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Edited by
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Editorial
Discourse and the Contemporary Chinese Media: An Expanding Research Field 5
Chiara Bertulessi, Lutgard Lams, and Bettina Mottura

A Dialogue of the Deaf? Decoding Discourse on EU-China Relations in the Chinese English-Language State Press 15
Lutgard Lams

Strategic Narratives across the Strait: A Comparative Analysis of the English, Italian, and Arabic Versions of *The Governance of China* (I) 35
Beatrice Gallelli, Luigi Miotto, and Tanina Zappone

Between Science and Silence: Media Representation of Thematic Foci in the *People's Daily* 65
Damien Ng

Mobilizing through Words: A Discursive-Pragmatic Analysis of Anti-Epidemic Slogans in Contemporary Chinese Media 97
Daniele Caccin

From Promotion to Criticism: Shifting Attitudes towards English Language Teaching in Chinese Official Media 121
Francesco Michael Scaringella

An Affective Region of Our Own: Semantic Change and Counternarrative on Chinese Social Media 139
Xingxing Yu

"Lianhuanhua on the easel": Framing Discourse on Chinese Comics 161
Martina Caschera

Rewriting the Myth in Times of Permacrisis: Discourse and Ideology in Chinese Animation from *Princess Iron Fan* to *Havoc in Heaven* 183
Giovanni Ruscica

Popularisation Strategies of Medical Knowledge and Terminology in Chinese Medical TV Series: A Preliminary Investigation 201
Natalia F. Riva and Alessandro Vallati

Authors 223

An Affective Region of Our Own: Semantic Change and Counternarrative on Chinese Social Media

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Abstract

This study investigates the semantic and affective repurposing of the term *dongya* 东亚 (East Asia) within Chinese public discourse. While traditionally a geopolitical and civilisational signifier, the term has recently been co-opted on social media to frame personal anxieties regarding family, education, and psychological trauma. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this paper analyses a diachronic corpus of highly-viewed WeChat Official Accounts articles from 2016 to 2025. Through a longitudinal analysis of thematic frequencies and sentiment trends, the study traces a marked shift in meaning: over time, *dongya* 东亚 (East Asia) increasingly anchors discussions of domestic precarity and emotional distress, diverging from its earlier geopolitical associations. The findings suggest that this resemanticisation reflects the emergence of an affective public that mobilises *East Asia* as a discursive shield to express social critique and negotiate collective vulnerability within a restrictive media environment.

Keywords: affective publics; Chinese social media; counternarrative; discursive shielding; semantic change.

1. Introduction

The term *dongya* 东亚 (East Asia) in Chinese public discourse has long carried both geopolitical and civilisational meanings. Culturally,

[*] This paper is based on a study independent of and preceding my doctoral research project at the University of Nottingham.

East Asia carries historical connotations. For centuries, the region operated as a stable and hierarchical international system with China as the clear hegemon (Kang 2010). This tribute system was built on a shared cultural and normative framework, with surrounding states and their elites consciously copying Chinese institutional and discursive practices, including a common Confucian worldview (*ibid*.). This shared worldview was reflected in concepts such as *Tianxia* 天下 (All-under-Heaven), which represented a philosophical and political ideal of a universal world institution, envisioning the world as a single, ordered entity (Zhao 2006). In contemporary usage it often functions as a neutral regional label, referring to the eastern part of the Asia continent. For example, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (2011) defines the *East Asian* region as comprising China, Taiwan, Japan, Mongolia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the Republic of Korea (ROK). In academic research and reporting, *East Asia* is also often employed as a neutral regional indicator. Cong *et al*. (2022) use *East Asia* as a geographical frame in their large-scale genomic analysis.

Yet in the Chinese social media environment, the term has recently been repurposed. The term is increasingly being used to frame intimate, personal anxieties about family, education, and psychological trauma. This study investigates the nature, timing, and implications of this semantic and affective shift. By analysing a diachronic corpus of articles from WeChat Official Accounts spanning from 2016 to 2025, this research provides a lens into an evolving public discourse of the digital media studies in contemporary China.

