



A Critical Cognitive Discourse Analysis of Aging Population Reports in *China Daily* from the Perspective of Proximization

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Abstract

China is currently undergoing a demographic transition toward an aging society of unprecedented scale and speed, making this issue a focal point of mainstream media discourse. Based on Cap's Proximization Theory, this study conducts a critical cognitive discourse analysis (CCDA) of aging-related reports in *China Daily* to explore how the media cognitively constructs the issue of population aging through spatial, temporal, and axiological dimensions. The findings suggest that in the spatial dimension, the media extensively employs physical displacement metaphors to reify abstract demographic shifts as external entities encroaching upon the "deictic center", which may position readers to perceive the phenomenon through defense-related cognitive schemas. In the temporal dimension, the discourse is designed to foster a sense of urgency through time-compression strategies. In the axiological dimension, the discourse exhibits a binary dynamic reconstruction; it frames potential crises by highlighting ideological conflicts such as labor shortages and pension pressures, while discursively framing positive concepts like the "silver economy" and "smart elderly care" in a manner that may mitigate public concern and provide a legitimizing basis for policies such as delayed retirement, fertility support, and the industrialization of elderly care. This research indicates how mainstream media seeks to shape the perception of social issues through proximization strategies, providing a new perspective for understanding the cognitive framing mechanisms underlying major demographic challenges.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

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Keywords

Population Aging, Proximization Theory, Critical Cognitive Discourse Analysis, Discursive Construction

1. Introduction

Population aging stands as one of the most serious and complex social challenges facing China in the 21st century. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Civil Affairs [1], by the end of 2025, the population aged 60 and above reached 323.38 million, accounting for 23% of the total population; among them, the population aged 65 and above reached 223.65 million, or 15.9% of the total, marking China's formal entry into a "moderately aging society" (defined by the UN and Chinese policy as the population aged 65 and above exceeding 14%). It is projected that by around 2035, the population aged 60 and above will exceed 400 million, entering a "severely aging stage" (where the population aged 65 and older exceeds 20%), and will peak at over 500 million by the middle of this century. Population aging will remain a fundamental national reality for a long period [2]. At a critical juncture, the 4th Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee made strategic deployments to ensure that the elderly are well-cared for, find happiness, and remain active [3]. It outlined a series of tasks, such as "actively responding to population aging and improving the policy mechanisms for the synergistic development of elderly care services and industries", providing a clear direction and framework for the 15th Five-Year Plan period. Constructing a theoretical framework for "active aging", innovating practical paths, and refining institutional guarantees to fully release the "elderly demographic dividend" will become a vital agenda for activating the new momentum of the "silver economy" (the aggregate of economic activities providing products and services tailored to the elderly—as a key driver of high-quality development) during the 15th Five-Year Plan [4]. This transition is not merely a quantitative demographic shift but a comprehensive test of the national economic model, social security systems, and traditional family ethics. In this grand social context, news media, as the primary channel for information dissemination and meaning construction, play a crucial role. Exploring how media characterize aging not only influences public emotional attitudes but also directly affects whether national strategies can gain public understanding and support. Therefore, a discourse analysis of mainstream media reports on population aging holds significant practical importance.

Numerous scholars have explored the media's representation of aging and its social impacts. For instance, Nilsson *et al.* [5] critically analyzed local Swedish health and social care policy documents to interrogate the "digital technology solution" discourse, revealing that such policies often place the responsibility for independence on older individuals while neglecting their agency and roles

as social contributors. El-Bialy *et al.* [6], from a critical discourse analysis perspective, discussed the negative image construction of long-term care facilities within public discourse under a neoliberal context. Cai and Hu [7] focused on the Chinese cultural context, analyzing discourse strategies and power negotiations of the elderly in intergenerational conflicts. Furthermore, the research by Glasdam *et al.* [8] on “ageing in place” in Norway utilized a Fairclough-inspired discourse analysis of a white paper to examine the discursive construction of elderly policy. While these studies are extensive and empirical, they often focus on content representation, socio-psychological effects, or conflict analysis in specific contexts, with a relative lack of exploration into the deep construction mechanisms of “aging crisis” from a cognitive linguistic perspective. This study takes mainstream media reports on population aging as the research object and establishes a corpus of “population aging” news. By applying proximization theory, it explores the discursive construction of aging, analyzes how media construct cognitive spaces using spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization strategies to guide public urgency and identification, thereby exploring the social mobilization value of news discourse and seeking cognitive guidance strategies to actively address an aging society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Critical Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CCDA)

