


Policywashing: Recontextualizing the “Craftsmanship Spirit” policy in corporate Weibo discourse

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ABSTRACT

While existing research has extensively explored corporate communications on social media, limited attention has been paid to how Chinese corporations leverage government policies to manage corporate reputation and foster government-enterprise relationships. This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of “policywashing”, defined as the strategic reconstruction and mediation of state policies in corporate discourse. Drawing on framing theory and recontextualization, we analyze 170 Weibo posts from Chinese corporations to examine how they recontextualize the government-promoted “craftsmanship spirit” policy. Findings reveal that corporations repurpose this policy through four interrelated frames: product excellence, policy endorsement, employee excellence and audience engagement. These frames highlight tensions between corporate consumerism and corporate commitment to government policies. More critically, such repurposing risks distorting policy intent, thereby giving rise to the phenomenon of policywashing. This study contributes to understanding how corporations strategically appropriate state discourse for brand management, with implications for policy implementation and corporate accountability.

1. Introduction

As competition grows increasingly fierce, corporations face a dual challenge in managing their reputation: first, they must prove the quality and practicality of their products; second, they need to demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and political missions (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021). Chinese corporations often address this challenge by forging a symbiotic relationship with the state, aligning themselves with state-endorsed frameworks to win government and public trust (Zhao and Belk, 2008; Tilt, 2018). Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the government has tightened its economic oversight, rigorously monitoring corporate activities and market conduct to protect national economic interests and sustain market stability (Tse and Li, 2023). Concurrently, the government has increasingly encouraged corporations to integrate political agendas into their corporate cultures, ensuring that businesses not only adhere to economic norms but also harmonize their values and practices with the nation’s broader political goals (Hawes and Chew, 2011; Xu et al., 2025). These practices have strengthened the relationship between corporations and the government, which in turn enables businesses to fulfill both their commercial objectives and civic

responsibilities. As a result, they increasingly incorporate state-championed narratives into corporate discourse, even without legal obligation for them to do so (Tse and Li, 2023). Yet such practices usually reflect only superficial alignment with the government agendas. For example, the government’s “craftsmanship spirit” (“工匠精神/gongjiang jingshen” in Chinese) policy is often repurposed in corporate discourses to promote product quality and brand image. We call this phenomenon “policywashing”, akin to the prevalent practices of “greenwashing”, “pinkwashing” and “sportswashing” (Skey, 2023). This study aims to deconstruct this phenomenon by drawing on Goffman’s (1986[1974]) framing theory and Van Leeuwen’s (2008) recontextualization framework, focusing on how corporations reconstruct government policies in their corporate Weibo discourse.

To this end, this study first develops a theoretical framework for the concept of policywashing and links it to Van Leeuwen’s (2008) theory of recontextualization, followed by a concise review of existing literature on corporate Weibo discourse. Subsequently, it elaborates on the methodologies employed for data collection and analysis. The core section, grounded in Goffman’s (1986[1974]) framing theory, examines how corporations recontextualize the “craftsmanship spirit” policy within their corporate Weibo discourse. Finally, the study discusses the

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underlying causes and potential implications of policywashing practices in corporate communication.

2. Policywashing and recontextualization

By “policywashing”, we refer to the strategic recontextualization of government policies in corporate communication, where corporations discursively co-opt the policies to advance their commercial interests. Consider Post 1 as an example: at the time of its publication, the term “craftsmanship spirit” had already been integrated into China’s Government Work Report (hereafter referred to as CGWR) as a key policy statement. However, this post extracts the policy concept from its original governmental context and instead associates it with the quality of Geonly’s products, thereby recontextualizing it into a commercial promotion. Consequently, the original meaning of the policy is diluted and repurposed for corporate commercial gain.

Post 1.



Trans. GEONLY: #Health is Priceless# Integrating decades of craftsmanship spirit, GEONLY meticulously creates every healthy product. Through perseverant quality research and development, #GEONLY# the new mysterious health product is freshly unveiled, opening up a beautiful new realm for you who pursue beauty. You are precious, ONLY FOR YOU~

Policywashing parallels “greenwashing”, “pinkwashing”, or “sports-washing” in that all of them share the lexeme “washing” or part of “whitewashing”, which connotes cleansing something undesirable (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Skey, 2023; Lubitow and Davis, 2011). Greenwashing is a dishonest marketing tactic where companies or groups falsely portray themselves as eco-friendly or sustainable to boost their image, often without taking real steps to protect the environment. It involves making misleading or exaggerated claims about the environmental benefits of their products, services, or actions. By doing so, they appeal to environmentally conscious consumers while hiding harmful or unsustainable practices (Jones, 2019; Xia et al., 2023). Pinkwashing describes marketing or political tactics that pretend to support LGBTQ + rights for a progressive image, while ignoring or distracting from real issues like discrimination, human rights abuses, or double standards (Lubitow and Davis, 2011; Schulman, 2011). Whereas, sportswashing is the act of enhancing the reputation of a nation or institutions by leveraging sports events, teams, or organizations. This is frequently done to divert attention away from issues like human rights abuses, environmental harm, or other controversies. Practices in sportswashing include funding sports facilities, sponsoring events, or buying sports teams to cultivate a favorable public perception and shift focus from detrimental activities (Skey, 2023). Policywashing shares core traits with these “washing” practices such as using selective positive narratives to hide deeper flaws, shifting public focus from critical issues and exploiting cultural or ideological symbols to manipulate perceptions (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Skey, 2023; Lubitow and Davis, 2011).