This paper argues that the discursive repurposing of *East Asia* is not a random linguistic drift but a strategic act of social critique. It represents the formation of an affective public that circulates a potent counternarrative against state-sanctioned narratives of relentless progress and social harmony (Bamberg and Andrews 2004; Lueg and Lundholt 2021; Zhang and Zhang 2025). In this process, a geopolitical term is co-opted to serve as a vocabulary for social critique, using the perceived shared experiences of neighbouring societies as a mirror and a metric for China's own internal problems. By framing domestic issues such as academic pressure, *neijuan* 内卷 (involution), and mental health as *dongya / dongya de* 东亚/东亚的 (East Asia/Asian), users create a shared, transnational identity of suffering (Chen, Zhou, and Yang 2024; Wang, Yang, and Cui 2024; Han and Cheung 2025). This act of reframing enables them to articulate dissent and build solidarity while navigating a restrictive and heavily monitored media environment (Abbott 2019; Ruan *et al*. 2021;

Chang 2025). This shift in usage not only reflects the dynamic development of language but also mirrors changes in social attitudes, cultural trends, and the media ecology, where the evolving affordances of digital platforms continually shape and reshape social expression (Schneider 2024; Yang and Hu 2024; Zhang, Dumitrica, and Jansz 2024).

Based on the above background, this study poses the following questions:

- How has the thematic focus of Chinese WeChat discourse concerning *East Asia* shifted between 2016 and 2025?
- What corresponding change in sentiment has accompanied this thematic shift?

2. Theoretical framework: affective publics and digital counternarratives

This study integrates three theoretical lenses: Papacharissi's (2014) theory of affective publics, which explains how online collectives cohere; the concepts of the networked public sphere and counternarratives (Bruns 2023), which explain where and why they form in opposition to dominant discourses; and theories of semantic change, which explain the linguistic mechanism they employ.

Traditional models of the public sphere often prioritise rational deliberation. However, Papacharissi (2014) argues that in the digital age, publics are increasingly mobilised not just through reasoned debate but through shared sentiment, emotion, and affect. Affect is defined as a pre-cognitive intensity – a "not yet formed shape" (*ibid*., 19) or a "drive or movement with a not yet developed sense of direction" (*ibid*., 21) – that precedes and fuels categorised emotions. Because of its unformed nature, affect holds a powerful potential for subversion before it is framed and contained by language and social rituals. Social media platforms are suited to channel these affective flows. Their technological affordances – such as the capacity for repetition (retweets), amplification (hashtags), and the infusion of personal storytelling into news – create what Papacharissi (*ibid*., 116) terms "soft structures of feeling". These platforms allow for a stream of affect, enabling users to feel their proximity to events and to each other, thereby cultivating the affective resonance that bonds a public together (*ibid*.). This framework is essential for understanding how the disparate, individual anxieties of Chinese netizens can coalesce into a powerful, collective discourse.

The emergence of such an affectively-bound public often occurs in opposition to dominant cultural stories, or master narratives (Bamberg and Andrews 2004). However, when such narratives fail to align with the lived experiences of citizens, alternative discursive spaces can emerge. Unlike the traditional, unified public sphere, the networked public sphere is fractured into a multiplicity of online spaces where official, commercial, and personal narratives intersect and compete (Bruns 2023). Within these networked spaces, actors can create and circulate counternarratives – discursive formations that resist, subvert, or parody dominant ideologies (Lueg and Lundholt 2021; Zhao and Zhang 2024). This framework helps explain why the critical discourse on *East Asia* has emerged. The primary tool used by this affective public to build its counternarrative is linguistic: the repurposing of an existing term. Social media has been shown to dramatically accelerate the process of semantic change, enabling words to be rapidly recontextualised by online communities (Iori 2023). This process is not random but is driven by social and cultural forces. As words are used in new digital environments, their interpretations can diverge significantly from traditional definitions, demonstrating that meaning is determined by context and usage (Fairclough 2010; Partington, Duguid, and Taylor 2013).

By synthesising these three frameworks, this study posits a communicative ecosystem: an affective public has weaponised semantic change as the primary mechanism for creating and circulating a counternarrative against a dominant political ideology. This approach demonstrates how linguistic, social, and political processes are deeply intertwined.

