

# “Modest Proposals”: Ironic Discursive Acts Against China’s Three-Child Policy From Weibo Users

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**Abstract**—This study adds to the growing literature on irony in Chinese social media through a case study of 39 “modest proposals” for enforcing China’s three-child policy on Weibo. Using the media discourse analysis approach, this study highlights the interplay of language, culture and media within the framework of the pretense theory of irony. Six frequent themes of “modest proposals” were analysed in detail. This study suggests that by means of “modest proposals” for promoting fertility, Weibo users intended to implicitly communicate criticism of the three-child policy and those who advocated or stipulated it, and demonstrate communal discursive acts against mainstream discourses and dominant ideology. This study not only demonstrates a strategy of irony in response to the three-child policy in Chinese social media, but also sheds light on the phenomenon of ironic discursive activism in Chinese cyberspace.

**Index Terms**—China’s three-child policy, irony, ironic proposals, pretense, insincerity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Although the three-child policy was pronounced in 2021, it is still highly important to study Chinese people’s responses to it, as birth policy appears in the thematic public sphere, which is characterized by strong openness, long longevity and a high degree of participation (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015). Various trades and professions have been influenced by the new birth policy. A brief review of China’s birth policies is introduced herein to understand the influence of the three-child policy and Chinese people’s responses to it. Birth control was proposed in 1953, four years after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and trialled from 1962 to 1969. Since 1970, the one-child policy (or the family planning policy) was in full operation. In 1982, the one-child policy, which advocated later marriage, later childbearing, and fewer and better births, was designed as a national policy by the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and was written into *the National Constitution*. In 2001, *the Population and Family Planning Law of the PRC* was enacted at the 25<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 9<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress.

The one-child policy has facilitated China’s population control and economic development in recent decades; nevertheless, it has also contributed to China’s ageing population, increased gender imbalances and other social issues. Since 2011, China’s birth policy has undergone critical changes. In 2011, the birth policy stated that a couple in which both members were from one-child families was permitted to have two children. In 2013, the birth policy declared that if either member of a couple was from a one-child family, the couple was permitted to have two children. In 2015, all couples were permitted to have two children, and the full two-child policy was implemented on January 1, 2016. On May 31, 2021, a conference was held by the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPC to promote the three-child policy and its concomitant measures, which was presumably a response to the results of the 7<sup>th</sup> census released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of China on May 11, 2021, which revealed that the population of China has grown slowly over the past decade, with an average annual growth rate of 0.53% and a total fertility rate of women of childbearing age of 1.3.

With the announcement of the three-child policy, young adults, who were mostly products of the one-child policy, are encouraged to have three children. Immediately after the publication of the three-child policy, the official Weibo account of Xinhua News Agency (the National News Agency of China) attempted to conduct a poll about whether people planned to have a third child, considered having a third child, were not sure about whether to have a third child or refused to have a third child; however, the poll was discontinued without comment. The vast majority of those polled opted for the last option. In Chinese culture, one must marry before bearing children. However, getting married is expensive, as a large amount of money is required to pay for an apartment, the wedding and perhaps even a dowry. For those who marry, the cost of supporting a family is very high. If a couple has a baby, their parents may need to contribute considerable effort and money. The masses can hardly afford to bear and rear a second child, not to mention a third child. As a matter of fact, the idiom of “民不聊生” (signifying that “people live a miserable life usually because of wars or disasters”) has been recontextualised (Bernstein, 1990) by Chinese netizens to indicate that the masses are too pressured by the heavy costs of housing, care, education, etc., to consider bearing child(ren), with “生” signifying “childbearing” instead of “life”. Consequently, after the three-child policy was publicized, negative responses to the three-child policy pervaded various

Chinese social media platforms. Additionally, multifarious discursive strategies were employed to indirectly convey their responses to the three-child policy. Yu et al. (2023) summarised the strategies of authorization, morality, and rationalization to articulate pro-work conservatism. This paper focuses on the strategy of “modest proposals”, namely, ironic proposals for enforcing the three-child policy. Specifically, this paper aims to answer two questions:

- (1) What kinds of ironic proposals did Chinese netizens make to enforce the three-child policy?
- (2) What purposes did such ironic proposals aim to achieve?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section first defines irony on the basis of previous research, summarises previous studies of irony in Chinese social media and finally introduces the pretense theory of irony, which is of vital importance to interpreting “modest proposals” for enforcing the three-child policy.

