

News Portrayals of Child Sexual Abuse in China: Changes from 2010 to 2019

This study investigated how the news media in China—a country influenced by collectivism, authoritarianism, and Confucianism—portrayed child sexual abuse to the public over the past decade. A content analysis of 501 newspaper articles published over that time period revealed how news portrayals of child sexual abuse changed following notable abuse cases and refinements in relevant laws in China. The results indicated that media attention to child sexual abuse increased dramatically after 2013, and a trend of shaping child sexual abuse as a social problem began in 2015. This study also found an interesting cultural difference in the application of framing theory. The Chinese news stories of child sexual abuse were more likely to present individual *cause* frames but societal *solution* frames. This apparent inconsistency was not seen in previous research with U.S. media (Weatherred, 2017) and may be attributable to a cultural preference for victim blame and collective solutions. The findings provide insights into news portrayals of child sexual abuse in a developing society. In addition, this study points out potential problems in Chinese news reports on child sexual abuse and offers suggestions for journalists and advocates for children.

Keywords: *news; framing theory; child sexual abuse; China*

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has long been a global problem. A review shows that the overall estimated global CSA prevalence was 12.7% in self-report studies between 1980 and 2008 (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). A more recent review warns that the main risk factors for CSA are the criminal history of the perpetrator, the gender of the victim, and the offender-victim relationship for institutional CSA (Clayton et al., 2018). CSA can have negative impacts on the social, mental, and sexual functioning of the victims later in life (Blakemore et al., 2017; Sanjeevi, 2018).

How the media portrays CSA is an important topic in CSA research. According to news framing theory, how the news media frames, or creates a context, for the responsibility of an issue affects public perceptions regarding a solution, such as whether it should be

provided at a societal or individual level (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1990). Accordingly, child welfare advocates suggest that journalists should frame CSA as a social problem so the audience will be more likely to support public policies that help to address the issue (Mejia et al., 2012; Weatherred, 2017).

However, most of the existing studies on news portrayals of CSA have focused on Western contexts and developed countries (Cheit et al., 2010; Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Mejia et al., 2012; Weathered, 2017), and few have paid attention to CSA news in developing societies. China, the most populous country in the world, is one of the developing countries suffering from serious CSA issues. In China, 21.9% of women reported CSA before the age of 16 (Chen et al., 2006). Surveys based on Chinese samples showed that victims of CSA were more likely to suffer problems in life, such as depression, overwhelming sadness, drinking alcohol, and smoking (Chen et al., 2006; Cong et al., 2012).

Compared to Western societies, news media portrayals of CSA in China can be different for several reasons. First, differences in the culture and social norms affect the treatment and individual perceptions of CSA (Futa et al., 2001) and also the news portrayals of CSA cases (Atmore, 1996). Chinese culture is influenced by a mix of Confucianism, collectivism, and authoritarianism. Moreover, although Chinese society is quickly transforming due to modernization and global influences, it has not experienced the women's rights and anti-rape movements that have occurred in many Western societies. Second, the lack of sex education in China leads to inappropriate understandings of sex abuse among the public (Jin et al., 2016), even for journalists. An example is that many news reports will describe an alleged perpetrator as a "pervert," "monster," or "the big, bad wolf" but fail to discuss the mental diseases (e.g., pedophilia) associated with the crimes. Last but not least, the news media in China is market-driven but under strict censorship. After reforms in the late 1970s, the Chinese news media faced the pressure of market profits, which caused some

accommodations and tensions between party journalism and market-driven journalism (Zhao, 1997). However, censorship of the news media did not decrease, and news in China still takes on the role of providing the public with social knowledge needed for the building of a forced consensus, the basis of Communist rule and legitimacy (Chang et al., 1994).

To understand how Chinese news media portray CSA, this study collected 501 CSA news articles from WiseNews, the largest database of news written in Chinese. The investigation helped us to understand how CSA is represented in a society influenced by collectivism, authoritarianism, and Confucianism. Moreover, this study shows how news portrayals of CSA in a developing country are shaped by the influence of traditional culture, modernization, and new global influences over an extended period of time. The use of news framing theory with Chinese CSA news revealed patterns uniquely different from Western contexts. In addition, this study sheds light on children's protection practices. Children's rights organizations can understand the public perception of CSA as shaped through the news portrayals. Journalists and child welfare advocates can learn about the problems of CSA news reports and work on portraying CSA as a social issue to facilitate advancements in public policies.

