

Understanding the Transforming Biopolitics: Shifts and Continuation in the Official Discourse of the Birth Planning Policy in China, 1956-2003

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Introduction

Background:

- China's birth planning project: the most striking case of applied biopolitics, the politics of governing vital human functions (e.g. fertility, genetic quality, etc.) "in the name of optimizing individual or collective life, health, and welfare"
- The birth planning policy in China evolved in tandem with China's gradual and momentous transition from socialism since the late 1970s.

Contribution:

- This study examines the temporal shifts in official discursive framings that embody biopolitical policy tendencies in terms of the rationalization and implementation approaches in order to decode China's transforming biopolitics.
- While the few previous works that study this topic all solely rely on qualitative methods, this study seeks to mitigate the shortcomings of both qualitative and computational content analysis through inductively identifying and meaningfully interpreting discourse patterns.

Research Question: What is the nature and transformative agency of biopower governing reproduction and population in China during 1956-2003? What broader historical, political and sociocultural dynamics might have shaped this transforming biopolitics?

Data and Method

Data:

- A corpus containing all articles on birth planning that were published in *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) during 1956-2003 (n=1812).
- As the mouthpiece of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), *People's Daily* serves to transmit messages from state to society, bearing the function of "propaganda, organization, mobilization and control."

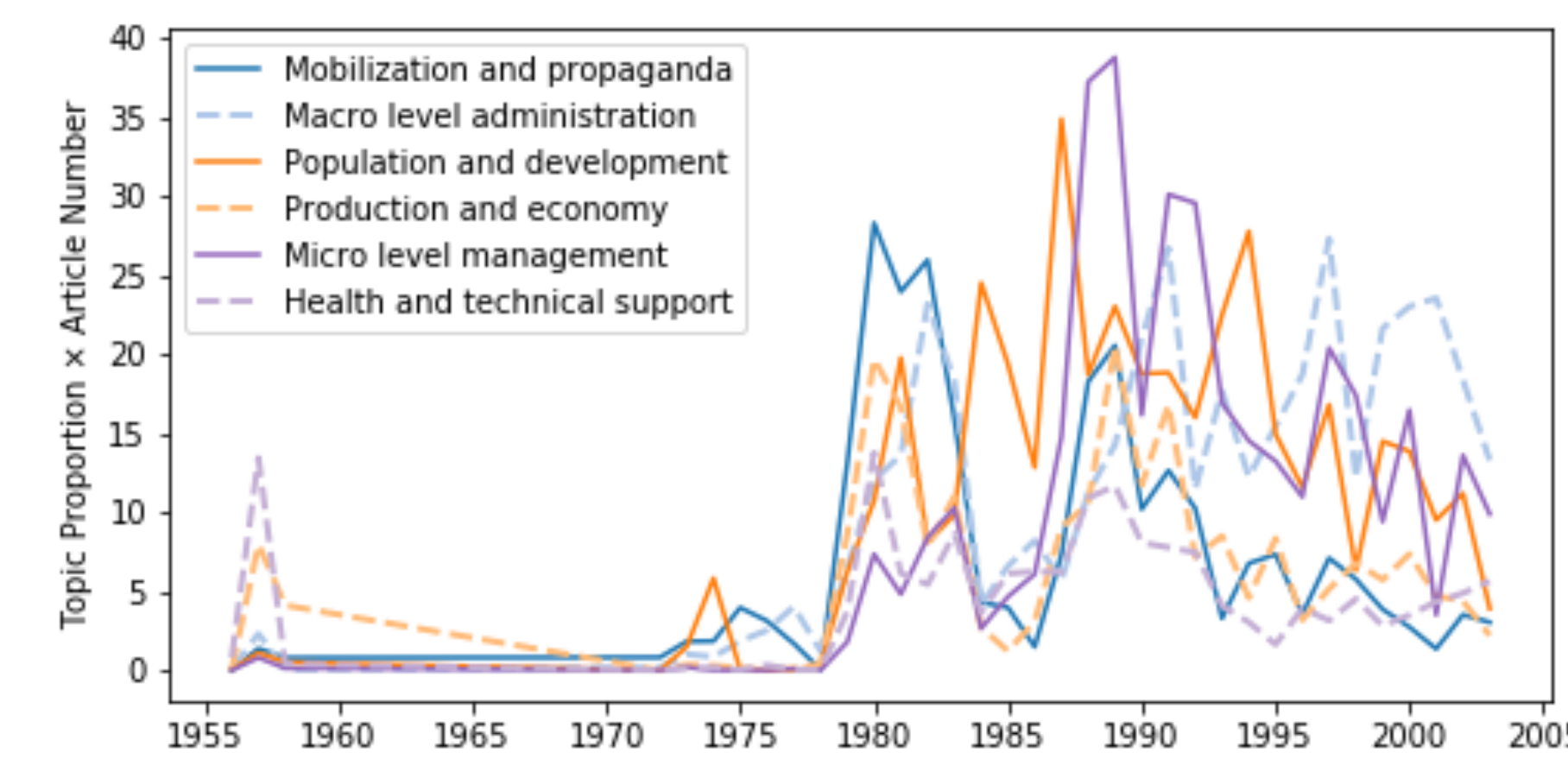
Method:

- Dynamic topic models (DTM) with six topics and three time periods (1956-1978, 1979-1989, 1990-2003)
- 1956-1978: the rein of Mao Zedong, socialist era
- 1979-1989: the rein of Deng Xiaoping, initial Open up and Market reform era
- 1990-2003: the rein of Jiang Zemin, the era when China deepened market reform, fully restored international connections that were cut off during the cold war and started on the breathtaking economic boom.
- Computationally guided deep reading of typical texts of each topic and discourse

The Evolution of Discursive Focus

- Governing individual reproduction in 1950s → governing aggregate population after the 1970s
- Macro-level development persists as a dominant focus since 1950s
- Revolutionary mobilization → bureaucratic administration

Figure 1. The Evolution of Discursive Focus

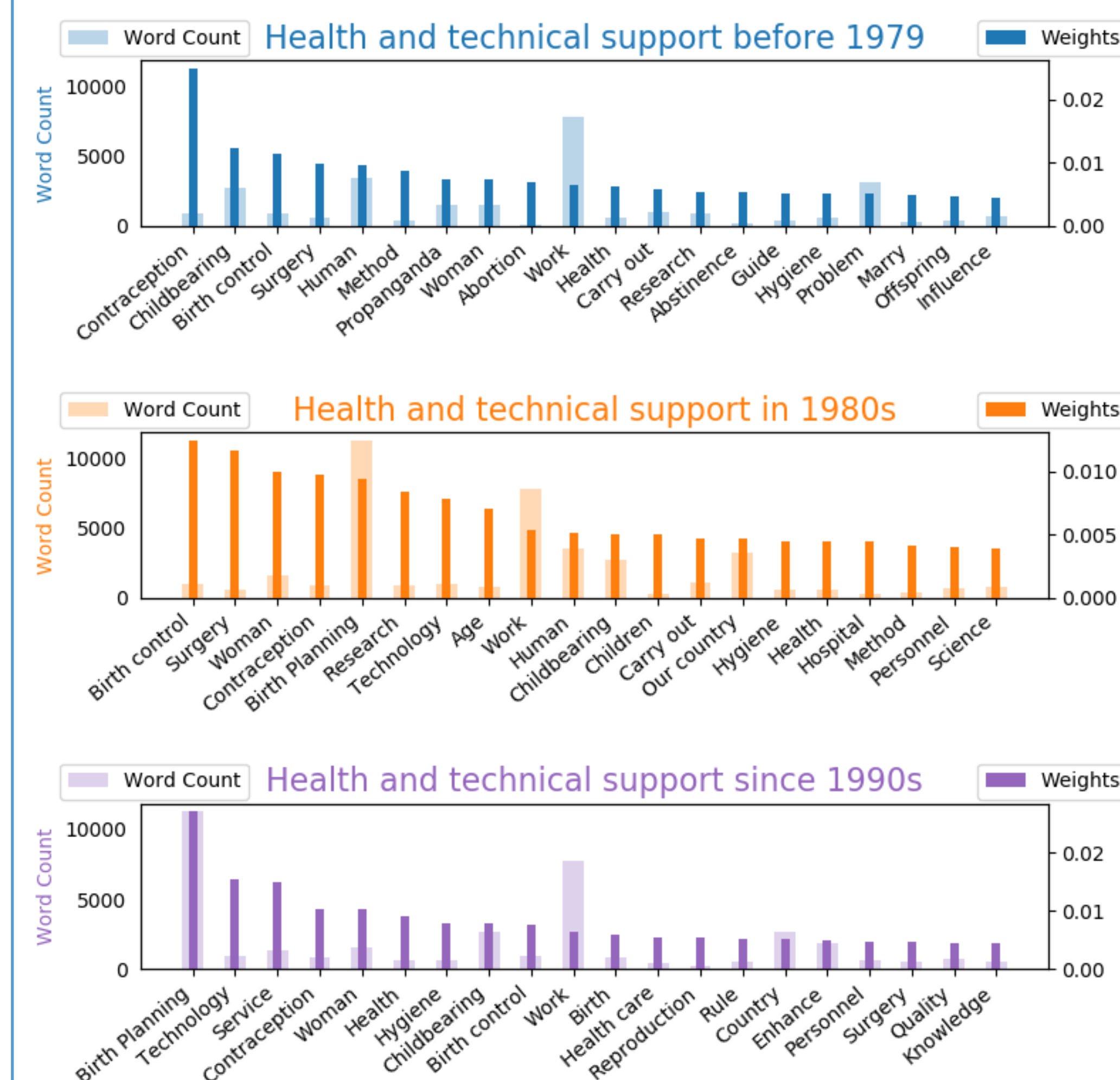


The Evolution of Discourse for Each Focus:

Three Cases Illustrating typical Shifts

• Health and Technical Support

Figure 2. The Evolution of Word Composition of the Discourse regarding Health and Technical Support

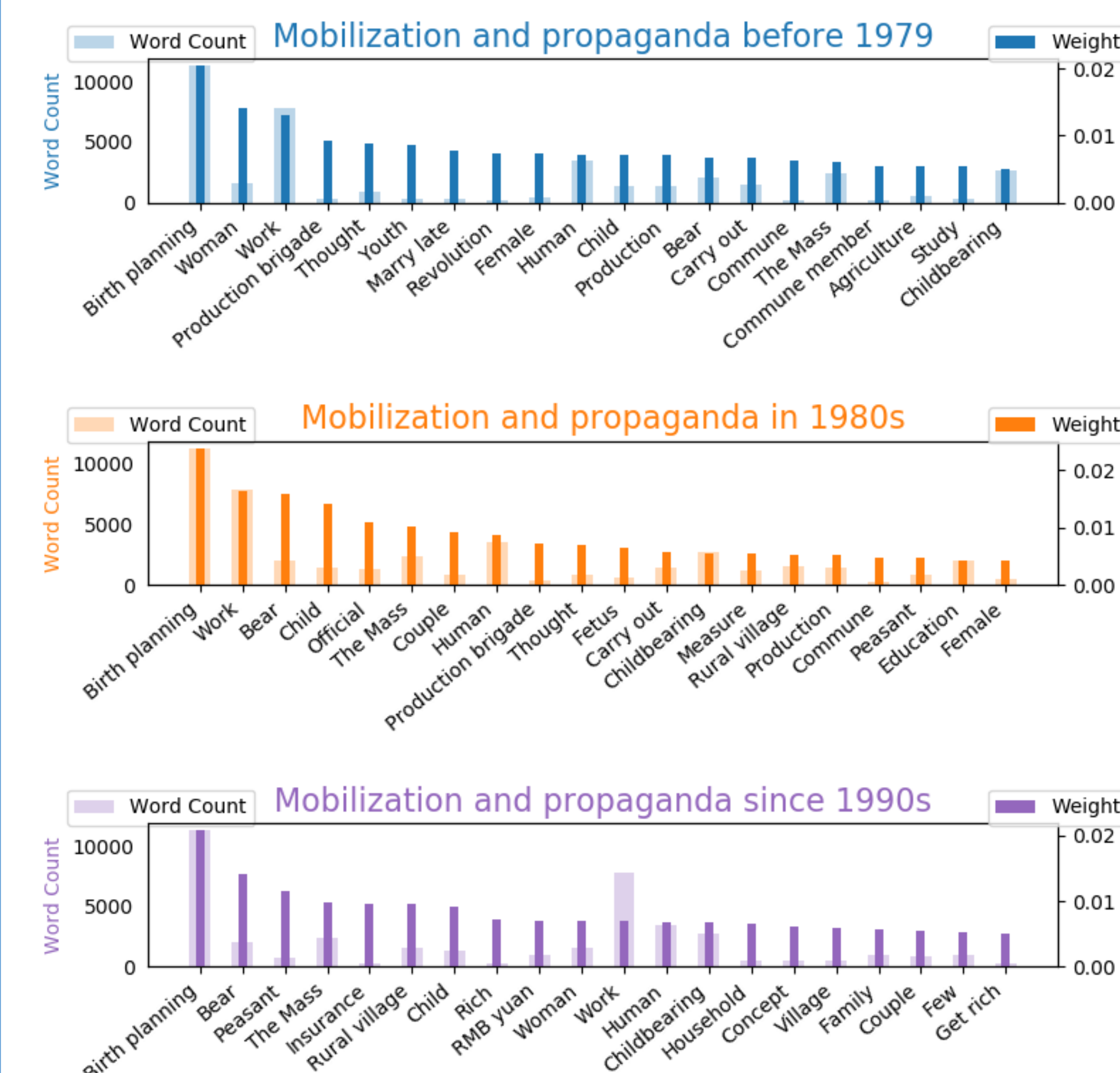


- Propaganda for the improvement of individual health → the direct forceful control of body and reproduction → indirect control through professional service regarding health care and reproduction quality
- Quantity → quality
- The increasing attention to technology, science and knowledge

• Mobilization and Propaganda

- Socialist revolution and woman liberation → economic incentives and individual interests

