

Textual Analysis of Child Care Service Policies for Infants and Toddlers Aged 0~3 Years Based on a Historical Institutional Perspective

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Abstract: Young children indeed represent the future of a nation and hold the hopes of the country. The age range of 0 to 3 years is a crucial and unique stage in the lives of infants and young children, during which, their healthy development plays a significant role in shaping the harmony and stability of the entire society. In recent years, China has successively introduced a series of policies and regulations on childcare services to continuously improve and improve childcare services for infants and children from 0 to 3 years old. This paper aims to investigate the change in China's childcare service policy since the founding of the People's Republic of China from the perspective of history and structure. To be specific, this paper studies the change path of childcare service policy from a historical perspective and discovers its characteristics, and explores the reasons for policy change from a structural perspective. With the aid of Python and Rost-cm6 software, the study focuses on four key stages including policy change (1949-1978), (1978-2010) policy extension, (2010-2018) policy exploration, and (2018-2022) policy systematization. It was aimed to analyze the policy text quantitatively, and then summarize the evolution law of the change, so as to provide a reference for the subsequent policy formulation and development.

Keywords: historical institutionalism; education quality; childcare service policy.

1 Introduction

With the new development concept and pattern, the “two-child policy” has transitioned to the “three-child policy.” In the “Fourth Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Outline of Vision Goals for 2035” promulgated in 2021 ^[1], it was proposed to promote the special development pattern and promote more efficient childcare services. Since 2016, childcare has repeatedly appeared in the government's policies and regulations. In 2019, China's childcare market's scale exceeded 170 billion ^[2]. Under the two-child policy, caregiver resources are expected to see substantial improvement compared to the unchanged current fertility policy ^[3]. On the other hand, the Central Government's Standard Documents on childcare have been released in a blowout manner. Currently, the number of infants and children under three in China exceeds 47 million ^[4], with an annual increase of approximately 10 million. Due to the absence of public childcare

services and the rising cost of privatized care services in China, childcare provision mainly relies on families. As a consequence, it has heavily influenced working women's choices of childbirth, childcare, and employment^[5]. One of the significant reasons young people of childbearing age are hesitant to give birth is the increasing demand for childcare within families. The strong demand for reforming and transforming child welfare services in response to the changes in the birth policy has spurred many new initiatives. Vulnerable children and families involved with child welfare deserve higher quality and more effective services. To achieve this, it is of utmost importance that we base our policies, programs, and practices on solid, verifiable evidence. Implementing reforms without a clear understanding of the current data could lead to adverse consequences, jeopardizing the well-being of families and national interests^[6].

Since 2010, China has prioritized improving preschool attendance as an education policy. Additionally, parental expectations for children's education have been found to influence preschool attendance. The study discusses the implications of these findings for early education policy^[7]. Furthermore, the research extensively explored China's childcare service policy, with a focus on the policy process, analysis, and comparison. Big data text analysis was employed to align evidence better and investigate the impact of the reforms. Building upon historical institutionalism, this article takes the childcare service policy text as the research object. It uses Python and Rost cm6 software to conduct data analysis and research on policy change. Finally, it summarizes the historical change experience and contributes to the development of childcare services in the new era.

2 Data Analysis

According to the statistics, from 1949 to 2016, the number of childcare service policies issued was relatively small, only between 0-1. However, in 2019, a significant shift occurred, marking a sharp increase in childcare service policies. Moreover, it shows an upward trend, influenced by national strategies and societal needs. This trend highlights the increasing importance of childcare services in China's policy agenda. However, there are also urgent problems in the development of childcare services. As a response, the country and society should accelerate the construction of a standardized and institutionalized childcare service system.

Statistical analysis of policy texts reveals that the childcare service policies in China primarily consist of departmental documents, mainly in the form of "notices" and "opinions," serving as guiding normative documents. This demonstrates an emphasis on using the guiding policy to achieve the goal. As a result, administrative guidance is being strengthened, and some documents have a certain level of operability. However, the low effectiveness of "notice" and "opinion" policies may impede the development of childcare services, coordination, and regulation of various subjects.