News portrayals of CSA: Media effects and representation

The news media's selection of topics to cover leads public attention to social issues, and how the media presents a story affects individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and reactions to it (Scheufele, 1999). Studies on CSA perception detected the effects of CSA news. Davidson's (2008) study suggested that the government implements new policies as a response to CSA news reports. Collings (2002) found that stereotypes in CSA news foster a non-supportive environment for abuse victims. Therefore, understanding how the news media portray CSA is essential.

As gatekeepers, the news media only reports on stories that they believe are newsworthy and then frames the information in certain ways before presenting it to an audience (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1990; Scheufele, 1999). Among the many available arguments, images, and sources, journalists choose the ones they prefer to use to frame a story (Lee et al., 2008; Tewksbury et al., 2000). The way journalists frame a story is not only shaped by journalistic professionalism but also by social norms, cultural values, and organizational pressures (Scheufele, 1999). Many studies have tracked and analyzed media coverage and attention to CSA, including how it is presented in the media (for a review, see Popović, 2018; Weathered, 2015). This study aimed to investigate news portrayals of CSA in China, regarding the news focus and framing of the CSA cases.

Victim gender

One of the most widely held misconceptions about sexual abuse is a gender stereotype: many societies believe that males, who are perceived as stronger than females, are unlikely to be victims of sexual abuse (Chapleau et al., 2008).

Although this stereotype is not specific to China, its traditional societal culture is very patriarchal and supports the stereotype by suggesting that men are stronger, more powerful, and superior to women (Jayachandran, 2015; Li, 2004; Xie, 2013). Until recently, a male individual could not be considered the victim of rape under Chinese law. For CSA cases, only after the laws on indecency are finally extended to male children can male victims of CSA also be protected by law. Another aspect of gender with regard to CSA is in news coverage. News values unusual stories that attract the audience's attention (Fuller, 1996). In other words, based on the requirements of newsworthiness, male victims in CSA cases are more likely to receive extra attention in terms of media coverage. To investigate how news interest in victim gender in China has changed over time, the following research question was investigated:

RQ1 How have the percentages of male and female victims in CSA newspaper stories in China changed over time?

Victim-perpetrator relationships

The news media selectively report on CSA cases based on victim-perpetrator relationships. Previous studies have found that the news media frame CSA as individual problems frequently attributing crimes to the “stranger danger” myth, which describes CSA as a crime committed by strangers (Beckett, 1996; Cheit et al., 2010). Some other studies have found that CSA cases involving **non-stranger relationships** were also largely reported (Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Mejia et al., 2012).

According to Girls Protection, a charity organization for CSA victims, the percentage of exposed CSA cases that were **committed by non-stranger perpetrators** remained above 70% from 2013 to 2018 (Girls Protection, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). However, the Chinese media seem to have paid extra attention to alleged perpetrators who are teachers. In China, CSA cases involving teachers and students have received massive attention due to a sensationalized school scandal in 2013. The scandal in 2013 brought intense social discussion on CSA and became a “moment of truth” for many in China on the issue of CSA. In May 2013, the case of a principal and a local government official who had raped six female students from a primary school in Hainan Province was reported by the news media. This case provoked public anger and finally raised much-needed social discussions about CSA. After this incident, an increasing number of CSA cases, especially those involving teachers and students, continued to be exposed to the public by the news media. **To investigate news interest in victim-perpetrator relationships in China, this study included the following question:**

RQ2 What are the different types of relationships between victims and perpetrators reported in CSA newspaper stories in China?

Morality and the legal frame

A morality frame is one of the most commonly used news frames, along with conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and responsibility (Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). A morality frame shapes the event, problem, or issue within the context of morals, social prescriptions, and religious tenets (An & Gower, 2009), which is often implied in news coverage since the journalistic norm of objectivity is against moral shaming (Neuman et al., 1992). A morality news frame has been found in news about politics, health, and sexual assaults (Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Wendorf Muhamad & Yang, 2017).