### A. Defining Irony

Irony is difficult to understand, “but irony is also ubiquitous” (Tobin & Israel, 2012, p. 27). No firm consensus has been reached on its precise definition. Among the numerous definitions of irony, two definitions were found very inspiring. One is Hutcheon’s (1995, 2005) definition of irony: “a discursive strategy operating at the level of language (verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual)” (p. 10), and the other is Haverkate’s (1990) definition: irony is the “intentional expression of insincerity” (p. 104) by which speakers can produce rhetorical effects on their interlocutors. Hutcheon’s (1995, 2005) definition focuses on the forms of irony and claims that irony may be represented by various semiotic resources. Zappavigna (2022) maintained that “irony markers are often multimodal or paralinguistic” (p. 108), and Gibbs (2021) asserted that nonverbal modes may also exhibit dissonance or discrepancy between prior expectations and the eventual reality, which is a premise upon which irony is generated. Haverkate’s (1990) definition centres on the generative mechanism and purpose of irony, with the generative mechanism being the intentional expression of insincerity and the purpose being the communication of rhetorical effects. With respect to the defining feature of irony, Garmendia (2010) insisted that “irony is always critical” (p. 397). On the basis of these views on irony, we define irony as a conscious strategy whereby people, in a detached way, convey critical intent with recourse to linguistic and paralinguistic resources.

### B. Studies of Irony in Chinese Social Media

Irony is considered a discursive strategy or practice to creatively, playfully and implicitly express criticism (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021). Similarly, Thornton (2002) considered irony a strategy of framing dissident views or delivering political critique in the face of repressive regimes, with the speaker/author being shielded from the penetrating gaze of the state. Zhao and Lin (2020) regarded irony as self-censorship practice, specifically, rhetorical resistance to power and transformative political discourse to deconstruct political and social culture. Liu and Leung (2021) deemed irony a counter-censorship linguistic strategy through which Chinese netizens challenge or criticise official discourses. Chen and Gong (2024) regarded irony as a discursive strategy in the context of censorship to reconstruct social structure and challenge political authoritarianism.

Studies have also concentrated on specific forms of irony in Chinese social media. Yao et al. (2013) reported that since 2009, the ironical *bèi*-construction (irregular expressions of passive voice) has become a typical pattern to express criticism and disapproval, and it can enhance criticism and negativity, protect self-respect, achieve humour, and establish in-group solidarity. Ye (2019) asserted that the new *bèi* structure in Chinese social media is a case of resistance to unnamed authority. Wu and Fitzgerald (2020) regarded irony as a discursive, indirect technique to vent political criticism and claimed that irony may be manifested in antiphrases, quotation marks and insincere proposals. Lin (2021) regarded irony as a rhetorical device to legitimize and enhance hegemony, and words in quotation marks may be ironic. Efforts have also been made to construct corpora of irony texts in Chinese social media. Tang and Chen (2014) constructed the very first, with 1,005 ironic utterances, and summarised five kinds of ironic expressions in negative contexts. Li (2022) established a corpus of 949 ironic texts and summarised eight patterns of ironic reversals and over fifty constructions that are likely to be ironic.

In brief, irony is regarded as a discursive strategy to skilfully circumvent censorship, demonstrate resistance, and deliver criticism. Although the literature with irony abounds in Chinese social media, few studies have focused on ironic proposals. In Wu and Fitzgerald’s (2020) examples of irony, an ironic proposal was mentioned, and they considered it humorous. From the perspective of the thesis author, ironic proposals are essentially sarcastic, not humorous. Additionally, their definition of irony (saying one thing but meaning the opposite) is limited; in fact, their mention of quotation and allusion can also be taken as strategies of irony.

### C. The Pretense Theory of Irony

Grice (1978) contended that, “to be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests)” (p. 125) and that the purpose of saying something ironically is “to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgement or a feeling such as indignation or contempt” (p. 124). Fowler (1969, 2009) defined irony as:

A form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear & shall not understand, & another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more & of the

outsiders' incomprehension. (p. 295)

On the bases of Grice's (1978) remark on irony and Fowler's (1969, 2009) idea of a double audience, Clark and Gerrig (1984) proposed the pretense theory of irony:

A speaker is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience; the speaker intends the addressees of the irony to discover the pretense and thereby see his or her attitude toward the speaker, the audience, and the utterance. (p. 121)

Clark and Gerrig (1984) justified their theory by analysing the irony in Swift's essay entitled "A Modest Proposal". "Modest proposals" are, in Muecke's (1969, 2020) term, "pretended advice or encouragement to the victim" (p. 69), a principal technique employed in impersonal irony. Later, Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995) proposed "the allusional pretense theory of discourse irony" (p. 3), and their "pretense" referred to "pragmatic insincerity" (p. 5), which they considered a criterial feature of all ironic utterances. Additionally, Sullivan (2019) noted that pretense is the essence of irony. In view of these accounts and the characteristics of our data, the thesis author claims that insincerity and pretense are critical features of irony and regards "modest proposals" as pretended discursive acts, wherein the ironist makes insincere suggestions.

