

# Transformation of Ideological Discourses of China on *People's Daily*

(1977-2003)

Course Project of MACS 30200

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## **Abstract**

After the death of Mao in 1976, the official discourses of the Chinese state have been broadly observed to become less ideological. However, there is rather limited literatures studying the ideological transformation of China, especially by using quantitative method. Encountering with the emerging social movements and changing social economic condition, how did the official discourses of China change? In attempt to maintain the social stability and ideological coherence, how did the authoritarian state deploy different strategies of discourse? This essay aims to apply the computational content analysis of the most influential Chinese newspaper, *People's Daily*, to study the ideological transformation of China. To interpret the de-Maoism and de-radicalization of the state ideology, social economic data was linked with the result of content analysis to examine how social movement and economic growth influence the ideology of the Chinese state.

## **Introduction**

In attempt to maintain social control, how do authoritarian states respond to emerging social movements and changing social economic condition? For years, these questions have attracted scholars working in social movement studies as well as political sociology broadly defined. This project mainly focuses on one of the authoritarian response strategies: discourse deployment. More specifically, I intend to examine changes of ideological discourses of Chinese authoritarian government in response to economic growth and emerging social movements. How do such authoritarian discourses become less ideological over time? What discourses does the authoritarian government deploy before and after movement events? By addressing these specific questions in the case of China during 1977 to 2003, I seek to advance current understanding of transformation of ideological discourses of China.

By using computational content analysis, I first identify the ideological words from the official newspaper of the CCP, *People's Daily*, and then further categorize ideological words to analyze the trends of ideological change from 1977 to 2003. Consistent with the previous literature, my result indicates that the official discourses of the CCP become less radical during 26 years — the terms relating to Maoism and Communism were gradually replaced by weak ideological words that are characterized in an arbitrary semantic space. To explain the transformation of official discourses, I examine the hypotheses proposed by previous literatures, which argue that economic growth and social movements shape the Chinese official ideology.

## **Literature Review**

The official discourses of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have been widely observed to become less ideological during the post-Mao era. In the CCP's official media, the ideological terms featured in the Mao era, such as class struggle, proletariat, and revolution, gradually

disappeared. Instead, the CCP's discourses put more emphasis on economic prosperity, social stability and "socialist material and spiritual civilizations" (Brown, 2012). In addition, although, the CCP occasionally staged political and ideological campaigns to attack the unorthodox Marxist and liberal intellectuals in the 1980s, after the legitimacy crisis of 1989 Tiananmen Pro-Democratic Movement, the Chinese state held a more laissez-faire attitude toward cultural productions, and deployed a much less ideological official discourses. For example, in 2000, President Jiang Zemin proposed the theory of "Three Represents" which stressed that the legitimacy of the CCP's ruling was based upon the "advanced social productive forces", "the progress of China's advanced culture" and "the fundamental interests of the majority". In 2005, President Hu Jintao's theory of "Harmonious society" signaled a more typical shift in the CCP's governing philosophy from radical ideology to overall societal balance and harmony.

The "de-Maoification" or de-radicalization of ideology of the CCP, has been explained by scholars from two previous perspectives, majorly focusing on how the state and political elites influence the ideological transformation. Given that the radical Maoist ideology hinders the development of the market economy in China, one of the prevalent accounts views the de-radicalization as an inevitable consequence of the economic reform led by the state (Dirlik and Meisner, 1989; Selden, 1993; Fewsmith, 1994). Therefore, the official discourses became less ideological as the economy grows since the CCP launched the economic reform during the early 1980s. Building upon the political economic accounts for the de-radicalization of the state ideology, some sociologists emphasize the significant impacts of institutional intellectuals and professional counter-elites outside the institutions on the decline of Maoism. Following the tradition of Theda Skocpol's state-centered view, sociologists analyze how the non-institutional intellectuals interact with the political elites to construct the new official ideology, and to justify the economic reform, which deviates from the Maoist dogma on

Communist economy (Misra, 1998; Ding, 2006).