However, policywashing has its unique characteristics. Unlike the

other three, policywashing takes advantage of government-endorsed language, policy frameworks, or political symbols. For example, Chinese corporations commonly align their marketing promotion with national policy slogans (e.g., “poverty alleviation”, “rural revitalization” or “Belt and Road Initiative”) and frame themselves as “policy-compliant” actors (Xu et al., 2025; Chang et al., 2021), even if their practices contradict the policy’s spirit. This tactic ties explicitly the organization to state-backed legitimacy, making its claims harder to be challenged publicly. Consequently, policywashing often blurs the line between public policy goals and private corporate interests, creating the illusion that the organization’s profit-driven actions are inherently “public-spirited”. Another distinctive feature resides in the discursive operation of policywashing. Green-, pink- or sports-washing relies heavily on concealing, denying or diverting attention from problematic practices (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Skey, 2023; Lubitow and Davis, 2011). However, policywashing adopts more nuanced and covert tactics such as reappropriating and reframing political statements or narratives, often

at the expense of distorting the original meaning of the policies.

Policywashing can be understood as a particular type of recontextualization, where certain elements (or the entirety) of policies are stripped of their original context and then repurposed to align with the meanings or values in a different context. Bernstein (2003) introduced the term of recontextualization, which he characterizes as the process wherein educational outcomes are detached from their original context and then reapplied in new settings across various pedagogical practices. Van Leeuwen (2008; 1993) extends this idea beyond education, applying it to all forms of discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Wu et al., 2016; Gruber et al., 2023). Central to Van Leeuwen’s (2008) argument is the notion that discourse does not mirror reality impartially; instead, it re-casts social practices through an ideological lens. The very moment a practice is spoken or written about, it undergoes a transformation, which he refers to as recontextualization.

Van Leeuwen (2008) outlines four types of transformation: selection, modification, deletion and addition. Selection involves incorporating specific elements of a social practice into a new context. Modification involves adjusting these elements to align with the new context, while addition refers to introducing entirely new components into the discourse. Deletion, conversely, involves omitting certain elements from the original practice. These transformations are not random; they are ideologically motivated, often functioning to legitimize or reinforce particular viewpoints while sidelining others (Andersson, 2019; Feng, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2008).

Following the theory of systemic-functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004), Van Leeuwen (2008) proposes a series of systematic tools for analyzing recontextualization. The first set of tools is centered

on the representation of social actors. It delves into questions including: Who is included or excluded from the narrative? How are the participants categorized? Are they portrayed as active agents or passive recipients, as specific individuals or generic entities and as singular persons or collective groups? The second set focuses on social actions, distinguishing between material processes (what people actually do) and semiotic processes (what they communicate through speech, writing, or symbols). It evaluates whether actions are framed as narrative sequences or abstracted concepts, whether agents are identified, and whether they are tied to specific contexts or stripped of spatio-temporal markers. A third cluster addresses circumstantial elements. It examines how time and place are rendered vague, idealized, condensed, or stretched. Additionally, it looks at whether participants are emphasized or downplayed, and whether goals and outcomes are explicitly stated or left to the reader's interpretation. The fourth dimension explores legitimization strategies. These strategies provide a framework for understanding how recontextualized practices are made to appear acceptable. This includes appeals to authority, moral evaluations, rational arguments, or the creation of narrative myths that lend credibility to the practices in question. The final dimension considers the purpose behind recontextualization. It investigates what underlying or overt aim is assigned to the practice and whose interests are served by this assignment.

These tools enable researchers to trace how texts or multimodal artifacts recontextualize social practices, thereby shedding light on the dynamic interplay among language, power and social reality. Notably, these tools are equally effective for detecting policywashing. Van Leeuwen (2008) argues that recontextualization is inherently political, as it functions to legitimize the interests of the dominant. This is precisely the aim of policywashing. By recontextualizing policies, it makes corporate words and actions appear legitimate, rational and publicly acceptable.

3. Corporate Weibo discourse

Sina Weibo (or Weibo for short), China's leading microblogging platform, functions as a critical hub for corporations to promote products, manage crises and cultivate brand identity. Weibo blends Twitter-style broadcasting with Facebook-like commenting, resulting in a unique platform for short, searchable posts (Zhu, 2016). Since China Unicom launched the first corporate account on Weibo in August 2010, monthly corporate posts on the platform have exceeded 20 million, solidifying Weibo's position as one of China's most influential platforms for corporate communication.

Weibo's technological affordances are essential for effective corporate communication on the platform. Unlike Twitter (now "X"), Weibo allows users to add comments when reposting content (Yang, 2012), which helps foster wider user interactions. Weibo also enables users to track and monitor their own activities through metrics such as engagement rates, reposts, comments and other relevant indicators (Yun et al., 2021). Since its technological features strongly support community development, Weibo has been widely adopted by corporations as a key platform for communication and user engagement. Furthermore, Weibo's real-time curation of trending topics enables users to engage in widely discussed subjects (Sun et al., 2022). For instance, high-profile government conferences and policy announcements frequently surge as trending topics on Weibo and tend to remain active for an extended period (Liu et al., 2025), thus providing corporations with chances to forge stronger connections with the government by keeping abreast of its latest policies (Riemer and Richter, 2010; Sun et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021).

