Greasing the wheels of policy reversal: Discursive engineering and public opinion management during the relaxation of China's family planning policy

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Abstract
How do autocratic regimes use political propaganda to facilitate policy reversals of major significance? In this article, we demonstrate how the authoritarian regime in China dynamically uses propaganda to accomplish rapid discursive shifts in the context of major policy changes. Using a structural topic model for unsupervised machine learning to analyze extensive propaganda materials, we explore how the Chinese Communist Party facilitated the reversal of its One-Child Policy in 2015 by deploying a systematic, precise, multi-dimensional, and multi-layered discursive engineering project. Our findings demonstrate that instead of a monolithic and rigid operation, China's state propaganda is a strategic and flexible discursive engineering project tailored to contingent factors, such as the nature of the policy being advocated, the level of the propaganda venue, and the needs, mentality, and tastes of carefully targeted audiences. This coordinated maneuver of state narrative is key for the effective and smooth policy reversal of major significance.

1 INTRODUCTION
How do autocratic regimes use political propaganda to facilitate policy reversals of major significance? In this article, we demonstrate the way in which the authoritarian regime in China can...
dynamically utilize propaganda to accomplish rapid discursive shifts in the context of major policy changes. From time to time, autocratic regimes have to deal with fundamental policy reversals at the national level. Nikita Khrushchev’s secret report in 1956 condemned the ferocity of the Stalinist rule of terror and opened up a relatively tolerant period future historians would call the Thaw (Оттепель). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) quietly arrested the widow of Mao Zedong in 1976, ending the radical leftist policy lines of the Cultural Revolution and kickstarting the nation’s reform and open-up project. Vietnam announced the beginning of its national liberalization policies, “Renovation” (Đổi Mới), in 1986. Cuba opened the country’s centrally planned economy in 1993. Fundamental policy reversals can be precarious moments for autocratic rulers, throwing doubt on the established political narrative long being advocated by the state, creating or exposing cleavages among the ruling elites and, in the worst scenario, posing a potential threat to the overall legitimacy of the regime (Boettke, 1995; Brandenberger, 2012). The case of China shows that enacting propagandist interference and managing discursive shifts can help mitigate the potential negative impact of fundamental policy reversals on the credibility of an authoritarian state.

In democracies, periodic elections facilitate peaceful policy reversals through the institutionalized transition of power. However, lacking the blessing of electoral legitimacy, autocratic rulers often face higher level of political uncertainty in the aftermath of significant policy reversals. Policy reversals with national political significance disrupt the status quo, creating events beyond the managerial routines of the bureaucracy and introducing political issues to public discussion. More importantly, the reversal of a major national policy requires the invalidation of the existing political and policy narrative on which the ruling regime bases its credibility (Brandenberger, 2012). Without propagandistic or even coercive maneuvers, there is a possibility that the political cost and aftermath of such brisk self-denial may become extraordinary. How do autocratic states such as that of China manage political reversals in such a way that avoids harm to the overall credibility of the regime and warrant a smooth implementation of the new policy line?

In this article, we demonstrate how the Chinese autocratic regime seeks to manage major political shifts and reduce the possible loss of credibility through the state project of discursive engineering. We define discursive engineering as a state’s tactical deployment of discourses bespoke to contingent contextual factors, such as the specific contents and nature of the policy being advocated, the bureaucratic level of a media outlet in the propagandist hierarchy or the intended audience’s specific attributes and tastes. Discursive engineering is a targeted, dynamic and orchestrated propaganda operation that adjusts the discursive strategy systematically and flexibly so as to manage public opinion to the state’s advantage. This coordinated maneuver of state narrative is key for the effective and smooth policy reversal of major significance in China.

In December 2015, the ruling Communist Party of China announced the liberalization of its family planning policy (jihua shengyu, or “One-Child Policy”). China’s strict population planning policy from 1982 to 2015 represents the height of political regulation based on alleged “scientific” knowledge that intrudes on the most intimate spaces of citizens’ private lives. By examining China’s loosening of its family planning policy, we seek to explain how an autocratic regime’s propaganda apparatus can smooth over the effects of a complete reversal of a basic national policy by strategically deploying the instrument of discursive engineering.

Some may argue that in giving people permission to bear more children, the liberalization of the notorious One-Child Policy was generally welcomed. In an authoritarian context, however, liberalizing policy turns that loosen social control are particularly problematic for the regime, as the suspicions and criticisms of the state—both of its old policy discourses and its commitment
to the new policy—then become points of discussion and, thus, public information. The political
effect for more liberalization may skyrocket because the reform is seen as a sign of weakness or even internal cleavage in the regime. Thus, the important point is not whether the policy turn is welcomed or not, but whether the potential threat that the turn poses to the credibility of state discourse can be properly handled by the state.

Using unsupervised machine learning with the help of a structural topic modelling (STM), in this article, we examine propaganda pieces published between 2008 and 2018 in 13 official Chinese newspapers edited and operated by Communist Party Committees at various levels. In China, official party newspapers serve as the Party-state’s mouthpiece, broadcasting its messages, mobilizing the masses and regimenting society. We select published texts that are directly relevant to the reversal of the One-Child Policy. Using advanced text mining technology, we build a corpus of 29,587 valid paragraphs and more than 4 million Chinese characters to dissect the propaganda pieces.

