



# Analysis of China's Mainstream Media's Construction on the Concept of Freedom to Love - Taking People's Daily as an Example

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**Abstract.** At the beginning of the 20th century, class, race and gender were the three main themes of mainstream global cultural studies. Gender and sexuality remain at the core of how people think about their identities, whilst media and communications are a central element of modern life. Individuals' and the public's perception of gender is affected by many factors, while state propaganda plays an essential role. As a significant communication platform, the mainstream media plays a crucial role in the influence of gender culture. Based on agenda-setting theories and through discourse analysis in Chinese official media - People's Daily, this study tries to analyze the reports related to love from 1946 to 2012 to reveal the construction on the concept of "freedom to love." According to the analysis, People's Daily serves as a megaphone and a sounder. Its reports are primarily based on times characteristics and focused on national policy. Additionally, it is in the process of propagandizing freedom to love with a gradually open attitude. The notion of freedom, however, nevertheless strongly reflects the period and the limitations of conventional thinking. This study also needs to strengthen its description and definition of "freedom of love." Therefore, the discussion of "freedom of love" in this paper also has certain limitations.

**Keywords:** Mainstream media · Freedom to love · Discourse analysis · Agenda-setting

## 1 Introduction

News report is the window for readers to know the world, and it not only plays the function of information transmission but also shapes and changes readers' ideologies. The gender issue in the mainstream media has become a prominent topic with the opening of society. As the "fourth power", the media plays an increasingly important role in the formation of gender identity through the selection and construction of social knowledge and social images.

The term "freedom" (zi you) has been around for a long time, but it is very different from the concept of liberty. Since Yan Fu, one of the most influential Chinese scholars, introduced the western concept of "freedom" to China in the 19th century, the word

“freedom” has been integrated into the turbulent Chinese society like a fish in water. “Love” is an interpersonal relationship arising from the intertwining of individuals in different societies and is a uniquely human social behavior as well. It was not until the early 1900s that “love” was introduced as a foreign term. At the same time, the modern meaning of individual will and gender equality implied by the term gradually penetrated the mainstream media. During the long-term transformation and development of mainland Chinese society, as the social development situation and state policies continue to change, the definition and discussion of “love” presented by mainstream media have also shifted, and become the witness of social and cultural construction, reflecting the value and ideology of the society at a particular time. It is also involved in the process of gender construction. Thus, although “love” is a private topic, it contains rich public ethics and social history content.

People’s Daily has been serving as the navigation of people’s consciousness and social thinking, guiding and recording the development and changes of Chinese society since its establishment in 1946. Therefore, this study aims to take People’s Daily as the research object, and conduct a longitudinal comparison and horizontal analysis of the frequency of word, word clusters and the number of articles on “love” and “freedom to love”, in order to extract the changes of people’s concept of love in social life in different times. Then to explore further the relationship between socio-cultural construction and gender as reflected by the mainstream media.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

The roles of communicators and the recipients in the communication process are constantly changing in the twenty-first century due to the emergence of social media. In the traditional sense, the audience is no longer just a passive recipient of the information; it is also a producer and disseminator. [5] The meaning of information is constantly being generalized throughout the communication process. The paradigm of “relational communication” presents a fresh obstacle for the agenda-setting hypothesis. In response to this, academics like Guo Lei and McCombs [3] proposed a network agenda-setting theory, which contends that a network of issues rather than a single issue or attribute ultimately shapes how the public combines various pieces of information to form its perception of the real world. This network of issues affects the public’s overall cognitive system.

The impetus behind the global gender equality agenda stems from the widespread persistence of inequality between women and men worldwide. [2] There are more and more researchers conducting gender research with agenda-setting theory. Ertürk, Y. offered policy guidelines that considered the role of men in gender agenda setting. Claire Annesley and Francesca Gains (2013) investigated, using graphs and descriptive analysis derived from three data sets, whether economic conditions constrain the agenda-setting possibilities of feminist policy actors pushing for redistributive gender policy.[1] Qi Ruilian (2021) based on the perspective of attribute agenda-setting theory, analyzed how propaganda-oriented media images of women were constructed in China and the United

States during the World War and compared the similarities and differences between them in the following section.

