

Reimagining Policing Through the Ethics of Care: Insights From Chinese Narratives and Practices

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Submitted: 15 January 2026 **Accepted:** 24 June 2026 **Published:** 22 July 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Compassionate Futures for Collective Well-Being” edited by Natalia Martini (KU Leuven) and Karin Hannes (KU Leuven), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i477>

Abstract

This article reexamines the foundations of policing by advancing *homo curans*—the caring human—not as a normative ideal, but as an emergent institutional rationality and governance disposition. Positioned as a counter-logic to the long-dominant *homo economicus* model of instrumental rationality, the study analyzes how security is increasingly reframed as a mechanism of collective care, structured by interdependence and responsiveness rather than coercion alone. Methodologically, the study combines critical discourse analysis of 300 Chinese media reports on policing (2014–2024) with 28 semi-structured interviews involving frontline officers, experts, and citizens. This design traces how *homo curans* functions as both a discursive legitimation frame and an operational logic across institutional texts and frontline practices. Findings reveal a gradual but uneven “care turn” in Chinese policing narratives. While early coverage emphasized deterrence, performance, and procedural control, post-2019 discourse increasingly featured relational and preventive vocabularies such as “linkage,” “home visits,” and “warm enforcement.” Pandemic-era reversals briefly restored coercive frames, yet post-2022 governance reforms consolidated care-centered narratives. Interview data corroborate this shift, identifying a routinized de-escalation → explanation → referral → follow-up pathway and a dual foundation of legitimacy: procedural correctness and relational recognition. The article contributes to policing studies by demonstrating that *homo curans* represents a substantive shift in governance logic, moving beyond the binary of coercion versus service to reveal care as an empirically institutionalized dimension of contemporary statecraft.

Keywords

China; critical discourse analysis; ethics of care; *homo curans*; institutional rationality; policing

1. Introduction

Historically, policing has rested on the premise of the *homo economicus*, prioritizing efficiency, control, and deterrence through surveillance and coercive force (Holmqvist, 2016). However, this model's failure to account for social vulnerability has severely strained public trust and institutional credibility (Bloom, 2025, pp. 158–174). Challenging this view, recent scholarship highlights the affective dimensions of law enforcement, conceptualizing policing as an ongoing negotiation between force and feeling (Fassin, 2015) and care as both an ethical practice and a regulatory mechanism (Ticktin, 2011). This shift aligns with broader scholarly inquiries into what specific services the police should fundamentally provide to the public beyond conventional crime control (Bradford et al., 2025). Yet, these debates remain largely confined to Western liberal contexts.

To bridge this gap, this article examines how care is operationalized within a non-Western, high-capacity security state. The Chinese case is uniquely instructive; here, an emerging “care turn” is refracted through contemporary “people-centered” governance and indigenous traditions of *ren* (仁, benevolence)—manifested in tailored enforcement for elderly, vulnerable populations, and caregivers—and *he* (和, harmony), expressed via mediation-oriented conflict resolution over immediate punitive intervention. These principles directly underpin contemporary community policing initiatives that emphasize explanation, negotiation, and social coordination—a communicative approach that proves particularly crucial when tailored to the varying expectations, life experiences, and media-driven values of different generations (Mao et al., 2025).

Methodologically, we combine a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 300 media reports with 28 semi-structured interviews spanning 2014–2024—a transformative decade in Chinese governance. Shifting from the earlier Harmonious Society agenda centered on stability and social integration, this period formalized “people-centered governance” and “social governance modernization.” These reforms mandated public agencies to complement enforcement-heavy metrics with service provision, dispute resolution, and preventative intervention. Policing thus became a primary arena for these objectives, tasking public security agencies to cultivate trust and maintain social cohesion alongside regular enforcement. This dual design offers a longitudinal, multi-layered analysis of how care-based and coercive rationalities articulate across official narratives and lived realities.

Empirically, we identify a growing emphasis on explanation, mediation, responsiveness, and follow-up. Rather than replacing coercive authority, these relational practices coexist with and reshape traditional enforcement. Utilizing *homo curans* as an analytical lens, this study offers a situated account of how legitimacy is co-produced through relational responsiveness and procedural control, thereby contributing to broader debates on the shifting moral foundations of contemporary governance.

2. Literature Review

The scaffolding of Western political economy and public policy has historically rested upon the figure of *homo economicus*—an atomized, self-interested agent driven primarily by utility maximization. This abstract ideal has drawn sustained fire for its inherent moral and relational sterility (Davis, 2018; Herfeld, 2022; Urbina & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2019). Critics of *homo economicus* argue that its instrumental logic reduces complex social and ecological relationships to market-like transactions (Sobel & Postel, 2016). Drawing on this critique, scholars

of care ethics and relational ontology advocate a shift from the “monadic self” to the “relational self” (Donati & Archer, 2015; Gergen, 2009; Yang, 2007).

Within this literature, individuals are viewed not as atomized utility-maximizers, but as relational beings embedded in networks of interdependence. Applied to public administration, this perspective implies that institutional legitimacy and image-building strategies cannot rely on top-down directives alone; rather, they must be grounded in the public’s genuine community perceptions (Mao et al., 2025), generating trust through responsiveness rather than mere deterrence. This framework underpins *homo curans*—the caring human—reimagining care not as a private sentiment, but as a foundational social and political practice (Brugère, 2020; Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993). Nonetheless, this paradigm faces an inherent tension: asserting its moral uniqueness risks subjectivity, while over-aligning with traditional principle ethics may dilute its normative power (Harbour, 2025).

Feminist scholarship has increasingly moved care beyond its traditional association with gendered labor, repositioning it as a broader principle of governance and social organization. Within this debate, different strands of literature highlight how care challenges dominant logics of neoliberalism and individualism. For instance, Odih (2014) critiques the marketization of social relations by showing how care exposes the limits of commodified moral frameworks, while Nissen et al. (2023) demonstrate how care practices can be institutionalized within welfare systems as alternatives to efficiency-driven governance. Relatedly, Vuolajärvi (2019) highlights the ambiguity of this shift, illustrating how care can be mobilized as a governance strategy that blurs the lines between social support and state control.