Weibo is commonly utilized as a platform to showcase and promote corporate social responsibility (CSR). According to Wang (2024), corporations with high pandemic relevance (e.g., pharmaceuticals, logistics) can significantly increase reposts, whereas low-fit companies experienced a reduction in reposts when sharing pandemic-related content. However, CSR information can boost likes across both types of companies, and greater interactivity can positively impact reposts and likes. Additionally, Ma et al. (2025) note that during disasters, corporations can strengthen community resilience by disseminating Weibo messages that emphasize shared responsibility and collective action. Such messaging resonates with the public, motivates active support, cultivates *communitas* and shares narratives critical for recovery.

Furthermore, corporations frequently deploy Weibo to strengthen both their market presence and political engagement. For the former, it acts as a dynamic platform for brand-consumer interaction. Wu and her colleagues identify three emotional-branding personas (pragmatist, evangelist, sensualist) on both Twitter and Weibo, noting that companies use similar politeness tactics and relational rituals to connect with consumers (Wu and Feng, 2015; Wu and Li, 2018). Politically, Weibo serves as a key space for discourses on social issues, public policies and civic participation (Feng and Wu, 2018; Gleiss, 2015; Han, 2018; Jin and Tay, 2025). Corporations take advantage of this platform to promote commercial agendas by discussing policies and circulating political directives (Han, 2019). This dual role cements Weibo's status as a multifaceted platform bridging commercial interaction and civic participation.

In the following sections, we will examine how corporations draw on their Weibo accounts to recast the "craftsmanship spirit" policy for their Weibo audiences, turning a top-down policy into brand talk that satisfy both governmental expectations and market demands.

4. Data and Method

The term "craftsmanship spirit" is not a recent invention. As early as the Tang Dynasty, the poet Zhang Hu had already used the term "jiangxin" (匠心) to describe the innovative thinking and dedicated focus evident in literary, artistic and technical pursuits,¹ a concept akin to the "craftsmanship spirit". However, "craftsmanship spirit" only gained widespread recognition in 2016, when it was referenced in China's Government Work Report (CGWR). Since then, the term has gained increasing prominence, particularly after being repeatedly highlighted in the 2017, 2018 and 2021 CGWR, effectively initiating a nationwide "craftsmanship spirit" campaign in China. Taking it as the core essence of this policy, the CGWR repeatedly emphasizes the importance of cultivating the craftsmanship spirit and calls on all entities, enterprises and citizens to foster a culture of professionalism by adhering to professional ethical standards. Its goals include nurturing skilled "Chinese Craftsmen", building globally recognized brands and driving China's economic transition toward quality-oriented growth. To achieve these goals, the initiative calls for comprehensive quality improvements, alignment with international standards and a revolution in manufacturing precision. Key actions involve strengthening quality infrastructure, refining standard systems, ensuring cross-industry consistency and elevating Chinese manufacturing through meticulous execution.

As a result, a nationwide campaign to pursue and practice the craftsmanship spirit has emerged across all sectors in China, encouraging governments, enterprises, schools, organizations, officials, professionals, ordinary workers and students to embrace and embody craftsmanship values. Corporations capitalize on this momentum, repackaging policy messages into catchy slogans or favorable narratives for their Weibo posts so as to strengthen their market influence while

¹ Zhang Hu mentioned "匠心" in his poem *Two Poems Inscribed on Wang Wei's Landscape Screen*.

Table 1
Metrics of the posts containing “craftsmanship spirit”.

Year	Posts	Retweets	Comments	Likes
2016	57	5,480	1,889	2,777
2017	35	1,742	790	838
2018	34	2,674	2,123	1,994
2021	44	8,210	6,562	17,216
Total	170	18,106	11,364	22,825

Table 2
Frequency of frames in corporate Weibo posts (Total posts: 170).

Frame type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Product excellence	82	45.1
Policy endorsement	29	15.9
Employee excellence	25	13.7
Audience engagement	22	12.1
Others	24	13.2
Total	182	100

fostering closer ties with the government, so much so that it forms into a trendy phenomenon of “policywashing”.

We collected the Weibo posts related to this policy using Python and Selenium-based web crawling frameworks. The collected posts were published by V-certified² corporate accounts and contained the phrase “工匠精神” (i.e., “craftsmanship spirit”), with publication dates ranging from March to May in the years 2016–2018 and 2021. These time-frames were selected because they contained the highest concentration of corporate posts related to the “craftsmanship spirit” policy, as the platform’s algorithm incentivizes corporate accounts to chase trending topics by amplifying content aligned with the latest policy agendas (Xu et al., 2025).

All the information obtained from the collected posts was stored in the local MySQL database, including the username of the poster, the posting time, the link and the counts of comments, likes and reposts. Next, we filtered out posts that only mentioned the “craftsmanship spirit” in passing (e.g., appearing solely in post-titles without substantive discussion) or had minimal audience engagement (i.e., posts with no more than 3 reposts or replies). This filtering process resulted in a final dataset consisting of 170 posts, with a total of 21,008 Chinese characters (see Table 1).