Moral blame is also frequently discussed by the Chinese public in sex crime cases, targeted at the victims or the perpetrators, for example, in judging the lifestyle of either or both. Traditional Confucian norms have an important influence in regulating sexual discourse and behaviors in Asia, including China (Chan, 2009; Gao et al., 2012). Confucian morality norms only permit sex within marriage, and an immoral sexual relationship (e.g., premarital sex or incestuous sex) is considered morally shameful to individuals and their families, even to the victims (Hong et al., 1993; Tang, 1995). An example of a morally-shameful expression about sex with regard to CSA is that losing virginity has been described as a “stain” on a female victim’s life in some Chinese news reports on CSA (e.g., Zeng, 2013). In addition, Confucianism believes that a polite and proper person should not talk about sexual topics. Hence, societies influenced by traditional Confucian cultural norms usually have shameful or negative feelings just by discussing sexual topics, especially in public (Choi et al., 2018; Tang, 1995). The absence of sex education results in the maintenance of morality shame. A Girls Protection investigation in 2016 showed that 50% of children from urban areas and 55% of children from rural areas have never had any kind of

sex education (Girls Protection, 2017). An annual report released in 2017 showed that only 37% of parents said they had taught their kids how to protect themselves from sexual abuse.

Given that China is going through a rapid process of modernization, one thing this study wanted to find out in this study was: has the frequency of moral blame associated with CSA reporting decreased in the past decade with the modernization of Chinese society?

Therefore, the second research question was:

RQ3 How has the frequency of the morality frame in CSA newspaper stories in China changed over time?

Historically, pioneering sociologist and jurist Max Weber (1978) viewed law and morality as a binary opposition, that law as a universal regulation should exclude morality. Habermas (1993) further developed Weber's theory and suggested that law and morality regulate people's behaviors interdependently rather than separately. But one idea of Weber (1978) has been widely accepted, that law is essential to civilization and modernization. Therefore, in addition to the morality frame, it is important to investigate the legal frame in media representations. **The legal frame discusses social problems from the perspective of the law, such as the legal definition of the issue and any legal loopholes indicated by a case.**

Based on the theory of news framing and media effects (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1990), a legal frame can arise from attention to and discussion about law-related issues.

Although Chinese society is still under the influence of Confucianism, CSA legislation in China has achieved salient progress since the 2013 Hainan scandal. "Soliciting underage prostitutes" has been officially criminalized since 2015. Previously, as an excuse for their actions, CSA perpetrators who had provided money to the victims declared that their actions involved prostitution but not sexual assault. In the same year, the law was changed so that indecent assault was a crime that could be committed against males in addition to females. Although males are not currently protected by Chinese laws regarding

rape, this change with regard to indecent assault helps to protect males and is a step in the right direction. In November 2018, the Supreme Court of China decided that non-body-contact behaviors like asking children for nude photos constituted CSA. In July 2019, the Supreme Court of China announced that perpetrators involved in extremely terrible CSA cases could be sentenced to death. These changes in laws and policies have shown an increasing effort within the country to punish child sexual abusers. The Chinese news media plays an important role in sustaining social stability by explaining the current legal system to the public, in line with the party's interest (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). To study how the news portrayals of CSA have changed along with this legislative progress in China, the following research question was posited:

RQ4 How has the frequency of the legal frame in CSA newspaper stories in China changed over time?

Framing child sexual abuse as a social problem

The framing of responsibility is of great importance for an audience to understand the cause of an event or how to provide solutions to a problem (Iyengar, 1989; Kim et al., 2002; Kim & Anne Willis, 2007). Child welfare advocates have argued that news frames of child abuse and neglect have an impact on people's interpretations of those issues (Bales, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2004), and thus journalists should frame child abuse and neglect cases, including CSA, as a problem for which communities and society in general are responsible. Advocates point out that in this way, people will be more likely to view CSA as a social problem, decrease individual blaming, and support relevant public policies that help to address the issues. The current study traced news frames of social responsibility of CSA in China, where the culture has not been very friendly to victims of sexual abuse. Following previous studies on CSA reports (e.g., Cheit et al., 2010; Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Mejia

et al., 2012; Weatherred, 2017), news frames that shape people's perceptions of and attitudes toward the responsibility for CSA were analyzed in this study.

Thematic vs. episodic

A typical news story is clearly directed either toward episodic framing or thematic framing (Iyengar, 1991). Thematic frames focus on political issues and events in a broader context and present collective, abstract, and general evidence, while episodic frames are more interested in what happened in a single event (Iyengar, 1990, 1991). Episodic frames pay attention to the details of events, which leads the audience to focus on cases as if they are independent of each other. In contrast, more frequent thematic stories would help policymakers, parents, and the public to understand CSA as a social problem. Previous studies on media portrayals of CSA found an episodic nature in the media, which was adopted to attract audiences' attention (Beckett, 1996; Cheit et al., 2010; Mejia et al., 2012; Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995).