### III. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYTICAL METHOD

Our data were collected from Weibo, the most widely used and most influential social media platform in China (He, 2022; Jin & Tay, 2023; Wu & Montgomery, 2020; Zhao & Lin, 2020). Weibo has become the most powerful and widely used channel for ordinary users to articulate critical attitudes towards sociopolitical issues (Jin & Tay, 2023; Wu & Fitzgerald, 2020). It is a virtual public sphere (Su, 2016) where posts are publicly accessible. Therefore, Weibo is an extremely useful research field for digital literacy (Zhang & Ren, 2020).

Since its publication, the three-child policy has been a trending topic on Weibo, and there have been numerous ironic comments on the new birth policy. However, irony, as an "affective practice" (Nikunen, 2018, p. 12), can hardly be annotated automatically. Hence, the thesis author manually browsed Weibo posts to collect ironic comments on the three-child policy. The period of data collection spanned two months, from May 31 to July 31, 2021. Burgers et al.'s (2011) verbal irony procedure was followed to identify ironic comments. The thesis author browsed comments with trending hashtags, for example, "#三胎生育政策来了#" (here, the three-child birth policy), searched for comments with the keywords "三胎/三孩政策" (the three-child policy) and obtained 332 ironic comments. The thesis author then reread these comments multiple times and finalized 39 posts of ironic proposals for this research.

"All signs in all modes are meaningful" (Kress, 2010, p. 59), and "texts on the Internet are almost always multimodal" (Jewitt et al., 2016, p. 25). Therefore, both linguistic comments and paralinguistic cues were reserved for analysis. With respect to ethical concerns, the thesis author followed the guiding principles of the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) and removed personally identifiable information such as names, avatars, mobile models, and identification of the positions (IP) of Weibo users to protect their privacy. All the verbal comments were translated into English by the thesis author, primarily by virtue of literal translation and sometimes free translation.

With respect to the analytical method, this study takes a media discourse analysis approach (Thurlow, 2017; Wu & Fitzgerald, 2020) that combines close textual analysis of ironic proposals and the interplay of cultural and technological affordances. Linguistically, propositions violating sincerity conditions (Haverkate, 1990) are likely indicative of irony. Culturally, China is a country with a long history and rich culture, endowing Chinese netizens with a tremendous reservoir for creative expressions. Technologically, the use of technological affordances, such as emojis, image macros, and screenshots, may complement verbal expressions and strengthen ironic intent.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The collected ironic proposals were categorised according to their themes. A total of 12 themes were summarised in our dataset. Only the six most frequent themes were elaborated on due to space limitations.

TABLE 1  
THEMES OF IRONIC PROPOSALS

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Recontextualising the coercive measures of the one-child policy	12	30.77
Relaxing birth control	6	15.38
Reforming the education system	4	10.26
Developing childbearing technologies	4	10.26
Limiting or taxing the purchase of contraceptives	3	7.69
Encouraging the elite to bear more children	3	7.69
Reforming the inheritance system	2	5.13
Offering houses as rewards for childbirths	1	2.56
Forcing women to become housewives	1	2.56
Advocating different childbirth policies for different social classes	1	2.56
Suppressing sexual minority	1	2.56
Trying polyandry	1	2.56
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100</b>

### A. *Recontextualising the Coercive Measures of the One-Child Policy*

The most frequent theme of all ironic proposals is recontextualising the coercive measures of the one-child policy. As mentioned in example (1) and delineated in Mo (2014), couples who had had one child were forced to have ligations, whereas pregnant women expecting a second child had to have abortions; otherwise, they would lose their jobs and CPC membership, and their houses could be demolished. Additionally, those who somehow managed to have two children would be fined heavily, and their properties would be confiscated if they could not pay the fine. First, the same measures for enforcing the one-child policy were proposed (examples (1) and (2)), but for diametrically opposite purposes. Namely, punishments for extra births were proposed to encourage more births, which is very ironic. Additionally, coercive measures were insincerely suggested to be recontextualised to facilitate implementing the three-child policy, for example, taxing singletons (example (2)) and forcing people to engage in sexual intercourse (example (3)). Additionally, multimodal or paralinguistic irony markers were deployed to complement verbal comments and intensify ironic effect. The emoji of husky (signifying silliness and innocence) 🐶 was used twice in example (1), and the emoji of “eating watermelon” 🍉 (waiting to see how things go on) was used three times in example (2). In example (3), a screenshot of a piece of news was appended below the verbal comment suggesting that the chairperson of a corporation proposed to provide contraceptives only for people with two children. The appended news served as the motivation for the ironic proposal of compulsory sexual intercourse.