## 2.2 Corpus and Critical Discourse Analysis

From the linguistic perspective, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was first formally introduced by Norman Fairclough in *Language and Power*. Critical discourse analysis inherits Foucault's view of discourse as a power, emphasizing the social properties of discourse and aiming to analyze and reveal the social power relations behind discourse [4] (Fairclough N, 1989). Foucault argued that discourse could give people a kind of discourse power. In the context of discourse power, a specific discourse can influence others or even influence the general consensus of society, and whoever holds the communication power can determine the content and direction of the discourse. Van Dijk (Dutch) saw discourse as a force of social control, where discourse is an expression of the will of social power and corresponds to a specific power structure. Discourse is not a simple description or reflection of reality but an in-depth social practice that achieves the maintenance or subversion of power by intervening in specific social processes.

## 3 Methodology and Data Collection

The setting of the media agenda can guide how a topic is thought about, and the words used in the national mainstream media can not only reflect the media's position but also show a country's attitude towards a particular event. In recent years, an increasing number of academics, both at home and abroad, have used corpus technology to conduct critical discourse analysis. By studying the textual, contextual information offered by the corpus, such as frequency, keyword, collocation, cluster, and pattern, these studies primarily investigate the inner meaning of the conversation.

Based on the above theories and thoughts, this study gathered and analyzed articles about the freedom to love that appeared in *People's Daily* between 1946 and 2012 using critical discourse analysis and agenda-setting theory. The "People's Daily Graphic Database" provided the corpus for this investigation. To find articles on the subject of love, articles with the word "love" (lian ai) in the title were chosen. To determine the variations in the phrasing of the *People's Daily's* coverage of "love" at different times, this study collects articles featuring "love" in the text. The frequency of wording "freedom to love" (zi you lian ai) in the *People's Daily* was revealed by choosing articles with phrases in the text. Finally, duplicate and non-compliant articles are removed to provide the sample that satisfies the standards after picking the pertinent articles that meet the requirements. There are 34 valid samples with the word "love" in the title, 2318 valid samples with "love" in the articles, and 236 articles with the phrase "freedom to love" in the text.

The study uses the jieba module in python to parse the data and perform statistical analysis on the words in the data to get the word cloud map and word frequency. At the same time, the study uses the re-module to count word clusters and de-duplicate the above data to remove useless data. The research uses quantitative and qualitative methods, focusing on this specialized corpus's high-frequency keywords and word clusters.

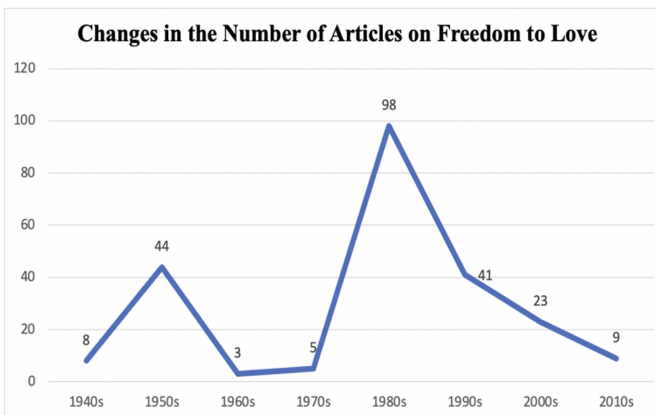
## 4 Analysis and Results

### 4.1 Analysis of Changes in the Number of Articles on the Freedom to Love

By analyzing the changes in the number of articles on the freedom to love in People's Daily over a certain period, combined with a specific historical context, it can reflect the government's views on the construction of the concept of freedom to love and the public's perceptions of love in different periods in China. In this study, the keywords "freedom to love" were searched in the text of the People's Daily Graphic Database articles, and 236 valid reports were collected. The articles were classified into 10-year periods, and the numbers were compared and plotted in a line graph (Fig. 1).

