websites of official administrations these days usually do have a section for the downloading of “important documents” (called 文库 *wenku* or 政务公开 *zhengwu gongkai*).

However, the nature of political documents — especially those that have been issued regularly, such as action plans in specific policy fields — creates some challenges of its own. As noted above, official documents are often quite bland. In cases where differences do exist beneath the surface between various bureaucratic or political actors, these may be papered over with vague statements. Alternatively, they may lead to official documents that seem contradictory or contain goals that are hard to reconcile. In order to understand these intricacies, it is important to go beyond studying individual documents. Only through comparison across various dimensions can one make sense of these texts.

In this project, for instance, policy documents on two different population issues, birth control and aging, are compared. So, first, there is the dimension of comparison between different subfields of population policy. This enables the researcher to trace how conceptualizations of population issues vary from one subfield to the next, but also to grasp how these understandings influence each other too. Whereas the National Health and Family Planning Commission[1] is in charge of birth control and traditionally places its focus on restricting population growth, the main bureaucratic actors behind aging-related societal problems are other ministries — specifically the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. Their prime worries relate to providing eldercare and paying for pensioners, meaning that they have a different idea about what China’s most pressing demographic challenges are: namely rapid aging and a shrinking labor force. Therefore, this comparison can provide glimpses of contrasting policy stances within the central government itself.

The second dimension of comparison is shifts over time. As official documents never highlight policy reversals and the same measures may be “recycled” as “new” strategies to solve the same problem a number of times, it is only by looking at similar documents from earlier years (or, in fact, decades) that one can one really appreciate shifts in emphasis. Only by reading the previous documents would one see that these are not new ideas; instead they seem to have been tried before, and apparently failed to effectively deal with the issue in question.

This kind of analysis also demonstrates how certain political interpretive patterns and narratives on population developments have become entrenched over time, and travel from one subfield to the other. Thus the idea that certain segments of the population that are excessively large are a “burden” on the state gained currency in the policy debates of the late 1970s to the early 1980s (Greenhalgh 2008: 115). At that time, this burden perspective referred to children; since the mid-1990s / early years of the new century the same perspective has been applied to the elderly, however. In a similar vein, the Chinese discourse of the earlier period placed the country’s population problem in a global perspective (“overpopulation”) and suggested that it was acting responsibly in the face of an global crisis by restricting birth numbers (Greenhalgh 2008: 154). Nowadays, an analogous interpretive pattern of a global population problem is invoked to contextualize China’s issues vis-à-vis an aging society.

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[1] There have been several name changes for this and other administrative organizations. The last one, in March 2018, saw it drop the term “family planning.”

> Xi Jinping gave a speech during the [Politburo] study session he chaired. He emphasized that the problem of population aging is a global one that produces deep-going and long-term impacts on human society. Our country is one of those where the level of population aging is relatively high, [our] elderly population is the largest, [our] speed of aging is the fastest, [our] responsibility of facing population aging is the heaviest. To satisfy the manifold demands of the enormously large group of elderly masses, to mitigate and solve the social problems brought about by population aging, these tasks impact on overall national development, on the happiness of common people, and require us to confront the issues with great vigor. (CNCAPRC 2016)

This deflects any criticism of China’s previous birth-control policies because other countries without birth limits face the same challenge, and shows that China’s leaders’ frame of reference is the developed world — since, actually, far from all countries suffer from aging societies — which is another parallel to earlier official discourses on population (Greenhalgh 2008: 111). In addition, defining the solution of population problems as the cardinal task on which the attainment of all larger goals of state and society depends also has a long tradition. Thus, the “open letter” of the Central Committee sent to all members of the Party and its Communist Youth League on September 25, 1980, that signaled the start of the harsh “one child” campaign explained:

> This is an important measure that impacts on the speed and direction of constructing the four modernizations [of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology], on the health and happiness of generations of children and grandchildren, and that is in accordance with the long-term and current interests of the people nationwide. (Central Committee 1980)

The third dimension of comparison is to expand the sample by moving downward in the administrative hierarchy, and outward from the party center and central government, to other bureaucratic actors such as ministries and commissions. Usually, whenever the central government publishes a circular or action plan then regional administrations (province, cities, etc.) will follow suit with their own. But China has 31 provincial-level units, so that by extending the scope even one level downward from the center might soon lead one to end up with a sample that turns out to be too large. Depending on the research question, it may be more sensible to intentionally select a few localities for more in-depth study. Following the logic of creating maximum contrast, the current project chose for comparison provinces with different demographic profiles.