Critical Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CCDA) has emerged as an interdisciplinary and cutting-edge paradigm in the field of discourse studies, organically integrating the social-critical perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA) with the socio-cognitive models of cognitive linguistics. While traditional CDA primarily focuses on the relationship between linguistic structures, social power, and ideology, it has often been criticized for lacking an explanation of the audience’s psychological processing mechanisms [9]. To address this cognitive deficit, CCDA introduces conceptual tools from cognitive linguistics—such as metaphor, framing, metonymy, and image schemas—aiming to reveal how language influences the audience’s understanding of social reality by activating specific cognitive structures in the brain [10]. Critical Cognitive Linguistics represents the fusion of cognitive linguistics and CDA. From the perspective of CDA, discourse analysis is a viewpoint of linguistic research that provides a theoretical interpretation of the instrumentality of language in creating and maintaining power and inequality within social behaviors, identities, and relationships [11]. Critical Cognitive Linguistics posits that lexico-grammatical structures can influence cognition, thereby achieving ideological manipulation [12]-[14], as the discourse producer’s representation of the world embodies authority exerted over the audience and control over the communicative process [15]. As Hart and Cap [16] noted, discourse is not merely a reflection of social practice but a process of constructing social reality through cognitive mechanisms. Under the framework of CCDA, the focus of analysis shifts to how texts are conceptualized cognitively—that is, how discourse

strategies guide readers to establish specific mental models, making certain ideologies or policies appear natural, reasonable, and inevitable. This “language-cognition-society” three-dimensional analytical path provides a more scientific and rigorous explanatory power for exploring the deep-seated ideological manipulation behind news reports.

2.2. Proximization Theory

Proximization Theory was developed within the interdisciplinary field of Critical Cognitive Linguistics, based on Chilton’s Discourse Space Theory [17]. Discourse produced through language use can be viewed as an abstract discourse space, in which various characters, objects, and events are represented as discourse entities with specific symbolic distances between them [9]. Applying proximization strategies within specific texts allows for the dynamic adjustment of symbolic distance, influencing the audience’s cognition to achieve specific discursive effects [15] [18] [19]. As a narrative strategy, proximization theory primarily explores at the lexico-grammatical level how to make the hearer perceive the threat of entities Outside-the-Deictic-Center (ODC) encroaching upon entities Inside-the-Deictic-Center (IDC), materializing ideological conflicts to achieve the legitimization of the speaker’s defensive measures or the delegitimization of the opposition [20]. Proximization theory comprises three strategies: spatial proximization, temporal proximization, and axiological proximization. Spatial proximization refers to the actual encroachment of peripheral entities toward the central entities in the discourse space (ODC toward IDC), categorized into six lexico-grammatical items. Temporal proximization brings past or future conflict events closer to the present time to create a sense of crisis and urgency, suggesting that immediate responses and preventive measures are required; this is usually achieved through two conceptual shifts: the past-to-present shift and the future-to-present shift. Axiological proximization brings the values of IDC into proximity with those of hostile ODC, resulting in ideological conflict [21] [22], and is categorized into three lexico-grammatical items. Proximization Theory serves as a theoretical framework with a systematic analytical method that supports visualizable cognitive construal. By explaining discourse through these three dimensions, it reveals the inherent meaning of discourse. In this study, Proximization Theory provides a precise analytical tool for deciphering how the media transforms population aging from a demographic concept into an urgent social crisis.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