This study offers a rare opportunity to examine how the Chinese state strategically undertook a systematic, precise, multi-dimensional and multi-layered discursive engineering campaign to facilitate the reversal of a basic national policy. Such a campaign involves disparate narrative forms, rhetorical styles and arguments that are customized based on contextual factors. We discover that when liberalizing a prohibitive policy, the authoritarian state shifts from overt to covert propaganda. Also, in terms of the administrative levels of the propaganda, the higher the level, the more rational is its discourse for advocating prohibitive policies; for liberalizing policies, higher level propaganda organs tend to deploy more sentimental arguments. Moreover, effective propaganda advocating a policy turn depends on carefully tailored discourses that are bespoke to the needs, mentalities and tastes of different targeted audience groups.

2 STRATEGIC PROPAGANDA AND DISCURSIVE ENGINEERING

China’s family planning policy was officially launched in 1982 and is perhaps the most widely recognized example of the “science-based” state control of the private realm (Alpermann & Zhan, 2019; Greenhalgh, 2008; Mattingly, 2020). Under the policy, the majority of Chinese citizens were permitted to have only one child. Violations of this “basic national policy” (jiben guoce) could lead to forced abortion, serious state sanctions, or even imprisonment.

The policy began to loosen at the end of 2013 with the introduction of a conditional Two-Child Policy (dandu erhai), which allowed couples to have a second child if either the husband or the wife was an only child. Two years later, a universal Two-Child Policy (quanmian erhai) allowed all couples to have two children.

The conservative and guarded tone of state narratives in official propaganda just shortly before the phased policy relaxations in 2013 and 2015 illustrates the abrupt nature of the national policy reversal regarding family planning. For example, in August 2013, an article published on the official website of the Central People’s Government affirmed that, “unshakably adhering to the basic national policy of family planning” must be a long-term undertaking (CPG, 2013). Yet merely 4 months later, the first-phase relaxation of the One-Child Policy was announced and implemented nationwide.

Even after the promulgation of the first-phase policy reversal in December 2013, the People’s Daily again declared that a universal Two-Child Policy would be unnecessary and harmful to the country as it would surely precipitate population growth that would be detrimental to long-term economic growth (2013a). In March 2014, People’s Daily assured the country that “there is no schedule for a universal Two-Child Policy” (2014) and in March 2015, they maintained that
the implementation of the conditional Two Child Policy “works just as expected” in encouraging population growth, implying that a more radical relaxation of the family planning policy remained unlikely (2015). However, only nine months later, the second phase of relaxation of the One-Child Policy—a fundamental reversal of the basic national policy since 1982—was officially announced and implemented across China.

The complete abolition of the One-Child Policy only 2 years after the initial loosening-up caught most Chinese people off guard. The CCP were faced with the challenge of managing this major policy reversal. From 1982 to 2015, China advocated the One-Child Policy with a scientific narrative and supported it with authoritative state endorsement, which enabled state implementers to inflict brutal punishments on violators, causing considerable social grievances (Greenhalgh, 2008). Abolishing the policy required arguments to be put forward against these state-endorsed scientific narratives.

Scholars have long noted that China’s propaganda state has a wide range of functions in managing public opinion. It proactively shapes public opinion by controlling media attention (King et al., 2017), muting alternative voices (King et al., 2013; Stockmann, 2010), setting the agenda for public debate (Repnikova, 2017), deterring political opposition (Huang, 2015), and fabricating public rhetoric (Han, 2015). The discursive engineering operated by the propaganda state seeks to anchor, direct, and manipulate this public opinion to the state’s advantage.

Previous studies have identified a broad array of propaganda styles used by modern states, including political (i.e., issue-specific) versus sociological (i.e., atmospheric) publicity, agitative versus integrative narrative, horizontal versus vertical persuasion, rational versus irrational discourses, and hard versus soft propaganda (Ellul, 1973; Huang, 2018). Recent studies have observed that states use different styles of propaganda under different circumstances. For example, Carter and Carter (2018) highlighted that the presence of institutional constraints such as pseudo-elections tends to promote honest propaganda that aims at persuasion, whereas the absence of such constraints often encourages power-showing propaganda to deter opponents. Rozenas and Stukal (2019) revealed that autocratic regimes strategically attribute negative economic news to external factors and good news to domestic causes. This selective attribution strategy is particularly salient at politically sensitive times. Field et al. (2018) showed that autocrats deploy subtler media manipulation strategies that distract from domestic economic downturn, such as more frequent reporting by state media that demonizes the U.S., portrays the U.S. as an unsafe place to live, or brags about its own military prowess in comparison to that of the U.S.

However, despite recognizing the divergent propagandist styles available to autocratic states, the conventional assumption persists that state propaganda only takes one monolithic style and delivers desired messages in one unified tone at any given moment (Ellul, 1973; Kenez, 1985; Silverstein, 1987). Little attention has been paid to how the style of state propaganda may vary at precarious political moments, such as major policy reversals, according to the specific policy area, the level of the media venue, and the demographic composition of the targeted audience.