It is easy to find that the coverage of "freedom to love" in the People's Daily went through two peak periods, respectively, in the 1950s and the 1980s, while there was relatively little coverage in the 1960s and 1970s. Combining the corresponding historical background, the government promulgated the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China in 1950, which stipulates that "the feudal marriage system, which is based on forced arrangement, male superiority and disregard for the interests of children, is abolished, and the new democratic marriage system, which provides for freedom of marriage between men and women, monogamy, equal rights for men and women, and protection of the interests of women and children, is implemented." Among them, bigamy, concubinage, child brides, interference with widows' freedom to marry, and the use of marriage to obtain property were all prohibited and corrected by legal provisions. For a long time, the traditional Chinese concept of love, "follow the order of parents, the matchmaker's advice," began to change. In this background, the number of articles mentioning "freedom to love" in the People's Daily also reached a small peak.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the country was amidst social changes and the "Cultural Revolution," society focused more on national construction and political movements. Thus there were few reports on "freedom to love." From the social and individual levels, the public's demand for freedom to love has become more robust, and the demand for the degree of freedom has been increasing. With the continuous implementation of the



**Fig. 1.** Changes in the Number of Articles on Freedom to Love. Photo credit: Original

“reform and opening up” policy, the rise of the Internet era, and the development of the national economy, people have begun to focus on the spiritual aspect of their needs, which also makes people’s thinking into a new wave. At the national level, in 1980, China’s second Marriage Law was promulgated, clearly stipulating that “the marriage system of freedom of marriage, monogamy, and equality between men and women shall be implemented, and the arrangement, sale, and purchase of marriages, and other acts that interfere with the freedom of marriage shall be prohibited.” As a result, the number of reports on “freedom to love” in the People’s Daily reached its peak, reflecting the vital role of the national mainstream media in disseminating the general policy direction of the state and responding to the objective needs of the public.

Since the 21st century, on the one hand, the connotation of freedom of love has been changing as China has become more open to the world and in constant collision with Western culture. On the other hand, the concept of freedom of love has penetrated a new generation of Chinese youth. Therefore, the coverage of free love in the People’s Daily has remained at a steady level of quantity.

#### **4.2 Analysis of High-Frequency Keywords of Reports with the Theme of Love**

The People’s Daily articles containing the word “love” in the title were more likely to use the word “work” (gong zuo) than “love” in the 1950s and mid-1960s. It is very counterintuitive that work appears 16 times at a time in love-themed articles, while the word relationship appears only 12 times less than work. Combined with the specific historical context, the country was in the early stages of socialism at the time. Production, development, and construction were the buzzwords of the times during that period. People lived in a society that prioritized rapid economic growth while paying less attention to their romantic side. The country also called more for rapid development, so the coverage of the spiritual aspect was reduced accordingly.

From the late 1960s to the 1970s, due to the small number of reports on love in the People’s Daily, there was not a word or a word cluster that appeared more than 10 times during the data analysis. Thus the analysis will not be expanded at this stage.

From the 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century, the most frequent words in the People’s Daily reports on relationships were youth (qing nian) and problems (wen ti). It can be seen that the national mainstream media has started to notice the pending problems in society which people have in the process of love. Table 1 presents the articles about lover relationship issues published in People’s Daily since the 1970s.

A more detailed analysis reveals that the People’s Daily published an article entitled “Helping young people to establish the correct concept of love” in 1978, emphasizing that during the “Gang of Four” period, “love” had almost become the keyword for “capitalist thought,” forming a bourgeois or even feudalistic and improper thought. People’s Daily also began to call for education on the concept of love for young people. On October 4, 1980, People’s Daily published an article titled “Care for young people’s marriage and love.” On September 14, 1981, and January 27, 1986, it published “‘Free love’ is better than ‘arranged marriage’” and “Learn to use legal weapons to protect the freedom to love and marriage” respectively. It also began to call on young people to defend their right to freedom to love. People’s Daily has published several articles on “free love” in