Since the 18th CPC National Congress, population aging has gradually ascended to the level of a national strategy, leading to a significant increase in the depth and breadth of mainstream media coverage on this issue. This study utilizes the LexisNexis database to retrieve reports from *China Daily*. The search was conducted using the keywords “population aging”, “older adults”, and “ageing society” within

the full text (including headline, lead, and body) to ensure a comprehensive data capture. To maintain the breadth of the discourse, all journalistic genres—including news reports, editorials, features, and commentaries—were included. The initial retrieval yielded 755 reports spanning from November 18, 2012, to February 11, 2026. After manually excluding duplicates, excessively short texts (under 100 words), and low-relevance articles, a pool of eligible texts was established. From this pool, 100 core news reports were selected using a random number generator (Simple Random Sampling). As this research is an exploratory study, a sample of 100 texts is considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation while allowing for both quantitative corpus mapping and qualitative discourse analysis. This resulted in a self-built “Population Aging” corpus consisting of 72,256 words and 81,729 tokens. The data were pre-processed using KH Coder 3, with statistical analysis conducted after removing stop words.

3.2. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis involves the extraction of high-frequency keywords and word frequency distribution statistics, while the qualitative analysis focuses on the interpretation of proximization discourse strategies within specific texts. The research procedure consists of the following three steps: First, a word frequency list (Word List) is generated using corpus tools to extract high-frequency content words such as “population”, “age”, “elderly”, “challenge”, “economy”, and “increase”. Based on Cap’s Proximization Theory, these high-frequency words are classified and mapped into the three proximization categories—spatial, temporal, and axiological—to calculate their distribution frequencies. Second, the Key Word in Context (KWIC) Concordance function is employed to observe the co-occurrence relationships and collocation patterns of core terms within their specific contexts. Third, a deep qualitative textual analysis is performed on the self-built corpus. Referencing Cap’s STA (Spatial-Temporal-Axiological) proximization analysis and incorporating the lexico-grammatical features found in the corpus, this step provides a detailed explanation of how the media constructs the cognitive framework of the aging issue through strategies such as spatial displacement, temporal compression, and axiological opposition. This ultimately reveals the underlying legitimization logic and social mobilization mechanisms.

4. Proximization Analysis of *China Daily* Reports on Population Aging

Utilizing the KH Coder 3 analysis software, a co-occurrence network diagram of high-frequency nouns and verbs from the “Population Aging” corpus is generated (as shown in **Figure 1**). In this diagram, the size of each keyword node represents its frequency within the news texts, while the color distribution and connections illustrate the density of semantic associations between keywords.

through policy instruments. Through the analysis of the co-occurrence network in the self-built corpus, it is evident that these high-frequency keywords not only objectively reflect the urgency of China's current aging situation (as seen in the frequent appearance of data-related terms like "reach" and "percent") but also highlight a multi-dimensional response path ranging from "elderly care services" to the "silver economy". This provides a solid foundation for the subsequent exploration of how media utilizes proximization strategies to guide public cognition.

4.2. Spatial Proximization

Spatial cognition is the most fundamental cognitive mode and the core dimension of Proximization Theory. Analysis reveals that spatial proximization strategies account for 45% of the total proximization strategies employed in the self-built corpus. Through metaphors and lexical means, the media reify the abstract concept of population aging into an entity moving within physical space, thereby shortening the psychological distance between the threat and the audience. Based on Cap's six categories of spatial proximization and the word frequency distribution within the corpus, the specific lexical distribution of spatial proximization in the "Population Aging" news corpus is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Spatial proximization in the "Population Aging" news corpus.

Category	Items	Frequency
Entities construed as IDC elements (NP)	China, Healthcare system, Pension Schemes, Society, etc.	12%
Entities construed as ODC elements (NP)	Population Aging, Demographic Shift, Grey Rhino, Burden, etc.	14%
Spatial displacement of ODC toward IDC (VP)	Pose, Face, Surge, Arrive, etc.	6%
Impact of ODC displacement (VP)	Strain, Overburden, Squeeze, Shrink, etc.	5%
Anticipated impact of ODC on IDC (NP)	Challenge, Pressure, Crisis, Threat, etc.	5%
Results of ODC impact (NP)	Gap, Shortage, Impact, etc.	3%

Note: Words within each category are arranged in descending order of frequency; the same applies to the following table.