Individual cause frame vs. societal cause frame

Cause in news frames assigns who is responsible for a reported event, whether the audience is aware of it or not. In crime news, cause defines responsibility regarding the issue and causal relationships regarding the victims and the offenders (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Stories that focus more on individual actors rather than abstract issues as underlying events frame individuals as causal agents (Iyengar, 1990, 1991). Individual cause is common in news reports on sexual abuse cases, such as blaming the victim's clothing, private sexual life, and being in an isolated location in the dark, while the societal cause is consistent with thematic frames that attribute the event to a higher societal level. Weatherred (2017) tracked a shift from framing CSA as individual cases to looking at it as a societal problem, which was identified as progress in CSA news coverage.

Individual solution frame vs. societal solution frame

Solutions provided by the news media also indicate the responsibility holder in the event (Iyengar, 1990, 1991). An individual solution is consistent with an individual cause, blaming individuals for the event, while a societal solution can drive the story in another direction. Previous studies in Western contexts agreed that CSA news seldom addresses solutions for CSA, especially in terms of prevention strategies (Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Meija et al. (2012). Weatherred's study (2017) found that news stories about CSA showed a preference for individual solutions rather than societal solutions.

The previous studies in a Western context lead to the following research question:

RQ5 How have the frequency of news frames—specifically, in terms of episodic versus thematic story frames (RQ5a), individual versus societal causes (RQ5b), and individual versus societal solutions (RQ5c)—used in CSA newspaper stories in China changed over time?

Method

Sample

This study chose to analyze news articles from newspapers. Newspaper content is the most accessible and reliably archived content for the time period in question compared with other Chinese news media sources. In China, WiseNews archives daily full-text news items from more than 1,200 newspapers from as far back as 1998; it is the largest database for news articles written in Chinese. The news articles analyzed in this study were selected through a keyword search of news articles published before December 31, 2019 from the WiseNews database. Following the suggestion of Lacy et al. (2015) regarding content analysis with a digital database, previous studies were reviewed to gather multiple keywords that offered more than face validity, which yielded *child sexual abuse (er tong xing sao rao)*, *child sexual crime (er tong xing fan zui)*, *child sexual assault (er tong wei xie)*, and *child rape (er tong qiang jian)*. Using the settings in WiseNews, this study identified results from mainland

China (excluding Chinese-language CSA news released in Hong Kong and Taiwan). The search results produced 5,009 articles that contained the identified keywords.

Next, articles that did not fit the research purpose were excluded. Since this study was interested in the Chinese context, news articles about CSA in foreign countries were excluded during a manual check of the articles. Also, this study excluded news articles that discussed CSA without mentioning any specific cases (e.g., a review of the number of CSA cases in the past year), because the focus of this study was news portrayals of CSA cases. After these exclusions, 1,648 news articles remained.

The last step was sampling. Lacy et al. (2000) suggested that for a content analysis of daily newspaper content from five years of newspaper editions, a nine-constructed-week sample (i.e., 3.5% of the total articles) is representative. Another study suggested a minimum sample of six constructed weeks (i.e., 2.3% of the total articles) for a five-year analysis (Luke et al., 2011). However, since CSA news is not regularly reported by time and the articles collected from the database were less similar than articles released by a single newspaper, the sample size for this study should be larger. This study extracted 30% of the 1,648 relevant articles released within a ten-year period based on the available resources to process them, which yielded a final sample of 501 news articles. A simple sampling method was adopted to identify the sample from the target articles, which helped to achieve efficiency and representativeness (Kim et al., 2018). The final sample ($N = 501$) included 12 from 2010, 35 from 2011, 33 from 2012, 136 from 2013, 74 from 2014, 76 from 2015, 39 from 2016, 40 from 2017, 36 from 2018, and 20 from 2019.

Coding procedure

The unit of analysis was a complete news article. The coding procedure and standards followed previous content analyses of news frames (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Mejia, Cheyne, & Dorfman, 2012; Weathered,

2017). An a priori codebook was developed in Chinese to provide detailed definitions of terms and operational definitions of the variables. Two college students from mainland China were recruited to code the sample articles. Both coders use Mandarin as their first language, and they passed a coding test as part of their recruitment interview.