3. Literature review

3.1. *The concept of 'East Asia': from historical sphere to contested identity*

The concept of *East Asia* has evolved from its origins as a historical, sinocentric cultural sphere to its contemporary understanding as a geographical and geopolitical formation. Geographically, the region is conventionally defined to include China, Japan, the Koreas, Mongolia, and Taiwan (IUCN 2011). Yet its earliest meanings were not spatial but civilisational. Historically, *East Asia* denoted a shared, China-centred worldview underpinned by the philosophical notion of *Tianxia* 天下 (All-under-Heaven), a universal and moral order that transcended territorial

boundaries (Zhao 2006). In this cosmology, *China* was conceived not as a bounded nation-state but as the institutional and cultural centre of a world system – the nucleus of a moral, political, and cosmic whole. *Tianxia* thus embodied what Zhao (*ibid*.) terms a world institution: a trinity of geographical, psychological, and political realms governed by the ethical principle of world-ness rather than sovereignty.

This philosophical order materialised through the hierarchical tribute system that structured East Asian diplomacy from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Kang (2010) characterises this system as a stable and legitimate hierarchy with China as hegemon, where rank was determined by cultural achievement and adherence to Confucian norms rather than by military power. Secondary states accepted subordinate status in exchange for recognition and security within a moral order, producing what Kang (*ibid*.) calls a Confucian international society in which hierarchy and harmony coexisted. The arrangement provided credible commitments from China not to exploit tributary partners and underpinned long periods of peace among Sinicised polities (*ibid*.).

In modern parlance, however, *East Asia* refers less to hierarchy than to diversity. The unified cultural sphere has given way to a constellation of sovereign nation-states marked by uneven political development – from consolidated democracies to hybrid and authoritarian regimes (Cheng and Chu 2018). Despite this political fragmentation, a sense of shared cultural identity persists, often invoked in contemporary discourse (Akaliyski 2023). These include deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and the intense educational competition that characterises societies across the region (Sechiyama 2013; Komatsu and Rappleye 2018; Zhang and Yamato 2018; Lai 2020).

3.2. *Social media as a site for discursive contention in China*

The Chinese social media landscape is a complex and contested space, shaped by the dual forces of stringent state control and vibrant user agency. The state actively employs digital platforms for propaganda, shaping public opinion, and enforcing stability maintenance (Ruan *et al*. 2021; Stevens 2025). This is a key component of a broader strategy of "digital authoritarianism", in which technology is leveraged to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic populations (Roberts and Oosterom 2024). WeChat, the platform central to this study, is a primary site for this surveillance and control (Jiang *et al*. 2021; Ruan *et al*. 2021).

However, a purely top-down model is insufficient for understanding this ecosystem. Chinese netizens demonstrate remarkable creativity and agency in navigating these constraints (Abbott 2019; Gu and Heemsbergen 2023). WeChat functions as a "multiverse" where content bleeds across public, semi-public, and private networks, and users engage in metavoicing – reacting to and reshaping current-affairs content via likes, comments, and reposts – thereby blurring production and consumption and generating accidental exposure to alternative narratives (Wu and Wall 2019). On Douyin, state actors deploy distinct emotional registers. Central news agencies emphasise military and diplomacy, while local outlets foreground "livelihood warmth", together revealing a layered affective strategy across the propaganda system (Zhao and Zhang 2024). These platformed emotions coexist with participatory practices that sustain online communities: on Bilibili, *danmu* 弹幕 (on-screen comments) facilitates co-viewing, playful interaction, and a sense of belonging – an affective sociality that makes audiences networked digitally but connected discursively (Wang 2022). This literature establishes Chinese social media not as a monolithic propaganda machine, but as a negotiated terrain where official narratives and user-generated meanings collide and co-exist.

3.3. *Counternarratives and the articulation of social anxiety*

In recent years, this negotiated terrain has become a vital arena for articulating collective anxieties about structural precarity (Chen, Liu, and Fang 2021). These anxieties are rooted in concrete macroeconomic realities: China's post-industrial economic slowdown, record-high youth unemployment, and a deflating property market have strained the implicit social contract that once linked education to guaranteed upward mobility (Bradsher 2025; Su 2025). This widespread disillusionment has given rise to powerful online counternarratives.

