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**Diachronic representation of rural China in mainstream Chinese news media: A corpus-assisted discourse analysis**

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**Abstract:** This study presents a comprehensive corpus-assisted discourse analysis that examines the diachronic representation of rural China in *People's Daily* from 2000 to 2025, utilizing the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). The research is based on a systematically constructed corpus of 1,739 news reports, which are categorized into three distinct phases aligned with major national policy shifts: rural governance reforms (2000-2005), new socialist countryside construction (2005-2017), and comprehensive rural revitalization (2017-2025). The analysis identifies a clear evolutionary trajectory in media discourse, with thematic focus progressing from basic governance and institutional reforms to systematic rural construction and finally to holistic revitalization. Furthermore, it reveals two key discursive transformations. First, nomination strategies shift from administrative terminology (“rural areas”) to culturally rich concepts (“countryside”), reflecting a reconceptualization of rural space. Second, perspectivization expands from exclusively government-oriented narratives to incorporate diverse voices, including local actors, enterprises, and international observers. These discursive shifts demonstrate a close alignment with China’s national rural policy evolution, illustrating how state-aligned media discourse actively constructs and legitimizes policy agendas while responding to sociopolitical changes. The findings contribute to understanding the dynamic relationship between media representation, policy implementation, and formation of public perception in contemporary China’s rural transformation. Notably, this study makes a unique contribution to corpus-assisted discourse analysis by demonstrating how the integration of diachronic corpus data with the DHA framework can systematically unveil and interpret nuanced linguistic and discursive adaptations that mirror and reinforce macro-level sociopolitical transformations.

**Keywords:** Rural China; Media representation; Discourse-historical approach; Diachronic approach; Corpus-assisted discourse analysis

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### Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed remarkable transformations in Chinese society. With the rapid growth of its economic strength, there has been a significant decline in the rural population. In 2007, more than

714 million people resided in rural areas of China, but by 2020, this figure had dropped to approximately 509 million (Xia et al., 2022). Notwithstanding the still substantial size of the rural population, China has achieved notable success in poverty alleviation, lifting

nearly 100 million individuals out of poverty, the majority of whom originating from these rural regions. Successive national policy frameworks targeting rural development have been implemented throughout the new century. Major initiatives include the Building a New Socialist Countryside campaign and the subsequent comprehensive Rural Revitalization Strategy (Pan, 2024). As a result, rural China has undergone profound changes, shaped by both demographic shifts and policy-driven measures.

The transformation of rural China presents a compelling academic locus for inquiry: how social realities and social changes are discursively constructed in China's mainstream media? This study hence focuses on the diachronic representation of rural China in Chinese domestic news media, to examine whether and how the changes of rural China have been discursively constructed. This examination is essential, as discourse around rural China has undergone major shifts along with China's social changes. Historically, the rural landscape served as a crucial epistemological foundation for Chinese intellectuals, providing fertile ground for reevaluating social, moral, and ethical constructs (Zhang, 2014). In Western academia, there was even an academic trend towards China Study before the 1980s referred as "rural preoccupation" (Lee and Li, 1999), indicating that research on China at that time was largely rural-oriented. However, with China's rapid strides in modernization and industrialization, scholarly and public focus has increasingly shifted towards urbanization, megacities, and economic growth (Cao, 2012; Neo and Pow, 2015; Rozelle and Hell, 2020), marginalizing rural narratives and rendering rural China an invisible entity in public consciousness (Rozelle and Hell, 2020). This trend has since reversed in recent years with China's remarkable success in the poverty alleviation campaign, which targeted rural areas, and the subsequent launch of the rural revitalization strategy. These initiatives have not only boosted rural development but also reignited

public interest in rural China, highlighted the renewed importance of rural narratives in national discourses.

Against this backdrop, the discursive construction of rural China has become an even more crucial issue. Previous research on rural China was dominated by sociological, anthropological, and historical approaches (Zhang, 2020), with limited linguistic scrutiny of how rural China is discursively constructed. While studies have investigated rural imagery in literature, film, and short videos (e.g., Peng and Fang, 2018; Yang, 2018; Fang, 2020; Weng and Liu, 2022), the language used to construct it was largely ignored. In recent years, some scholars have examined the representation of rural China in news media, including in foreign news media (e.g., Pan, 2024; Lu et al., 2024) and Chinese English-language newspapers aiming at international publicity (e.g. Zhu et al., 2024; Chen, 2022). While these studies offered valuable insights, how rural China is represented in national Chinese-language newspapers targeting domestic audiences is under-explored. Unlike Chinese English-language media, which primarily serves as a tool for international communication and external propaganda, Chinese-language newspapers are more deeply embedded in the daily lives of the Chinese populace and exert a more direct and immediate influence on domestic audiences' understanding of rural issues. Therefore, investigating the discourse around rural China in Chinese-language mainstream media is essential for comprehensively understanding the multifaceted representation of rural China in contemporary discourse.