To this end, this paper presents Figure 1, a research framework for conducting comprehensive research and analysis of childcare services for infants and young children aged 0 to 3.

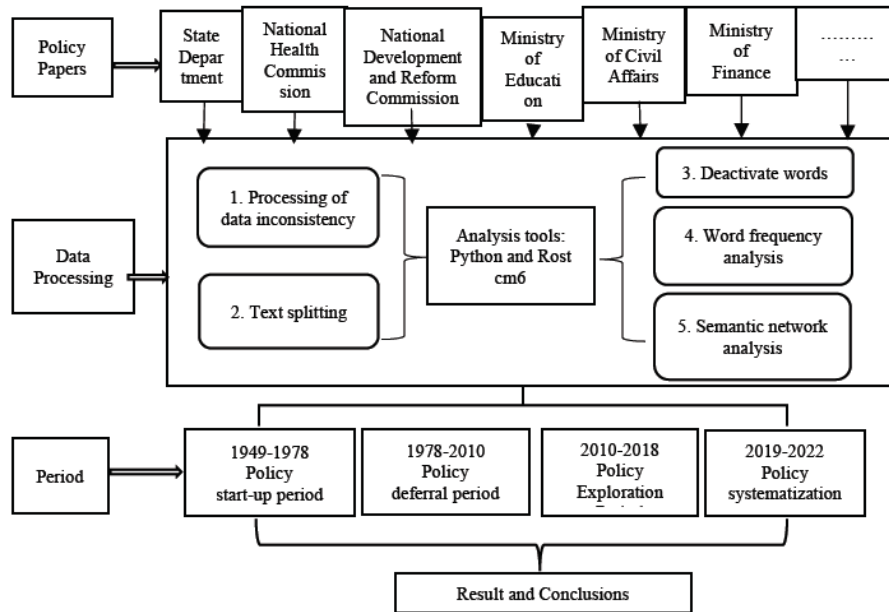


Figure 1 Research Framework

3 Analysis of the evolution of childcare service policies.

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), multiple entities have played active roles in formulating childcare service policies. The primary subjects responsible for policy formulation include the State Council, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the National Health Commission, among others. An analysis of the compiled data reveals that the National Health Commission has issued the highest number of documents, followed by the State Council and the Development and Reform Commission. This highlights the significant role and influence of the Health Commission in managing childcare services, assuming a leading position in this area.

At the intermediate level, the government focuses on formulating supportive policies for childcare services, while at the macro level, the state establishes policies to guarantee the overall development of childcare services. Notably, childcare service policies are mainly promulgated by a single department, occasionally involving collaborative releases with multiple departments. This indicates that the formulation of childcare policies tends to be relatively independent, with limited interdepartmental cooperation.

In conclusion, the active participation of various government entities, especially the National Health Commission, has played a crucial role in shaping childcare service policies in China. The government’s focus on supportive and macro-level policies demonstrates its commitment to enhancing childcare services. However, further efforts to enhance interdepartmental collaboration may be beneficial for establishing a more cohesive and comprehensive approach to childcare policy formulation.

3.1 The beginning of the policy in 1949-1978

The evolution of China's childcare services, from the establishment of the PRC to the reform and opening up, has been marked by continuous exploration and development. Initially, it was aimed to change the traditional domestic roles of women, leading to a shift in focus from viewing infant and child care as mere "housework" to recognizing it as a broader public concern and social responsibility.

An in-depth analysis of childcare service policies during this period revealed recurring key terms with high frequency, including enterprises, wages, employees, committees, regulations, and workers, followed by subsidies, regulations, and administration. These findings underscore the pivotal role of enterprises and trade unions in driving the development of childcare services and assuming responsibility for childcare provisions. The state underpinned these organizations to empower women and foster their active engagement in socialist construction. Consequently, childcare services during this era were predominantly characterized by a welfare-oriented approach, emphasizing societal support and collaboration.