Based on Van Leeuwen’s (2008) recontextualization framework, we analyzed all the selected Weibo posts, focusing on whether and how social actors, social actions and spatio-temporal elements were recontextualized when the “craftsmanship spirit” policy was re-framed into the posts. If such recontextualization occurred, we further examined whether it was justified or legitimized, and for what purposes. Finally, we categorized the analyzed results into different types based on Goffman’s (Goffman, 1986) concept of “frame”.

5. Results

Goffman defines a “frame” as a mental structure that organizes social experiences, enabling individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” experiences, behaviors and situations (Goffman, 1986). Frames function as schemata of interpretation, allowing individuals to classify events and determine appropriate roles or responses. Goffman differentiates between primary frames (i.e., basic interpretations such as

² Weibo’s platform authentication system, which publicly designates officially verified organizational accounts with a blue ‘V’ badge, facilitates clear and efficient differentiation between verified and non-verified accounts.

“work” or “disaster”) and transformed frames, where existing frameworks are altered. Importantly, frames are not fixed; they can be contested or negotiated. A misalignment in framing leads to misunderstanding. For example, one person treats a situation as humorous while another perceives it as hostile.

Drawing on this concept, we identified from the collected data a total of 182 instances of frames that were used to reshape the “craftsmanship spirit” policy.³ Four main types of frames emerged as dominant: product excellence (82 cases, 45.1 %), policy endorsement (29 cases, 15.9 %), employee excellence (25 cases, 13.7 %) and audience engagement (22 cases, 12.1 %). The remaining 24 cases cover diverse frames, including environmental protection, health care and daily life sharing, but none are statistically significant (see Table 2).

5.1. Product excellence

The “product excellence” frame operates by incorporating the policy-endorsed concepts such as “craftsmanship spirit” into corporate discourse to highlight goods’ or services’ excellence in quality. As the most frequently recurring frame (82 posts, 45.1 %), it employs the strategies of addition and contrasting to position the craftsmanship spirit as a defining attribute of the product.

Addition involves incorporating the policy-derived craftsmanship spirit into a product’s attributes to ensure the product’s quality. In Post 1, the phrase “craftsmanship spirit” is seamlessly integrated into the text and is framed as an inherent trait of the company’s production of “GEONLY”. This is legitimized by appealing to impersonal authorities like “quality research and development” along with moral-rational evaluations (e.g., “healthy”, “meticulous”, “precious”, “a beautiful new realm”)(Van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008). Such legitimation often omits concrete details and fails to specify, for instance, how the craftsmanship spirit is embedded in product development workflows, or what measurable outcomes would result from its application. This generalized representation enables corporations to loosely affiliate with the “craftsmanship spirit” without substantial justification (Chen, 2016). Another “addition” strategy involves framing the craftsmanship spirit as an inherent corporate trait by anchoring it in historical continuity. This approach redefines time as a “subjective experience” of duration rather than objective “clock time” (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 81). As seen in Posts 1–2, product excellence is described as the outcome of the corporation’s long-term commitment, as shown through phrases like “decades of craftsmanship”, “perseverant quality research and development” and “persistently passed down”, thus positioning the spirit as a timeless value. This constitutes a form of policywashing, as it distorts the governmental requirements, transforming the government’s call for change to being content with the corporate status quo.

Another strategy, contrasting, concerns using the policy-derived craftsmanship spirit as a distinctive attribute of the product to differentiate a corporation from its competitors. With this frame, corporations portray themselves as social actors embodying the craftsmanship spirit, while characterizing their competitors as lacking such values (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). They extract the term “craftsmanship spirit” from the policy document and rebrand it as a component of their corporate identity, foregrounding themselves as exemplary practitioners of this spirit. This is often realized in terms of nomination (Van Leeuwen, 2008). As we can see from Post 1, the company user foregrounds its product by repetitively mentioning and even hashtagging its brand name (i.e., “GEONLY” and #GEONLY#). In contrast, when competitors are mentioned, they are often referenced with a generic, categorical label, such as “people” and “consumers” in Post 2.

³ Given that individual posts could contain multiple frames, a total of 182 frames were identified across the dataset.

Post 2.

Source



Trans. Kia: #The Forgotten Spirit of Craftsmanship Has Persistently Passed Down Here# With the changing times, the spirit of craftsmanship has gradually been forgotten by people. However, Dongfeng Yueta Kia has never forgotten it, implementing the spirit of craftsmanship, striving for excellence, and dedicating itself to creating outstanding driving products for consumers, earning recognition from the German media "Auto Bild".

This strategy is often justified through appeals to pathos (Higgins and Walker, 2012), a common promotional tactic used to highlight products as unique and excellent (Cook, 2001). For instance, Post 2 adopts a problem–solution structure (Feng and Wignell, 2011), of which the problem is framed as “others’ lacking the craftsmanship spirit and the promoted brand, Kia, is cast as the heroic entity that “solves” this deficiency. Specifically, it characterizes Kia as a hero “having persistently passed down” this spirit, thereby positioning the company as the solution to the problem (Rambaree, 2021). To reinforce this narrative, the post employs the emotionally resonant phrase “never forgotten” to foreground the contrast between Kia’s proactive promotion of craftsmanship and its competitors’ inaction.