According to **Table 1**, with the subjectivity of news reports as the basis for categorization, words construed as IDC elements within the discourse space primarily represent the existing social order and the community of interests that require "protection", such as the "healthcare system" and "pension schemes". Conversely, terms representing changes in demographic structure, such as "population aging" and "demographic shift", are construed as ODC elements. These terms construct aging as an external, irresistible force moving toward the center. This mapping relationship is manifested as follows: aging, acting as an external entity (ODC), is launching an assault on the internal space (IDC) centered on national stability and social welfare, thereby transforming an abstract demographic issue into a concrete

problem of “physical pressure”. In addition to the aforementioned forms of spatial proximization, displacement verbs and action verbs also reflect the spatial movement trajectory of the ODC toward the IDC in media reports, while the anticipated impacts and results of the ODC on the IDC are expressed through noun phrases. The following provides a specific analysis based on authentic texts from the corpus:

(1) “This additional financial burden (ODC), if not mitigated, risks overburdening (Impact) the healthcare system (IDC) and constraining resources for other public services”.

(2) “Population aging (ODC) also presents economic challenges by placing strain (Impact/Action) on pension schemes (IDC) and altering national demographics”.

(3) “The aging society (ODC) is poised to become our most significant challenge in the future, a grey rhino (ODC Metaphor)”.

In Example (1), the media employs the term “overburdening”, which carries a strong physical gravity metaphor. Here, the fiscal pressure resulting from population aging is reified as a heavy object (ODC) pressing directly upon the “healthcare system” (IDC). This narrative of spatial “heavy pressure” enables readers to cognitively perceive the physical squeezing of the IDC space, suggesting that without immediate action, the system faces the risk of collapse. This strategy intuitively constructs a sense of imminent crisis. In Example (2), the core word is “strain”. In physical terms, “strain” refers to a state where an object is stretched to its limit by external forces. Through this lexical choice, the media transforms the abstract pension funding gap into a form of physical tension: aging (ODC) is forcefully pulling at society’s pension safety net (IDC). This spatial metaphor activates a “rupture schema” in the audience’s mind—implying that if the tension continues to increase, the safety net will snap—thereby legitimizing the urgency of pension system reform. Example (3) represents a classic case of spatial proximization. The media cites expert opinions to directly metaphorize aging as a “grey rhino”. In cognitive linguistics, this reifies an abstract concept into a massive, high-impact, and encroaching animal (ODC). The phrase “poised to become” further shortens the spatial distance, suggesting that this “rhino” is already standing at the threshold of the IDC (our society) and could charge at any moment. This rhetorical strategy significantly enhances the visualization of risk, warning the public that this is not a remote “Black Swan” event but a massive reality that must be addressed immediately.

The analysis reveals that mainstream media constructs a proximization phenomenon on the spatial axis where the crisis and opportunity of the ODC coexist. The objective is to demonstrate that while population aging is a severe challenge, it can be transformed into a growth driver for the “silver economy” through proactive responses. The frequent use of spatial proximization strategies evokes a sense of urgency and identification at the cognitive level. It utilizes displacement and action verb phrases (e.g., surge, squeeze) to illustrate the encroaching trend of the aging wave toward core IDC areas such as healthcare, pensions, and the

labor market, while also using noun phrases (e.g., burden, pressure) to highlight the impact of demographic structural shifts on social stability. Furthermore, there is a distinct negative proximization pressure: population aging exerts a substantial impact on the carrying capacity of the social security system—manifested in issues like pension gaps and the overcrowding of medical resources—which triggers significant public anxiety. To alleviate this spatial pressure and achieve sustainable development, the discourse suggests vigorously developing the silver economy and smart elderly care technologies, effectively transforming the “burden” into a “dividend” and mitigating the social risks inherent in aging.

