



Visual Rhetoric and Mobilization of Public Opinion: A Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of China's Family Planning Policy Propaganda Posters

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Abstract: As an instrument of political mobilization, mass media influence public opinion to increase the efficiency of mobilization and achieve ambitious goals. Since artistic images are more effective than texts in attracting attention and conveying messages, China has used posters extensively to change public opinion when promoting its family planning policies. This study analyzes the characteristics of family planning posters in different periods from the 1970s to the present within the multi-modal analytic framework of visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen in terms of “representational”, “interactive” and “compositional” modes of meanings. The study finds that politically charged ideological indoctrination dominated the 1970s, the 1980s featured raising public awareness of specific policies, and from the 1990s to the present, artistic expressions have enjoyed thematic diversity and innovation. In general, conducive to fertility-related belief revision and behavioral change of the public, China's colorful family planning posters have played a positive role in encouraging favorable views towards China's family planning policies.

Research Background

The Chinese government has made extensive use of posters to raise public awareness of its family planning policies so posters are very relevant when studying China's promotion of the policies. The construction of family planning posters in multimodal discourse lends national identity and historical charm to the long-term and large-scale political campaign regarding knowledge dissemination, promotion of behavioral change and cultural reconstruction. Therefore, a historical overview and analysis of the visual grammar strategies used in the campaign is of great relevance to the current and future promotion of family planning.

Theoretical Framework

Halliday, in his theory of systemic functional linguistics, proposes three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that visual images also produce symbolic meanings so a social semiotic approach is applicable. They apply Halliday's theory of social semiotics to visual communication, proposing a range of meanings, i.e., representational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and compositional meaning to further explore the socio-cultural contexts behind and social functions of images.

Research Design

In this study, China's family planning posters are divided into three periods: 1970s-1980s, 1990s-early 2000s, and 2010s-present based on their content. A total of 60 pictures were selected with 20 from each period and then analyzed within the framework of Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar in terms of representational meaning, interpersonal meaning and compositional meaning. The three-dimensional multimodal discourse analysis aims to summarize the visual grammar strategies used in family planning posters of different periods and how the posters contributed to mobilizing public opinion.

Findings

1970s-1980s: Policy advocacy and ideological indoctrination with an emphasis on social responsibility

1. Texts are more prominent than images and family planning is correlated with national development.
2. Social identities stand out in low angle composition and the social implications of law-abiding families are emphasized.
3. Straightforward themes replete with political colors showcase the ubiquity of one-child families in the society.

1990s-early 2000s: Creation of a new family planning culture and cultivation of public approval of the policies

1. Interaction is highlighted to present eugenic ideals
2. Family life is displayed at eye level and the intrinsic value of family roles is acknowledged.
3. Objective description of different gender roles of men and women conveys the message of gender equality in family planning

2010s-present: Encouraging childbirth through subtle inspiration and emphasizing the emotional benefits of having multiple children

1. Panoramic presentation of interaction between parents and children equates more children with greater happiness
2. Blurring and generalizing the subjects in posters leaves room for the imagination of a happy life
3. Families are not complete without children and multiple children lead to family happiness

Possible reasons why China's family planning posters changed over time

1. Restriction to Relaxation: More accommodating family planning policies
2. Indoctrination to inspiration: The rise of individual autonomy and aesthetics
3. Homogeneity to diversity: Different types of themes and poster designers