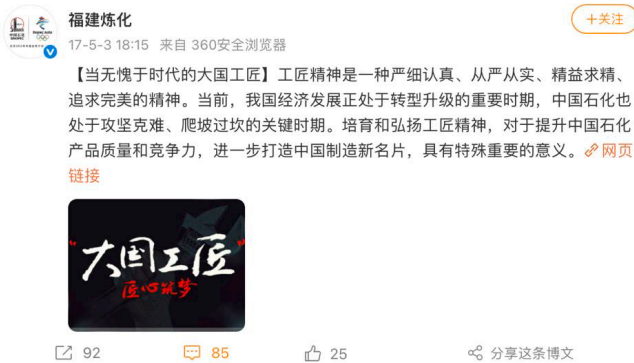
5.2. Policy endorsement

By policy endorsement we mean corporations selectively articulate policy-related issues to align their organizational interests with the

discourses, corporations are not explicitly portrayed as the agents or doers of a process. Instead, they are implicitly framed as recipients of policy directives. This stands in sharp contrast to the other three frames, where the corporate “agent” role is emphasized. For instance, though tied to a company, Post 3 emphasizes broader national themes and roles, rather than the corporation’s stories, by using terms like “China” and “country”. The post centers on state-prioritized messages extracted from the “craftsmanship spirit” policy, such as “the craftsmanship spirit embodies meticulousness, strictness, and excellence”. These messages are integrated with the term “大国工匠” (“national-level master artisans”) and an image featuring identical textual content placed below the verbal text. These messages derive their legitimacy by appealing to rationality (Van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008), which stems from discussions of solutions to challenges faced by both the nation and the corporation, such as upgrading manufacturing processes, overcoming obstacles, enhancing international competitiveness and improving the national image.

Post 3.

Source



Trans. Fujian Refining & Chemical Company: 【Worthy Craftsmen of the Era】 The craftsmanship spirit is a spirit of meticulousness, strictness, excellence and the pursuit of perfection. Currently, our country’s economic development is in an important period of transformation and upgrading. China Petrochemical Corporation is also in a critical period of overcoming difficulties and challenges. Nurturing and promoting the craftsmanship spirit is of special significance for enhancing the quality and competitiveness of China Petrochemical Corporation’s products and further creating a new calling card for Chinese manufacturing.

policy. This frame ranks second (29 cases, 15.9 %) in the dataset. Within this frame, the nation (such as “China”) is often constructed as the primary actor of social practices such as issuing policies. In these

Posts with this frame often incorporate direct quotations accompanied by positive comments. For instance, Post 4 includes selected excerpts from the CGWR that emphasizes the craftsmanship spirit. The post starts

with a direct quotation from the 2016 CGWR, explicitly designating “enterprises” as the primary implementers of the government-mandated craftsmanship spirit. However, in its subsequent comments, the post expands the scope of the intended social actor by contending that everyone has the potential to embody the craftsmanship spirit. This argument is further bolstered by the messages conveyed through images, which suggest that this spirit can be practiced by individuals from all walks of life. As a result, the craftsmanship spirit is effectively transformed from a specialized professional trait into a characteristic that can be embraced by everyone. This rhetoric, moving from emphasizing corporate adherence to evoking a broader civic responsibility, shifts the narrative from a narrow corporate perspective to a broader politically charged appeal for collective action (Johnston, 2008).

Post 4.

third in the dataset, with 25 instances accounting for 13.7 percent. It is often represented through storytelling, with which corporate users transform the officially endorsed “craftsmanship spirit” into narratives about “exemplary” employees.

This transformation takes place in several stages. Initially, it involves translating the “craftsmanship spirit” policy into relatable values. These include qualities like perseverance in quality research and development (Post 1) and relentless pursuit of excellence (Post 3). Organizations then distill these values into actionable behaviors, such as meticulous attention to detail (Posts 1 and 7) and a long-term commitment to tradition or craftsmanship (Posts 1, 2 and 4). Then, the policy is anchored in stories of employees whose behaviors embody these values. For example, Post 5 shows that the train cargo handler, Meng Xianzhong, has perfected the railway cargo handling and loading process; Post 6 shows that the railway maintenance worker, Xie Xiaohua, has tirelessly safeguarded the

Source



Trans. Taikang Insurance Group: 【“The Craftsmanship Spirit” is included into the Government Work Report】 “Encourage enterprises to carry out personalized customization, flexible production, cultivate the spirit of excellence, increase varieties, improve quality and create brands”. Pursuing excellence, focusing on details and seeking ultimate perfection, the “Craftsmanship Spirit” represents the simple spirit of the times. Not everyone needs to become a craftsman, but everyone can become a practitioner of the “Craftsmanship Spirit”. Focus on the task at hand and adhere to doing the right thing. Time will be the answer! @People’s Dayly

In general, social actions within this frame are likely depicted in an abstract and broad manner, indicating that corporate engagement with government policies tends to remain at a superficial level. The reliance on vague rhetoric, such as “pursue excellence” and “seek perfection”, reflects a deliberate avoidance of providing actionable specifics, such as outlining methods to improve product quality. This practice resonates with Ledin and Machin’s critique that “brands do not actually articulate the details of the socio-political issues alongside which they align” (Ledin and Machin, 2020). Of course, such generalization may also result from Weibo’s piecemeal mode of information dissemination (Jiang et al., 2016).