Neglecting the structured flexibility and evolution of state propaganda as a strategic discursive engineering project fails to account for a crucial aspect of the political adaptability of authoritarian regimes (Heilmann and Perry, 2011). Our research thus contributes by revealing the orchestrated use of diverse propaganda styles by autocratic states through venues targeted at various audiences and tailored to specific political goals and policy areas. We argue that autocratic propaganda should be seen as a discursive engineering project in which different forms and content are strategically presented in response to diverse local manifestations of political challenges, particularly during times of major policy reversals such as the relaxation of the One-Child Policy in China.
Based on the existing literature, we identified four major propaganda styles and distinguished them on two dimensions: rational versus sentimental and overt versus covert (see Figure 1). Ellul (1973) first identifies overt, “political” propaganda versus covert, “sociological” propaganda and rational versus irrational propaganda as two major dimensions of categorization for propaganda (see also Carter & Carter, 2018, as discussed above). Subsequent studies emphasize different features of propaganda along these two dimensions. For example, along the overt-covert axis, Brady (2008) and Shambaugh (2017) provide an institutional overview of China’s state propaganda apparatus, classifying it as an overt operation to accomplish state goals, whereas Stockmann (2013), Field et al. (2018) and Rozenas and Stukal (2019) view propaganda as a collection of subtle strategies that exert influence over the public sphere in covert ways and on everyday terms. Along the rational-sentimental axis, Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) analyze the effect of commercialized propaganda as an instrument of pro-state persuasion, whereas Perry (2017) emphasizes how state propagandists’ manipulate people’s non-rational faculties to shape their attitudes and behavior to the advantage of the state (Huang, 2015; Mattingly & Yao, 2022).

In the first dimension, state propaganda can be either rational or sentimental. Rational propaganda relies on prudent, pragmatic, and calculated arguments to persuade its target audience. Sentimental propaganda primarily deploys affective rhetoric to achieve intuitive, uncalculated, and direct human reactions from the audience that are to the state’s advantage.

In the second dimension, state propaganda can be either overt or covert. In overt propaganda, the state or its agents appear authoritatively as an organic component of the message; they may be cast as the narrator or certifier of the message, thus validating it when there are questions about state credibility. In covert propaganda, the state deliberately hides backstage and the propaganda message is presented as neutral, disinterested, impartial, or scientific. Along these two dimensions, we identified four propaganda facades: rational–overt, sentimental–overt, rational–covert, and sentimental–covert.
2.1 | Rational–overt propaganda

Rational–overt propaganda refers to a state’s attempt to directly persuade and steer the target audience into compliance based on a pragmatic calculation of material interests or the loss of such securities. The principle behind this type of propaganda is persuasion through the agency of rationality, with the aim of tapping into the audience’s spontaneous will. In rational–overt propaganda, the state acts openly as a teacher, providing the rational logic for the consumption of the message and assuring individuals, with the backing of state authority, of the advantages of compliance.

“Rational-overt propaganda” must be distinguished from “policy statements,” which are formal declarations that seek to inform the public or involved stakeholders about the nature, intention, measures of enforcement, and potential implications of a certain public policy. They are often issued by state authorities in their official capacity. Rational-overt propaganda is one of the four propagandist styles studied in this article and more often refers to journalist reports published in state-controlled media venues that advocate a public policy and quote the official dispositions of state authorities based on material gains or losses as the primary means to persuade the public to accept the policy.

2.2 | Sentimental–overt propaganda

Sentimental–overt propaganda usually involves the state’s overt attempt to use symbols that are “highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed” (Lifton, 1961, p. 429). This type of narrative seeks to elicit favorable emotions and direct public behavior toward habitual compliance. Grand concepts, such as human rights, national dignity, and scientific progress, often appear in this category.

2.3 | Rational–covert propaganda

In rational–covert propaganda, the state hides backstage and focuses on reducing the target audience’s concerns about the potential costs incurred by compliance. This typically refers to the state’s effort to attest that the system supporting a certain policy reversal is abundant and accessible, and that compliance with the policy is easy. The messages belonging to this type of propaganda appear to be objective and disinterested.

2.4 | Sentimental–covert propaganda

Sentimental–covert propaganda consists of reports, narratives, and messages that seek to influence the target audience’s attitudes by depicting the satisfactory and pleasant personal experiences that result from a certain state policy. This type of propaganda emphasizes the sharing of real or forged life experiences among ordinary people and the state remains completely invisible in both the message and the undertaking to deliver it to the targeted audiences. It does not attempt to persuade the audience or offer a rational discussion about the policy.

These classifications are not predetermined labels. The propaganda style being deployed can be deliberately chosen strategically from them, contingent on and adjusted to the environment,
especially when political needs change abruptly with a major policy reversal (see Table 1). We used the relaxation of China’s family planning policy in 2015 to analyze how propaganda as a form of political maneuvering adopts different strategies to help maintain autocratic stability through precarious times.

3 | DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The official newspaper system is a crucial propaganda instrument used by the Chinese Party-state to permeate society with precisely tailored messages for different target audiences. The official newspapers range from the central to the municipal level (Brady, 2008). We collected 23,954 articles from 13 state newspapers using the keywords “only child,” “one-child,” “two-child,” “family planning,” “over-birth,” and “birth certificate.” Online Appendix A presents a list of the sampled newspapers. The time span was set from January 1, 2008 to January 1, 2018. We chose this time span because the conditional two-child policy (i.e., the first step of relaxation) was implemented in 2013 and the universal two-child policy (i.e., the complete relaxation) was implemented in 2015. Thus the length of both the pre- and post-policy-change periods we chose to observe is 5 years each, equally.