The concept of *neijuan* 内卷 (involution) has become a key term for describing this condition. It refers to a hypercompetitive social environment of diminishing returns, where individuals feel trapped in a cycle of exhausting effort for minimal gain (Zhang and Li 2023; Liang 2024). The psychological impact of *involution* is significant, with studies linking it to heightened academic stress and anxiety among college students (Wang, Yang, and Cui 2024; Zhang *et al.* 2024). In response to the pressures of *involution*, the movement of *tangping* 躺平 (Lying Flat) emerged

as an affective counternarrative of passive resistance. As Zhang and Li (2023) argue, *Lying Flat* represents a form of affective withdrawal from the state's ideal of relentless productivity, transforming personal fatigue into a public critique of the toxic work culture and unattainable meritocratic promises. Similar affective networks have formed around feminist issues. The hashtag *#GirlsHelpGirls* exemplifies what Yang and Hu (2024) call an affective heterotopia: a fleeting but intense digital space where women articulate solidarity against patriarchal violence and state censorship (Chang 2025). As Sechiyama (2013) reminds us, such feminist contestations challenge enduring Confucian gender hierarchies that subordinate women's agency to family and nation.

While existing scholarship has documented *East Asia* as a geopolitical concept and has separately analysed the rise of social anxieties in China, a research gap remains. No study has analysed how an established geopolitical term is being semantically and affectively repurposed to serve as the primary vessel for these potent counternarratives of precarity.

4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining computational linguistic techniques with descriptive time-series analysis to investigate the thematic and affective shifts in the discourse surrounding *East Asia*.

4.1. *Corpus construction*

The primary dataset is a purpose-built, diachronic corpus of top-viewed articles (each exceeding 100,000 views) from WeChat Official Accounts, spanning from September 10, 2016 – the earliest date a top-viewed article could be sourced – to September 8, 2025. *Weixin gongzhonghao* 微信公众号 (WeChat Official Accounts) are semi-public channels inside WeChat that let individuals, media, and institutions publish long-form articles to subscribers – and, despite state regulation, they're among China's most influential venues for shaping public discourse because of their massive reach and push-based distribution (HSBC Business Go 2024). Their visibility metrics – such as article view counts – serve as useful proxies for gauging public resonance and social salience in the Chinese digital sphere (Wu and Wall 2019; Jiang *et al.* 2021).

By focusing on widely circulated content, the corpus captures discourses with demonstrable social salience and broad public engagement, thereby strengthening the reliability of subsequent linguistic and interpretive analyses. This nearly decade-long timeframe enables a robust longitudinal analysis capable of identifying significant discursive trends. WeChat was chosen for its unique position as a "multiverse" where public, semi-public, and private communications intersect, making it an ideal venue for observing the organic negotiation of meaning (Wu and Wall 2019). The raw data underwent a rigorous cleaning and preprocessing protocol to ensure the integrity of the linguistic analysis.

To provide a baseline for comparison, the ZHTenTen simplified Chinese corpus was used as a reference. This large, general corpus represents a more conventional usage of *dongya* 东亚 (East Asia), allowing for a comparative analysis to determine whether the trends observed on WeChat are unique to that platform or part of a broader semantic shift (Weninger and Li 2023).

4.2. *Thematic analysis*

A multi-step thematic analysis was conducted to move from individual words to coherent conceptual themes. First, all nouns appearing in a direct syntactic relationship with the keyword *East Asia* were extracted. In Chinese, this attributive relationship can be expressed directly – e.g., *dongya nü'er* 东亚女儿 (East Asian daughter) or with the possessive marker *de* 的. As the marker is often omitted in common collocations (Chen 2025), the two grammatical relations were programmatically unified into a single dataset of modifiers.

A collocational analysis was then performed on both corpora to identify the most frequent and statistically significant modifying terms. To isolate the emergent meaning within the WeChat discourse, a comparative filtering method was applied, following Partington, Duguid, and Taylor (2013). High-frequency geopolitical collocates dominant in the reference corpus – e.g., *guojia* 国家 (nation); *jingji* 经济 (economy); *wenhua* 文化 (culture) – were excluded from the primary analysis of the self-built corpus. This step was crucial for uncovering the unique features of the WeChat discourse.