5.3. Employee excellence

The “employee excellence” frame centers on the cultivation and celebration of outstanding employee performance. This frame ranks

railway tunnels and bridges for 21 years. These employees become “exemplars” not just for what they have achieved, but for how their stories make the abstract “craftsmanship spirit” appear real and aspirational.

Several strategies stand out distinct in storytelling. First, “exemplary” employees are identified through specific “nomination” (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 40). Posts with this frame often identify the employees with detailed credentials, including their names, professions, titles, and organizations (Feng, 2022; Gao et al., 2025). Examples include: “Meng Xianzhong, head of cargo loading at the Ulanhot Business Office of Baicheng Freight Center” (Post 5) and “Xie Xiaohua, chief of bridge and tunnel workers at the Wujiang Bridge and Road Inspection Area of the Zunyi Bridge and Road Workshop, Guiyang Section” (Post 6). Such identification not only positions employees as exemplars but, more importantly, emphasizes that their excellence reflects the spirit of their corporations.

Post 5.

Source  **沈阳铁路** +关注
 18-3-26 13:40 来自 360安全浏览器
 #匠心铸就安全魂#孟宪忠, 白城货运中心乌兰浩特营业室货装工长。1979年参加工作, 凭着“珍惜岗位, 尽心履职”的信念和精益求精的工匠精神, 成为单位安全生产的标杆。

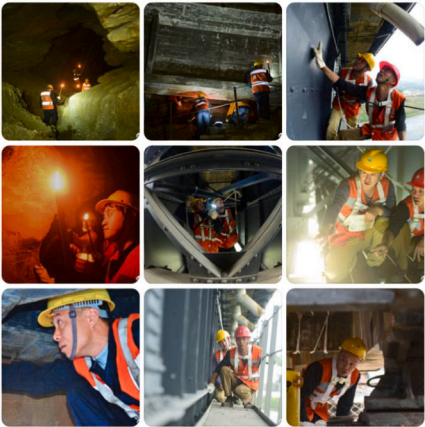


🔖 35 💬 10 👍 14 🔗 分享这条博文

Trans. Shenyang Railway: #Craftsmanship Shapes the Soul of Safety# Meng Xianzhong, head of cargo loading at the Ulanhot Business Office of Baicheng Freight Center. He joined the workforce since 1979. With the belief of “cherishing the position and fulfilling duties” and a spirit of craftsmanship that strives for perfection, he has become a benchmark for safety production in his unit.

Post 6.

Source  **西南铁路** +关注
 17-3-27 15:39 来自 微博 weibo.com
 #成铁一线# 【二十年的工匠精神——谢小华】谢小华, 中共党员, 是贵阳工务段遵义桥路车间乌江桥路检查工区桥隧工长。1988年参加工作, 与乌江大桥相依相守20载, 他与他的“乌江奇兵”共同肩负18座桥梁、27座隧道、105座涵洞等桥路设备的检查养护任务——21年, 没有丰功, 唯有乌江河边的默默坚守; 21年, 没有伟绩, 唯有乌江桥畔的勇敢担当; 21年, 他把班组当成了自己的家, 奔波在管内42公里线路上。



🔖 48 💬 7 👍 7 🔗 分享这条博文

Trans. Southwest Railway: #Chengdu Railway Frontline# [Twenty Years of Craftsmanship Spirit: Xie Xiaohua] Xie Xiaohua, a member of the Communist Party of China, is the head of bridge and tunnel workers at the Wujiang Bridge and Road Inspection Area of the Zunyi Bridge and Road Workshop, Guiyang Section. He started working in 1988... For 21 years, there have been no grand achievements, only silent dedication by the Wujiang River; for 21 years, there have been no great feats, only brave responsibility by the Wujiang Bridge. For 21 years, he has treated his team as his family, tirelessly working along the 42-kilometer line under his care. During the Spring Festival travel rush, as the team leader, Xie Xiaohua leads his colleagues to fight freezing conditions, combat snow disasters and clear landslides and falling rocks, wholeheartedly and loyally ensuring the punctuality and safety of every train!

The exemplars’ embodiment and practice of the craftsmanship spirit are often legitimated with emotional narratives (Higgins and Walker, 2012). Post 6, for example, repeatedly uses the sentence pattern “For 21 years, there’s nothing but...” to juxtapose the harsh natural conditions with the employee’s unwavering commitment and moral qualities such as bravery, responsibility and self-dedication. This practice not only evokes emotion from the audience but also portrays employees as qualified

exemplars of the craftsmanship spirit.

Furthermore, the narrative tends to emphasize the time span over which the craftsmanship spirit is practiced by repeatedly referencing extended time frames (Van Leeuwen, 2008), such as “21 years” mentioned in Post 6 and “since 1979” in Post 5. Such temporal framing provides concrete evidence regarding the exemplars’ sustained practice of the craftsmanship spirit. This, in turn, further underscores the point

that they are representatives of the corporation embodying this spirit, thereby acting as symbols that enhance the corporation's reputation (Skey, 2023).