Among the 13 sampled newspapers, three were sponsored by central-level party committees, five by provincial-level party committees, and three by municipal-level party committees. The geographical locations of the 13 sampled newspapers can be seen in Appendix A. The localities of the publishing sites of these newspapers cover the eastern, central, and western regions of China. In terms of economic development, the localities cover both the developed and under-developed regions of China. We also sampled the rural versions of two provincial-level official newspapers that target local peasants. To reduce the noise in the data, we restrained our unit of analysis to 29,587 paragraphs that contained at least one of the keywords. In total, they consisted of 4,372,626 Chinese characters.

We used a structural topic model (STM), an advanced method of computer-assisted content analysis, to investigate the large corpus. We chose this method for two reasons. First, STM affords the unsupervised reading of a large-scale corpus with an extraordinary richness and depth of detail, validity, and reliability. Second, STM allows the incorporation of covariates into the topic models to scrutinize how the content of the corpus differs across contextual factors, thereby revealing the strategic choices and crafted maneuvers of the state in our case (Roberts, 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of propaganda</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Primary content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational–Overt</td>
<td>Rational persuasion</td>
<td>Instructive</td>
<td>Logical and/or scientific arguments explicitly supported by state credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentimental–Overt</td>
<td>Repetitive Indoctrination</td>
<td>Inculcating</td>
<td>Grand concepts, abstract words, fundamental values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational–Covert</td>
<td>Public service announcement</td>
<td>Conditioning</td>
<td>Promotion of public services that will bring convenience to people under the policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentimental–Covert</td>
<td>Atmosphere construction</td>
<td>Immersive</td>
<td>Claimed to be the peer sharing of satisfactory, pleasant personal experiences under a certain policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategic choices and crafted maneuvers of the propaganda state are usually laid out from three angles: the temporal, the vertical, and the horizontal. We accordingly identified three covariates to measure the differentiation and contingency of the topics along these three lines. Temporally, we mapped the topics onto the time axis to unveil the lexical differences in the pre-change (prohibitive policy) and post-change (liberalizing policy) time period. The primary difference here was the nature of the policy being advocated.

Vertically, we investigated whether the propagandist discourses differed at various levels of the media outlets in China’s propaganda hierarchy. In China, different levels of Communist Party Committees vary in their jurisdiction, scope of mission, developmental goals, and bargaining power within inter-governmental negotiation. The Party Standing Committee at each level instructs the propaganda apparatus within its jurisdiction.

Horizontally, we explored the influence of urban–rural division on the style of the official propaganda. The CCP runs newspapers specifically targeting the urban and rural readership, respectively, enabling a strategically tailored propagandist content. The rural and urban populations have long held different attitudes toward the One-Child Policy. The rural population, which expresses a strong fertility desire, was the main victim of the One-Child Policy, whereas the urban population, which internalized the One-Child Policy as a social norm, was more at ease with the strict birth control rule (Li & Wong, 2019; Nie & Wyman, 2005). Given this background, we assumed that the difference in attitudes may have had an impact on the state’s strategic choice of propagandist style when confronted with the need to justify the policy relaxation to both urbanites and peasants.

4 | RESULTS

In the issue area of family planning, the CCP’s official propaganda underwent a major change in its primary storyline from 2008 to 2018. Before 2015, to effectively execute the One-Child Policy, the propaganda state was dedicated to the smooth implementation of its strict birth control policy and the draconian measures associated with it. We call this storyline the “pro-control” discourse. After the relaxation of the One-Child Policy in 2015, the propaganda state was committed to ensuring the smooth reversal of the existing birth control policy and advocating the new universal two-child policy. The propaganda state now needed to resolve inconsistencies in the official discourses about the appropriate size of a Chinese family to prevent this abrupt change in policy narratives from damaging the credibility, authority and stability of the regime. We call this storyline the “pro-relaxation” discourse.

The STM identified 48 topics in the corpus, of which 26 (or 53.87%) fit into the four major types of propaganda described in Table 1 (i.e., rational–overt, sentimental–overt, rational–covert and sentimental–covert propaganda) (for the choice of topic number, see Online Appendix B). Of the 26 identified topics, 13 were pro-control and 13 were pro-relaxation, representing 28.50% and 29.87% of the corpus, respectively. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the articles along a time axis. Table 2 provides a summary of the topic classifications across the four prototypes of state propaganda. Online Appendix C provides the details of each topic.

4.1 | Pro-control discourse

The pro-control discourse promotes the One-Child Policy through rational–overt, sentimental–overt and rational–covert narratives. Rational–overt propaganda supporting birth control focuses...
on the availability of state rewards for one-child families, including a state cash allowance for single-daughter households (Topic 1) and single-child households (Topic 2), a national college admission policy in favor of girls from single-child households (Topic 3), financial aid in the form of a government pension to single-child families who have lost their only child (Topic 4) and a favorable poverty alleviation policy for one-child households (Topic 5). These narratives reflect the state’s attempt to directly and rationally persuade the citizenry with material gains. They encourage compliance with the national policy based on a calculation of pragmatic interests.