The remaining keywords were grouped into semantically coherent thematic clusters using a bottom-up, thesaurus-based methodology. This ensures that the identified themes are empirically grounded in the

corpus itself. For instance, keywords related to parental and household roles were grouped into a "Family" cluster. Notably, while keywords such as *xiaohai* 小孩 (young child) and *zinü* 子女 (sons and daughters) also belong to the family theme, their huge surge in frequency since 2023 warranted their separation into a distinct "Children" cluster to better analyse this recent, high-impact trend. A similar process was used to create an "Education" cluster. This bottom-up approach ensures that the identified themes are empirically grounded in the linguistic patterns of the corpus itself (Partington, Duguid, and Taylor 2013). The three most prominent emergent clusters identified were "Family", "Education", and "Children". The composition of these clusters is detailed in *Table 1*.

Table 1. – Composition of core thematic clusters identified in the Self-Built Corpus.

Cluster name	Constituent keywords (simplified Chinese)	Total frequency
Family	*fumu* 父母 (parents), *mama* 妈妈 (mom), *muqin* 母亲 (mother), *muqinmen* 母亲们 (mothers), *nü'er* 女儿 (daughter), *nü'ermen* 女儿们 (daughters), *haizi* 孩子 (child), *haizimen* 孩子们 (children), *ren* 人 (person), *fuqin* 父亲 (father).	104
Education	*jiaoyu* 教育 (education), *jiaoyu tizhi* 教育体制 (education system).	63
Children	*xiaohai* 小孩 (young child), *zinü* 子女 (sons and daughters).	54

4.3. *Sentiment and time-series analysis*

To quantify the affective tone of the discourse, a lexicon-based sentiment analysis was conducted using the *National Taiwan University Sentiment Dictionary* (NTUSD), a validated lexicon for Chinese (Yang *et al.* 2022). A random sample of 100 snippets containing the keyword was extracted from each corpus for a comparative overview. For the diachronic analysis, a random sample of 50 snippets per year was drawn from the self-built corpus for the years 2016 through 2025, with the full sentence serving as the unit of analysis.

5. Findings

The analysis reveals a transformation in the discourse surrounding *East Asia*, marked by a discursive inflection around 2020. This period marks the repurposing of the term from a primarily geopolitical signifier to a framework for articulating domestic social anxieties, a shift accompanied by a dramatic turn toward overwhelmingly negative sentiment.

5.1. *The 2020s as a period of thematic reorientation*

The three domestic-life clusters – Family, Education, and Children – exhibit asynchronous but convergent shifts in prominence over the 2016-2025 period (*Fig. 1*). *Education* emerges earliest, peaking around 2018-2019 before declining during the pandemic years. *Family* discourse intensifies sharply after 2020, reaching peaks in 2021 and 2023, while *Children* shows a delayed yet pronounced rise beginning in 2022 and accelerating through 2025.

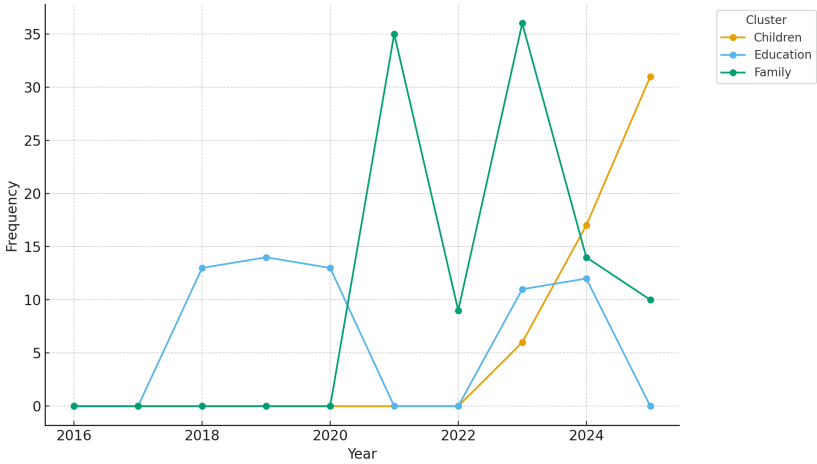


Figure 1. – Yearly trends of core thematic clusters showing a discursive inflection around 2020.