Recent contributions further extend this shift by emphasizing the collective and relational dimensions of care. Chamberlain (2020) traces the movement from self-care to collective care, underscoring how care becomes a shared social responsibility rather than an individual coping strategy. Similarly, Bali and Zamora (2022) propose the equity-care matrix, illustrating how care must be embedded within broader structures of social justice and institutional design. Together, these perspectives highlight that care is not merely an ethical disposition but an organizing logic that reshapes how responsibility, legitimacy, and social relations are structured in the public sphere (Trnka et al., 2021). In public administration, Tronto (2013) advocates a “politics of care,” proposing that care be institutionalized as a public principle capable of rehumanizing Weberian bureaucratic rationality and grounding governance in relational responsibility. Engster (2020) further developed the “ethics of public care,” contending that frontline bureaucrats (e.g., police, social workers, teachers) effectively “do policy through care” in their daily discretionary routines.

When care enters bureaucratic systems, responsibility is redefined: It is no longer mere compliance but a “moral attentiveness” to social impact (Dubnick, 2017). This operationalizes *homo curans* within administrative routines—transforming care from a private virtue into a public duty enacted through professional discretion and explanation (O’Leary, 2019).

This paradigmatic shift has extended even into the traditionally coercive fields of conservation and security. Lunstrum et al. (2025) advocate for care-full conservation, reframing conservation not as militarized protection but as an empathetic relational process, including care for those who transgress. Likewise, Johnson (2025) explores “coercive care” in medico-legal interfaces, showing how police and health actors navigate moral tensions in contexts of “significant physical intrusion.” Jovičić (2018) further illuminates this

dilemma in the policing of asylum seekers, revealing how “care” is often structurally sidelined in neoliberal border regimes.

These developments mark a cross-disciplinary consensus: Security can be reimagined as the collective engineering of trust, interdependence, and social resilience, elevating care into an embedded governance logic. Kruse et al. (2020) illustrate this by showing how frontline professionals actively reconcile care, bureaucracy, and professionalism—adapting standardized rules to individual needs so that discretion and relational judgment can coexist with formal structures. Conversely, Hughes et al. (2020) highlight that the ultimate integration of such care frameworks is heavily shaped by institutional inertia and inter-agency dynamics.

In China, this tension is filtered through indigenous traditions of *ren* (仁, benevolence) and *he* (和, harmony). Chinese *homo curans* represents a modern synthesis of traditional relational ethics and “people-centered” governance (Fan & Zhang, 2025). This echoes the broader “lived” institutionalization of care identified by Trnka et al. (2021), yet remains distinct in its authoritarian context. Indeed, as East Asian digital governance studies show, techno-rational models often prioritize standardization over the relational safety and emotional reassurance the public expects (Kanbara & Shaw, 2021).

Despite these advances, two gaps remain: First, most “ethics of care” research in policing remains theoretical or focused on Western welfare-policing models; second, there is a lack of longitudinal empirical evidence showing how “care” as a discursive frame actually translates into institutionalized pathways in a non-Western security apparatus. This study addresses this gap by interrogating the “care–coercion assemblage” in Chinese policing. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. At the textual level, how did Chinese media (2014–2024) rhetorically construct the shift from *homo economicus* to *homo curans*?
2. In discursive practice, through what institutional routines and intertextual chains were these “care” frames mobilized to build legitimacy?
3. In social practice, how is care enacted on the frontline, and how do marginalized groups and practitioners perceive these efforts?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study conceptualizes *homo curans* as an institutional rationality through which care is operationalized in governance—not as a utopian moral ideal, but as a patterned mode of organizing authority through relational responsiveness. Although *homo economicus* and *homo curans* originate in Western political economy and care ethics, they are deployed here as Weberian ideal-types rather than culturally bounded descriptions. Rather than imposing Western essentialisms onto the Chinese case, these heuristic devices serve to analyze how divergent governance rationalities intersect and reconfigure within specific state structures. The contemporary Chinese policing field—characterized by an institutional pivot toward “social governance modernization,” dispute mediation, and “people-centered” administration—provides a compelling empirical site to examine this hybridization without assuming cultural convergence.

Our framework contrasts these two ideal-typical rationalities. *Homo economicus* denotes a calculative subject driven by managerial efficiency, risk minimization, and metricized accountability. Conversely, *homo curans* posits a relational subject embedded in networks of interdependence, where legitimacy is co-produced through attentiveness, moral responsiveness, and the endurance of social ties. Crucially, these rationalities are not mutually exclusive binaries but coexisting logics in perpetual tension; *homo curans* reconfigures rather than replaces coercive authority, rearticulating how state power is justified and experienced.

This formulation refines the analytical scope of *homo curans*, distinguishing it from both the localized spontaneity of street-level discretion and the transaction-bound limits of procedural justice. By examining how institutions systematically leverage relational ties to secure compliance, *homo curans* operates as a mid-range framework that captures the structural co-articulation of care and coercion within contemporary statecraft.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design Overview

To trace the emergent shift from *homo economicus* to *homo curans* in Chinese policing, this study employs a convergent mixed-methods design. We integrate CDA of institutional media texts with semi-structured interviews to capture both macro-level governance agendas and micro-level lived meanings. Methodological rigor is maintained through data triangulation and independent double-coding, ensuring interpretive validity within a constructivist paradigm. The specific data corpora and analytical procedures are detailed in the following subsections.