(1)

06月01日 17:02

来，我们反向运行，以前计生，违反了拆房，开除，罚款.....，如今只要是不生三胎的，全都用上，保管用🐶🐶#三孩生育政策来了#

Translation: Now let's go the other way around. Those who violated the family planning policy were dismissed, fined, and got their houses destroyed....Now, identical measures can be imposed on those who haven't had three children. They will definitely facilitate the enforcement of the three-child policy. #Here, the three-child policy#

(2)

05月31日 18:12

#三孩生育政策来了#单身交税，不生罚款，以后入学第一档改成至少有两个兄弟姐妹



Translation: #Here, the three-child policy# Single people should pay more taxes; people who have not had three children should be fined; one needs to have at least two siblings to have access to education.

(3)

5-31 23:27

我建议，国家每晚安排俩公职人员至年轻未育夫妻房中，摠着他们传宗接代。不上手段怎行呢？ #三胎生育政策来了#



Translation: I suggest the state assign two civil servants every night to the room of each young childless couple and force them to make babies. How can it work without tough measures? #Here, the three-child policy#

Translation of the title of the appended news: the Chairperson of Zhongyuan Group Corporation (a real estate agency group) suggested that contraceptives should be provided only for people who have had two children.

No authorities were mentioned directly in these proposals except for example (3). In example (3), the state was assumed the enforcer of the proposed measures. Through these insincere proposals, Weibo users pretended to take the stance of the

government or members of their brain trust and encouraged the use of tough measures to enforce the new birth policy, and indirectly expressed their grudge against the government, especially the family planning department, which had taken extreme measures to implement the one-child policy, and they conveyed their worries about the potential reuse or recontextualisation of coercive one-child measures to implement the three-child policy. In essence, Chinese netizens communicated their displeasure of the government for their routine coercive working style.

### B. Relaxing Birth Control

China's birth policies changed from the one- to the two-child policy and then to the three-child policy. And Chinese netizens were bewildered by the number of children expected for each family and doubted the rationale for the formulation of each policy. Some Weibo users assumed that the number of children in birth policies was stipulated on impulse; therefore, they proposed the four-child policy (example (4)), the ten-child policy (example (5)), and even an unfettered birth policy (examples (5) and (6)).

(4)

2021年06月16日 16:41

#国家统计局回应三孩政策#生四个吧 抬棺稳点 😊😊

Translation: #The NBS responded to the three-child policy. #Bear four children so that one's coffin can be carried more steadily.

(5)

6-16 18:14

#国家统计局回应三孩政策#可以开放10胎甚至不限胎，有经济能力的多生，这样平均下来也有3胎了 😂

Translation: "The NBS responded to the three-child policy". The ten-child policy or even an unlimited childbirth policy should be promulgated. In that case, the rich can bear many children, and on average, each family may have three children.

(6)

6-16 18:11

#国家统计局回应三孩政策#你直接不限制生育不就行了？能者多劳 😏😏

Translation: #The NBS responded to the three-child policy. # Why not completely remove the restriction on fertility completely? Able people should do more work.

The four-child policy was proposed in example (4) on the basis of the ritual of coffin carrying at the traditional Chinese funeral ceremony. Ironically, the number of children suggested was for the sake of the death of parents. The ten-child policy and an unfettered birth policy indicate that people should bear as many children as they please. The three-child policy was considered infeasible for ordinary families and, thus, a policy tailored for the rich; likewise, the ten-child policy or an unfettered birth policy was proposed for the rich. These proposals can be explained by the "philosophy of lying flat" (躺平学), which has been popular with Chinese youth since a post declaring "Lying flat is justifiable" swept the internet in April 2021. The "lying flat" grassroots would retain their negative attitudes towards fertility, regardless of how the birth policy changed. Additionally, the Weibo user in example (5) implicitly ironized the common tactics of averaging in Chinese mainstream discourses. Different laughing emojis were used to demonstrate the insincerity of these proposals: the emoji of grinning 😊 in example (4), the emoji of a tearful smile 😂 in example (5) and the emoji of tittering 😏 in example (6). Netizens may use the same emoji more than once for emphasis.