In 2011, Beitan County gave 5,400 yuan as a reward to each of its 35 single-daughter households. [Gansu Peasants Newspaper, November 29, 2011, #provincial #rural]
In recent years, our municipality has awarded bonus points to the 23,000 girls from single-daughter households on their secondary school and college entrance examinations. [Yangtze River Daily, July 11, 2015, #municipal]

Sentimental–overt propaganda supporting birth control includes heavy-handed, repetitive mentioning of the One-Child Policy, to the point of information bombing (Topic 6); reiterations of the policy’s significance to the overall development of the national economy (Topic 7); and portrayals of the single-child family as representing a civil, modern and scientific lifestyle (Topic 8). These narratives are loaded with the repetitive use of grand concepts and values that are treated as unquestionable and obviously desirable. They aim to directly elicit voluntary compliance.

Chairman Hu pointed out in the speech that the population element is the key factor influencing social development. It is related to the reform and opening policy and to the success of socialist modernization. [Economic Daily, April 28, 2011, #central]

China will adhere to the basic national policy of family planning and will effectively achieve the primary task of stabilizing the low birth rate. [Jiefang Daily, July 23, 2012, #provincial]

The pro-control discourse also deploys rational–covert propaganda to highlight the administrative (Topics 9, 10, 12), technical (Topic 11) and social (Topic 13) benefits of birth planning, with the aim of conceptually diminishing or marginalizing practical hurdles to persuade the citizenry. These narratives claim to be disinterested, objective announcements about the available public services that favor birth control. They seek to assure the public that compliance with the One-Child Policy is a stress-free process.

In the Convenience Service Office, family planning, labor insurance and six other public services that are closely related to people’s lives can be applied for in one visit. [Hubei Daily, August 1, 2014, #provincial]

Develop and promote safe, effective and appropriate new technologies and methods of contraception and birth control, promote informed choices about contraception and provide quality services for contraception and birth control. [Jiangxi Daily, December 28, 2011, #provincial]

4.2 | Pro-relaxation discourse

The pro-relaxation discourse aiming to legitimize the abolition of the One-Child Policy and advocating the universal two-child policy is predominantly covert. The figure of the state disappears from the frontstage of the propaganda operation. The propaganda messages are masked as public announcements of the benefits provided by the state that can help people who want to have two children (rational–covert propaganda). Otherwise, they are personal stories featuring the satisfaction and happiness of families that already have two children (sentimental–covert propaganda). They seek to portray personal experiences under the relaxed birth policy as contented, satisfactory and without complication.

Seven topics fall in the category of rational–covert propaganda. They cover changes in laws and regulations that are favorable to the relaxation of the One-Child Policy (Topics 17, 19, 20),
improvements in the public healthcare system (Topic 15) and educational facilities (Topic 18), suggestions about pregnancy and childrearing (Topic 16) and technological advances in obstetrics and gynecology (Topic 14) that are conducive to the relaxation of the birth policy. These narratives claim to provide neutral information. The state is hiding backstage, avoiding any ostensible clashes with its past narratives about the necessity of the One-Child Policy.

[Local governments should] enhance the construction of maternal and child health care and family planning service institutions, focus on upgrading public health service facilities, such as perinatal care, neonatal disease screening and health education, and improve clinical medical conditions. [Hubei Daily, April 11, 2016, #provincial]

The personal income tax reform ... is also considering appropriate increases in the level of "special expenditure deductions" related to family livelihoods, such as expenditure on the education of two-child families. [Jiefang Daily, March 8, 2017, #provincial]

Topics 21–26 are different types of sentimental–covert propaganda. They look closely at the personal experiences of families with two children to create a social atmosphere in which two-child households can become the new norm. As with the pro-control discourse, which portrays the single-child family as a modern, civilized lifestyle, sentimental–covert propaganda covertly seeks to convey to its audience that families with more than one child are happier and more harmonious (Topic 21) and that children with siblings may develop better personalities (Topic 22). Key topics around the two-child lifestyle are also added to the agenda for public discussion. These topics include affordability (Topic 23), the prices of baby products (Topic 24) and real estate (Topic 25) and family anecdotes about celebrities with more than one child (Topic 26).

I asked my elder daughter, “how do you like your sister?” She said, “Of course I love my sister!” Every morning, the elder daughter goes to school. The younger one sees her off. They keep waving goodbye at the elevator. Every evening, when the elder daughter comes home, she hugs and kisses her sister first. The younger daughter is not yet able to talk but, nevertheless, is full of joy. Whenever this happens, I think that all my suffering during pregnancy was worth it. [Guangzhou Daily, November 26, 2015, #municipal]

4.3 | Propaganda maneuvering across covariables

We identify three covariables upon which the state chooses its propagandist strategies flexibly in its discursive engineering project amidst a major policy reversal. First, the nature of the policy (prohibitive/liberalizing) being advocated at the time; second, the urban/rural divide that defines the configuration and attributes of the audiences; and third, the administrative level of the media venue.

(1) Nature of Policy Being Advocated

With the birth control policy reversal in 2015, the Chinese Party-state’s propaganda machine quickly shifted from long-held pro-control discourses to pro-relaxation messages. In terms of style, overt propaganda became covert. The state’s relentless preaching about population control was entirely replaced by mundane, depoliticized discussions of new medical equipment, prolonged maternity leave and new family norms, all of which favored two children per family (Figures 3 and 4).