First, the coders were given extensive representative examples of story features that would identify a news article as belonging in either coding category. The training helped them to understand the coded items and the coding scheme. The research purposes were kept by the coders so that they could judge the items without an experimental bias. The coders could discuss with the researcher to reach a consistent understanding of the coding schemes during the training. The coders were then asked to code 10% ($n = 50$) of the articles randomly selected from the entire sample ($N = 501$) to test intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliabilities for all the variables were examined using Krippendorff's alpha, which is an advanced indicator of internal reliability used when units of content are coded. The values of Krippendorff's alpha for the coded variables ranged from .92 to 1.00, which reached satisfactory levels. Next, each of the two coders formally coded different halves of the entire sample. All the data from the coding of the 501 news articles were entered into IBM's SPSS to be analyzed.

Coding scheme

Victim gender. For the gender of the victim(s) in each article, a male victim was coded as "0," a female victim was coded as "1," and "2" was used if an article described both male and female victims.

Perpetrator-victim relationship. This study focused on the categorization of the perpetrator relationship to the victim(s): "1" for a teacher; "2" for other non-stranger; "3" for a stranger; "4" for a stranger but prominent individual (e.g., celebrity); and "5" mixed. This study aimed to examine which type of perpetrator–victim relationship received more media

attention, stranger or **non-stranger**. However, two special categories were extracted. This study separated the teacher-student relationship from the **non-stranger** relationship because Chinese public attention to CSA is highly associated with teacher-student CSA cases. The category of prominent strangers was separated from the stranger category because cases involving celebrities or other notable individuals receive extra attention.

Morality frame. The morality frame was dummy coded. Articles that mostly discussed CSA under the scope of morality (i.e., professional ethics, family ethics, and Confucian values) either targeted at the victims or the perpetrators were coded as “1” on the “moral blame” item. The others were coded as “0.”

Legal frame. Articles that mostly discussed CSA cases from the legal perspective were coded as “1” on the “legal frame” item, and the rest of the articles were coded as “0.” In this study, the legal frame identifies and explains a case with legal terms, points out the flaws in related laws, and proposes potential changes in the law. **Since no previous study has suggested that the morality and legal frames are mutually exclusive, one article could be coded as adopting both of these frames for the purpose of this study.**

Episodic vs. thematic, individual vs. societal cause, and individual vs. societal solution frames. The operational definitions of these frames were adopted from previous studies (Iyengar, 1991; Mastin et al., 2007), which have been examined repeatedly later. An episodic vs. thematic frame was coded as a binary variable based on the framing of the whole article. An episodic frame was coded as “0,” while a thematic frame was coded as “1.” For the cause frame and solution frame, the societal frame was coded as “0,” and the individual frame was coded as “1.” When both frames were used in one article, the one that outnumbered the other on word count was coded as the frame for the article. **However, in some articles, the societal and individual frames were used equally or not used at all. Then, these articles were coded as “2” under the corresponding variable.**

This study also categorized the presence of causes and solutions, following Weatherred (2017). However, since the public perception and societal knowledge of CSA in China are different from that in the U.S., the categories were adjusted based on the CSA news reports in China. The presence of an individual cause included: (a) personalities, characteristics, or appearance; (b) personal safety and legal awareness; and (c) individual behavior or lifestyle. The presence of a societal cause included: (a) family, school, or community; (b) legislation and public policies; and (c) changes in social values or cultures. The presence of individual solutions included: (a) changes in personalities, characteristics, or appearance; (b) the improvement of personal safety and legal awareness; and (c) changes in individual behavior or lifestyle. The presence of societal solutions included: (a) advances in family, school, or community; (b) advances in legislation and public policies; and (c) advances in social values or cultures. All the variables regarding causes and solutions were dummy coded. As long as a news article had mentioned one of the causes or solutions, the corresponding variable was coded as "1." One news article could mention more than one cause and solution.

Results

News focuses on child sexual abuse in China

The first research question asked about the victim gender of CSA cases reported by the Chinese news media. Figure 1 displays the percentages of male and female victims as reported in the CSA news sample. News articles that reported on both male and female victims were excluded from this figure ($n = 20$). In total, 10.4% of the news articles mentioned male-victim CSA cases, and 85.6% focused on female-victim cases. The news media's highest proportion of male-victim cases (in relation to female-victim cases) were in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2015.