5.4. Audience engagement

The “audience engagement” frame concerns how corporations

The phrase “boys and girls” can foster a close communal affiliation (Mukenge and Chimbarange, 2012; Gumperz, 1982), while “you” may create an illusion of intimacy between corporations and their audiences.

Post 7.



Trans. TV Fruit: The #CarveYourTVFruit# challenge begins now, celebrating the spirit of craftsmanship! The big boss of Xiaoguo Vision calls on the spirit of craftsmanship every day! Boys and girls, hurry up and take action! Starting today, hold your small knives, cut “TV fruit” (as shown in the picture) and tag @Xiaoguo Vision. Xiaoguo will gift a second-generation Apple TV to the top 10 fans with “craftsman-spirit”.

exploit public policies to attract the audience. Though it ranks lower than other frames (only 22 cases, 12.1 %), audience engagement is regarded as an obligatory move in marketing discourse (Chen et al., 2023; Bhatia, 2013). It fosters a sense of alignment between the audience and the promoted products/services and it is mainly achieved through the tactics of command and gamification.

Command is usually realized with imperatives having the illocutionary force of demanding or inviting the audience (Searle, 1976). In such clauses, corporations are framed as the agent guiding audiences to embrace or exercise the craftsmanship spirit. Post 7 uses action-oriented expressions such as “hurry up and take action” (快行动起来) and “take you to experience” (带你体会). These directives convey a sense of audience interaction, which is further strengthened by the use of second-person pronouns (“you”) and informal terms such as “boys and girls”.

Gamification means incorporating game design elements and principles into non-game contexts to enhance audience engagement, motivation and participation. With gamification, corporate Weibo discourse can incorporate game-like elements and policy-designated information into the product discourse to render it simultaneously policy-oriented, entertaining and engaging. Post 7 repurposes the craftsmanship spirit as a promotional appeal: fans who slice the most “TV fruits” are recognized as embodying the “craftsman-spirit” and are rewarded with an Apple TV. By transforming the collective political aim of enhancing the product quality (i.e., the craftsmanship spirit policy) into an individualized game-like contest, serious political ideologies are rendered amusing and engaging, thereby ingeniously promoting the audience’s participation enthusiasm and consumption desire.

Post 8.



Trans. IT168: On March 29th at 14:30 in the afternoon, come to IT168 to watch the Xiaomi Spring Communication Meeting live updates @Xiaomi Company and explore the path of new domestic products @Xiaomi New Domestic Products! Take you to experience the “the spirit of craftsmanship” ~ At the same time, the official Weibo of 168 and the 168 Salon Group will simultaneously hold a lucky draw event. Witness #Xiaomi New Domestic Products # on March 29th. Repost this Weibo; random lucky fans will receive mystery new products, Xiaomi sockets and Xiaomi internet radios!

However, even within this framework, the audience is usually positioned as merely passive recipients rather than active participants. As observed, nearly all frames portray corporations as proactive agents responsible for “embodying”, “practicing” and “publicizing” the craftsmanship spirit (see Posts 1–8). In contrast, audiences have been portrayed as passive recipients, merely called upon to “experience” this spirit. This imbalance creates a power dynamic where corporations take concrete actions, while audiences passively “watch” or “experience” the corporations’ “stories”. Consequently, they are excluded from the recast “craftsmanship spirit” frames, granted only “limited power as individual consumers, rather than as political actors connected to a broader collective” (Jones, 2019: 3).

6. Discussions

We discussed four primary discursive frames that characterize the recontextualization, or specifically the policywashing, of China’s “craftsmanship spirit” policy in corporate Weibo discourse. The first frame is “product excellence”, through which corporations deploy the craftsmanship spirit as a benchmark of technical superiority to foreground their products. This rhetoric is primarily constructed by associating craftsmanship-related positive qualities with both the product and its corporate identity, while contrasting its own excellence against competitors lacking such a spirit. By directly linking craftsmanship spirit to tangible products, this frame caters to consumers’ desires for quality and exclusivity. The second frame, “policy endorsement”, constructs the nation as the central actor in social practices while minimizing corporate visibility, a distinct contrast to other frames that foreground corporate roles. This emphasis on national agency serves to align corporate messaging closely with state-endorsed narratives. However, a critical hallmark of this frame lies in its frequent reliance on abstract and vague depiction of social actions, which suggests that such policy endorsement just amounts to superficial engagement with government policies rather than substantive commitment. The third frame, “employee excellence”, uses storytelling to convert the officially recognized “craftsmanship spirit” into stories about “exemplary” employees embodying this spirit. It follows a four-step trajectory: turning policy into relatable values, refining these values into actionable behaviors, embedding the policy in employee narratives, and weaving these narratives into engaging stories. By doing so, corporations package themselves as proactive advocates of this ethos. The final frame, “audience engagement”, exploits government policies to attract the public and motivate audience participation. It is achieved mainly through strategies like command and gamification. However, most frames position audiences as just passive consumers rather than active practitioners of the craftsmanship spirit, thus making the repurposed “craftsmanship spirit” diverge from the original intent of the policy.