4.2. Data Sources

4.2.1. Media Corpus

The corpus comprises 300 news reports on policing published between January 2014 and December 2024, drawn from major national and regional outlets including *People's Daily Online*, *Southern Weekly*, *The Paper*, *Xinhua News Agency*, and official provincial police bureau websites. While this limits the diversity of independent voices, it is precisely this top-down, institutionalized nature that makes these reports a valuable proxy for tracing official discursive shifts and the state's intentionality in projecting a *homo curans* image. Articles were retrieved using core Chinese keywords such as “公安” (“public security”), “警察” (“police”), “警务” (“policing”), and “社区警务” (“community policing”) through both outlet-specific searches and general web queries.

Substantive reports (≥ 500 characters) on policing and governance were included, while brief notices and duplicates were excluded. The selection prioritized prominent, widely shared reports to capture the dominant discursive formations shaping public narratives. This approach mirrors the mainstreaming of policing discourse (2014–2024) more effectively than topic stratification. The resulting corpus balances central and regional media, averaging 25–30 reports per year. Keyword frequency checks against larger databases confirmed its representativeness, providing a robust foundation for a longitudinal CDA of the shift from efficiency-centered to care-oriented narratives.

4.2.2. Interviews

Complementing the CDA, semi-structured interviews ($N = 28$) were conducted with five stakeholder groups: seven police personnel (frontline and administrative), four scholars (sociology, ethics, and policing), four marginalized citizens (laborers and caregivers), one community liaison, and twelve general citizens representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds (see Table 1). The inclusion of caregivers and laborers was theoretically motivated by their structurally vulnerable positions, which make them particularly sensitive to the presence or absence of care in policing encounters. We employed purposive, maximum-variation sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals for hard-to-reach participants.

Table 1. Basic information of respondents.

PID	Functional role (study)	Gender
I-01	Frontline police (community)	Male
I-02	Frontline police (patrol)	Male
I-03	Frontline police (former)	Female
I-04	Frontline police (former)	Male
I-05	Police administration/station ops	Male
I-06	Police administration/case filing	Male
I-07	Police administration/office clerk	Female
I-08	Community safety liaison	Female
I-09	Scholar/sociology	Female
I-10	Scholar/public administration	Male
I-11	Scholar/policing studies	Male
I-12	Scholar/ethics & policy	Female
I-13	Citizen/marginalized	Male
I-14	Citizen/marginalized	Male
I-15	Citizen/marginalized (caregiver)	Female
I-16	Citizen/marginalized (caregiver)	Female
I-17	Citizen/freelancer	Female
I-18	Citizen/no job	Female
I-19	Citizen/no job	Male
I-20	Citizen/real estate sales	Female
I-21	Citizen/farmer	Male
I-22	Citizen/teacher	Female
I-23	Citizen/nurse	Female
I-24	Citizen/laborer	Male
I-25	Citizen/government staff	Female
I-26	Citizen/maintenance worker	Male
I-27	Citizen/student	Female
I-28	Citizen/student	Male

Interviews of 60 to 90 minutes, in Mandarin, were audio-recorded, anonymized, and analyzed through a constructivist lens. An iterative codebook, centered on the care–coercion tension, was refined through 20% inter-coder adjudication to ensure consistency. The interview guide prioritized perceptions of “good policing” and lived experiences of empathy versus control in security encounters. All procedures adhered to institutional ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all participants.

4.3. Analytical Framework

4.3.1. CDA

We employ CDA to examine how policing texts constitute care versus coercion to shape social realities (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). To minimize cherry-picking, a corpus-assisted procedure (keyword/collocate profiling → human validation) structured the sampling. Following Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework, analysis proceeded in three moments. First, textual analysis traced recurrent lexical, syntactic, and metaphorical realizations of care/coercion within the 300 reports. Second, discursive-practice analysis mapped intertextual chains and legitimation strategies across central–provincial–municipal outlets over time. Third, social-practice interpretation linked these shifts to broader governance agendas, specifically considering the legacy of the Harmonious Society and recent social governance modernization reforms (e.g., community-based prevention, inter-agency coordination, and people-centered delivery). Coding began deductively and was refined inductively through memoing. To ensure consistency, two researchers cross-checked a 20% subsample to stabilize the codebook. All items were analyzed in the original Chinese, with translations used only for presentation.

4.3.2. Dual Coding Framework

This study utilizes a care/economic rationality CDA framework (Table 2). Grounded in Tronto’s (1993, 2013) moral elements (“caring-with”) and Held’s (2005) relational ontology, the care pillar encodes responsiveness to vulnerability, connectivity, shared responsibility, and preventive support. Conversely, the economic–rational pillar reflects the institutionalized drive for efficiency and procedural control rather than

Table 2. Theoretical foundation of the dual-pillar coding framework.

Dimension	Care pillar (<i>homo curans</i>)	Economic-rational pillar (<i>homo economicus</i>)
Ontological foundation	Relational ontology (Held, 2005); care as interdependence and moral responsiveness (Tronto, 1993, 2013)	Instrumental rationality (Foucault, 1977/1995; Weber, 1978); efficiency-centered subjectivity (Foucault, 1977/1995)
Moral orientation	Responsiveness, empathy, attentiveness, and shared responsibility	Calculation, self-interest, and performance orientation
Institutional logic	Governance as relational engagement; emphasis on inclusion and preventive support	Governance as control and optimization; emphasis on output and procedural standardization
Discursive indicators	Responsiveness to vulnerability; connectivity; shared responsibility; preventive support	Efficiency; deterrence; individual attribution; procedural standardization

mere punitive coercion. Drawing on Foucault's (1977/1995) disciplinary power and neoliberal subjectivity, it encodes efficiency, deterrence, individual attribution, and procedural standardization. Ultimately, these poles contrast *homo economicus* as the rationalizing subject of performance against *homo curans* as the relational subject of responsiveness.

Table 3 operationalizes the theoretical framework into specific lexical, phrasal, and narrative indicators used in the CDA corpus analysis. This framework functions both as a deductive structure (derived from theory) and an inductive tool (allowing emergent sub-themes).

Table 3. Operational coding scheme for care and economic rationality in Chinese policing discourse.