By proposing more children, Weibo users pretended to respond to the state's call to increase the fertility rate, and tend to be more audacious than policy-makers. Behind these proposals, Weibo users implicitly ironized policy proposers and makers for finalising the number of legitimate children without seeking public opinion and demonstrated their propensity not to be practitioners of the three-child policy. From their perspective, the modification of birth policies should be based not only on the development of the state but also on the masses' willingness and financial capabilities.

### C. Reforming the Education System

The three-child policy had an immediate effect on the education industry. In July 2021, the Ministry of Education issued a "dual reduction policy" to reduce the burden of homework and off-campus training for students in compulsory education. To reduce the burden of homework, teachers were motivated to provide extracurricular services for the students after school, which means that teachers had to work for at least two more hours every day to help students finish their homework. Extra work usually means extra income. However, some parents believed that teachers should provide free extracurricular services, as teachers are labelled selfless "gardeners", a common metaphorical expression that stresses the dedication and role of teachers in Chinese culture. The Weibo user posting example (7) pretended to agree with those parents in the verbal comment but disagreed implicitly by suggesting that the earnings from two extra lessons were not

enough to buy a dessert in the appended screenshot of WeChat talk.

(7)

7-26 22:26

工作不努力 思想有问题🤔

老师的本质就是志愿者。为社会主义事业义务培养人才，难道不是一件光荣伟大的事情嘛？为什么要给报酬啊？其实老师只用包吃住就行，也不需要找对象结婚响应“三胎”政策。家长吐槽的对，暑假延时服务就不应该交钱，反正公交车也就一块钱，来回两块钱，吃顿饭呢就十几块钱，生活成本也不高。一节课给老师五块钱太多了，建议无偿补课！这样才和无私奉献的园丁身份相匹配！

#延时服务##暑假延时服务# 收起



Translation: One must harbour evil thoughts if one does not work hard. Teachers are essentially volunteers. Isn't it a great undertaking to voluntarily cultivate talent for socialism? Why should teachers be paid? Just provide them with free accommodations. Teachers do not need to look for a life partner, marry or implement the three-child policy. Parents are right to make complaints: extracurricular services during summer vacation should be free. Anyway, the living cost is not high. It only costs 1 yuan to take the bus, 2 for a round trip and approximately 10 for a meal. Consequently, 5 yuan is too much for a lesson. Teachers should offer free lessons after school, which instantiates their identities of selfless "gardeners".

To reduce the burden of off-campus training, educational training institutions were forbidden from providing curricular training for students in primary and high schools. Many training institutions were thus closed or downsized, and training teachers were dismissed. Under that circumstance, the Weibo user in example (8) pretended to take the government's stance or that of career mentors and suggested that training institutions change their business scopes and that teachers change their jobs accordingly. These changes were ironically considered contributions to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, a common mobilising slogan in Chinese mainstream discourses. In the end, New Oriental Education and Technology Group was mentioned, as it was an influential training institution and was overwhelmingly influenced by the "dual reduction policy".

(8)

7-30 13:00

根据新时代赋予的新任务，建议校外培训机构，立马转行，教师转岗，把以前的学校改为哺乳室、幼儿园，以前的教师抓紧转岗培训，学习哺乳、幼儿教育知识，为三胎政策的落实推出新举措，为中华民族伟大复兴做出新贡献。@新东方 等

Translation: In accordance with the missions of the new era, off-campus training institutions should change their business scopes, and teachers should transfer to new posts. Former schools should be changed to nursing rooms and kindergartens, and teachers should take training for new posts as soon as possible and learn about breastfeeding and preschool education to facilitate the enforcement of the three-child policy and contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. @New Oriental Education and Technology Group, etc.

By proposing to reform the education system, Chinese netizens ironized the overwhelming influence of the three-child policy on various trades and industries and, more generally, the authoritative nature of the government and the predominance of politics. Weibo users who made this series of proposals believed that some policies were put forwards or stipulated without grassroots research and doubted the priority of fertility.

#### D. Developing Childbearing Technologies

Others have proposed developing new technologies to create artificial uteruses (example (9)) and "male mommies" (男妈妈) (example (10)) so that it would not be necessary for women to bear and rear their children. Once such technologies are developed, fertility can be guaranteed despite some women's unwillingness to bear children. Some women are reluctant to bear child(ren) because they dread the suffering of pregnancy and delivery, and they are reluctant

to sacrifice their careers and devote themselves to looking after children day and night. Furthermore, assembly lines of childcare were proposed (example (9)) on the basis of the busy working schedules of most young people so that children could be raised effortlessly.