This study advances research on government-enterprise relationships by uncovering the phenomenon of policywashing that prevails in corporate Weibo discourse. The analysis showed that corporate Weibo posts make full use of the “craftsmanship spirit” policy, primarily treating it as a promotional tool. Of the 182 frames analyzed, 129 (70.9 %) adopt promotion-oriented frames, such as “employee excellence” and “audience engagement”. In contrast, only 29 (15.9 %) employ the “policy endorsement” frame, which prioritizes political alignment over commercial interest. These results indicate that corporations tend to reframe political agendas and public policies as tools to enhance their brand image and consumer engagement. This aligns with Cook’s (2001) observation that market strategies often exploit policy rhetoric for commercial gain. In our data, the “craftsmanship spirit” policy has been repurposed as a neoliberal corporate discourse that integrates state political discourse into a competitive, efficiency-driven market framework (Krzyżanowski, 2016; Fairclough, 1993). Within this framework, corporations regard the craftsmanship spirit not as a symbol of national pride, as articulated in the CGWRs, but as an instrument to bolster corporate reputation and secure a competitive edge. Consequently, this

type of corporate discourse does not fundamentally differ from neoliberal marketing rhetoric that focuses on reputation enhancement (Chen and Eriksson, 2019; Cook, 2001). It falls short of fostering substantive changes that align with public policies, thus devolving into a phenomenon of “policywashing”.

Critics may argue that policywashing offers no novelty compared to established “washing” practices such as greenwashing, sportswashing, and pinkwashing. Yet, policywashing differs distinctly from other “washings” in that it is intrinsically associated with governmental discourses, as discussed in Section 2. More importantly, policywashing poses distinct potential risks that necessitate our attention and vigilance. First, by framing corporate engagement in public policies as superficial adherence rather than an authentic commitment to state mandates, policywashing risks undermining a sound corporation-state relationship (Rambaree, 2021). For instance, within the “product excellence” and “employee excellence” frames, corporations frequently exploit the “craftsmanship spirit” as a commitment to align with policy; however, this commitment is merely symbolic, as its ultimate purpose is to promote their products and enhance corporate reputation. Such practices may inadvertently distort the intent of government policies, leading to a mismatch between actual policy goals and corporate practices and thereby widening the gap between corporate communication and policy execution.

Additionally, policywashing risks eroding transparency and accountability in corporate communications. It involves corporations’ non-substantive implementation or superficial discussion of policy directives. Rather than engaging deeply with policy intent, policywashing often resorts to simplistic endorsements of policy rhetoric, often reducing policies to mere slogans or beautiful wording (Ledin and Machin, 2020), as exemplified in the “policy endorsement” frame. By selectively emphasizing certain policy aspects while downplaying others, corporations may create an incomplete or misleading picture of their policy compliance and implementation efforts. This lack of clarity can further complicate government oversight and evaluation of policy effectiveness, resulting in ineffective policy outcomes. If corporations fail to genuinely align with policy directives, the intended benefits of the policy will not be fully realized, thus leading to wasted resources, unmet societal needs and a general erosion of public trust in both government policies and corporate reputation. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial for corporations to adopt a more genuine and transparent approach towards government policies.

These discussions raise another critical question: Does every instance of corporate discourse that includes government policies or directives constitute “policywashing”? This inquiry mirrors Jones’ (2019) provocative query regarding greenwashing: “whether or not ‘honest’ techniques of green advertising exist?” Research often conflates green advertising with greenwashing, as both typically employ selective discourse, vague claims, or misleading narratives for corporate impression management. Jones (2019) asserts that this is not a binary question given the sophistication of claims and complexity of narrative techniques involved. This perspective is equally applicable to policywashing, which should not be reduced to a simplistic yes-or-no judgement. As shown in our analysis, the majority of corporate Weibo posts are motivated by commercial objectives. These posts repurpose the “craftsmanship spirit” policy through emotional storytelling, vague descriptions, and unsubstantiated claims of legitimacy. However, variations exist across frames. The policy endorsement frame, for instance, involves “less” policywashing than the other three as we have discussed. While inherently promotional, this frame generally aligns with government policies by explicitly endorsing them, lacking explicit commercial promotions, at least on the surface.

To conclude, this study enhances our understanding of government-enterprise relationships by defining policywashing as a concept similar to yet distinct from other “washing” practices such as greenwashing and sportswashing. It contributes to research in critical discourse analysis and political economy, particularly in the field of corporate political

communication. From a practical standpoint, the findings indicate that both policymakers and policy implementers must distinguish between symbolic and substantive policy engagement. For regulatory bodies, this entails developing frameworks to evaluate not only corporations' policy-related rhetoric but also the alignment between their actions and policy objectives. For corporations, engaging in policywashing risks damaging corporate reputation, eroding stakeholder trust, and undermining their long-term legitimacy.

This study remains some limitations, though. First, its analysis focused solely on corporate Weibo posts, so it may not capture instances of policywashing in other corporate discourses, such as annual reports, press releases, or internal company documents. Second, the focus on the "craftsmanship spirit" policy means the findings may not apply broadly; future research should extend to other policy areas, such as environmental regulations or labor standards. Finally, owing to data limitations, this study failed to measure how policywashing impacts policy outcomes, including its effects on societal benefits and resource allocation. Consequently, future empirical research is required to investigate these effects.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jingtian Sydney Wang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Debing Feng:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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