Although the trajectories differ in timing, their convergence after 2020 marks a broader discursive reorientation toward domestic and affective concerns (*Fig. 2*). The geopolitical framing once dominant in *East Asia* discourse gives way to themes centred on parenting, household life, and

emotional precarity. This transformation aligns with the social and psychological reverberations of the Covid-19 era, when digital spaces such as WeChat became arenas for expressing private anxieties and collective self-reflection (Zhang, Dumitrica, and Jansz 2024).

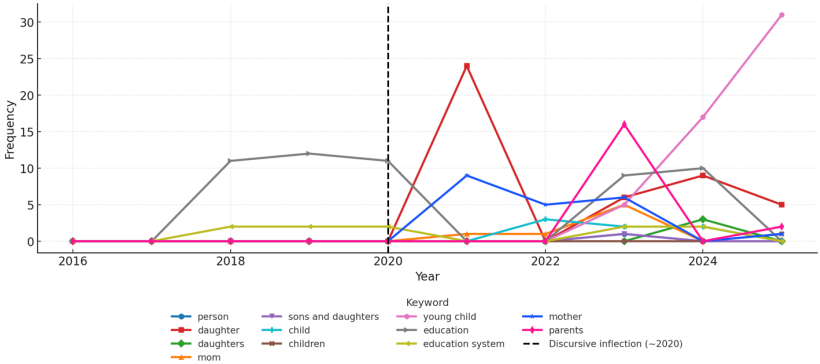


Figure 2. – Yearly change of East Asia modifiers (2016-2025).

5.2. *A negative affective turn*

The quantitative analysis of sentiment reveals a turn toward negativity. A comparative analysis of the self-built WeChat corpus and the reference corpus show a divergence in affective tone.

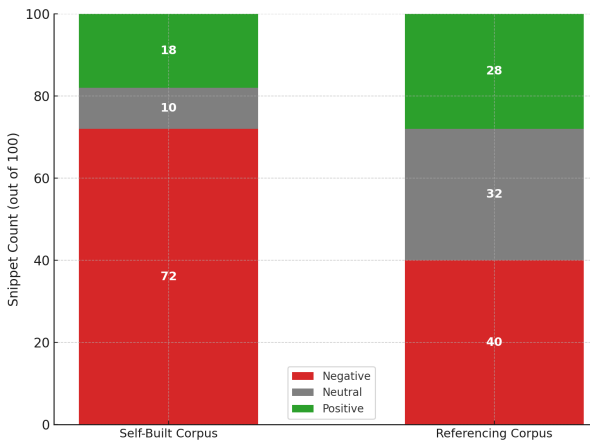


Figure 3. – Comparison of sentiment distribution between the self-built and reference corpora.

As seen in *Figure 3*, the self-built corpus is 72% negative, 10% neutral, 18% positive; the reference corpus is comparatively balanced (40/32/28). Yearbyyear, negativity spikes in 2018-2019, dips to a mixed profile in 2020 (RCEP-related positives coexisting with the *bingfu* 病夫, sick man), then climbs and stays high (≥ 84%) through 2025 (*Figs. 2-3*).

This 32-percentage-point gap in negative sentiment provides evidence of a functional transformation of the term. It is no longer primarily a neutral descriptor but a keyword that activates a semantic field of negativity and critique. This suggests the term may be functioning as a form of discursive shielding, where framing a critique of intense educational competition or stifling parental expectations as an *East Asian* problem, rather than a *Chinese* one, creates critical distance and may mitigate censorship risks (Ruan *et al.* 2021; Gu and Heemsbergen 2023; Roberts and Oosterom 2024; Chang 2025). Such strategies of indirection and coded framing have been documented in Chinese digital discourse, particularly among users seeking to articulate social critique or feminist dissent within tightly controlled communicative environments (Wu and Wall 2019; Mao 2020; Yang and Hu 2024). The repurposing of regional labels like *East Asia* thus appears to operate as a subtle rhetorical maneuver for negotiating state-imposed discursive boundaries while preserving critical affect.

5.3. *The chronology of a discursive transformation (2016-2025)*

The year-by-year sentiment analysis, depicted in *Figure 4*, maps the chronological progression of this affective shift.