Framework	Main code	Sub-code	Operational definition	Example (translated from Chinese media)
Ethics of care	Responsiveness to vulnerability	Sensitivity to victims, emotional presence	Police respond empathetically to citizen grievances	"The police calmed the old man and helped him find his lost wife."
	Connectedness	Community participation, relational governance	Collaborative or dialogical interactions between police and citizens	"The police station and community volunteers jointly carry out the 'neighborhood watch' activity."
	Shared responsibility	Collective security, partnership model	Co-production of safety, shared prevention efforts	"Police and people build and govern together to share peace."
	Preventive support	Early intervention, psychosocial assistance	Police actions addressing causes rather than symptoms	"Police visit the homes of troubled teenagers to prevent them from breaking the law again."
Economic rationality	Efficiency	Quantitative performance, time-saving logic	Focus on clearance rates, response speed, or technological control	"The time to respond to a crime is reduced by 30 percent, and the rate of solving crimes is increased."
	Deterrence	Punitive or disciplinary emphasis	Emphasis on strict punishment or threat of force	"Strict punishment in accordance with the law to deter."
	Individual accountability	Blame and moral isolation	Crime framed as individual moral failure	"The suspect will bear full legal responsibility."
	Procedural standardization	Bureaucratic or technocratic legitimacy	Reliance on codified rules, professionalism, or automation	"Strictly implement the standard operating procedures for law enforcement."

Beyond CDA, we ran a lightweight, dictionary-based pass on news titles and leads. Tokens and bigrams were mapped to our two-pillar scheme (care vs. coercive, with efficiency/procedural sub-dimensions). Annual rates are reported as illustrative shares; bigram collocations (± 5 tokens) profile lexical ecologies. This pass is indicative, not dispositive; final interpretations rest on CDA and interviews.

4.4. Coding and Reliability Procedures

Following a 50-article pilot that refined operational definitions through open coding, we applied the finalized dual codebook deductively to all 300 reports in NVivo 14. A secondary coder—an independent researcher specialized in care ethics who was not part of the primary project team—blindly coded a 15% random subset of the data, yielding Cohen's $\kappa = .86$. We then mapped code frequencies across 2014–2024 to visualize longitudinal shifts, and finally integrated the discourse patterns with interview themes to build a multi-level narrative of care–coercion dynamics.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent in accordance with institutional ethics approval. Identities and affiliations were anonymized; quotations were edited only for clarity. Given the study's sensitivity—analyzing policing and public discourse—extra care was taken to protect participants' confidentiality and to represent differing voices equitably.

Reflexive notes were maintained throughout analysis to account for the researcher's interpretive position and sociocultural proximity to the field. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee under reference number UMREC_2650.

4.6. Reflexivity

The authors acknowledge that “care discourse” in state media may function as a strategic legitimation tool or a response to internal performance evaluation pressures (e.g., “warm enforcement” quotas). Our analysis does not assume uniform behavioral change; rather, it captures the discursive institutionalization of care. Rather than treating the 28 semi-structured interviews as a statistically representative baseline, this design deploys them as an indispensable micro-narrative counter-weight to complement, contextualize, and at times critically deconstruct how top-down official discourses align with, or diverge from, the lived realities on the ground.

4.7. Analytical Synthesis

The analytical synthesis stage integrated findings from the three CDA levels to address the research questions. Specifically, the textual level focused on lexical and rhetorical patterns that articulate care or coercion orientations in media discourse. The discursive practice level examined how these linguistic features were embedded within intertextual chains and how they were recontextualized across institutional communication routines. The social practice level triangulated these insights with interview data to interpret how care-oriented policing was enacted, constrained, or negotiated in practice (see Table 4).

This synthesis enabled a multi-scalar reading of care–coercion dynamics, revealing how textual discourse, institutional mediation, and everyday practice co-produce the evolving moral economy of policing in China.

Table 4. Alignment between research questions and CDA analytical levels.

CDA Level	Analytical focus	Data source	Corresponding RQ
Textual	Lexical, rhetorical construction of care/coercion	Media corpus (2014–2024)	How were <i>homo economicus</i> and <i>homo curans</i> discursively constructed?
Discursive practice	Intertextual production and circulation of frames	Media-policy intertexts	Through which routines and intertexts were frames produced and mobilized?
Social practice	Translation of care frames into practice; legitimacy perceptions	Interviews with officers & citizens	How are care-oriented practices enacted and perceived?

5. Findings

5.1. Media CDA results

5.1.1. Overview of Discursive Trends (2014–2024)

Between 2014 and 2024, Chinese media discourse exhibits a structural rebalancing from economic rationality to care-oriented vocabulary. As visualized in Figure 1 and detailed in Table 5, this decade-long macro-trajectory is non-linear, characterized by three distinct phases: an initial dominance of efficiency and deterrence-driven frames (2014–2018), a temporary pandemic-era resurgence of control-oriented rhetoric (2020–2021), and a decisive post-2022 reversal. Driven by institutional shifts toward “people-centered governance,” care ethics have since normalized as the dominant rationality in contemporary policing narratives, relegating instrumental control to a secondary position by 2024.