4.3. Temporal Proximization

Temporal cognition is a key dimension through which humans understand the progression of events. In Critical Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CCDA), temporal proximization refers to a discourse strategy that depicts distant future events (ODC) as moving rapidly toward the present (IDC), or frames the current moment as a decisive juncture for the future. This cognitively compresses temporal distance to create a sense of urgency. Analysis shows that temporal proximization strategies account for 35% of the total proximization strategies in the self-built corpus. By frequently employing temporal deictics, aspect markers, and speed-related vocabulary, the media reconstructs the aging society from a long-term evolutionary process into an imminent crisis or a fleeting opportunity. Based on the categories of temporal proximization and the word frequency distribution in the corpus, the specific lexical distribution is shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Temporal proximization in the “Population Aging” news corpus.

Category	Items	Frequency
Entities construed as IDC elements (NP/Adv)	Now, Current, At Present, Today, etc.	8%
Entities construed as ODC elements (NP)	2035/2050, Future, Coming Decades, etc.	10%
Temporal movement of ODC toward IDC (VP)	Approach, Loom, Accelerate, Begin, etc.	6%
Speed modifiers of ODC toward IDC (Adj/Adv)	Rapidly, Fast, Unprecedented, Urgent, etc.	7%
Temporal span between ODC and IDC (NP)	Period, Stage, Transition, Window of Opportunity, etc.	4%

According to **Table 2**, when constructing the aging issue, the media makes a concerted effort to anchor future ODC elements through specific time nodes (e.g., 2035, 2050). These years are no longer abstract numbers; instead, they are constructed as the points at which the aging crisis will fully erupt, rushing toward us in the present (IDC). Simultaneously, the high-frequency use of speed modifiers such as “rapidly” and “accelerate” cognitively shortens the time interval between the IDC and ODC, making the audience perceive that the window of opportunity

for social reform is closing.

In addition to these forms, the choice of tense (such as using the present continuous to describe future trends) and the use of modal verbs vividly illustrate the temporal compression trajectory of the ODC toward the IDC in media reports. The discourse primarily revolves around the temporal mismatch of “growing old before getting rich” and the urgency of policy reform. The following is a detailed analysis based on authentic texts:

(4) “More importantly, now (IDC) is the critical period (Time Interval) for taking all-around actions to address the problem”.

(5) “China is likely to become a deeply aging society (ODC) by 2035 (Time Marker). By the end of 2023, China had nearly 300 million people aged 60 or above...”

(6) “China is witnessing an accelerated pace (Speed) of population aging and a fast decline (Speed) in birthrate”.

In Example (4), the media uses the strong temporal deictic “now” to lock the IDC into the present moment, defining it as a critical period. This strategy cognitively draws a “time red line”, implying that only this brief critical period separates the future ODC (the severe consequences of aging) from the present IDC. This discourse establishes a decisive temporal framework aimed at legitimizing policies that must be implemented immediately (such as delayed retirement), effectively excluding the possibility of procrastination. Example (5) reifies the abstract “deeply aging society” (ODC) into a certain future event through the specific time node of 2035. In news discourse, 2035 is typically linked to the national goal of “basically achieving socialist modernization”. By setting the arrival of severe aging at the same node, the media creates a sense of temporal “collision”. This strategy makes the audience realize that the grand goals of the future and the challenges of aging will inevitably meet on the timeline, thereby intensifying the psychological pressure of future challenges on the present. In Example (6), the core terms are “accelerated pace” and “fast”. Rather than using static descriptions, the media emphasizes the rate of change. In cognitive proximization, a higher speed means a shorter time for the entity (ODC) to reach the center (IDC). This emphasis on speed activates a “loss of control” or “emergency braking” schema in the audience’s mind, suggesting that conventional linear time-based solutions have failed and that extraordinary measures must be taken to address this accelerating reality.