This study aims to conduct a corpus-assisted study to examine discourses around rural China in mainstream Chinese-language news media, *People's Daily* (人民日报), with a specific focus on the news reporting of rural China during 2000 to 2025. State-affiliated media outlets, such as *People's Daily*, play a central role in shaping public perceptions of rural issues. Examining discourse from the start of the new century will provide insight

into whether and how the discourse of rural China has changed over time. Unlike qualitative approaches, a corpus-assisted study enables systematic identification of lexical patterns and discursive strategies at a large scale, offering empirical insights into how rural China is linguistically constructed in state-aligned media. Three research questions (RQs) are raised to guide this study.

RQ1: What themes emerge from the three sub-corpora respectively?

RQ2: How rural China is discursively constructed in different phases?

RQ3: What is the sociopolitical context and ideology behind such constructions?

### Literature review

#### *Rural China, media, and representation*

Rural China represents an important site to trace the development of China. As Fei (1992: 1), a famous Chinese sociologist, states that “Chinese society is fundamentally rural”, highlighting the deep-seated connection between the rural landscape and the core of Chinese civilization. This perspective is further supported by Zhao (2010), who traces the origins of China’s agricultural civilization back tens of thousands of years, showcasing the enduring legacy of rural practices that have shaped the nation’s identity. Netting (1993) also emphasizes that China’s massive rural population, engaged in intensive farming, is unparalleled globally, reinforcing the significance of rural China on the world stage. Visser (2010) echoes this notion by asserting that rural China embodies authentic Chinese society, with the rural serving as a microcosm of the nation’s values, traditions, and social structures. Even today, despite China’s rapid modernization, the rural population remains substantial. Given this, media representations of rural China carry substantial weight as they shape public perceptions of a sector intricately tied to national identity.

The media, particularly state-affiliated news outlets, play a pivotal role in constructing these perceptions. News media

exert influence through agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2005), selectively highlighting or silencing aspects of rural life to align with institutional stances (Li, 2009). This process is not neutral as media actively reshape reality through linguistic and discursive strategies (Hall, 1997; Fürsich, 2010), a dynamic intensified in state-aligned media like *People’s Daily*, which serves as a key channel for national discourse.

Representation, defined as “the production of meaning through language” (Hall, 1997: 16), operates via signs to construct conceptualizations of rural China. Discursive strategies, such as emphasizing development achievements or cultural traditions (Li, 2009; Yang and Chen, 2021), frame rural areas in ways that reflect sociopolitical priorities. For state media, these representations are not merely descriptive but symbolic tools to legitimate policy agendas, making the discursive construction of rural China a critical lens into state-society dynamics.

#### *Past studies on the representation of rural China*

Existing research on rural representation spans diverse media forms, but gaps remain in examining discursive mechanisms in domestic mainstream newspapers. In literary studies, rural imagery has been interpreted through binary frameworks (“demonization” vs. “pastoralization”) (Cao, 2012) or functional symbolism (Nan, 2019), while new-century works focus on modernization-driven transformations (Li, 2014). However, these analyses prioritize thematic content over linguistic construction. In visual media, representations of rural areas have shifted with national agendas, with works in 1980s stereotyping rural areas as poverty-stricken, narratives in 1990s emphasizing social bonds, and 21st-century texts aligning with “new socialist countryside” and “rural revitalization” initiatives (Ji and Wu, 2014). Yet such studies rarely dissect linguistic strategies underpinning these shifts. Newspaper coverage reveals divergent narratives tied to media orientation.

Mainstream party newspapers, especially during rural revitalization, portray positive rural images aligned with national agendas (Fang, 2020; Ouyang, 2018), while metropolitan newspapers stigmatize rural areas as underdeveloped (Luo, 2011). International media, such as *The New York Times*, consistently frame rural China negatively (Pan, 2024), contrasting sharply with domestic narratives.