[Figure 1 about here]

During the first three years of the period under study, it appears that newspapers paid extra attention to male-victim CSA mostly because it was considered rare, which fit the news concept of worthiness. Also, celebrity involvement made some cases more "valuable" from the perspective of their newsworthiness. In 2011, a male singer was convicted of sexual assaults on male children for the second time in his life and thus drew massive attention. In 2012, a senior official made the news because of sexually abusing male children who knew him from the internet. After 2012, it appeared that journalists were no longer paying extra attention to young male victims, except in 2015, when a new law was published to include male victims as protected subjects of indecency. The correlation between time and the victim gender in the Chinese CSA cases was supported by a chi-squared test, $\chi^2(18) = 46.57, p < .001$.

The second research question asked about the types of cases reported by the Chinese news media regarding victim-perpetrator relationships. The percentages of different types of CSA reported in Chinese news are shown in Figure 2, except that news articles that included mixed types of relationships were excluded ($n = 55$). Before 2013, the percentage of reported cases that happened involving a perpetrator and a victim with no previous relationship (when the perpetrators were well-known individuals like celebrities or ordinary people not otherwise known to the victims) was higher than those involving a **non-stranger** (when the perpetrators were teachers or other individuals previously known to the victims). However, a big change occurred in 2013. Starting that year, the frequency of reporting CSA that happened involving **non-strangers** increased dramatically, which better represents reality, as in most CSA cases, perpetrators are previously known to the victims. Among the entire sample, the teacher-student CSA cases obtained the most news attention ($n = 179$). The percentages of teacher-student CSA reports were high in 2012, 2013, and 2014, and had

spiked in 2013, when the Hainan scandal was exposed. The correlation between time and the reported types of CSA was supported by a chi-squared test, $\chi^2(36) = 285.25, p < .01$.

[Figure 2 about here]

The third research question concerned the frequency of morality frames appearing in Chinese CSA news. In total, 12.4% of the news articles ($n = 62$) covered CSA under the scope of moral blame. In general, the frequency of moral blame in Chinese CSA news has declined greatly since 2016 (see Figure 3). However, a chi-squared test showed that the correlation between time and morality blame was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(9) = 9.86, p = .36$.

The fourth research question asked about the frequency of a legal frame appearing in the Chinese CSA news. More than half of the news articles ($n = 272$) reported CSA within the scope of legal discussions. The percentage of those concerning legal discussions has dramatically increased since 2017 (see Figure 3). The correlation between time and legal discussions was significant, according to the chi-square test, $\chi^2(9) = 28.46, p < .01$.

[Figure 3 about here]

News frames of child sexual abuse in China

The fifth research question asked how the frequency of news frames—specifically, in terms of episodic versus thematic story frames (RQ5a), individual versus societal causes (RQ5b), and individual versus societal solutions (RQ5c)—changed in Chinese CSA news reports.

Thematic frame vs. episodic frame

In total, 25% ($n = 125$) of the news articles used a thematic frame and the others used an episodic frame. The results of the coding of the thematic vs. episodic frames used in Chinese CSA news each year are shown in Figure 4. Each year, most of the news articles adopted an episodic frame, and the percentages ranged from 52.8% to 94.8%. However, it

should also be noted that the frequency of the use of a thematic frame showed an upward trend after 2015. Starting with 2016, more than 30% of the news articles about CSA adopted a thematic frame. A chi-squared test showed a significant correlation between time and the use of a thematic vs. an episodic frame, $\chi^2(9) = 30.52, p < .001$.

[Figure 4 about here]

Individual cause frame vs. societal cause frame

In total, 22.0% ($n = 110$) of news articles adopted an individual cause frame, 13.6% ($n = 68$) adopted a societal cause frame, and 7.4% ($n = 37$) used both. The other 57.9% ($n = 290$) used neither frame. The percentages of the individual and societal cause frames in the Chinese news articles on CSA are shown in Figure 5. The percentage of news articles that used a societal cause frame was quite stable, ranging from 10% to 30% for most years; the percentage of news articles leaning on individual cause frames fluctuated more. In 2015 and 2016, more than half of the news articles framed CSA with individual causes. A chi-squared test showed that the rise and fall of the cause frame were statistically significant, $\chi^2(27) = 118.55, p < .001$.