(9)

6-1 23:48 :

最快且受支持的方法假设：

人造子宫这项技术可以再多投点资金开发推广一下，育儿流水线也可以研发一下，然后放到寄宿幼儿园直到大学。😂😂😂 #你怎么看开放三孩政策#

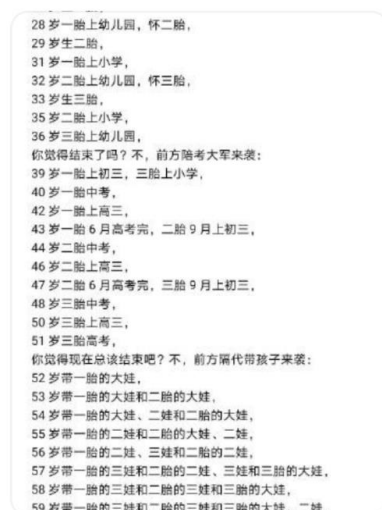


Translation: This is the fastest and best-supported method among all the hypotheses: more funds should be invested in developing and promoting the technology of artificial uteruses and childcare assembly lines. The children will then be sent to boarding kindergartens until college. #What do you think of the publication of the three-child policy?#

(10)

6-16 18:52

#国家统计局回应三孩政策#研发新科技吧，男妈妈是时候该有了🤖🤖🤖



Translation: #The NBS responded to the three-child policy# Develop new technologies. It is time that there should be male mommies.

These two comments used the same emoji three times and an appended picture to complement verbal comments and strengthen ironic intent. The guffaw emoji 😂 in example (9) and the husky emoji 🤖 in example (10) both demonstrated the insincerity of these proposals. The appended picture in example (9) visualised artificial uteruses, where embryos were equipped with tubes delivering nutrients and smart screens monitoring their vital signs, while the appended screenshot in example (10) outlined the life of a mother of three, which was presumed to be all about childbearing and rearing, thus explicating women's low desire to bear children.

These proposals have at least two presuppositions. First, women are just womb carriers, and they can be easily replaced by artificial or male womb carriers. Second, children are just products of technology, and they can be produced on a large scale. In fact, mothers are of paramount importance to embryos and children, and they are irreplaceable; moreover, children cannot grow well without parents' love and care. By proposing practically infeasible technologies, Weibo users ironized the state's overemphasis on fertility and understatement of the hardship of childbearing and rearing, especially for women. It was implied that women, as the key to birth policies, should have been surveyed for enacting or modifying any birth policy.

### E. Limiting or Taxing the Purchase of Contraceptives

In the one-child era, contraceptives were encouraged to avoid unplanned pregnancy, and they were thus tax-free (example (12)). In practice, the family planning departments, hospitals, communities, and even self-service machines on the street distributed condoms for free in the one-child era. As the birth policy changed, Chinese netizens proposed changing the contraceptive policies accordingly.

(11)

7-27 19:19

三胎政策再次拿到台面，改革住房，教育，医疗三座大山，目的只有一个就是想让你安心生孩子，那安全套如果限购，须成年人凭身份证每人每月只能购买少量几只，或者开始摇号模式会怎么样🤔

#股票##投资#

Translation: The three-child policy is discussed again. Reforming housing, education and health care, the three heaviest burdens for modern Chinese people, is just to have people bear children reassuringly. What if a restriction is put on the purchase of condoms and each adult can only buy several condoms monthly with an identity card? Or, how about having a lottery for purchasing condoms? #stock# #investment#

The Weibo user in example (11) proposed restricting the purchase of condoms and even mentioned the mode of a lottery, which is usually deployed for purchasing scarce commodities such as licence plates and houses in cities. The emoji of “fake sadness” (refraining oneself from laughing) 🤔 highlighted the absurdity and insincerity of such a proposal.

(12)

7-30 18:38

既然避孕药品和用品是因为一孩政策免税的，那么现在三孩政策了，是不是应该按13%税率征收呢，这样执行一年的财政收入增加不少，还能促进生育呢🤔



Translation: Since contraceptives are free of duty because of the one-child policy, they should be taxed at a rate of 13% with the advent of the three-child policy. After a year, fiscal revenue will increase exponentially, and fertility will be promoted.

In example (12), it was suggested that taxes be levied on contraceptives to increase fiscal revenue and promote fertility simultaneously. People in general are (potential) consumers of contraceptives, yet these proposals are to consumers' disadvantage. Additionally, the Weibo user ended his or her comment with an emoji of giggling 🤔 to mark the insincerity of the proposal and the wit of thinking unconventionally. The appended image macro, a personalised panda adjusting his eyeglasses, again highlighted the wit of the proposer and his or her doubt about whether the proposal would be accepted. Apparently, proposals to restrict the purchase of condoms or taxing contraceptives were made insincerely, with proposers pretending to take the stance of the government and endeavouring to propose what benefits implementing the three-child policy most.