Discourse analysis and corpus linguistics have been increasingly employed as effective approaches to decoding media representation of rural China. Several studies have utilized corpus linguistics to identify patterns in media discourse. For instance, Chen (2022) conducts a corpus analysis of *China Daily* headlines (2001-2021), finding that economic development is the most frequently discussed factor in rural transformation, and notes the media's relative objectivity in addressing negative issues. Another diachronic corpus-based study by Pan (2024) on *The New York Times* (1980-2024) reveals a consistent, negative representation of rural China as impoverished and problematic across decades, with a focus on issues like disease and women's status, demonstrating little change despite China's internal developmental shifts. The DHA has also been applied to unpack the discursive strategies in rural reporting. For example, Sun and Li (2025) use DHA to analyze *China Daily*'s economic news on rural revitalization, identifying how nomination, predication, and argumentation strategies construct a positive, modern, and innovative image of the new countryside for international audiences. Similarly, Li and Li (2024) apply DHA to a single report from *People's Daily Online*, detailing how nomination, predication, and argumentation strategies are employed to frame the roles of the government, society, and individuals in promoting rural revitalization through digital commerce.

Recent research also shows efforts to integrate corpus methods with other theoretical frameworks. Zhu, Liu, and Xu (2024) combine corpus-assisted discourse

studies with Harmonious Discourse Analysis (HDA) to examine *China Daily*'s reports on rural revitalization. They argue that the outlet constructs a harmonious, green, and people-oriented rural image by adhering to HDA's principles, using a constructive reporting framework and authenticity discourse strategies. From a broader perspective, Lu and de Vries (2022) perform a large-scale keyword analysis of Chinese academic publications (1981-2020), distilling eight dominant rural development paradigms over four decades and interpreting discursive shifts concerning actors, places, and activities, highlighting the duality in current rural development discourse.

Collectively, these recent studies underscore a heightened academic interest in the discursive construction of rural China and demonstrate the utility of corpus-assisted and discourse-historical methodologies. However, a significant gap remains. While existing research has effectively analyzed international media portrayals (e.g., Pan, 2024) and the external propaganda functions of Chinese English-language media (e.g., Chen, 2022; Sun and Li, 2025; Zhu et al., 2024), the discursive construction of rural China in domestic Chinese-language mainstream newspapers is under-explored. Studies focusing on domestic outlets like *People's Daily* are fewer and often lack a systematic, diachronic, and corpus-assisted examination of the linguistic strategies underpinning representation shifts across key policy phases. This study aims to address this gap.

## Methods

### *Data collection and corpus construction*

The corpus of this study was constructed from news reports extracted from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, following a systematic procedure to ensure relevance and quality. The retrieval was conducted in CNKI with the following criteria: the title of the reports must contain either “农村” (rural areas) or “乡村” (villages). Only reports published in the Chinese-language *People's Daily* were

included, as it serves as a key official media outlet in China, ensuring the representativeness of state-aligned discourse on rural-related issues.

After initial retrieval, the collected reports were subjected to strict screening to exclude irrelevant or low-quality materials. Reports whose titles did not explicitly include “农村” (rural areas) or “乡村” (villages) were eliminated. Texts primarily focusing on topics unrelated to rural China (e.g., urban policies, international affairs) were excluded. Duplicate reports (i.e., identical content published on different dates) were removed to avoid redundancy. Materials consisting solely of images without textual content were discarded. The reports in CNKI span from the earliest one dated May 12, 2000, to the latest one retrieved on July 4, 2025. In total, 1,739 files were identified as valid.

As this study aimed to explore and reveal the changes of rural China in the 21st century, the timeframe of interest was divided into three phases. The first phase started from May 12, 2000 to October 11, 2005, the second from October 12, 2005 to October 18, 2017, and the third from October 19, 2017 to July 4, 2025. October 11, 2005 marks the official proposal of the Building a New Socialist Countryside campaign, and October 19, 2017 corresponds to the inclusion of the “Rural Revitalization Strategy” in the report of the 19th National Congress. All the valid reports were downloaded in chronological order, and then categorized into three sub-corpora aligned with the defined phases (see Table 1).

Next the files were converted into plain text (.txt) format to standardize the corpus and enable compatibility with corpus analysis software. Irrelevant information (e.g., headers, footers, and page numbers) was manually removed to ensure the corpus contained only substantive content of the reports.