The analysis demonstrates that mainstream media constructs a phenomenon of accelerated encroachment and urgency on the temporal axis, aiming to prove that the time window is fleeting and action must be taken now. The extensive use of temporal proximization strategies builds public crisis awareness and reform urgency at the cognitive level. This is achieved not only by using specific time nodes (such as 2035) to bring the distant future into the immediate view but also through high-frequency speed modifiers (e.g., rapidly, accelerated) that show the aging process catching up with social development plans. Furthermore, there is a narrative of a “window of opportunity”, where the media defines the present as the final

critical period for responding to aging—pointing out the severity of the problem while retaining the possibility of action. To gain the initiative in this race against time, institutional reforms and the layout of the silver economy must be advanced immediately to complete the optimal allocation of social resources before the demographic structure is fully finalized.

4.4. Axiological Proximization

Axiological proximization focuses primarily on how discourse constructs conflicts between ideologies, beliefs, and values. In critical cognitive discourse analysis, this is typically manifested by portraying the IDC (Inside the Deictic Center) as a representative of justice, progress, and stability, while constructing the ODC (Outside the Deictic Center) as a threat or challenge to these core values. Analysis reveals that axiological proximization strategies account for 20% of the total proximization strategies in the self-built corpus. Through binary evaluative lexis, the media, on one hand, frames the “burden” and “shortages” brought by aging as an assault on core values such as “common prosperity” and “modernization”. On the other hand, by reshaping concepts like the “silver economy” and “smart elderly care”, it transforms the ODC into new growth points that align with the IDC’s value orientation. The specific lexical distribution of axiological proximization in the “Population Aging” news corpus is shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Axiological proximization in the “Population Aging” news corpus.

Category	Items	Frequency
Core IDC values (Positive values)	Development, Well-Being, Stability, Harmony, Modernization, etc.	6%
ODC value threats (Negative values)	Burden, Crisis, Inadequate, Inequality, Shortage, etc.	5%
Axiological impact of ODC on IDC (VP)	Threaten, Hamper, Undermine, Strain, etc.	4%
Axiological Reconstruction and integration of IDC (VP/NP)	Promote, Improve, Opportunity, Silver Economy, etc.	5%

According to **Table 3**, the media’s construction in the axiological dimension exhibits distinct characteristics of dynamic confrontation and transformation. IDC elements are assigned positive value labels such as “Development” and “Well-being”, representing the common goals pursued by Chinese society. Conversely, the initial ODC elements (aging) are bound to negative values like “Burden” and “Crisis”, viewed as external forces that “Hamper” the realization of IDC goals. However, it is noteworthy that the media also frequently uses terms like “Promote” and “Opportunity” to reconstruct the originally opposing ODC values through the concept of the “silver economy”, integrating them into the IDC value system and thereby alleviating public value anxiety. The following provides a detailed analysis based on authentic texts:

(7) “This demographic shift (ODC) could hamper (Value Conflict) economic

growth by reducing the flexibility of domestic consumption and labor market (IDC Value)”.

(8) “Developing the silver economy (Reconstructed ODC) to enhance the well-being (IDC Value) of the elderly marks a groundbreaking shift”.

(9) “Population aging is not inherently a crisis (Negative ODC)—it is the natural outcome of success (Positive IDC) in health, longevity, and social advancement”.

In Example (7), the media uses the verb “hamper” to construct a value conflict between the ODC and the IDC. Here, the core IDC value is “economic growth”, the cornerstone of national modernization. The ODC (demographic shift/aging) is directly characterized as an antagonist to this core value. This construction of value opposition activates an “impeded development” schema in the audience’s cognition, thereby granting moral legitimacy to aging policies as a means of “defending economic growth”. Example (8) demonstrates the strategy of value reconstruction within axiological proximization. The “elderly” (ODC), originally framed as a burden, are transformed here into a positive factor capable of “enhancing well-being” (a core IDC value) through the intermediary concept of the “silver economy”. This discourse strategy successfully moves the ODC from being an “opponent” to a “contributor” of the IDC, dissolving the value conflict between aging and social development and guiding the public to view aging with a proactive and constructive mindset. Example (9) is a typical case of value re-evaluation. The media directly negates the traditional framework of viewing aging solely as a “crisis” (negative value) and instead defines it as a byproduct of “success” (positive value). This strategy is cognitively sophisticated: it informs the audience that aging (ODC) is actually a part of the IDC (social progress, health, and longevity) itself, rather than an external intruder. Establishing this “homogeneity” significantly shortens the psychological distance between the ODC and the IDC, fundamentally dissolving the audience’s fear and rejection of aging.