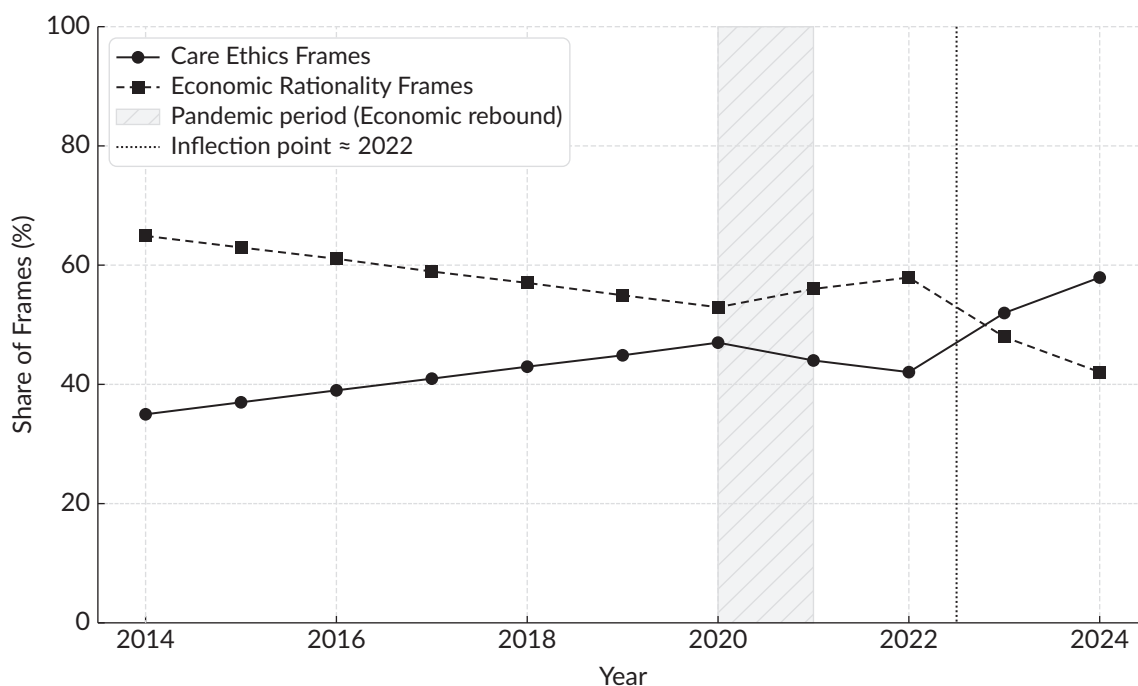


Figure 1. Illustrative frequency mapping.

This linguistic transformation suggests the emergence of an evolving moral economy of policing—where responsiveness, empathy, and social inclusion increasingly supplement deterrence and control.

Table 5. Analytic overview table.

Period	Dominant discursive orientation	Policy/institutional context	Representative lexical frames	Interpretive note
2014–2018	Coercion-centered (efficiency, deterrence)	Early “performance policing” era; focus on output indicators	“Strike hard,” “standardized enforcement,” “result reporting”	Reflects <i>homo economicus</i> logic—rationalized and metric-driven policing.
2019–2020	Transitional (mixed rationality)	Reform rhetoric (“people-centered governance”) begins	“Home visits,” “linkage,” “education with warmth” co-exist with “discipline”	Hybrid discourse—emergent <i>homo curans</i> frames within bureaucratic structure.
2020–2022	Procedural resurgence (control phase)	Pandemic control, lockdown enforcement	“Grid management,” “strict standard,” “command execution”	Temporary reversal toward coercion; care subordinated to procedural control.
2022–2024	Relational turn (care-centered governance)	Post-pandemic re-legitimation, community service focus	“Warm enforcement,” “relational service,” “follow-up care”	Consolidation of <i>homo curans</i> legitimacy through relational framing.

Table 5 provides an interpretive summary of the shifting care–coercion balance across four temporal phases. Each phase is characterized by distinct institutional logics, rhetorical repertoires, and policy discourses.

5.1.2. Analysis of Critical Discourse in Media Reports

A CDA of 300 media texts from 2014 to 2024 reveals a long-term competition and reconfiguration between the care and coercion semantic domains in Chinese police narratives. In the early years (2014–2018), corresponding to the implementation of periodic “strike-hard rectification campaigns” (intensive, state-led crackdowns on crime) and the nationwide Police Reform Outline (2015–2020; a blueprint for professionalizing procedures and performance metrics), reports largely adhered to a law-enforcement–efficiency logic. National authority and order were constructed through high-intensity terms such as “crackdown,” “rectification,” and “deterrence.” Quantitative rhetoric—“higher case-solving rates,” “standardized procedures,” “faster response time”—portrayed the police as a technocratic machine where efficiency was seen as a source of legitimacy. Metaphorically, policing was often framed through warfare and disease metaphors—“sword-unsheathing operations,” “social tumors”—depicting deviance as a threat to be eradicated:

Since the beginning of this year, Beijing police have maintained a *zero-tolerance* policy and *high-pressure crackdown* on drug-related crimes, solving over 1,800 drug-related criminal cases. (“Beijing jingfang,” 2014)

Public security organs can use the intelligent application for video alarms on citizens' mobile phones to obtain audio and video information from the crime scene in real time, perceive the situation at the crime scene, and secure evidence *in advance*, making command and response more *efficient and enforcement* more *timely*. ("Liaoning Fuxin," 2017)

We will *rigorously prevent* and *resolutely combat* all forms of....We will *deepen special campaigns* such as the *crackdown* on gun and explosives trafficking and the *severe punishment* of telecommunications and online fraud, *resolutely punish* frequently occurring property crimes, and promote the construction of a security risk prevention and control system in key areas such as primary and secondary schools, kindergartens, and hospitals. ("Gonganbu," 2018)

Since 2019, Chinese policing narratives have undergone a distinct semantic shift, coinciding with public administration reforms prioritizing "people-centered governance." The revitalization of the historical "Fengqiao experience" (a grassroots model of resolving disputes locally through public involvement) into "social governance modernization" (a reform agenda promoting community-based prevention and multi-agency coordination) institutionalized community-based prevention and multi-agency coordination. This policy environment established structural incentives—including citizen-satisfaction and social stability metrics—for police and state media to foreground care-oriented narratives. Consequently, official discourse transitioned from command-driven to support-oriented, adopting relational verbs ("coordinate," "connect") and framing devices ("compassionate law enforcement") that position police as community collaborators rather than mere enforcers. Word frequency analysis confirms this structural reorientation toward empathy: By 2024, "care" vocabulary rose from 35% to 58%, while "coercive" terminology declined from 65% to 42%. See the examples below:

An elderly resident in a neighborhood was approached late at night by a drunkard banging on his door, and police officers stood guard outside his door for the night....In Zhangzhou, Fujian, the saying "*A distant relative is not as good as a close neighbor, and a close neighbor is not as good as Zhangzhou 110*" is deeply ingrained and passed down by word of mouth. ("Danfuqi huhang xin shidai," 2019)

On December 19, 2014, the Fanshui Bridge officially opened to traffic, ending the lives of residents in the Fanguanghu area who relied on ferries to enter the town. Before that, Li Shugan would come to the ferry almost every morning to push carts, *help the elderly, and assist with unloading goods*....He took *care of* everything, both his own and others, because he was the only policeman there. ("Shequ minjing Li Shugan," 2019)

A banner hangs on the wall of the Tieshu Xiejie Community Police Station, which reads "*Serving the People and Caring for the Masses*." ("Shequ minjing de 'xin shenfen,'" 2019)

A notable "rebound" in coercive discourse appeared during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021), aligning with the state's Law-Based Pandemic Control Guidelines and the Public Security Covid Response Protocols. During this period, media coverage prominently featured terms such as "maintaining order," "strict control," and "lawful handling," which reasserted the logic of command and compliance. These reports often followed an intertextual sequence of authoritative directive → standardized enforcement → achievement reporting, reproducing the bureaucratic rhythm of legitimacy.

Linguistically, this phase witnessed a resurgence of institutional metaphors such as frontline defense, fortress, and battle, casting police as soldiers in a moralized war against the virus. The repetition of these metaphors across outlets reactivated the disciplinary register of the pre-2018 era, temporarily re-centering efficiency, control, and obedience. Yet, even within this coercive resurgence, subtle traces of relational language—"protecting communities," "caring for the vulnerable," "assisting quarantined citizens"—persisted, suggesting that the ethic of care, though overshadowed, continued to circulate beneath the surface of China's pandemic policing discourse:

We must *resolutely treat* epidemic prevention and *control* as the top priority, making full and *effective* use of legal provisions to *punish* all kinds of illegal and criminal activities that hinder epidemic prevention and *control* in a timely and severe manner, providing *strong legal guarantees* for winning the *battle against* the epidemic. ("Gongan zhan 'yi," 2020)

Those who harm medical personnel, disrupt medical order, or maliciously spread the epidemic must be *dealt with swiftly and resolutely*, and typical cases should be *promptly exposed* to create an *effective deterrent*. ("Zhan yiqing," 2020)

In the post-pandemic era (2022–2024), media narratives increasingly reflected China's governance modernization reforms, emphasizing "prevention first," "co-construction and co-governance," and "people-centered security." Aligned with the evaluation systems for Building a Peaceful China (2021 onward) and the national drive for social governance modernization outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), reports portrayed police less as enforcers and more as mediators and caregivers. Terms like "psychological counseling," "community coordination," and "trust-building" became frequent collocates of "care" and "cooperation." The earlier "war" metaphors gave way to "family" and "neighbor" imagery—"the police are the guardians next door"—signaling a discursive normalization of empathy, prevention, and shared responsibility in post-pandemic Chinese policing:

In recent years, the police station has assembled a "*Harmony Mediation Team*" comprised of community security officers, lawyers, and enthusiastic Party members to promptly mediate disputes[:]. "*Diversified mediation of conflicts and disputes is a beneficial exploration in our police station's community-based crime prevention and control work. Through proactive investigation and diversified mediation, we have achieved early detection, early intervention, and early resolution of conflicts and disputes, which is conducive to neighborhood harmony and social harmony.*" ("Gongan paichusuoyu tuixing yufang jingwu," 2023)

To address the urgent needs and *concerns* of the people by providing better *safety and security*, and to realize a higher level of safe China in a way that is visible, tangible, and perceptible to the people. ("Liaowang," 2022)

Sitting side by side is the only way to *bridge the gap between hearts*. Huizhou police, through Party building *partnerships*, have repeatedly *listened to the voices of the people* and *sought their advice*....Deploying police forces promptly installed safety netting along the river in front of the Wenfeng Kindergarten in Daxincheng, completely eliminating safety hazards. ("Yongxin fuwu qunzhong," 2024)

Further placing these linguistic features within the context of social governance reveals a close correspondence between discourse shifts and policy logic: 2014–2018 was a mandatory phase centered on “prevention, control, and standardization”; 2020–2022 saw a renewed strengthening of “proceduralization and deterrence” due to the public health emergency; after 2022, institutional mechanisms such as “primary prevention,” “two teams and one office,” “one police officer per village,” and “police grid + community grid” were implemented, while co-governance vocabulary such as “civilian-auxiliary cooperation and government-society collaboration” rapidly emerged, driving the care framework to continuously strengthen in the dimensions of “prevention, support, connection, and shared responsibility.”

Overall, the changes in media discourse exhibit three key characteristics:

1. Semantic rearrangement: from high-intensity deterrence and quantifiable efficiency to relational support and preventative governance.
2. Metaphorical substitution: from “enforcers of crime fighting” to “collaborators in community care.”
3. Reconstruction of legitimacy sources: from “control capacity” to “accessibility, emotional response, and relational trust.”

5.2. Interview Results Analysis

The interview data indicate a transition in grassroots policing from a logic of “control and efficiency” toward one of “prevention and care.” At the same time, they both corroborate and complicate official narratives: While many participants confirmed an increased emphasis on explanation and responsiveness, marginalized groups pointed to persistent inconsistencies and the risk of care becoming superficial in the absence of sustained follow-up. Frontline respondents described a refined handling sequence of de-escalation, explanation, lawful processing, referral, and follow-up. As I-01 emphasized: “We must first stabilize emotions...then clearly explain the procedures so the process can proceed smoothly.” Patrol officers echoed this view, noting that without explaining “why we are doing this and what comes next,” enforcement is “easily perceived as coercion” (I-02). This relationship-oriented approach was also reflected in citizens’ experiences. Recalling a police intervention in a family caregiving dispute, I-24 noted that “the police patiently listened to me explain my mother’s situation...which made me less resistant.” Similarly, discussing a neighborhood conflict, I-17 observed: “Before, I felt the police came to take charge, but now they ask if we need help first.”