The three sub-corpora were imported into a corpus analysis software and were processed respectively, including extraction of keywords, high-frequency words and multiword expressions. The software chosen for corpus analysis was Sketch Engine. Sketch Engine was a powerful corpus analysis tool with multiple functions, including word sketch, word sketch difference, wordlist, keyword, and N-grams, which help identify lexical patterns to support analysis of themes and discursive strategies. Most importantly, Sketch Engine can process multiple languages including Chinese (Kilgarriff et al., 2014), which makes it an appropriate tool for the current corpora. Recent studies have utilized Sketch Engine to analyze Chinese corpora (Xu, 2021). For the extraction of keywords, a built-in Chinese corpus (Chinese Web 2017 (zhTenTen17) Simplified) containing 18,353,895,474 tokens, was served as a reference corpus. The statistical significance of each keyword was determined by calculating the log-likelihood value using the Log-likelihood calculator developed by researchers from Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) (Ming-xia, 2021).

**Table 1.** Corpora composition

Sub-corpus	Period	Number of articles	Tokens
Phase 1	May 12, 2000 – Oct 11, 2005	365	300,305
Phase 2	Oct 12, 2005 – Oct 18, 2017	904	859,459
Phase 3	Oct 19, 2017 – Jul 4, 2025	470	658,437

**Analytical framework: The discourse-historical approach (DHA)**

This study adopted the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), a major variant of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Ruth Wodak and her colleagues

(Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2015). DHA is rooted in the premise that discourse is not merely a reflection of social reality but a context-dependent symbolic practice deeply embedded in historical, social, and political structures. It aims to unpack the interplay

between language, power, and ideology by integrating historical sources, sociopolitical contexts, and linguistic analyses, thereby revealing how discursive practices construct, maintain, or challenge social identities, relations, and inequalities (Wodak, 2009).

DHA involves identifying the key themes, topics, or content of the target discourse. This step focuses on what is being communicated. For example, the central issues, events, or social actors highlighted in the texts. By mapping dominant and marginalized topics, researchers can discern the primary focuses of the discourse and their alignment with broader social or political agendas (Liang et al., 2024). In this study, this dimension will involve extracting recurring themes related to rural China from *People's Daily* reports, to establish the foundational content of rural discourse.

DHA emphasizes five interrelated discursive strategies through which meaning is constructed and legitimized (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2015), including nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and

intensification/mitigation (see Table 2). For this study, we focused on the two strategies of nomination and perspectivization. The primary reason for this selective focus is that these two strategies are most directly pertinent to capturing the core discursive shifts in the representation of rural China as framed by our research questions. Nomination, concerning the linguistic labeling of social actors/objects, directly reflects evolving conceptualizations and policy orientations towards rural space. Perspectivization, concerning the framing of discourse through specific viewpoints, directly reveals shifts in whose voices and perspectives dominate the discourse. While argumentation, predication, and intensification/mitigation are valuable for analyzing evaluative and justificatory aspects, nomination and perspectivization provide unique lens for examining the constitutive naming and framing mechanisms in the diachronic construction of rural representations, which is the central aim of this analysis.

**Table 2.** Discursive strategies and their descriptions

Discursive Strategies	Description
Nomination	The linguistic labeling or categorization of social actors, objects, or phenomena, which serves to draw boundaries between “ingroups” and “outgroups”
Predication	The attribution of positive or negative traits, evaluations, or characteristics to the nominated entities
Argumentation	The use of rhetorical “topoi” (e.g., topos of threat, topos of progress) to justify or challenge evaluations, thereby legitimizing specific viewpoints
Perspectivization	The framing of discourse through specific viewpoints to emphasize or downplay certain perspectives
Intensification/ Mitigation	The strengthening or weakening of evaluative claims through linguistic devices

The two strategies of nomination and perspectivization employed by the news reports were detected by using corpus tools. Specifically, nomination was identified by analyzing keywords and high-frequency n-grams extracted via Sketch Engine. Changes

in the most salient and frequent nouns and multi-word nominations across the three phases are taken as indicators of shifting labels and categories assigned to rural entities, revealing changes in conceptual emphasis and policy alignment. Perspectivization was

investigated by examining high-frequency verbs related to verbal processes and their concordance lines. Analyzing the grammatical subjects (who is speaking) and the content surrounding these verbs in context allows us to identify the primary actors granted a and the typical forms of their discursive contributions, thereby mapping the distribution of discursive perspective and authority over time.

A defining feature of DHA is its emphasis on situating discourse within broader historical trajectories and sociopolitical contexts (Wodak, 2015). This includes analyzing how past discourses, policy, and social changes shape current representations (Zhao, 2017). By contextualizing *People's Daily* reports within China's rural development policies and demographic shifts, this study will explain why certain discursive patterns emerge or evolve over time.

By adopting DHA, this study moves beyond descriptive analysis of media content to reveal the how and why of rural China's discursive construction in state-aligned media. It enables systematic examination of both macro-level contextual influences (e.g., policy agendas) and micro-level linguistic practices (e.g., lexical choices), offering a holistic understanding of how rural discourse reflects and reinforces social changes in China.