The timeline unfolds in distinct phases:

- 2016-2017 – The discourse begins as predominantly neutral, reflecting objective reporting on geopolitical and diplomatic events.
- 2018-2019 – A sharp increase in negativity occurs, reaching 72% by 2019. This marks the initial emergence of the social critique narrative, with users beginning to articulate the pressures of hyper-competition through *dongya jiaoyu* 东亚教育 (East Asian education).
- 2020 (The Break Year) – Sentiment becomes more mixed. Negativity remains high at 46%, driven by controversies like the use of the derogatory phrase *dongya bingfu* 东亚病夫 (East Asian sick man), while positivity rises to 28%, reflecting optimism surrounding regional cooperation events such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement and the comparatively successful domestic containment of Covid-19 during that year.

- 2021-2025 (Post-2020 period) – In the post-2020 period, the discourse becomes intensely and consistently negative. The proportion of negative snippets climbs to 84% in 2021 and remains at similarly high levels through 2025 (e.g., 87.2% in 2024). This era is dominated by deeply personal themes of familial trauma, gender struggles, mental health crises, and the recurring motif of wanting to *taoli dongya* 逃离东亚 (escape from East Asia).

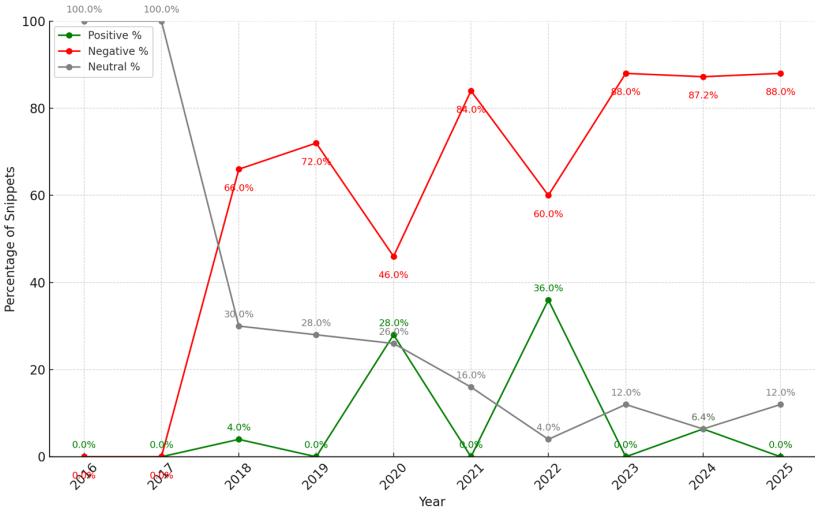


Figure 4. – Yearly sentiment trends in the self-built corpus (2016-2025).

6. Discussion

The findings are not merely descriptive of a linguistic trend, they reveal a sophisticated form of digital social critique adapted to China's restrictive media environment.

6.1. *East Asia as an affective public*

The negative sentiment observed in the WeChat corpus is the empirical signature of an affective public in formation. The shared, intense feelings of precarity, exhaustion, and disillusionment – driven by the

lived experience of *involution* and stifling familial expectations – act as the "affective attunement" that Papacharissi (2014) describes. This is not a public coalescing around rational policy debates but one bonded by a common feeling of being trapped. These dynamics resonate with Massumi's (2021) understanding of affect as a pre-cognitive force that shapes collective orientations and movements, and with Yang's (2018) analysis of how Chinese online publics channel emotion into restrained, civilising forms of activism under constraint. The constant circulation of keywords like "East Asian daughter", "East Asian parents", and "escape from East Asia", particularly the intensification of gendered and familial concerns post-2021, creates a chorus-like stream of affect that, as Papacharissi (2014) describes, solidifies collective identity through repetition and resonance.

6.2. *A counternarrative to the master narrative*

This affective discourse functions as a potent counternarrative that directly challenges the state's top-down modernist master narrative (Schneider 2024). Where the official narrative promotes prosperity through relentless hard work, the counternarrative of *East Asia* highlights its debilitating psychological costs, such as *kongxinbing* 空心病 (hollow heart disease) and the desire to *tangping* 躺平 (lie flat). Where the master narrative celebrates Confucian ideals of filial piety, this counternarrative voices a painful critique of "East Asian parents" and the trauma they can inflict, with discourse around gendered issues and mother-daughter entanglement becoming particularly dominant from 2021 onward. This discourse thus serves as an oppositional interpretation of reality, formulated and circulated by a diverse array of content creators within the networked public sphere of WeChat. It operates as a counternarrative that contests a hegemonic discourse by articulating the anxieties and lived experiences that the master narrative overlooks (Lueg and Lundholt 2021; Zhao and Zhang 2024).