A fourth dimension of comparison is that of official and academic discourses on the subject matter at hand. This can be employed to fathom what impacts advisors and scientists might have had in related policymaking. To be sure, the exact processes of how ideas are incorporated into policies — or conversely, how policy ideas are “scientized” (Greenhalgh 2008) — is extremely hard to track in a polity as opaque as the Chinese one (Scharping 2019). But at the very least, such an extension of the analysis to academic discourses can show what other policy options to select from might have been readily available for decision makers. It is also striking to see how at least some of China's academics use scathing irony to express their frustration at official policy intransigence. Consider the following example by a leading demographer and critic of China's one-child policy, Mu Guangzhong (and his co-authors). In order to propagate the new universal two-child policy they "propose to take the issue date of the 'Open Letter of the Central Committee to all Party and Youth League Members Regarding the Problem of Controlling the Population Increase in China,' September 25, 1980, and turn it into a day of remembrance, an 'anti-abortion day'" (Mu, Mao, and Zhou 2016: 120).

Ostensibly, they stay within the official speech space since they present suggestions for improving the implementation of official policy. But any reader will understand the subtext of their acerbic suggestion: that a cruel policy has been enforced far too long, leading to millions of abortions and exacerbating today's aging problems. Notably, this criticism is much more forthright today than the more veiled attacks on the one-child policy before its eventual lifting — though there are some exceptions to be found in the less academic literature (see Scharping 2019).

Given that the body of work on this — indeed, on virtually any — topic in Chinese is so large due to the mechanisms described in the previous section, another source of information is called on so that the outside researcher can find his way forward: namely expert interviews. These can serve to identify diverging positions on policy issues that are often only hinted at rather than expressed openly in Chinese academic discourses (remember that citing sources is not done in the same way as in international academic publications, which usually reference the positions within the literature that they want to challenge or contradict). Like ethnographic immersion in the previously described project, these interviews serve to familiarize the outside researcher with the "lay of the land" in a given discursive field and can also be used to identify prospective cases for the conducting of in-depth analysis (such as which provinces to select for expanding the sample of official documents downward). In addition, they can be used to discuss preliminary interpretations of discourse elements. Some issues that will not be spelled out in public writing due to political constraints may be clarified in an interview setting meanwhile.

So, we propose that discourse analysis in the Chinese case can benefit greatly from incorporating this data source (cf. Zhang and McGhee 2014). But there are two caveats to add. First, it is prudent to conduct interviews with quite different experts (those more versus less aligned with the party-state, those located in its upper echelons versus in more local academic institutions, and so on). It is not possible to take a shortcut by understanding discourses only through the lens of interviewees, since one may easily be led astray or become biased. Second, interview material is to be treated as a discourse statement itself (not as something existing outside the discursive field). Chinese researchers may not even be aware of some of the narratives or discursive strategies they regularly use. For this reason alone interviews cannot replace documentary analysis, but they can usefully complement it.

Conclusion

Discourse analysis plays an increasingly important role in the methodological arsenal of Social Science Chinese studies. The ways in which the context of contemporary China structures discourse fields presents some challenges for doing discourse research. In this article, we highlighted the political constraints and incentives of public discourse, the top-down structuring of many discourse fields, and the tendency toward reduplication of (redundant) content. We explained this bloating of discourses as a bandwagon effect of the follow the leader imperative, and as a result of other incentives pertaining to publications in China. In addition we presented how we ourselves have tried to deal with these research challenges, and attempted in the process to derive some general advice from our experiences.

First, due to the political constraints inherent in China's system it is particularly important to pay attention to positions not taken and voices quickly sidelined or silenced within the discursive field in question. Second, due to the follow the leader imperative even in discourses that are not heavily politicized it is worthwhile to pay attention to official (state-endorsed) discourses, since these often (pre)structure the field in a top-down manner. Third, combining fieldwork or expert interviews with discourse analysis can be effective strategies via which to learn more about the context at hand and for discerning the main arteries along which discourses develop. This helps in dealing with the phenomenon of bloated discourses, which are otherwise hard to grasp.

Since we are concerned in our respective projects with specific questions, not all of the above may be applicable to the full range of possible research inquiries in Chinese studies. We do hope, however, that this contribution can serve as a starting point to deepen methodological discussion on discourse research in Chinese studies more broadly. At the same time, we believe it can help discourse researchers working in other areas to reflect upon the contextual contingencies of their own approaches too.

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