### Results

#### *Thematic evolution: From "rural basic governance" to "comprehensive rural revitalization"*

Based on the analysis of keywords (see Table 3), 3-4 grams (see Table 4), and high-frequency nouns (see Table 5) across the three phases, the core themes of rural China exhibit a clear diachronic progressive feature, echoing the shifts in China's rural development policies.

**Table 3.** Keywords for each phase

Phase	Keywords (top 5)	Frequency	Log-likelihood
1	税费改革 (tax and fee reform)	290	3655.49
	农村税费 (rural tax and fee)	247	3336.95
	农村卫生 (rural health)	271	3300.14
	农村税费改革 (rural tax and fee reform)	236	3212.78
	农村卫生工作 (rural health work)	130	1939.04
2	新农村 (new countryside)	2599	22675.10
	农村建设 (rural construction)	1558	18330.80
	农村基层 (rural grassroots)	716	6392.07
	农村改革 (rural reform)	516	5100.09
	农村改革发展 (rural reform and development)	196	2330.92
3	乡村治理 (rural governance)	375	3768.29
	乡村产业 (rural industries)	314	3423.79
	攻坚成果 (poverty alleviation achievements)	272	2785.76
	农村现代化 (rural modernization)	234	2626.61
	农业农村现代化 (rural construction)	215	2488.91

Phase 1 centers on rural basic governance and institutional reforms. The corpus analysis identifies high-frequency nouns such as *rural areas*, *farmers*, and *agriculture*. More importantly, the keyword analysis (see Table 3) reveals terms with

exceptionally high log-likelihood (LL) values, such as *tax and fee reform* (LL=3655.49), *rural tax and fee* (LL=3336.95), and *rural health* (LL=3200.14), confirming their statistical salience as core discursive foci beyond mere frequency. These keywords

specify the discourse focus on policy-driven reforms. Keywords and n-grams like *rural tax and fee reform* and *Three Represents* further specify the discourse focus. From a DHA perspective, this thematic construction reflects the immediate socio-political context of alleviating peasant burdens and stabilizing grassroots governance, framing the state in the role of a problem-solver.

Phase 2 shifts to the theme of Building a New Socialist Countryside. The discourse undergoes a strategic shift corresponding to the 2005 policy initiative. The rise of the noun *construction* and the dominance of keywords with high statistical keyness, such as *new countryside* (LL=22675.10) and *rural construction* (LL=18330.80), indicate a thematic expansion from basic governance to systematic, holistic rural transformation. High-frequency n-grams like *new countryside construction* and *new socialist countryside* also signify such an expansion. This shift in

thematic focus, as revealed by the corpus, exemplifies how media discourse operationalizes a new policy framework, constructing the state as an architect of balanced urban-rural development.

Phase 3 focuses on rural revitalization and agricultural and rural modernization. The thematic upgrade is most notably signaled by the high-frequency noun *countryside* surpassing *rural areas*. Keywords with high statistical significance such as *rural governance* (LL=3768.29), *rural industries* (LL=3423.79) and high-frequency n-grams like *promote rural revitalization* underscore a connotative expansion. The discourse thematically constructs rural space not just as an administrative or economic unit but as a holistic entity integrating economic, cultural, ecological, and social dimensions, legitimizing the comprehensive goals of the Rural Revitalization Strategy.

**Table 4.** High-frequency 3-4 grams in each phase

Ph	3-4 Grams
as	
e	
1	<p><b>Original:</b> 农村税费改革, 三个代表, 农业和农村, 农村合作医疗, 新型农村合作, 新型农村合作医疗, 和农村经济, 农业和农村经济, 农村卫生工作, 农村义务教育</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> rural tax and fee reform, Three Represents, agriculture and rural areas, rural cooperative medical care, new-type rural cooperation, new-type rural cooperative medical care, and rural economy, agriculture and rural economy, rural health work, rural compulsory education</p>
2	<p><b>Original:</b> 新农村建设, 社会主义新农村, 建设社会主义新, 建设社会主义新农村, 社会主义新农村建设, 农村建设的, 新农村建设的, 经济社会发展, 基层党组织, 先进性教育活动</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> new countryside construction, new socialist countryside, building a new socialist, building a new socialist countryside, construction of new socialist countryside, of rural construction, of new countryside construction, economic and social development, grassroots party organizations, advanced education campaign</p>
3	<p><b>Original:</b> 推进乡村振兴, 乡村全面振兴, 乡村振兴战略, 全面推进乡村, 全面推进乡村振兴, 乡村振兴的, 脱贫攻坚成果, 农村人居环境, 实施乡村振兴, 高质量发展</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> promoting rural revitalization, comprehensive rural revitalization, rural revitalization strategy, comprehensively promoting rural areas, comprehensively promoting rural revitalization, of rural revitalization, achievements of poverty alleviation, rural living environment, implementing rural revitalization, high-quality development</p>