### F. Encouraging the Elite to Bear More Children

Although the three-child policy is a national birth policy, many Chinese netizens consider it a policy tailored for the elite, especially rich people. It was thus deemed the recontextualised Favour Extension Order (推恩令), originally issued by Emperor Wu (156 BC–87 BC) of the Han Dynasty to consolidate the centralised monarchy. Today, ordinary people can hardly afford to raise three children, whereas rich people can rear three or more children effortlessly. By means of hypothetical statistical analysis, the Weibo user in example (13) claimed that rich people could and would enforce the three-child policy satisfactorily and that ordinary people thus need not bother themselves about it. In the appended picture,

a rich man rubbing his eyes further implied that it was not a big deal for rich people to raise three children.

(13)

06月02日 02:21

用得着三胎？这事情太简单不过了。

所谓能力越大，责任越大。首先，我们要勇于承认马先生、马先生、李先生、王先生等人的能力。

我们人均资产37万，一家就算它一百万，说实话，平均养一个孩子还可以吧。（记住，这是平均，实际上是远远不可能有这么多钱的）也就是说，你有一百万就要生一个孩子。

马先生资产3700亿，做个表率，生它37万个孩子……排名前五百的能人（富豪）们，总资产17万亿，你看，光他们就能而且应该生17000000个孩子，所以，你们这些负翁操的什么心？#你怎么看开放三孩政策##三孩政策会带来哪些改变##如果我有3个孩子#



Translation: Is the three-child policy necessary? It is so simple. Able people should do more work. Above all, we should admit the capabilities of Mr. Ma, Mr. Ma, Mr. Li, Mr. Wang (alluding to four business tycoons of China), etc. On average, we have 370,000 RMB per person, and one household has 100,000 RMB, which is generally enough to raise a child (Remember, this is just the average amount. In fact, one couldn't have that much money.). In other words, you need to bear one child if you have 100,000 RMB. Mr. Ma has assets of 370,000,000,000 RMB, and, thus, he should set an example by bearing 370,000 children... The top 500 able people (rich people) have assets of 17,000,000,000,000 RMB, and they can and should bear 17,000,000 children. So, why do people in debt bother about the three-child policy? #What do you think of the publication of the three-child policy? ##What changes will be brought about by the three-child policy? # #If I have three children#

Additionally, experts who proposed and advocated the three-child policy were also urged to bear three or even more children. In example (14), it was suggested that each expert bear a dozen children. This insincere proposal demonstrated the loss of credibility among some Chinese experts. "Experts" (专家) may be unworthy of their professional titles and make irrational propositions (Lin, 2021), and it has become a repulsive term and often arouses ironic comments online. In fact, there are so many expert suggestions online that #Experts are advised not to advise# (建议专家不要建议) turned into a trending hashtag on Weibo in 2022.

(14)

6-16 18:41

#国家统计局回应三孩政策#

我只知道少生优生，幸福一生

专家建议开放三胎，请专家每人生十几个

多生就能解决老龄化问题了？女性的个人意愿谁有问过？不生2.3胎就是违背了国家发展伦理道德？

生于计划生育年代真好。

Translation: #The NBS responded to the three-child policy. # I only know that fewer births and better births will ensure a life of happiness. Experts suggest that people bear three children. Each expert should bear a dozen. Can the ageing

problem be solved by increasing the number of childbirths? Has anyone cared about women's will? Do people who do not have two or three children violate the ethics of national development? It is great to be born in the era of the one-child policy.

## V. DISCUSSION

In Section IV, we summarised the themes of ironic proposals in our dataset and discussed the six most frequent themes with representative examples. Now, we discuss the potential purposes of ironic proposals to enforce the three-child policy.

### A. *Ironic Proposals as a Strategy of Implicitly Conveying Criticism of the Three-Child Policy*

"Irony is always critical" (Garmendia, 2010, p. 397). In our dataset, Weibo users pretended to make proposals for the government on how to enforce the three-child policy, yet these proposals are propositions of transparent insincerity (Haverkate, 1990), implying criticism of people advocating or stipulating that policy. According to the pretense theory of irony, by virtue of pretense, people intend to convey critical attitudes towards injudicious proposers, uninitiated readers, and propositions (Clark & Gerrig, 1984). The injudicious proposers in the abovementioned proposals are primarily the government and experts who strive to stipulate and enforce the three-child policy to increase the fertility rate of China. Uninitiated readers are people who know nothing of the longitudinal changes in China's birth policy and the status quo and inner thoughts of contemporary Chinese youth. All the propositions were made insincerely, which means that their literal meaning is not credible.