This shift does not negate procedure but recontextualizes it. As I-03 recalled: “A gentle approach does not mean disregarding procedures, but rather explaining them clearly and thoroughly.” To sustain this “care,” practitioners rely on inter-departmental collaboration involving police officers, schools, neighborhood committees, and social workers. Such arrangements reflect recent social governance reforms that encourage public agencies to share responsibility for prevention and dispute resolution rather than relying solely on punitive intervention. I-12 suggested: “Try to avoid punishment if possible; first, make referrals and follow-ups to reduce risk,” supported by I-09’s view on collective problem-solving through media and organizational contact. From the community perspective, this forms a “care chain” of accessibility and sustainability. I-13 argued that “a single visit has limited effect; follow-up phone calls and home visits are necessary,” while I-11 warned that without subsequent social work, reassurance “easily becomes a one-off and superficial act.”

Academic interviewees clarified that care is a professional, institutionalized task. I-04 noted: “Procedures make law enforcement stand the test, and care makes it more acceptable” (similar to I-12 and I-22). Regarding the tension between due process and humane enforcement, I-05 proposed a compromise of “giving choices, giving time, and informing consequences,” emphasizing evidence preservation. Public responses were positive: “If there are two options and the impact is explained, I feel respected” (I-25), “video recordings and receipts make me feel more at ease” (I-15). This “dual-foundation legitimacy” fosters cooperation and trust (I-10).

The pandemic briefly disrupted this logic, imposing “rigid targets” where officers were “afraid of being held responsible if we didn’t do enough” (I-04, I-03). The public understood the control but sought “more explanation, as we still have elderly and children at home” (I-16). I-19 emphasized compensatory care: “If coercive measures are unavoidable, visiting people afterward to explain...and providing psychological support can repair relationships.” While practice has largely returned to a service track, constraints persist. I-06 summarized the need for “manpower, training, and a coordinating unit,” as insufficient time (I-01, I-04) and a lack of emotional intervention training (I-03) remain barriers.

To balance performance with relational work, I-07 suggested “including visits and follow-ups in workload statistics,” warning that valuing only case-solving rates encourages “quick results” (I-05). Public expectations are pragmatic: “It’s not about achieving zero disputes, but about having someone willing to listen...and telling you what to do next” (I-28). In high-uncertainty scenarios, coercion remains prioritized—“the scene must be controlled first” (I-01)—but post-incident reassurance is vital. Without follow-up explanations, “people will only remember ‘coercion,’ not ‘protection’” (I-10, I-06). Ultimately, care embeds authority within relationships, turning it from a private virtue into a public duty.

6. Discussion

6.1. *The Discursive Construction of Care and Legitimacy in Chinese Policing*

Addressing the textual level, the analysis shows that Chinese media discourse reconstructs policing legitimacy through an increasing reliance on relational and care-oriented language. Beyond documenting changes in vocabulary and rhetorical emphasis, the key issue is how this shift redefines the moral basis of authority. The findings suggest a reorientation from a model grounded primarily in deterrence and procedural compliance toward one increasingly anchored in responsiveness, accessibility, and communicative engagement. In this sense, care operates not as an alternative to authority, but as a modality through which authority is justified and experienced, echoing Fassin’s (2015) notion of a “moral economy of policing.”

Importantly, this transformation remains conditional. During periods of heightened uncertainty, coercive rationalities regain prominence, indicating that procedural control continues to serve as the pragmatic foundation of governance. The “care turn,” therefore, is best understood as a reconfiguration of legitimacy rather than a linear transformation.

Building on this perspective, media discourse is treated not merely as a reflection of social reality, but as a site where governance is actively constructed. At the same time, such discourse is structurally driven by

concrete institutional incentives within the security apparatus. These include alignment with top-down policy mandates—such as “social governance modernization” and “Peaceful China” evaluations—as well as internal performance evaluation systems that increasingly tie bureaucratic recognition to metricized citizen-satisfaction targets and grassroots dispute-resolution quotas. Accordingly, the observed shift toward care is interpreted as a form of discursive institutionalization, which may reflect both evolving practices and strategic efforts at legitimation.

6.2. Institutional Mediation and the Operationalization of Care

At the level of discursive practice, relational governance is negotiated and institutionalized through everyday frontline routines. Interview narratives demonstrate that “people-centered governance” is operationalized via a concrete street-level workflow: pre-enforcement explanation, dispute mediation, and structured follow-up. Frontline officers actively navigate the structural tension between rigid legal mandates and situational responsiveness, utilizing interdepartmental social service referrals to manage complex citizen vulnerabilities. This aligns with street-level bureaucracy frameworks emphasizing the interpretive and ethical agency of frontline actors (Rowe, 2024).

This process reflects what Engster (2020) terms the institutionalization of care, whereby care becomes an administrative expectation rather than merely an ethical disposition. Its implementation, however, remains contingent. Time pressures, performance metrics, and risk-accountability structures often favor efficiency over relational engagement. Consequently, care-oriented practices tend to flourish in low-risk community settings but recede under crisis conditions or hierarchical pressure.

A critical reading suggests that the “care turn” may represent not only substantive change but also strategic adaptation. Consistent with Ticktin’s (2011) critique of the “politics of care,” practices of “warm enforcement” may enhance compliance while extending governance capacity—a form of “carceral care.” Care therefore coexists with, rather than replaces, existing logics of performance and control. Sustaining relational responsiveness requires institutional redesign, particularly evaluation systems that recognize prevention, explanation, and emotional communication alongside outcome-based measures.