Figures 3 and 4 respectively show the evolution of pro-control and pro-relaxation discourses in China’s propaganda. The first vertical line indicates the implementation of the conditional
two-child policy on November 18, 2013. The second vertical line marks the implementation of the universal two-child policy on October 29, 2015. These two figures illustrate that mainly covert propaganda promoting the relaxation and abolition of the One-Child Policy abruptly replaced (as shown in the major dips and spikes) predominantly overt propaganda in favor of this policy.

We wish to note that the 5% prevalence of pro-control discourses after the policy reversal likely related to the continued restriction on the permitted number of children by the revised policy to two between 2013 and 2015. The pro-control propaganda still helped the enforcement of that policy during these two years of transition. In addition, the very low-level continuation of pro-control topics may be linked to noise in the text, as pro-control discourses often also touch upon issues such as contraception and poverty alleviation, which remained relevant after the reversal of the universal two-child policy. Similarly, the very low prevalence of pro-relaxation discourses before the policy reversal likely related to the links between pro-relaxation topics and other issues such as education and health care, which existed before the actual relaxation of the One-Child Policy. Our research shows that only after the policy reversal did pro-control discourse ultimately subside and pro-relaxation discourses become increasingly dominant. Our argument is based on this substantial evolution in official propagandist discourses over time.

(2) Level of Propaganda Venue

We found the pro-control propaganda was spread in a top-down manner, using mainly central- and provincial-level propaganda venues. The central-level newspapers were devoted to using grand narratives to influence public opinion. They sought to stir emotions about honor, responsibility, national pride and sacrifice. The state-controlled newspapers at the central level mainly deployed sentimental–overt propaganda (Topic 7), repeatedly preaching to the population that strict birth control was linked to modernity, science and national development. With the senti-
mental social atmosphere created by the central-level propaganda state, newspapers at the provincial level were able to use arguments about rational calculations to persuade the people to “voluntarily” comply with the state’s birth control policy (Figure 5).

The pro-relaxation discourse demonstrated a more elaborately orchestrated discursive engineering operation at all levels of the propaganda state. However, the main battlegrounds were still at subnational levels. The pro-relaxation discursive engineering campaign overwhelmingly relied on sentimental messaging and intentionally avoided rational counterarguments against the previous One-Child Policy propaganda. More precisely, the themes significantly varied between bureaucratic levels. The central-level propaganda state highlighted the state’s financial investment in public health and education, indicating that a second child would receive strong infrastructural support from the state. The provincial-level newspapers emphasized favorable policy arrangements, such as extended maternity leave and the protection of women’s rights. The promotion of the availability of practical arrangements was designed to persuade the audience that the relaxation of birth control would translate into a convenient process for individuals, who would not face any administrative obstacles. Municipal-level propaganda focused on favorable practical factors, such as the establishment of new hospitals, the availability of new medicine and other local public service improvements. Indeed, these factors are considered conducive to people’s decision to have a second child. Both central- and municipal-level newspapers engaged in sentimental–covert discursive engineering, magnifying positive personal experiences under the relaxed birth policy (see Figure 6).

(3) Urban versus Rural Variations

Figure 7 shows the impact of the urban-rural division on the propaganda state’s discursive engineering operations. In the pro-control discourse, the main target audiences lived in rural
areas. Readers in urban areas received more sentimental–overt propaganda that highlighted the general significance of the population control policy. In contrast, pro-relaxation propaganda shifted its focus to the urban population. The propaganda machine was committed to creating a comprehensive image of happy two-child households in cities and an amiable social and policy environment for people to have a second child.
Our empirical findings lead to three general propositions. First, we discover that when liberalizing a prohibitive policy, the Chinese state shifts from overt to covert propaganda. To advocate a prohibitive policy, the state resorts to a propagandistic demonstration of its coercive power to deter potential resistance, guarantee rewards for obedience and mobilize mass support. The credibility of the state’s ability to punish defiance and reward compliance is the key message in the state discourse, which can be effectively delivered by overt propaganda in the name of the state.

In contrast, the liberalization of a prohibitive policy calls for a more covert style of propaganda. In overturning the prohibitive policy, the propagandists’ foremost consideration is to avoid fundamental damage to the credibility of the state, which has been vested heavily in its discourses supporting the old policy. Covert propaganda becomes the best instrument, as it hides the figure of the state—who nevertheless announces the policy reversal procedurally—backstage and presents the propaganda message as neutral, disinterested and even apolitical. Covert propaganda for liberalizing a prohibitive policy tends not to argue against the previous policy measures and the rationale behind them; rather, it seeks to forge a new and society-wide discursive atmosphere that favors the implementation of the liberalized behavior, avoiding the appearance of self-denial and hiding the inconsistency in the official policy narrative before and after the reversal.

Second, our research findings demonstrate that, in the discursive engineering project, the strategies taken by different levels of the Chinese state propaganda organs vary significantly. This strategic choice is also shaped by the nature of the policy being advocated. For prohibitive policies, the higher the level of the propaganda organ in the administrative hierarchy, the more sentimental is its propagandist discourse. The central-level propaganda often highlights the sense of glory surrounding the people’s contribution to the collective well-being through self-discipline, the deep sympathy of the state to people’s personal sacrifices and the aspiration for a brighter future after the momentary difficulties and inconveniences caused by the prohibitive policy in
question. The lower-level propaganda venues, on the contrary, resort more to people’s rational calculations of avoiding punishment and maximizing their material gains by obeying.