**Discursive strategies: Dynamic adjustment of nomination and perspectivization**

**Nomination strategy: Symbolic reconstruction from rural areas to countryside**

The nomination strategy, through the labeling of rural-related entities, reflects changes in policy orientation and social cognition. The nomination strategies were identified based on the keywords (see Table 3) and high-frequency nouns (see Table 5).

Phase 1 centers on labels such as *rural areas* and *farmers*, supplemented by vocabulary from specific fields like *agriculture* and *taxes and fees*. It emphasizes rural areas as an administrative and economic unit relative to urban areas, highlighting its attribute of needing support and transformation (e.g., *rural drinking water difficulties*, *rural tax and fee reform*). During Phase 2, *new countryside* emerges as the core nomination. The adjective *new* endows rural development with initiative and systematicity, while *new socialist countryside* clarifies its ideological attribute, integrating rural construction into the national overall

development framework. Phase 3 witnesses *countryside* replacing *rural areas* as a high-frequency noun. Nominations such as *rural governance* and *rural industries* weaken administrative overtones and strengthen the integrity of *countryside* as a natural, cultural, and social community (e.g., *rural culture*, *rural tourism*), echoing the policy positioning of livable, industry-friendly, and beautiful countryside.

The nomination changes from *rural areas* to *countryside* is a notable phenomenon, as rural areas are traditionally an administrative and economic concept, emphasizing rural regions as counterparts to urban areas in the urban-rural binary framework. It is closely associated with agricultural production, grassroots governance, and material conditions. In contrast, *countryside* carries richer cultural, ecological, and social connotations, transcending mere administrative boundaries. It integrates natural landscapes, traditional culture, and community life, aligning with holistic development goals such as cultural inheritance, ecological protection, and livability.

**Table 5.** High-frequency nouns in each phase

Phase	Nouns
1	<p><b>Original:</b> 农村, 农民, 工作, 农业, 教育, 经济, 建设, 发展, 改革, 地区</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> rural areas, peasants, work, agriculture, education, economy, construction, development, reform, region</p>
2	<p><b>Original:</b> 农村, 农民, 建设, 农业, 发展, 工作, 社会, 村, 经济, 教育</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> rural areas, peasants, construction, agriculture, development, work, society, village, economy, education</p>
3	<p><b>Original:</b> 乡村, 农村, 农业, 村, 产业, 建设, 发展, 农民, 服务, 工作</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> countryside, rural areas, agriculture, village, industry, construction, development, peasants, service, work</p>

**Perspectivization strategy: Distribution of discourse power from “government-led” to “multi-party participation”**

The perspectivization strategy constructs the dominant perspective of different stages through the selection of discourse subjects (who is speaking) and expression forms (how to speak), whose

characteristics can be summarized through the analysis of concordance lines of verbs such as *said*, *proposed*, *emphasized*, and *pointed out*. The perspectivization strategy was identified by examining the high-frequency verbal verbs (see Table 6) and their concordance lines (see Table 7).

**Table 6.** High-frequency verbal verbs related to perspectivization in each phase

Phase	Verbal verbs
1	<b>Original:</b> 说, 提出, 强调, 指出 <b>Translation:</b> said, proposed, emphasized, pointed out
2	<b>Original:</b> 说, 提出, 强调, 指出 <b>Translation:</b> said, proposed, emphasized, pointed out
3	<b>Original:</b> 说, 介绍, 提出, 表示, 强调 <b>Translation:</b> said, introduced, proposed, expressed, emphasized

Phase 1 highlights discourse led by the government and grassroots cadres. The discourse subjects are mainly government officials (e.g., Vice Minister of Water Resources Zhai Haohui, President Hu Jintao) and rural grassroots cadres (e.g., Yan Hongchang, director of Xiaogang Village Committee). The subjects of *proposed* are mostly central departments (e.g., the Ministry of Education, the central government), while *emphasized* and *pointed out* focus on central meetings and leaders (e.g., the meeting, Hu Jintao). This forms a top-down policy communication perspective, highlighting the state’s leading role in rural reform (e.g., the promotion of tax reforms).