However, both of these two accounts have some difficulties in explaining the changes in ideological discourses of the CCP. The first account proposed by the political economists, simplifies the ideological struggles within the party-state, and that between the party-state with society. It implies the CCP's official discourses changed from the radical Maoism to the less radical socialism in a linear manner, and thus ignores the twists and turns in such transformation. This can be seen in several ideological campaigns during the mid-1980s, in which the Maoist language, such as "bourgeois liberalization", was still used by the CCP to oppose any heretical economic and political activities and plans. Therefore, this account cannot explain why only after 1989, the state-led political and ideological campaigns no longer occur in China. On the other hand, the second account mainly relies on the significant roles of intellectual elites in constructing the political ideologies, but neglects how the ordinary people influence the official discourses of the CCP, especially in the recurrent social movements in the 1980s. More importantly, although this account successfully points out the contradiction between the logic of economic reform and the Marxist-Maoist doctrines within the state's ideology, it simply argues that such contradiction directly leads to the failure of fashioning a new ideological consensus (Misra, 1998), and thus fails to explain why in the alleged "ideological vacuum" (Lin, 1993) the Party-state still succeeds in prolonging the social stability.

In order to overcome the limitations of the two previous perspectives and to further our understanding of the de-radicalization of the state ideology in a much broader social political context, scholar may refer to the works of sociology of social movement. From this view, the change of state ideology could be seen as a strategy of authoritarian government to repress the social movement and claim the legitimacy of the political regime.

To date, one of the few studies that focus on the relationships between official discourse

of authoritarian state and movement trajectory is Zhao (2000)'s illuminating article. Zhao argues that during the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989 participants used discourses rooted deeply in traditional Confucius culture of China, partly because moral-based state legitimacy in the 1980s made movement participants receptive to culturally and morally charged movement activities. He further presents the connections between state legitimacy and movement trajectory in his following book (2001). Zhao argues that, influenced by societal needs, the legitimacy of Chinese government gradually shifted from ideology-based (*i.e.*, state legitimacy based on puristic Communist ideologies and individual ideological loyalty) to performance-based (*i.e.*, state legitimacy based on improvement of individual living standards and national economic performance) in the 1980s. Accordingly, during recurrent social movements in the 1980s, the authoritarian government deployed different official discourses to reflect different legitimacy bases and cater to new societal needs. Inspired by Zhao's and others' work, our project aims to trace discourse change of Chinese authoritarian government over a relative long period of time (see more details in the next section) and use computational methods to provide more accurate descriptions and dynamics of change.

In this essay, I propose that both economic growth and social movements may contribute to the change of the state ideology. There are two hypotheses I intend to examine: first, as political economists argue, *(Hypothesis I) as economy grows, the official discourses of the Chinese state become less ideological* (Dirlik and Meisner, 1989; Selden, 1993; Fewsmith, 1994); secondly, according to the sociology of social movement, and especially Zhao's theory of the legitimacy transformation, *(Hypothesis II) in response to recurrent social movements, stronger ideological discourses are deployed by the Chinese state, but later are gradually replaced by weaker ideological discourses, to reflect new societal needs* (Zhao, 2000 and 2001).

## **Data and Methods**

To accurately capture the trends of the official ideology of China, this work constructed the text corpus by using the news reports from *People's Daily*. As previous researchers have pointed out, the *People's Daily*, the mouth-piece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does offer us opportunities to investigate the official discourses of the autorotation state during the late 1980s for two reasons (Frank, 1990; Wu, 1994). First, *People's Daily* is published worldwide with a circulation of 3 to 4 million, and thus is the most influential official newspaper of the Chinese government. Second, the CCP always signals its attitudes toward certain social and political issues through this paper. For example, during the Tiananmen student pro-democracy movement, the government published the notorious editorial “Firmly Stand Against the Counter-revolutionary Turmoil” on April 26<sup>th</sup> of 1989 to intimidate the participants of the movement. Also, after the crackdown of the Tiananmen movement, series of news reports and editorials on the *People's Daily* were meticulously framed to construct a counter-traumatic narrative of the massacre, and to attack the student leaders and intellectual elites as “a small handful of people” who intend to overturn the Socialist institutions.