From a cultural perspective, this relational orientation resonates with Confucian ethics of *ren* (仁, benevolence) and *he* (和, harmony), as well as socialist traditions of collective responsibility (Van der Wal & Yang, 2015). Yet, as Wang and Zhang (2025) note, these moral ideals are often translated into managerial practices of “virtue crafting,” highlighting the enduring tension between ethical responsiveness and bureaucratic rationality.

6.3. Enacting Care: Frontline Practice and the Limits of Relational Governance

At the level of social practice, our findings clarify how care is enacted as a structured institutional process rather than a random act of kindness. The identified pathway—de-escalation → explanation → referral → follow-up—demonstrates that care is operationalized as an endogenous governance rationality embedded within administrative routines (Trnka et al., 2021). In this context, practitioners perceive care not as a distraction from “real” police work, but as a strategic necessity to manage uncertainty and secure cooperation as policing increasingly extends beyond crime control to encompass dispute mediation, community engagement, and preventive governance. For officers, “care” is a tool for relational safety,

allowing them to navigate the “moral economy” of policing where legitimacy depends on affective judgments of empathy and proportionality.

However, the experiences recounted by our sampled vulnerable respondents point to the potential limits and unevenness of this relational governance. While some citizens experience the “warmth” of the state as a rehumanizing force, others in precarious positions view it with a degree of ambivalence. As scholarship on the “politics of care” suggests, compassion can function as a regulatory force that constructs implicit hierarchies of “deservingness” (Brugère, 2020; Ticktin, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Although our limited qualitative sample cannot establish a definitive national trend, the narratives of hesitation and strategic compliance among these respondents tentatively suggest that when citizens struggle to align with the prescriptive vision of “harmony,” the care-based apparatus risks reverting to more traditional forms of procedural coercion. This friction underscores that the conclusions drawn here remain exploratory, highlighting a critical boundary of carceral care that warrants further large-scale empirical investigation.

6.4. Reframing Enforcement: The Care–Coercion Assemblage

Synthesizing the textual, institutional, and experiential evidence, the analysis reveals that care does not diminish enforcement but effectively rearticulates it. Within this framework, *homo curans* represents an institutional logic that organizes how care and coercion are co-articulated in practice, moving state legitimacy beyond a sole reliance on deterrence or procedural compliance.

Crucially, this transformation remains inherently ambivalent. As Maile et al. (2023) and Bäckström and Schwarz (2025) observe, practices of attentiveness can humanize authority while simultaneously extending its reach. In this sense, care operates within the structures of control, reinforcing the dual character of contemporary policing. The significance of the “care turn” thus lies in the transformation of the moral and relational conditions under which state power is exercised. In the Chinese context examined here, the institutionalization of relational responsiveness within a traditionally coercive apparatus suggests a reconfiguration of governance legitimacy. Rather than replacing coercion, *homo curans* provides an additional moral register through which authority is justified and experienced. The findings indicate that, in this context, the “warmth” of the state can function as a strategic resource for securing both order and legitimacy across discursive, institutional, and social dimensions.

7. Implications and Future Directions

Our findings suggest that care is becoming an increasingly important source of legitimacy within contemporary policing. Consistent with debates on the moral economy of policing (Fassin, 2015) and the politics of care (Ticktin, 2011), the study shows that care and coercion operate as complementary rather than opposing modes of governance. Rather than replacing *homo economicus*, *homo curans* captures how institutions seek legitimacy through attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational engagement. This positioning of care as a constitutive element of governance highlights its structural friction with traditional Weberian bureaucracy and New Public Management frameworks, contributing to broader debates on governance rationality and public administration (Akopian et al., 2024; Bouckaert, 2023).

Practically, translating care from discourse into organizational reality requires reforming traditional police assessment systems. Shifting away from metrics focused primarily on case-clearance, stability-maintenance, and arrest rates, institutions should incorporate concrete care-based legitimacy indicators, including structured responsiveness, explanation, follow-up, and citizen aftercare protocols. At the same time, the findings suggest that care-oriented practices are most sustainable in low-risk community settings and become harder to maintain under crisis conditions or strong hierarchical pressures, underscoring the need for organizational support and evaluation mechanisms that recognize relational work.

Future research could examine how care–coercion dynamics vary across political and cultural contexts, how algorithmic governance and AI-assisted policing reshape institutional responsiveness, and how frontline officers manage the emotional labor associated with balancing compassion and control. Such work would help clarify the conditions under which care becomes an enduring governance practice rather than a temporary organizational strategy.

Overall, the Chinese case demonstrates that care does not eliminate coercion but reshapes how authority is justified and experienced. By embedding relational responsiveness within everyday policing practices, the care turn highlights the growing importance of moral and relational dimensions of legitimacy in contemporary governance while also revealing the tensions and limits that accompany their institutionalization.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the strong support of several policing institutions (with the regions and specific station names anonymized at their request), frontline officers, experts, and citizens who generously participated in the data collection and qualitative interviews for this study. Gratitude is also extended to the various Chinese public media organizations whose archived reports provided the foundational data for our discursive analysis. Special thanks are due to Fathi Abu Ayyash, a native English-speaking scholar, for providing final proofreading and copy-editing that significantly enhanced the linguistic clarity of this manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The media discourse data analyzed in this study were compiled from publicly available Chinese news platforms. The qualitative interview transcripts are not publicly available due to ethical constraints and the strict protocols implemented to protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants (frontline police officers, experts, and citizens). However, the analytical coding frameworks or de-identified selective excerpts may be made available from the first author of the article upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized ChatGPT (OpenAI, San Francisco, CA, USA) and Gemini (Google, Mountain View, CA, USA). These Large Language Models (LLMs) were used exclusively to assist with grammar improvement, stylistic refinement, and clarity enhancement of the author-generated text. They were not employed for data collection, core analysis, or the synthesis of research findings. Following the use of these tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited the content as needed, and they retain full responsibility for the originality, structural integrity, and factual accuracy of the final publication.

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