For liberalizing policies, the relationship is reversed. The higher the rank of the propaganda organ, the more rational is its discourse, with state propaganda organs at the lower levels tending to use sentimental arguments to advocate the policy in question. The lower-level propaganda, through its down-to-earth tone, embeds the revised policy goals into the intimate everyday experiences of the people and establishes a happy vision of the projected lifestyle under the new policy to lure the targeted audiences into obeying. Higher-level propaganda venues, vested with state authority and credibility, actively report the services and support that are available to facilitate people’s adjustment to the new policy and to guarantee the public that their compliance will be hassle-free.

Third, in China, effective propaganda advocating a policy turn depends on discourses that are bespoke to the needs, mentalities and tastes of different audience groups. Policies group people by generating winners and losers. For a prohibitive policy, propaganda often targets the people whose interests are being undermined (in our case, the rural dwellers who want more children but are forbidden to have them) by advocating for their sacrifice and deterring their resistance. However, when a policy is liberalized, the state propagandists avoid explaining the discursive inconsistency to the general public, turning instead to specific groups that are more likely to accept the newly liberalized policy goal because of personal gains (in this case the urban residents) and tailoring the propaganda discourses to their taste.

It is worth noting that the central leadership of the Chinese Party-state changed in 2012. However, the shift from the Hu Jintao to the Xi Jinping administration, although broadly important, had little impact on our research findings. First, China’s propaganda apparatus is a part of the Party-state bureaucracy with its own modus operandi (Brady, 2008). Even when new leadership has a different set of preferences for propagandist style, its effect on the official policy discourses can be considerably lagged. Given that our research scrutinizes the propagandist operations from the central to the local level immediately after the change of leadership, the effect of reshuffling the ruling elite was unlikely to have manifested in such a short period. Second, the One-Child Policy has been supported as a basic national policy by a narrative focusing on the importance of “science and modernization,” which is integral to the communist state’s overall ideological credibility regardless of the incumbent leadership. The general legitimacy of the Party-state, rather than that of one specific leader, was at stake with the reversal of this fundamental policy narrative. Third, the accession of the Xi leadership in 2012-13 occurred through institutionalized succession rather than an intra-elite purge. The Party-state has a motive to maintain a discursive continuity and justify obvious discrepancies in the fundamental policy discourses in such a scenario, which also necessitated the deployment of a strategic discursive engineering project.

Also, a growing recent literature has stressed the complicity of China’s administrative structure (Landry, 2008; Lu & Tsai, 2021; Ma, 2022). When top Party officials in crucial municipalities or provincial capitals enjoy concurrent appointment at higher levels in the nomenclatura, their privileged access to policy discussion at a more senior level may influence the local propagandist style. This concern can be addressed on two fronts. First, the Standing Committee of the CCP at any given level leads the municipal propaganda apparatus at that level. Although a top Party boss in a provincial capital may be appointed at the deputy-ministerial (provincial)-level, the Propaganda Department, as a Party-state agency, remains at the prefectural (i.e., departmental) level and receives directives corresponding to that rank. Second, even when the Provincial Standing Committee includes top Party bosses of provincial capitals (who may access insider information about a forthcoming policy reversal), they are unlikely to be permitted to instruct the propaganda
bureaucracy under their auspices to publicly discuss that potential policy about-face ahead of official schedule.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this study, we used structural topic modelling to analyze the Chinese Party-state's propaganda operations during a major reversal of the country's national family planning policy. We found that the autocratic state in China used strategic discursive engineering to smooth the process of this major political reversal and mitigate potential harm to the state's credibility brought by such a fundamental change in the Party-state's long-held narrative on the necessity of strict state-directed family planning. The sampled discursive materials were tailored to the nature of the advocated policy, the level of the state propaganda organ in question, and the needs, mentality, and tastes of the different targeted audiences. Our findings challenge the conventional understanding of state propaganda as a static institutional output that imposes pre-programmed and unified messages on society as a whole in one monolithic style at a given time. We conversely demonstrate that contemporary authoritarian rulers use propaganda, as a crucial instrument of statecraft, with a high level adaptivity, flexibility, and deftness. As opposed to a monolithic single voice, the case study of China shows that, the “discursive engineering” of an autocratic state is a concerted project with the intended message sent through different propaganda venues in tones best suited to particular populations. The discursive engineering explicated in this article is not a standalone type of state propaganda, but rather a microcosm of the elasticity of general Chinese state propaganda.

Our finding that the state uses discursive engineering to manage public opinion during critical policy turns may inform research on state propaganda. For example, in addition to the relaxation of the one-child policy, we can see the intentional and careful adjustment of propaganda styles during major political turns and other policy about-faces, such as during the post-Mao leadership reshuffle in 1976 (Mang, 2006) or the surprising visit of U.S. President Richard Nixon to China in 1972 (Yi, 2013). Beyond China, historical cases illustrate that without discursive engineering, autocratic states often have grave trouble surviving policy turnarounds and political transitions. The failure of the Soviet regime to adjust its propaganda discourses to the series of policy changes that began with the New Economic Policy (1921-28) precipitated citizens' eventual distrust of the socialist economic regime (Boettke, 1995). In Cromwellian England, the rapid centralization and rigidification of the propaganda state preluded the eventual political disintegration of the Protectorate (Peacey, 2006). During the Great Terror under Stalin, the unexplained purge of previously lauded revolutionary figures led directly to citizens' loss of faith in the Soviet ideology (Brandenberger, 2012). While developing a complete understanding of the ways in which our typology and findings may be applicable in different policy change scenarios is beyond the scope of this article, our work opens up a new line of future enquiry that will contribute to the general understanding of state propaganda.