The analysis reveals that mainstream media constructs a dialectical proximization phenomenon on the axiological axis, shifting from “threat” to “opportunity”, to prove that with proper policy guidance, population aging can be compatible with core social values. When employing axiological proximization strategies, the media evokes public concern at the cognitive level by emphasizing the potential threats of aging to economic growth and the social security system (e.g., hamper, threaten). Simultaneously, it reshapes public value judgment by introducing new concepts like the “silver economy”, emphasizing that aging is a manifestation of social progress (e.g., success, well-being). Furthermore, there is a value-based discussion regarding social equity and intergenerational justice, with the media calling for a response to aging that does not sacrifice the interests of the younger generation or lower the quality of life for the elderly. To solve the problem of aging at a deeper level, it is essential to construct a proactive view of aging throughout society, liberating the elderly from the value framework of being a “social burden” and redefining them as “social wealth” and a “driving force for development”.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Based on Proximization Theory, this study utilizes corpus analysis tools to conduct a visualized analysis of lexical categories, word frequencies, and their correlations within mainstream media reports on population aging. The findings reveal that mainstream media discourse employs extensive spatial proximization strategies, reifying abstract demographic shifts into encroaching entities. This highlights the non-negligible impact of aging on healthcare, social security, and the macro-economy, while illustrating how the aging process continues to trigger profound transformations in the labor market and social structure.

By supplementing spatial strategies with temporal and axiological proximization, the discourse not only underscores national subjectivity and decisiveness in addressing the aging crisis—thereby establishing a responsible image of a government actively improving social welfare—but also leverages mainstream media to reshape public perception of an aging society. Furthermore, the use of proximization strategies effectively captures and reflects public anxieties and expectations. The frequent occurrence of positive lexis alongside concepts such as the “silver economy” suggests that, in the media’s cognitive construction, aging is also framed as a natural outcome of health, longevity, and social progress, which is conducive to driving innovation in the elderly care industry and fostering new economic momentum. Simultaneously, a significant number of reports indicate that population aging poses a potential threat by increasing social burdens. This application of negative proximization instills a necessary sense of crisis and urgency in the public, encouraging understanding and support for a series of social policy reforms, such as delayed retirement and fertility support.

As the aging issues presented by the news media are closely intertwined with daily life, focal points like elderly care and medical services enable the public to realize the far-reaching effects of demographic transition on their future lives. As the primary channels for information dissemination and meaning construction, mainstream media discourse profoundly influences public value judgments and plays a vital role in fostering an active view of aging throughout society. In the process of news production, mainstream media integrates grand policy information through specific discourse strategies like proximization, making the content more cognitively accessible (e.g., through the reification of crisis) and emotionally resonant for building identification.

Consequently, the greater the cognitive consensus achieved between media information/policies and the public, the higher the information mobilization value generated by the media, and the more favorable it becomes for the implementation of national aging strategies. Therefore, mainstream media must disseminate objective and rational discourse that aligns with the national 15th Five-Year Plan for the development of aging undertakings. Such discourse should fully reflect the contemporary characteristics of the national strategy for actively responding to population aging, thereby enhancing the media’s ability to guide public opinion and leading all of society to collectively resolve the aging crisis and co-construct an age-

friendly society. Despite these insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. This study is restricted to a single English-language mainstream outlet, *China Daily*, and utilizes a sampled corpus of 100 core reports. While these data are sufficient for an exploratory analysis and reach thematic saturation, the findings primarily reflect the discursive strategies of China's external-facing media and may not fully represent the diverse framing found in domestic Chinese-language media or commercial outlets. Future research could broaden the scope by incorporating cross-linguistic comparisons and larger datasets to further validate the generalizability of these proximization mechanisms.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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