[Figure 5 about here]

This study also recorded what kinds of individual or societal causes were mentioned in the news articles in the past 10 years. In total, 10.4% of the news articles ($n = 52$) mentioned individual personalities, characteristics, or appearance as the cause of CSA cases; 12.6% ($n = 63$) mentioned the lack of personal safety and legal awareness as the cause; and 22.4% ($n = 112$) mentioned individual behavior or lifestyle as the cause. As for societal causes, 26.4% ($n = 132$) of the news articles mentioned the reason of family, school, or community; only 5.4% ($n = 27$) mentioned the reason of legislation and public policies; and 3.2% ($n = 16$) mentioned changes in social values or cultures. The percentage of news articles mentioning different categories of individual and societal causes are listed in the

Appendix. The percentages of the three individual causes and the societal cause referring to the family, school, or community's responsibility all reached their peaks during 2015–2016.

Individual solution frame vs. societal solution frame

Most of the news articles ($n = 341$) did not use any solution frame. For the rest of the articles, 3.0% ($n = 15$) used an individual solution frame, 25.9% ($n = 130$) used a societal solution frame, and 3.0% ($n = 15$) used both. The percentages of the individual and societal cause frames in Chinese news articles on CSA are shown in Figure 6. Most of the individual solution frames were used during 2015 and 2016. The percentage of news articles that used societal solution frames showed an upward trend in the past decade. This pattern was statistically significant in the chi-squared test, $\chi^2(27) = 65.09, p < .001$.

[Figure 6 about here]

This study also recorded what kinds of individual or societal solutions were mentioned in the news articles in the past 10 years. In total, 1.2% ($n = 6$) suggested an improvement of personalities, characteristics, or appearance; 7.8% ($n = 39$) of the news articles suggested an improvement of personal safety and legal awareness, and 3.2% ($n = 16$) suggested changes in individual behavior or lifestyle. As for societal solutions, 21.4% ($n = 107$) of the news articles suggested advances in family, school, or community; 13% ($n = 65$) suggested advances in legislation and public policies; and 4.6% ($n = 23$) suggested advances in social values or culture. The percentage of news articles mentioning different categories of individual and societal solutions are listed in the Appendix. Individual solutions about personal safety and legal awareness and individual behavior or lifestyle were mostly discussed during 2015 and 2016. Societal solutions about advances in family, school, or community were equally important in each year (as represented by frequency), while the frequency of discussing an improvement in legislation and public policies has increased rapidly since 2017.

Discussion

This study involved a content analysis of CSA news in China to reveal how the CSA cases were framed, which can influence perceptions toward CSA. Through longitudinal comparisons over a ten-year period, some significant and interesting findings were discovered. The implications should be used to improve news reporting on CSA and other important social issues.

Two turning points in Chinese CSA news

Based on the results, this study detected two turning points of Chinese news reports on CSA. The first turning point was the year 2013, when the Hainan Scandal attracted massive attention to the issue of CSA. First of all, the number of CSA cases reported in 2013 was the highest for the period examined (and likely the highest ever). Also, discussions about morality and law both reached their peak in 2013. Second, since 2013, journalists have paid more attention to CSA cases that involve **non-strangers** rather than just those that involve victims and strangers. Before 2013, the Chinese news media seemed to be reinforcing the “stranger danger” myth.

The second turning point was the period 2015–2016. During these two years, China released important policies on CSA in the wake of the 2013 Hainan scandal. Criminalizing the “solicitation of underage prostitutes” in 2015 was one of the most important recent events in the history of Chinese CSA. In the same year, protection from the laws on indecency was finally extended to male children. Starting in 2016, more and more cities began to publish information on CSA criminals and forbid them from jobs that involved contact with children (e.g., teachers). This series of changes showed the Chinese government’s efforts to prevent and curtail CSA. The results of this study demonstrate that after the second turning point, many of these changes were reflected in the Chinese news

media regarding CSA coverage. The proportion of CSA news articles focusing on a discussion of law exceeded the proportion that focused on moral blame after 2016. Also, the use of the thematic frame has grown greatly since 2016. During the period 2015–2016, discussions about individual causes and solutions spiked yet decreased rapidly afterward.