Our research provides new insights into the puzzling stability and resilience of autocratic regimes, such as that of China. Scholars have argued that China's pragmatic flexibility in policymaking and implementation, capacity to learn quickly, and adaptivity to local contexts are key to its survival (Perry & Heilmann, 2011). However, such guerrilla-style policymaking and implementation require trial-and-error, the acceptance of uncertainty, and constant reversals of major policy directions. It would be dangerous, if not impossible, to take this approach in the absence of strategic and sophisticated discursive engineering. Discursive engineering effectively shapes and
directs public opinion to the state’s advantage during the uncertain times that come with major policy reversals. Our research has contributed to the accomplishment of this critical theoretical gap in the study of authoritarian resilience.

More broadly, our research sheds new light on the more general question of how autocratic regimes such as China’s respond to politically precarious moments such as the reversal of a fundamental policy at the national level. The strategic discursive engineering operated by the propaganda state provides a tailored narrative that justifies fundamental policy turns according to the variation in propagandist venue, the composition of the targeted audience, and the nature of the intended policy message. This propagandist maneuvering helps to mitigate the potential harm a policy reversal can have upon the credibility and sustainability of an autocratic regime. In this sense, the study of 21st century Chinese state propaganda also contributes to the generalized discussion of how autocratic regimes use their propaganda capacity to manipulate public opinion to their own advantage, particularly when they find themselves politically vulnerable during major policy transitions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
We declare no conflict of interest for all authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
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ENDNOTES
1 In December 1982, the 5th Plenum of the 5th National People’s Congress of China promulgated compulsory family planning as a “basic national policy”. By 1990, most Chinese provinces had implemented and institutionalized the Family Planning Policy, which subjected the great majority of the national population to the one-child limit, with the following exceptions: (1) couples living in rural parts of 19 Chinese provinces were permitted to have a second child if their first child was female; (2) couples living in the rural areas of five border provinces were permitted to have two children; (3) couples who were both only children were permitted to have a second child; (4) some ethnic minorities could have three children; and (5) Tibet was exempt from the family planning policy.

2 Before the 2013 nationwide reversal of the One-Child Policy, various localities in China implemented a trial Two-Child Policy in November 2011 that allowed couples to have a second child if both husband and wife were only children (“shuangdu”). While this 2011 shuangdu policy provided leeway from the long-held One-Child Policy in certain regions, it influenced only a tiny fraction of the population. As demonstrated by Wang and Zhang (2020), only 2.28 million women of childbearing age were eligible for this trial shuangdu policy, compared to the 33.89 million women of childbearing age who would later be eligible for the 2013 national relaxation of the One-Child Policy. Furthermore, out of concern that the shuangdu policy in 2011 could jeopardize the broader implementation of the One-Child policy in the majority of mainland China at that time, it was not widely propagated when originally implemented as a pilot experiment for a larger national policy shift. Due to its limited impact, the trial shuangdu policy was not viewed as a notable reversal of the existing One-Child
Policy, nor did it receive substantial public attention. The recent doctoral study of Ni (2021) also confirmed that the trial *shuangdu* policy “failed to attract much attention from both the media and the public” (p.26).

3 In Chinese, 一胎, 一孩, 二胎, 二孩, 两胎, 两孩, 计划生育, 计生, 超生, 准生证, 独生.

4 *Nongcun Xinbao* and *Gansu Nongmin Bao* are currently the only official newspapers designated for the rural population, and have the largest circulation in the rural areas of their respective provinces. We chose *Nongcun Xinbao* and *Gansu Nongmin Bao* because they are the rural editions of *Hubei Daily* and *Gansu Daily*, the official Party-state mouthpieces of their respective provinces. This enabled the comparison of the urban and rural editions of the same official provincial newspapers and allowed us to more accurately discern the evolution of propaganda style along the rural-urban divide.

5 The remaining 22 topics were not propaganda materials. They were (a) plain government orders without a justification, (b) irrelevant to the family planning policy or (c) fractions of articles that only served grammatical or structural functions.

6 Although in some provinces of China, rural families with “extraordinary difficulties” were already permitted to have a second child before 2013 if their first child was a daughter (known as the “only daughter policy”), the peasantry remained the population that suffered most from the Party-state’s strict family planning policy. Three reasons are salient. First, this policy still strictly constrained the maximum number of possible children for rural couples (i.e., at most two). Second, the eligibility requirement for this policy benefit is ill-defined (i.e., households with “extraordinary difficulties”). Third, the rural population generally has a higher willingness to have more children due to practical reasons such as the need for labor in farming work or the prospect of having sufficient support from children in old age. Consequently, the peasantry tended to be more resistant to the state’s family planning enforcement before 2013 (Liang, 2014).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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