Ironic proposals made by Chinese netizens are the products of Chinese history, politics, culture, and the development of digital technology (Yang & Jiang, 2015; Zhao & Lin, 2020). First, China is a country of one-party autocracy, and the birth policy is a sensitive topic, especially in regard to the one-child policy. Although the one-child policy was questioned, people kept silent about it and implemented it passively. However, resistance to the three-child policy is demonstrated, implicitly in Chinese social media. Second, China is a country with a long history and abundant cultural resources. One needs to know historical events, cultural terms, etc. to capture ironic intent. Political and cultural reasons can be considered "communal common ground" (Clark, 1992, p. 100) for producing and interpreting ironic proposals. Third, China probably has the largest and most complicated online censorship mechanism (Shen, 2019). Censorship cannot eradicate political expression; it only channels it into specific forms (Nordin & Richaud, 2014). Ironic proposals analysed in this research are a form of circumventing censorship and expressing criticism, and they can be considered "a special kind of substitute for silence" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 148). By making ironic proposals, Chinese netizens creatively communicated their negative responses to the publication of the three-child policy with a sense of detachment, and they can always shift to the literal meaning of their comments to protect themselves.

### B. *Ironic Proposals for the Three-Child Policy as a Miniature of Communal Discursive Acts against Dominant Ideology*

Although these Weibo comments are "standalone communicative acts" in the virtual public sphere, "they are interactional by definition" (Blommaert, 2019, p. 116) and can elicit "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna, 2022, p. 98) with netizens who share opinions and stances. Ironic proposals can be regarded as representations of counter-culture (Roszak, 1969) or anti-languages (Halliday, 1976) on social media, and they may lead to discursive activism against official discourses and even dominant ideology. This case study of ironic proposals for enforcing the three-child policy provides a lens through which to examine that phenomenon.

In general, ironic discourses are characterised by negativity, equivocality, and detachment, and they are frequently used in the Chinese censored media environment to vent ordinary netizens' oppressed dissatisfaction with or grudge against harsh realities, rich people, experts, and the government. Ironic discourse is deliberately distorted and not intended to be taken at face value (Fubara, 2020). Those who can interpret ironic intent are "the initiated readers and they enjoy the secret intimacy set up between them and the judicious speakers" (Fowler, 1969, 2009, p. 296). The motive or aim of irony is exclusiveness, and the initiated audience is "in the inner circle" (Fowler, 1969, 2009, p. 241). As a creative language, irony can establish intimacy between the producer(s) and interpreter(s) and separate "an inner circle in the know" from "an outer circle in the dark" (Gerrig & Gibbs, 1988, p. 8). In Lakoff's (1990) words, "irony makes use of presumptive homogeneity and reinforces it: understanding irony communicates 'you and I are the same.'" (p. 173).

Netizens who make ironic proposals and those who can capture ironic intent may gather on social media without direct interaction. Behind the dark glasses of irony (Anolli et al., 2002), Chinese netizens equivocally and detachedly communicate criticism and enact ambient affiliation with others for collective participation in political affairs. Rebellious social alignments are thus created in the virtual public sphere and are intended to act against mainstream discourses and authoritative institutions. With the affordances of social media, the disillusioned public can deftly deconstruct entrenched social structures and demonstrate their mindsets and indignation (Szablewicz, 2014). Ironic proposals in Chinese social media can be taken as manifestations of counter culture or anti-languages against mainstream culture or discourses. Although state media and commercial media are increasingly harmonised (Liu & Leung, 2021), social media provide a carnivalized virtual world where the public can express their inner thoughts on current affairs, and question, criticise and even deconstruct mainstream discourses and dominant ideology, which is discouraged and forbidden in the real world.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study, taking the media discourse analysis approach, examines ironic proposals for the enforcement of China's three-child policy on Weibo immediately after the announcement of the three-child policy. Ironic proposals are insincere proposals made to achieve ironic effect. In our dataset, ironic proposals for the enforcement of the three-child policy include recontextualising the coercive measures of the one-child policy, relaxing birth control, reforming the education system, developing childbearing technologies, limiting or taxing the purchase of contraceptives, and encouraging the elite to bear more children, etc. By means of ironic proposals, Chinese netizens implicitly communicated their negative response to the new birth policy. By pretending to make suggestions for enforcing the three-child policy, Chinese netizens unconsciously formed ambient affiliation with others who shared critical views on dominant ideology.

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