In conclusion, the historical evolution of China's childcare services from the founding of the PRC to the reform and opening up reflects a significant transformation from viewing childcare as a domestic responsibility to recognizing it as a vital social concern. The pivotal role of enterprises and trade unions, in collaboration with state support, shaped a welfare-oriented approach to childcare services, aiming to empower women and foster their active engagement in nation-building endeavors.

3.2 1978-2010 Policy extension period

In the dawn of China's reform and opening up in 1978, a significant milestone was established with the adoption of the Decision on the Reform of the Economic System during the Third Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. This marked a transition from a planned economy to a market economy, leading the country into a transformative era of reform and development. During this period, the landscape of infant and child care services underwent a notable shift, evolving from a single-state entity to a diverse and pluralistic structure. State-provided welfare-based childcare services gradually made way for involvement from various social organizations, while policy orientation began to embrace marketization and socialization.

A comprehensive analysis was conducted on policy texts from 1978 to 2010, employing word frequency analysis, keyword screening, and text segmentation. The analysis revealed that certain words, such as health care, institutions, education, development, kindergartens, and management, appeared with the highest frequencies, followed by nurseries, guidance, and departments. These findings indicate that since the reform and opening up, the transformation of childcare policies has been facilitated by the reform of the economic system. The country has actively encouraged diverse childcare services, and infant education has progressively embraced socialization and marketization.

In conclusion, the reform and opening up era in China has played a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of infant and child care services. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy has led to a shift towards pluralistic childcare services, with the government embracing a policy orientation that fosters socialization and market-driven approaches in infant education.

3.3 Policy exploration period from 2010-2018

Since 2010, the challenges in accessing preschool education have gained significant attention from both the Party and the state, exacerbated by the “comprehensive two-child” policy in 2015. China’s large population base, combined with a relatively weak desire for childbirth, have led to a notable disparity between the supply and demand of infant and childcare service. As a result, it has become a prevailing trend to establish a comprehensive childcare service system with diverse providers^[8].

A comprehensive analysis of the policy texts from 2010 to 2018 was conducted to find the words with the highest frequency, using word frequency analysis, keyword screening, and text segmentation. The most frequently mentioned terms included institutions, health, education, and childcare institutions, followed by development, fertility, security, service, management, society, and family planning. These findings indicate that with the implementation of the two-child policy, the government has increasingly emphasized early childhood care services. Early childhood care is undergoing a shift towards marketization and socialization, with the gradual restoration of national responsibility.

In order to further advance the development of infant care services, the government is taking a leading role, while the market and community are actively exploring opportunities within the field of childcare services^[9]. Consequently, an increasing number of childcare institutions and kindergartens have been established, aiming to address the growing demand for quality early childhood care.

3.4 The period of policy systematization in 2018-2022

The year 2019 marked a crucial turning point for China’s childcare service industry, as it presented new opportunities for growth and development. During this period, the State Council consistently released important guidelines and opinions to promote the development of infant care services for children under 3. Additionally, the Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Elderly Care Services from 2019 to 2022 outlined the fundamental principles, development goals, policies, and measures for childcare services in China. These policy initiatives were aligned with the broader direction of educational services.

The word frequency analysis exhibited that terms such as infants and young children, institutions, development, and construction emerged with the highest frequency, followed by terms like health, country, construction, and inclusiveness. The results highlight the central role of service provision within childcare policies. The state issued a series of detailed policies encompassing establishment standards, management norms, childcare guidance outlines, and other aspects related to childcare institutions^[10]. These policies hold immense significance for fostering the healthy development of childcare services.