Phase 2 signals participation of local and multi-party subjects in the discourse. The discourse subjects expand to local governments (e.g., Cui Jiangshui, Secretary of Handan Municipal Party Committee), enterprise leaders (e.g., Wang Mengtang, Chairman of Zhongdao Industrial Company), and environmental protection departments (e.g., Li Yuan, Deputy Director of the Ecological Department of the Ministry of Environmental Protection). The content of *emphasized* includes both central policies

(e.g., the construction of modern agriculture) and local innovations (e.g., the dominant position of farmers); *pointed out* adds perspectives from experts and grassroots practitioners (e.g., Xu Ke from the Ministry of Health); and *proposed* spans national strategic frameworks (e.g., the Central No.1 Document), policy tools (e.g., financial aid for rural students), and local implementation plans. This reflects a multi-perspective of central coordination plus local innovation, echoing the policy orientation of industry nurturing agriculture and urban-rural integration in new countryside construction.

Phase 3 shows integration of global and grassroots perspectives. The discourse subjects become more diversified, including central leaders (e.g., President Xi Jinping), grassroots cadres (e.g., Chen Yong, Party branch secretary of Dongding Village, Boshan District, Zibo City), foreign observers (e.g., David Gilly), and villagers (e.g., Liu Wei, a villager). The content of *said* includes both policy implementation (e.g., the industrial income increase) and international comparisons (e.g., China-Vietnam agricultural cooperation), while *proposed* focuses on national strategic documents (e.g., the Central

No. 1 Document). This forms an integrated perspective of national strategy plus grassroots' practice plus international vision,

reflecting rural revitalization as both a national strategy and global experience.

**Table 7.** Sample concordance lines related to perspectivization in each phase

Phase 1		
<p><b>Original:</b> 据水利部副部长翟浩辉今天在此间</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> According to what Zhai Haohui, vice minister of the Ministry of Water Resources,</p>	<p>说, said</p>	<p>到今年年底 here today, by the end of this year</p>
<p><b>Original:</b> 会议</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> The (central) meeting</p>	<p>提出, proposed</p>	<p>当前和今后一个时期 that at present and in the period ahead</p>
<p><b>Original:</b> 胡锦涛</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> Hu Jintao</p>	<p>强调, emphasized</p>	<p>这次学习教育活动的宝贵经验 that the precious experience gained from this learning and education campaign</p>
Phase 2		
<p><b>Original:</b> 邯郸市委书记崔江水</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> Cui Jiangshui, Secretary of the CPC Handan Municipal Committee</p>	<p>说, said</p>	<p>市里打破城乡二元结构 that the city has broken down the urban-rural dual structure</p>
<p><b>Original:</b> 一号文件明确</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> The No. 1 Central Document explicitly</p>	<p>提出, proposed</p>	<p>要完善县域村镇体系规划和村庄规划 that it is necessary to improve the planning of county-level town and village systems and the planning of individual villages</p>
<p><b>Original:</b> 回良玉</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> Hui Liangyu</p>	<p>强调, emphasized</p>	<p>加强农业基础设施建设 that strengthening the construction of agricultural infrastructure</p>
Phase 3		
<p><b>Original:</b> 淄博市博山区东顶村党支部书记陈勇</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> Chen Yong, Party branch secretary of Dongding Village, Boshan District, Zibo City,</p>	<p>说。 said.</p>	
<p><b>Original:</b> 2024年中央一号文件</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> The 2024 Central No. 1 Document</p>	<p>提出, proposed</p>	<p>实施农民增收促进行动 that implementing farmers' income promotion action</p>
<p><b>Original:</b> 习近平总书记多次</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> General Secretary Xi Jinping has repeatedly</p>	<p>强调, emphasized</p>	<p>中国要强 that if China is to be strong</p>

### ***Sociopolitical context and ideological embeddedness: Mutual construction of policy transformation and discourse change***

Consistent with the DHA's core principle of historical contextualization, the discursive evolution of rural China is inextricably linked to the broader sociopolitical context. The thematic and strategic shifts in *People's Daily* discourse are not incidental but are deeply embedded in and responsive to major policy transitions. Phase 1 corresponds to the rural tax and fee reform pilot in 2000. The discourse focuses on reducing burdens and grassroots stability, reflecting the governance logic of the state alleviating rural contradictions through policy adjustments. Phase 2 starts with the 2005 proposal of Building a New Socialist Countryside strategy. The discourse shifts to construction and balancing urban and rural areas, reflecting the policy orientation of industry nurturing agriculture in the mid-industrialization stage and the systematic investment in rural infrastructure and public services. Phase 3 begins with the 2017 proposal of the Rural Revitalization Strategy. In the discourse, *countryside* replaces *rural areas*, and *revitalization* replaces *construction*, echoing the goal of agricultural and rural modernization in the new era, as well as diverse development needs such as urban-rural integration, ecological civilization, and cultural inheritance. Meanwhile, the inclusion of international perspectives also reflects the global significance of China's rural development experience.