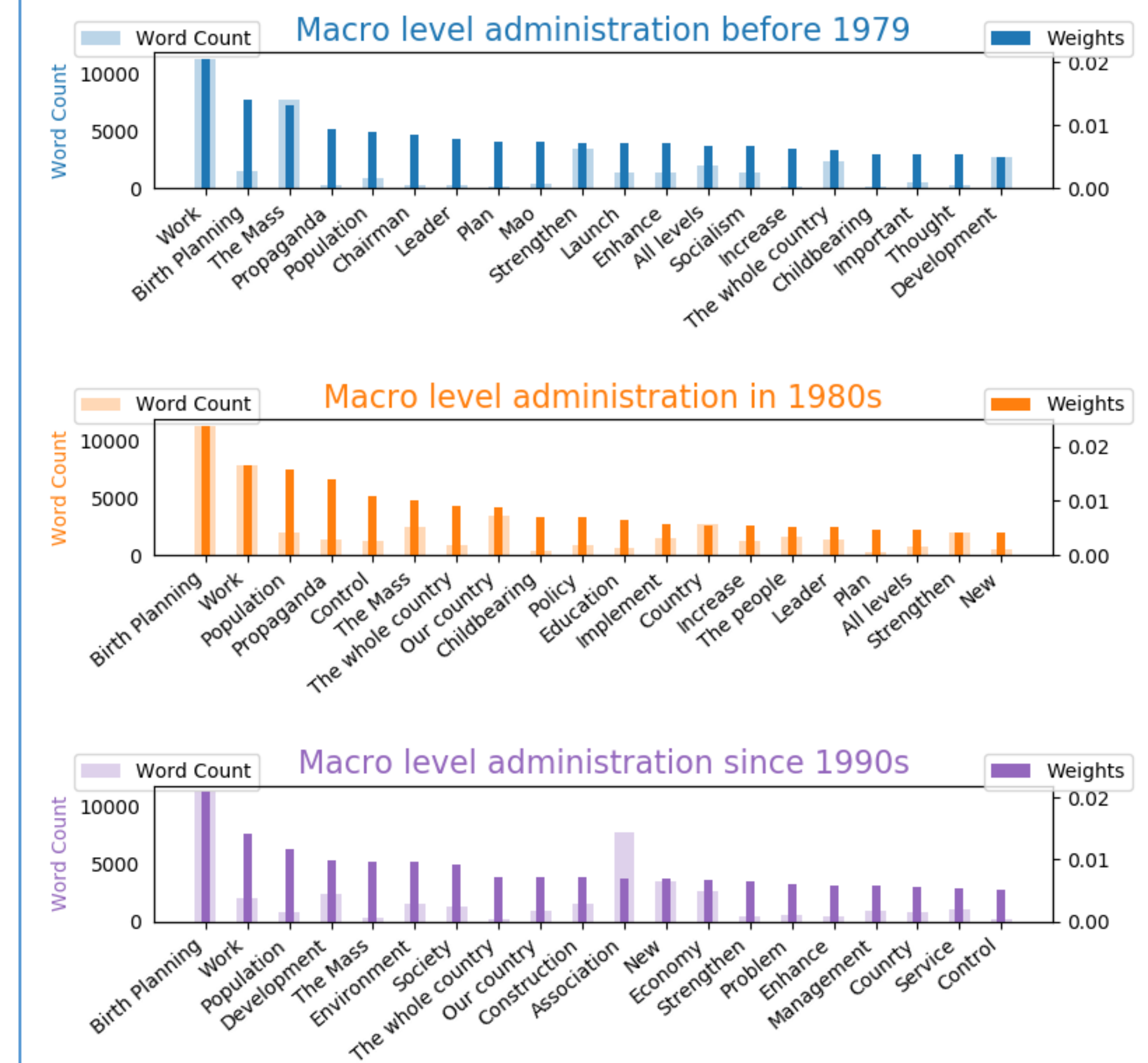
Figure 3. The Evolution of Word Composition of the Discourse regarding Mobilization and Propaganda



• Macro Level Administration

- Socialist mobilization → bureaucratic control → professional administration and service
- Party leader → state → society
- The expansion of developmental goal to include environment

Figure 4. The Evolution of Word Composition of the Discourse regarding Macro Level Administration



Conclusion

- Since the 1950s, individual reproduction and the aggregate population have successively become domains under the state's governance and marking the official emergence of biopolitics in China.
- Macro-level development persists to be a dominant concern in rationalizing the birth planning policy since the 1950s, though the focus has been shifted from the development of socialist production to economic growth and then to a more comprehensive development including environmental sustainable development and the promotion of population quality. It reflects China's modernization struggles.
- The official discourse of the birth planning policy shifted from a revolutionary and socialist discourse to bureaucratic professionalism since the late 1970s and then incorporated a reformist agenda with salient elements of marketization in the 1990s. The transformation of China's biopolitics was shaped essentially by China's post-socialist transition and re-integration into the world.