Overall, the strategic initiatives and policies implemented during this period have opened up new possibilities for the childcare service industry in China, establishing a solid foundation for its growth and emphasizing the vital importance of quality service provision within the sector.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Result

The study's results, as depicted in **Figure 2**, reveal distinct patterns of change in China's infant and child care services across different periods. The semantic network diagram highlights the emerging themes, including institutions, education, children, development, health, construction, health care, and infants and young children. These topics demonstrate the highest frequency of occurrence throughout the analyzed periods. The developmental trajectory encompasses a shift from initial unit nurseries and public educational institutions to the suspension of unit nurseries and public childcare institutions, resulting in a return of infants and young children to their families^[11]. Notably, education emerges as a consistently significant aspect in the evolution of childcare services.

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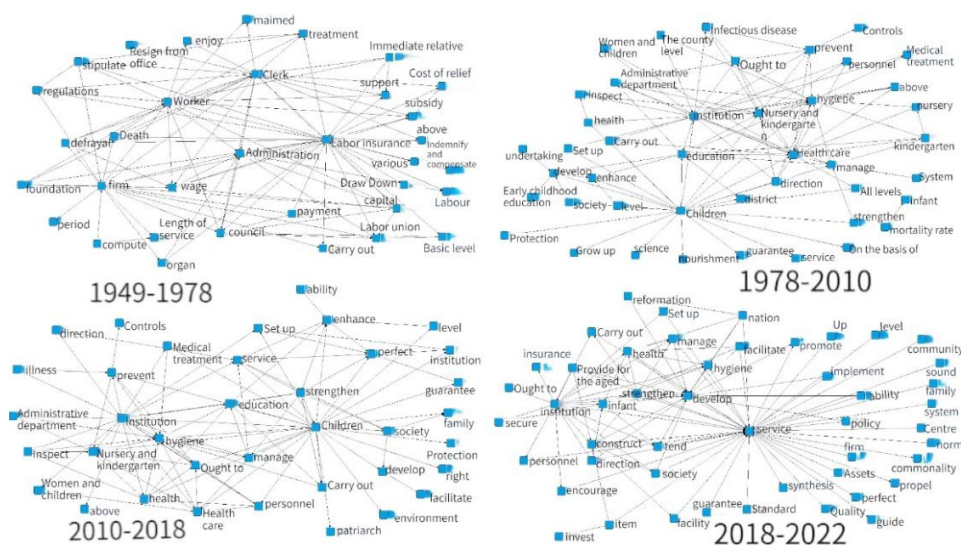


Figure 2 Semantic network diagram of 1949-2022

This paper aims to study the evolution of China's childcare service policies since the founding of the People's Republic of China from historical and institutional perspectives. Employing the historical institutionalism approach, it examines the historical trajectory and characteristics of childcare service policies and investigates the reasons behind policy changes from a structural standpoint. The study uses Python and Rost-cm6 software to investigate four key policy change periods (1949-1978, 1978-2010 policy extension, 2010-2018 policy exploration, and 2018-2022 policy systematization). It quantitatively analyzes policy documents and concludes the patterns of change, thus providing valuable references for future policy formulation and development.

The research finds that enterprises and trade unions play a crucial role in shaping a welfare-oriented approach to childcare services with state support. The concept of welfare here refers to various policies and measures designed to support and safeguard women in childcare and work, including but not limited to parental leave, subsidies, insurance, and childcare services. The overarching goal of these measures is to empower women to effectively balance their work and family responsibilities, thereby encouraging their active engagement in various societal pursuits.

Over the course of the last seven decades, the Chinese government has demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting and developing childcare services through various initiatives, including parental leave, childcare services, and welfare policies. These efforts have had a significant and positive impact on both parents and children, bolstering support and security within families. China's achievements in childcare service policies are noteworthy, as they contribute to empowering women's active engagement in society, fostering children's healthy growth, and creating better living conditions for families. These accomplishments in childcare service policies in China deserve recognition and commendation.

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