**Table 1.** Selected Articles Containing the Word “Love” in People’s Daily

Date	Title
1978.04.10	Helping young people to establish the correct concept of love
1980.10.04	Care for young people’s marriage and love
1981.09.14	“Free love” is better than “arranged marriage
1986.01.27	Learn to use legal weapons to protect the freedom to love and marriage
1987.03.11	Talking with young friends about love and marriage
1989.01.19	College students in love variation

Photo credit: Original.

just a few years, reflecting the importance the country attaches to the issue of youth love and the desire of society for freedom to love.

**4.3 Analysis of “Love” Clusters and the Contextual Background**

Common word clusters in the 1950s and 1960s include “class love,” “love and revolution,” “love is subject to,” “conditions of love,” and so on, a very visual reflection of the situation of the country at the time. At the beginning of the establishment of the PRC, the domestic political environment was still relatively unstable, highlighting the confrontation and revolution between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. As a result, love was also influenced by the larger social context, more so to promote class uniformity. The nation needed to mobilize all its resources to build the infrastructure simultaneously. Freedom to love was constrained and impacted at that time by these causes. People’s Daily, the state-approved mainstream media, focused on its ideological and political stance and serviced the state’s propaganda needs more.

In the 1970s and 1980s, love was more often paired with “problem,” “difficulties,” and “marriage,” reflecting the fact that after the country’s reform and opening up and after the reorganization of the policies, it began to pay attention to the problem of love, analyze the causes of the problem, and make official recommendations.

Words like “love quarrel,” “love trouble,” “love outlook,” and “campus love” started to emerge together after the 1990s. The People’s Daily reports on love are more focused on the issues surrounding romantic relationships. Gradually, attention has focused on the issue of young people falling in love at school, and it has been suggested that schooling be improved to stop the phenomenon of so-called “early love.” Furthermore, early love, once and again, is not a restriction on the freedom of love. Would not restricting early love be a way to limit restrict freedom?

It can be concluded that the coverage and propaganda of “love” and “freedom to love” in the People’s Daily are gradually developing towards a more liberal way, which reflects the state’s orientation towards love. However, it is undeniable that this degree of freedom still needs to be further expanded. For example, the negative publicity on “early love” and “homosexuality,” often accompanied by AIDS in the People’s Daily’s reports, proves that the current freedom may still not be freedom.

## 5 Conclusion

People's Daily's efforts to propagate the idea of freedom to love are greatly influenced by historical context and national policy. The People's Daily, a driving force in mainstream media in mainland China, grasps the changes in national policy and social trends. According to the ideological slant of the superstructure, it seizes the times lifeline and connects the collective imagination and common consciousness of "love" and "freedom to love" across several eras, constituting a certain degree of common thoughts of the times.

**The Megaphone:** People's Daily positively illustrates how national awareness has permeated and set agendas in popular culture. The People's Daily, a representative of the mainstream media in China, has traditionally served as the voice of the Party, the government, and the people. It also serves as the primary platform for the building of culture.

**The Sounder:** People's Daily reverse symbolizes the contribution of contemporary public gender consciousness. The way "freedom to love" is defined and discussed in popular culture has changed, reflecting the concrete penetration of state consciousness and agenda-setting in the mass culture and representing the awakening of contemporary public consciousness.

**The Limitations of the Definition of Freedom to Love:** The state's dominant authority uses the media to disseminate and build a cultural environment that serves its political goals. It subtly increases people's acceptance of and pleasure with the established social structure. Additionally, the state consciousness manipulates public opinion and agenda-setting through the mainstream media to influence how the general public thinks. Based on this thought, the "freedom to love" discussed in this paper is only limited to the freedom of gender in mainstream society, which is somewhat restricted. It is believed that in the two-way dynamic social context, more and more individuals will begin to realize and rebel against the gender range and notion defined by the current mainstream media for freedom to love," and that this will lead to future "freedom" and "equality" with broader meanings.

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