The representation of rural China in the three phases have different ideological embeddedness. Phase 1 responds to the need for alleviating rural burdens through tax reforms, constructing an image of the state as a problem-solver of rural grievances. Phase 2 aligns with the mid-industrialization strategy of industry nurturing agriculture, framing the state as an architect of balanced urban-rural development. Phase 3 echoes the new-era goal of agricultural and rural modernization under the Rural Revitalization Strategy,

portraying the state as a visionary leader of comprehensive national rejuvenation. In each phase, *People's Daily*, as the party's mouthpiece, translates policy into discourse that naturalizes the state's ideological priorities, making them appear as inevitable and beneficial to all.

In sum, the discursive construction of rural China is both a reflection of sociopolitical practice and a symbolic tool for policy promotion. The discourse change from rural governance to rural revitalization not only records the development process of China's rural areas but also reveals the power interaction and value reconstruction among the state, society, and market in the rural field.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

This study employs a corpus-assisted discourse analysis combined with the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to examine the diachronic representation of rural China in *People's Daily* from 2000 to 2025. The primary findings are as follows.

First, the thematic evolution of rural discourse in *People's Daily* aligns closely with phased shifts in national rural policies. This alignment empirically supports the DHA premise that discourse is a social practice shaped by and shaping its historical context. The progression from "Rural Basic Governance" to "New Socialist Countryside Construction" and finally to "Comprehensive Rural Revitalization" in the media narrative demonstrates how state-aligned media actively constructs thematic agendas that mirror and legitimize policy evolution.

Second, the analysis of discursive strategies reveals the linguistic mechanisms of this construction. The nomination strategy's shift from the administrative-economic term *rural areas* to the culturally-inflected *countryside* is a key finding. It provides empirical evidence for how language is used to symbolically reconstruct social reality, in this case, redefining the conceptualization of rural space to fit new policy goals (Visser, 2010). Similarly, the evolution in perspectivization, from a monolithic, government-led voice to a multi-stakeholder

chorus incorporating local, corporate, and international actors, illustrates how discourse manages and distributes symbolic power. This strategy enhances the legitimacy of policies by making them appear consensual and widely supported, reflecting a sophisticated application of agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) within a state-media framework.

Third, situating these linguistic patterns within the sociopolitical context, as mandated by DHA, clarifies their ideological function. The discourse in *People's Daily* is not a neutral reflection but an active, ideological construction. It consistently frames the state as the central, benevolent agent in rural transformation, first as a solver of peasant burdens, then as a designer of modern countryside, and finally as a visionary leader of revitalization. This study thus contributes to the theoretical understanding of discourse-power dynamics (Hall, 1997; Wodak, 2015) by showing how macro-level policy is operationalized through micro-level linguistic choices in a state-media context.

Empirically, this research addresses a gap in focusing on domestic Chinese-language mainstream media. It complements studies on international media (Pan, 2024) by highlighting the distinct, state-strategic construction of rural narratives for a domestic audience. The findings underscore the hegemonic nature of this discourse: while it shows an apparent diversification of voices (perspectivization), the overarching narrative remains tightly aligned with national policy, potentially marginalizing alternative or critical rural narratives (Luo, 2011).

#### **Research limitations and future directions**

Despite the insights gained from examining the diachronic representation of rural China in *People's Daily*, this study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment, while also pointing to avenues for future research. First, it focuses solely on *People's Daily*, limiting insights into rural representations in other media such as local newspapers, social platforms, or non-mainstream outlets, which may offer

divergent narratives. Second, the corpus selection might exclude relevant texts where rural themes were implicitly embedded, narrowing thematic comprehensiveness. Third, the analysis prioritizes “nomination” and “perspectivization” within the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), leaving other critical strategies (e.g., predication, argumentation) under-explored, which could have enriched understanding of discourse legitimization. Future research could expand to comparative studies across diverse media, broaden the corpus scope, deepen the analysis of discursive strategies, and conduct international and cross-cultural comparisons to more comprehensively and dynamically interpret the media construction of rural China.

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