In addition, to focus on the most ideological propaganda of the CCP, I intend to use only the articles on the front pages of People's Daily, since these articles were majorly editorials and the most significant news reports, which are edited by the chief-editors assigned by the Publicity Department of CCP. Moreover, to examine the ideological transformation after the death of Mao at 1976, I chose the time frame of the newspaper starting from 1977.

Since there is no ready-to-use text corpus of *People's Daily* available on-line, I scrape the raw texts from this electronic resource (<http://www.ziliaoku.org/rmrb>), which includes all the news reports of *People's Daily* during 1949 to 2003. As for the dataset of this project, I collect all reports in the front page of People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese

Communist Party, between January 1, 1977 to December 31, 2003. This dataset includes around one million of article reports over 26 years, which is appropriate for the study of official discourses before and after the key movements. To segmentize and tokenize the Chinese texts, the specific Python package, *Jieba*, was subsequently used, and particular non-substantive words, namely the “stop words” were removed from each news report following the general procedures widely applied in the literatures (He *et al*, 2014). After tokenization, the text corpuses of the same individual months or years were combined together to constitute a new corpus under that month or year.

In the preliminary examination, I employed the Kullback–Leibler (KL) divergence analysis on yearly corpus to see how the word distribution of each year vary compared to its preceding year. The heat-map of the similarity between each two years shows that the word distribution gradually evolves from 1977 to 2003 (Figure 1.), and year 1989, when the Tiananmen Pro-Democratic Movement occurred, is a turning point for the transformation of word distribution, which means after 1989, the word distribution is much similar to that of 2003 (on the heat-map, the color after 1989 is lighter than the color before 1989). After reducing the dimension of KL-divergence data, the similarity distances of individual year’s corpus are plotted in Figure 2, which also confirms this point.

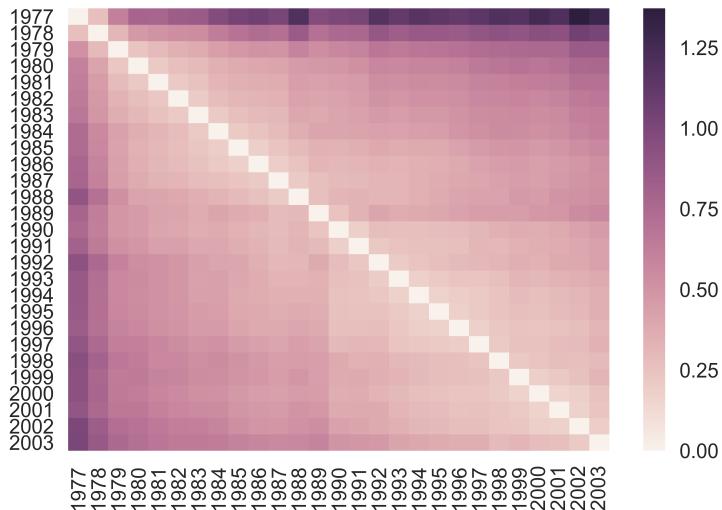


Figure 1: Heat-map for KL-divergence for word distribution from 1977 to 2003 on *People’s Daily*.



Figure 2: Similarity plot for word distribution from 1977 to 2003 on *People's Daily*.

In the following sections, the monthly corpus collection was analyzed by the approach of term frequency-inverse document frequency (Tf-Idf), or each word of the whole corpus was vectorized by word embedding approach to do the further semantic analysis. First, through Tf-Idf and K-means clustering, the ideological words were extracted from the original one million of unique words. Second, the ideological words were further clustered and projected into an arbitrary semantic space, and strong ideological words and weak ideological words were classified. Third, each month's strong or weak ideological words were counted and weighted. Finally, each year's frequency of strong ideological words, as the index for each year's ideology, were linked with social economic data, such as social movement, GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and CPI (Consumer Price Index). China's monthly macro-economic data were obtained from the online database curated by Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta (<https://www.frbatlanta.org/about/atlantafed.aspx>).