The temporary positive turn in 2022, corresponding with the East Asian Summit, does not undermine this counternarrative; rather, it highlights the discourse's dynamic nature. It demonstrates that while the underlying affective current remains critical of domestic life, it can be momentarily redirected by major geopolitical events before reverting to its dominant introspective focus.

6.3. *Discursive shielding as a strategic practice*

The choice to frame these potent critiques as *East Asia/Asian* rather than explicitly *Chinese* appears to be a deliberate strategic practice, here termed discursive shielding – a strategy of mediated self-protection that enables users to express dissent while avoiding direct confrontation with censorship. These practices function as what Roberts (2018) calls *performative compliance*, whereby users engage in subversive talk that appears apolitical on the surface but carries layered meanings intelligible to in-group audiences. In China's digital environment, such discursive tactics constitute vital means of sustaining critique and solidarity under conditions of pervasive surveillance (Yang 2018; Gu and Heemsbergen 2023).

In a tightly controlled media environment where direct criticism of national policy or societal failings carries significant risk (Yang 2018; Roberts and Oosterom 2024; Zhao and Zhang 2024), generalising the problem to a regional level provides a crucial layer of plausible deniability. It allows users to discuss highly sensitive domestic issues – the perceived failures of the education system, unbearable social competition, a crisis in mental health – without directly attacking Chinese identity or national policies. This strategy aligns with other forms of networked, discursive activism adapted to authoritarian contexts (Wu and Wall 2019; Gu and Heemsbergen 2023; Chang 2025). It is not an overt protest but a subtle, yet powerful, form of resistance that leverages semantic ambiguity to open a space for dissent.

This phenomenon also reveals a fascinating transformation in the very concept of regional identity in the digital age. Historically, *East Asia* was a top-down concept, defined either by a Sinocentric cultural-political hierarchy or by modern geopolitical and economic blocs (Kang 2010; Zhang 2025). The discourse observed in this study, however, represents a bottom-up, user-generated redefinition. This new, emergent identity is not based on shared geography, politics, or a glorious heritage, but on a shared affective experience of suffering that has evolved over time – from early education-centred complaints to a deeper, more intimate reckoning with gendered trauma, intergenerational conflict, and the anxieties of child-rearing in a hyper-competitive society (Yang and Hu 2024; Han and Cheung 2025; Hung *et al.* 2025). Through social media's connective affordances, users have begun constructing an affective region – a transnational space bound not by prosperity or progress, but by collective fatigue and frustration (Papacharissi 2014; Massumi 2021).

7. Conclusion

This study has documented and analysed a discursive shift on Chinese social media. A mixed-methods analysis of a nearly decade-long corpus from WeChat Official Accounts reveals that around the year 2020, the term *East Asia* was systematically repurposed. It transformed from a largely neutral geopolitical signifier into a highly negative conceptual framework for articulating domestic social anxieties related to family, education, and psychological distress. Corpus trends and sentiment analysis jointly indicate that this period marked a decisive turn toward negative affect, reflecting broader emotional undercurrents within Chinese digital discourse (Yang *et al*. 2022; Zhang *et al*. 2024).

The central argument of this paper is that this phenomenon is best understood as the formation of an affective public that circulates a powerful counternarrative of precarity against official narratives of progress (Papacharissi 2014; Schneider 2024). By strategically employing the term *East Asia*, users engage in a form of discursive shielding, creating a space for social critique within a restrictive media environment.

8. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. The analysis is confined to WeChat Official Accounts, and a comparative study across other major platforms like Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu would provide a more comprehensive picture of the discourse. Furthermore, while the concept of discursive shielding offers a compelling explanation for the observed linguistic behaviour, this study cannot definitively prove user intent. Qualitative methods, such as digital ethnography or interviews with users, would be invaluable for exploring the motivations and strategic thinking behind this discursive practice.

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