In conclusion, the first turning point in 2013 made CSA, especially CSA involving **non-stranger relationships**, a heated social issue. However, the changes in news portrayals happened after the second turning point in 2015–2016. The increasing use of a legal frame, decreasing use of a morality frame, and the decreasing “stranger danger” myth in CSA news show how the influence of traditional sex culture on mass media has been changed by the process of modernization. Also, the historical trends of CSA news revealed how news media frames social issues with both market- and politics-driven interests in China, an authoritarian country with an open economy. The massive use of an episodic frame revealed the market interest of the news media. The influence of government regulation on the news media was presented after the second turning point, when the Chinese government started to make powerful policies to prevent CSA. In line with the policy changes, the news media seemed to play an important role in spreading relevant knowledge and bringing policy discussions to the public after 2015, with an increase in the thematic and legal frame use in CSA news.

The longitudinal investigation demonstrated that Chinese news media can bring massive attention to CSA, facilitate the advancement of CSA policies, and then help to explain the new policies to the public. Journalists and governments should work on cultivating and maintaining this benevolent cycle. In addition, advocates and NGOs for children should also pay attention to media representations of CSA and work with journalists to promote the public influence of CSA cases.

News portrayals of responsibility in Chinese CSA news

The primary goal of this study was to trace the patterns of news frames in Chinese CSA news, so that we could determine how the Chinese news media presented the responsibility of CSA to the public over the past decade. To make a comparison with previous findings in Western contexts, this study discussed the similarities and differences of CSA news frames between China and Western societies.

Initially, in Western societies, the general preference for an episodic frame remained constant in news coverage of CSA (Beckett, 1996; Cheit et al., 2010), which can be explained by the market orientation of the news media. This study also found that Chinese journalists mostly adopted an episodic frame with CSA cases during 2010–2019. Secondly, studies in Western contexts found that CSA news lacked in-depth and broader discussions about solutions (Kltzinger & Skldmore, 1995; Mejia et al., 2012). In line with previous findings, the results in this study showed that the majority of the news articles did not use any solution frame. However, a trend of presenting CSA as a social issue was detected in Western societies (Dorfman et al., 2012; Weatherred, 2017). As China increasingly showed progress on CSA laws and regulations, a similar trend was emerging, as demonstrated in this study. The percentage of episodic frame use was dropping, which shows that fewer news articles were discussing CSA cases as isolated events. In addition, the use of individual causes declined rapidly after 2016, and the use of a societal solution frame showed a constant upward trend.

The apparently inconsistent preferences for an individual cause and societal solution in Chinese CSA news are unique. Although only 31.7% of the Chinese news articles on CSA adopted a frame of solution, the societal solution frame percentage was always higher than the individual solution frame from 2010 to 2019, and the gap between them was getting larger. However, the Chinese CSA news generally preferred an individual cause frame more than a societal cause frame, which means that the environmental reasons that cause CSA

were presented as less important than individual causes in the Chinese CSA news. In contrast, another longitudinal study found that American CSA news mentions individual solutions for CSA more frequently despite placing the blame for CSA on societal-level causes (Weatherred, 2017).

A possible explanation for the apparent inconsistent use of the cause and solution frame is a cultural difference. On the one hand, influenced by traditional Confucian values, Chinese society tends to attribute abnormal behaviors, including sexual abuse, to individual causes, like a personal moral defect. On the other hand, China is a collectivist society, where the power of the group is usually higher than the power of an individual; thus, people may be more willing to address and solve problems with a group dynamic. Another explanation is a difference in political systems. As a socialist country, the government has a duty to solve social problems in a top-down manner. Hence, news articles that mention the solutions to CSA are more likely to discuss preventions at a societal rather than an individual level.

Given the effect of news portrayals on audiences and policies, journalists should be better trained to portray CSA as a social instead of an individual problem. Advocacy groups, NGOs, and other relevant organizations or institutions should work to promote the thematic and societal cause frame in CSA news writing.

Limitations and future study

It is important to point out the limitations of this study. First, due to the resources accessed, this study only analyzed newspapers, while other types of mass media (e.g., magazines or TV) or alternative news sources (e.g., online news websites, citizen journalists) might show some different patterns of news portrayals of CSA cases. Future studies can examine other types of news media in order to see how they portray CSA cases in China. However, given that both traditional and new media are under governmental regulation and censorship in China (MacKinnon, 2008; Xu & Albert, 2014), the differences in CSA news

frames could be limited across the media modalities. For example, a previous study comparing TV and newspaper coverage on CSA in the U.S. did not detect differences in the news frames between the two modalities. Second, content analysis of news coverage helps to understand how news media sets the agenda in CSA cases, but it cannot demonstrate the social influences of the news agenda. Future studies can further examine the effect of news frames on audiences' perceptions of CSA.

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