## Identifying the Ideological Words

Although *People's Daily* is always viewed as a powerful ideological apparatus for the CCP to deliver its political propaganda, there are still lots of articles contain non-political contents, and not all the words or phrases are deployed to express ideological claims. Also, there are around one million articles with one million unique words in the corpus, it is necessary to concentrate on merely those ideology-related words and articles to save time and energy. Therefore, the first task in this project is to extract the ideological words from corpus of *People's Daily*. According to previous literatures, there are two possible methods to achieve this goal. One is the hierarchical clustering method to deal with the vectorized terms, and the other is to perform the K-means clustering on the term-document matrix (Mou *et al*, 2015). Two methods were both tried on a randomly selected small corpus (around 5-8% subset of the whole corpus). However, I found the hierarchical clustering always offered a unevenly distribution of words in each cluster: some clusters may contain 80-90% of all the terms, but some may only have one to ten terms. As for the K-means approach, first, I transformed corpus into a term-document matrix by Tf-Idf approach. Then, to reduce the dimension of data, a Principle Component Analysis (PCA) was implemented to provide a two dimensional subspace for the term-document matrix. Finally, the K-means clustering algorithm was applied to roughly classify the terms.

As Figure 3 has shown, different settings of K-means approach have been tried, and through minimizing the mean squared error (MSE), the optimized clustering number is 5. By this way, around 2000 terms in the red cluster (Figure 3-C) were selected out, most of which are highly related with ideology, containing the words, such as Socialism, Communism, Revolution, Anti-revolution, Work, Spiritual Civilization, Primary Stage (of Socialism), and so on.

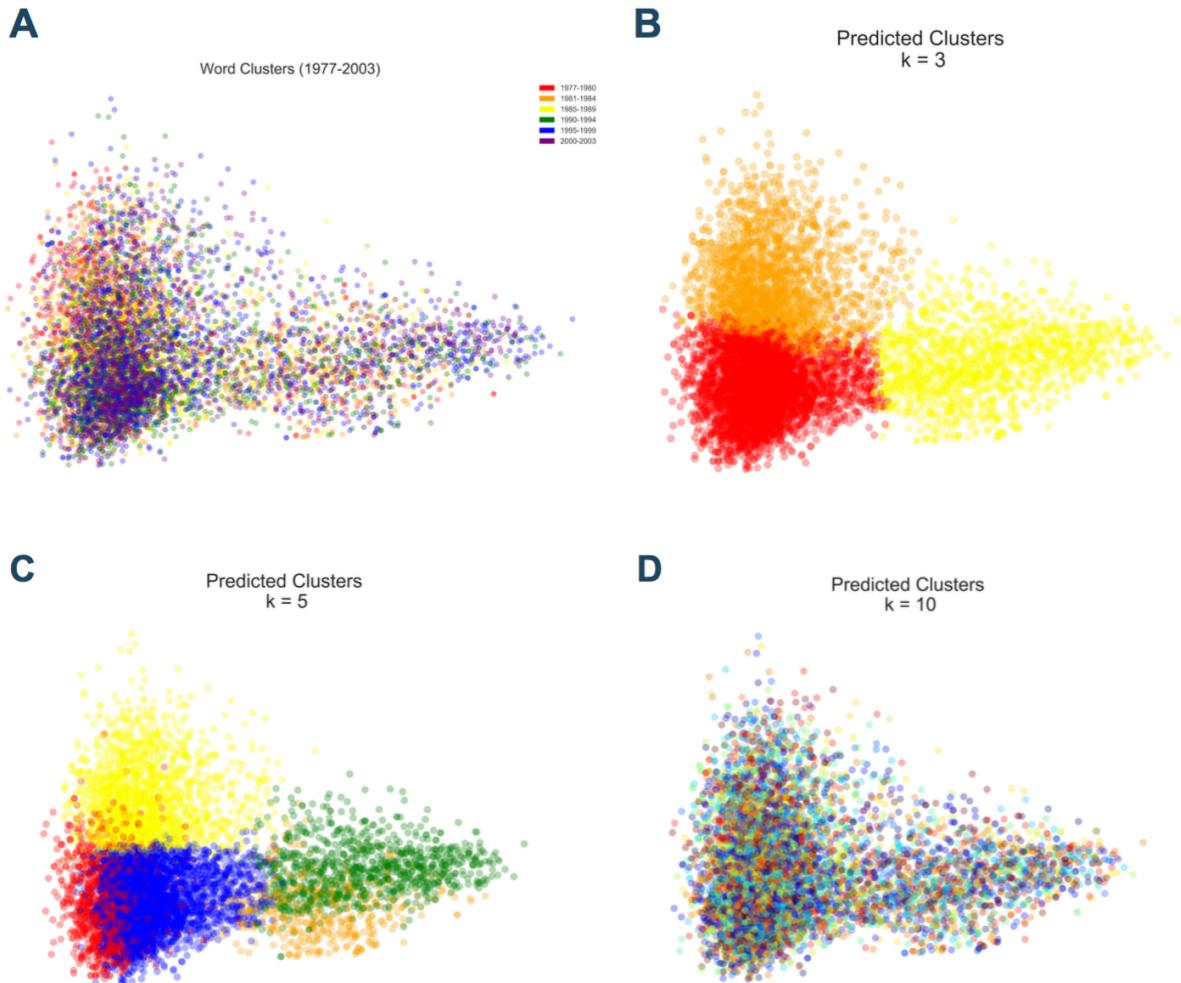


Figure 3: K-means clustering on the PCA reduced term-document matrix, with clustering number  $k = 3, 5$  or  $10$ .

However, this clustering method encounters two fundamental problems: first, in the “cluster of ideological words”, there are still lots of terms not related with ideology, such as We, People, Beijing, Speech and so on; second, it is obvious some important ideological words, such as “Three Presents” (the political guide during the period of President Jiang Zemin), “Scientific Outlook on Development” (proposed by President Jin tao Hu, which stressed the sustainable development, social welfare) and others were not included in this cluster. To solve these problems, I applied the KL-divergence algorithm to figure out the terms which distinguished the corpus in successive years, and combine the unique words (~400 words) with the “ideological cluster”. Thereby, emerging political slogans and

ideological claims were collected into this new cluster, including “Three Presents”, “Scientific Outlook on Development”, “Three Demands”, “Falun Gong”, “The theory of Deng Xiaoping” and so on. To filter the non-ideological terms, the word embedding model was first trained by the whole monthly corpus. Through the vectorization of terms by word embedding approach, the co-occurrences of terms were statistically characterized (window = 5) and a semantic space of terms was constructed (each word with 400 dimension). According to the full word embedding model, the cosine similarity of around 2400 words were examined, and thus only those words with higher similarity were kept in the cluster. Finally, there were 1404 words remained in this pool of ideological words.

In order to characterize the words in this ideological pool, I performed the K-means clustering again on the cosine similarity of words (Figure 5, clustering number = 7). According to the clustering result, blue cluster includes words, such as Economic Construction, Maintaining Social Stability, “Four Cardinal Principles”,...; green cluster includes Party and People, Communism, Revolutionize, Working Class, Class Struggle,...; red cluster includes names of the Party’s leaders, Party’s conferences, and historical events of the Party, such as the revolutionary uprising before 1949; grey and yellow cluster includes some political propaganda, such as, Patriotism, Serving the People and so on; orange cluster include strong ideological words used to attack the political enemies, such as Anti-revolutionary, Bourgeois liberalization, Conspiracy, Anti-Party, Anti-Socialism and so on; the purple cluster includes words related with reform, such as Reform and Opening-up, Socialism, Construction and so on. The clustering result has shown there is certain tendency that the conservative Communist ideology were highly possible to be clustered in to red, grey, orange and yellow clusters, while the relative moderate ideological words, such as Economic Construction, Reform, Modernization, were likely to be clustered into the blue, purple and green clusters. Although the word clustering can provide us some insight to the data we

processed, the clusters themselves do not have any sociological meaning, and thus hard to be further interpreted. Therefore, in the next section, I attempt to project the words into a two-dimensional semantic space to further characterize those words.

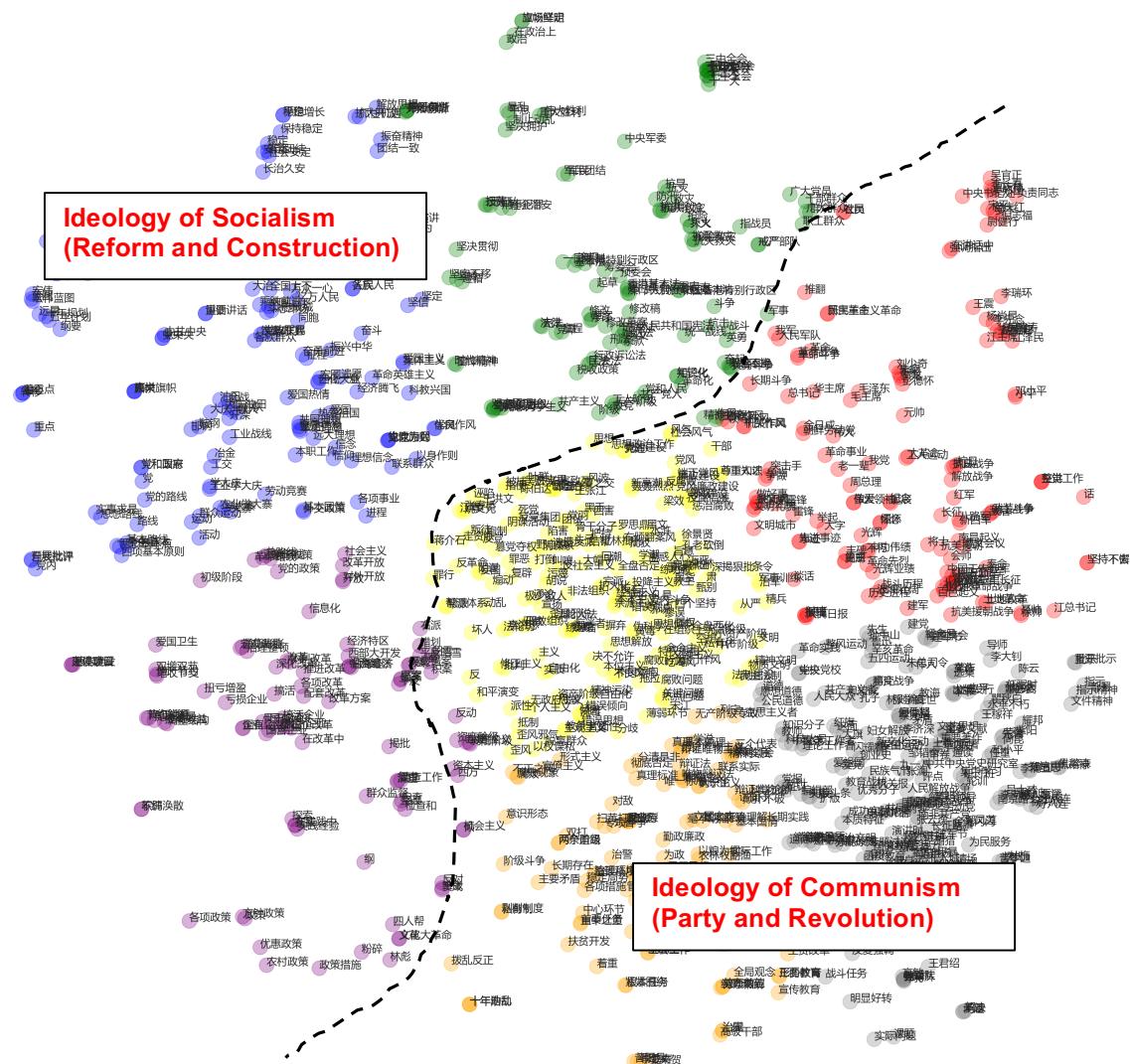


Figure 5: K-means clustering for the vectorized “ideological terms” in word embedding model. (Due to huge amount of Chinses words, I did not include English translation into this graph)

## **Projecting the Ideological Words into Two-dimensional Semantic Space**

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