



Discursive construction of ethical business leadership in China: A corpus-assisted ecological discourse study of online public mourning discourse

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Arran Stubbe's (2024) proposal for an ecolinguistic approach to ethical leadership, this study aims to conduct a corpus-assisted ecological discourse study of online public mourning discourse following the passing of Zong Qinghou, founder of the Wahaha Group in China. An integrated analytic framework for ethical business leadership is established by drawing insights from related disciplines, such as critical discourse studies, eco-critical discourse analysis, and ecological discourse analysis. A specialized corpus was built by collecting public mourning posts on Weibo related to Zong Qinghou's passing. Through incorporating text mining into ecological discourse analysis, this study explores the discursive constructions of an ethical business leader at multiple levels of discourse and the ecosophy behind these constructions. The findings reveal the understanding and construction of ethical business leadership in the Chinese context, and demonstrate the benefits of a corpus-assisted ecological discourse study.

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1. Introduction

The sudden passing of Zong Qinghou, founder of the Wahaha Group, on February 25, 2024, indeed sparked an unprecedented wave of public mourning in China (Gan, 2024), offering a unique window into the evolving discourse surrounding ethical business leadership. When Zong Qinghou passed away, people spontaneously gathered at the old Wahaha headquarters to mourn, offering flowers and Wahaha products like AD Calcium Milk. This event, unparalleled in recent Chinese history (Yuan, 2024), suggests a shift in public perception of business leaders. As China continues to navigate its economic development and global position, the public's perception of what constitutes an admirable business leader appears to be shifting, potentially influencing both policy and business practices in the future (Lee and Wang, 2023).

In the past 2 decades, the transition of mourning practices to digital platforms has increasingly attracted scholarly attention (Almaghouth, 2022; Giaxoglou, 2014; Harju, 2015). The digital realm offers unique opportunities for preserving memories, facilitating ongoing connections with the departed, and extending the reach of mourning beyond geographical

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boundaries (Harju, 2015). Online meaning-making is an evolution of offline bereavement practices, involving community support, sharing memories, and maintaining relationships with the deceased (Brubaker et al., 2013). During this process, users can express their experiences of loss and create a sense of affinity with other mourners (Giaxoglou, 2014).

Previous studies have highlighted the vital significance of digital mourning in preserving, commemorating, and disseminating the legacies of the deceased (Aguilar et al., 2024; Gross, 2023). Researchers have examined emotional expressions, collective memory construction, and affective stance-taking strategies in online tributes to celebrities like Michael Jackson (Lee and Goh, 2013), Steve Jobs (Harju, 2015), Aaron Swartz (Martini, 2018), and David Bowie (Matley, 2019). However, most of these studies are conducted in a Western context, overlooking public mourning discourse in the Chinese context (Zhou and Zhong, 2021). Additionally, many of the previous analyses were conducted manually, without taking advantage of the benefits of recent developments in computational technologies and text mining for efficient and accurate processing of large data samples (Liu et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2022).

This study employs a corpus-assisted ecological discourse analysis approach (Poole, 2022) to examine the linguistic and discursive strategies used in online tributes to Zong Qinghou, who was believed to symbolize exemplary entrepreneurship and corporate ethics in China. The primary aim is to reveal how ethical leadership is conceptualized in contemporary China. The study is significant as it captures a critical moment of collective meaning-making around business ethics in China. Over 40 years of economic reforms have transformed China's economy and given rise to influential entrepreneurs (Zhang et al., 2014). As Lee and Wang (2023) note, these ongoing reforms have continually shifted optimal business strategies and leadership styles in China. The unprecedented public mourning for Zong suggests a change in how business leaders are evaluated and remembered. By analyzing this discourse, we can gain insights into the evolving social contract between businesses and society in China, and how language reflects and reinforces these changes.

2. Ethical leadership and sustainability

As global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequality continue to escalate, the role of ethical leadership in fostering sustainable business practices has become increasingly critical (Fulmer, 2004). Ethical leadership is a leadership style that prioritizes moral principles, fairness, and integrity in decision-making and organizational interactions (Banks et al., 2021; Darcy, 2010). Ethical leaders serve as role models, inspiring their teams and organizations to act in ways that align with values such as honesty, accountability, and social responsibility (Brown et al., 2005). Unlike conventional leadership approaches that focus primarily on achieving goals, ethical leadership emphasizes how those goals are achieved, ensuring that processes are just, equitable, and do not harm people, communities, or the environment (O'Brien et al., 2025).

Sustainable performance is an organization's ability to achieve economic, social and environmental goals simultaneously (Ishaq et al., 2025). This concept is grounded in the triple bottom line framework (Elkington, 1994), which advocates for the balance for profit, people and the planet. The economic dimension focuses on profitability and stakeholder returns (Sarfraz et al., 2023). Firms pursue innovation, cost efficiency and competitive advantage to achieve economic sustainability. The environmental dimension emphasizes reducing environmental impact through eco-conscious practices such as pollution control, green human resource practices and sustainable supply chains (Aftab et al., 2023). The social dimension promotes stakeholder well-being, including fair labor practices, community engagement and work-life balance (Zheng et al., 2023). Achieving sustainable performance requires strategic integration of these three dimensions to avoid compromising long-term sustainability for short-term gains (Khan and Muktar, 2024). However, there is a shift from financial performance alone to the attainment of social and environmental performance (Ishaq et al., 2025).

Recent studies have turned to examine the relations between ethical leadership and sustainable performance. Some studies have revealed the significant effect of ethical leadership on some individual and organizational outcomes, such as environmental performance and in-role and extra-role green behaviors (Ren et al., 2021). Velasquez (2002) argues that businesses cannot thrive without ethics, as they are foundational to building trust with stakeholders and maintaining long-term success. Ethical leadership ensures that sustainability initiatives are not just environmentally effective but also socially just, creating a balanced approach that benefits all stakeholders.

Furthermore, previous studies have revealed that the conceptualization of ethical business leadership varies across different cultures (Resick et al., 2011). The Chinese and Western ways of understanding ethical leaders differ significantly due to cultural and philosophical traditions (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023). While previous studies have predominantly focused on ethical leadership within Western contexts (Pletz et al., 2024), few studies have explored the understanding of ethical leadership in the Chinese context (Yuan et al., 2023). Ethical leadership in China is deeply influenced by Confucian values such as benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), and propriety (*li*), emphasizing collective well-being, harmony, and long-term societal stability (Yuan et al., 2023). These values offer alternative models to Western conceptualizations of ethical business leadership and provide new stories for fostering a sustainable future (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023). Nevertheless, there is little information about what types of ethical business leaders are expected by the public on social media in present-day China.

3. Ethical business leadership: towards an ecolinguistic analytic framework

This study proposes an integrated analytic framework by drawing on insights from eco-critical discourse analysis (Stibbe, 2014, 2021), critical discourse studies (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak and Meyer, 2016), and ecological discourse analysis (Stibbe,

2021; He and Zhang, 2017) (see Fig. 1). Inspired by Stibbe's (2024) concept of “ecolinguistics for ethical leadership”, this study employs an ecolinguistic approach to analyze the discursive construction of ethical business leadership on social media. Ecolinguistics, as defined by Stibbe (2024), encompasses a diverse range of study areas related to ecological humanities, focusing on engaged inquiry that considers not only humans but also other species and ecosystems. The primary aim is to reconstruct a socially just society while protecting the ecosystems upon which life depends (Stibbe, 2014, 2021). In other words, it moves beyond “the analysis of ecological discourse” to the “ecological analysis of discourse” (Alexander and Stibbe, 2014, p. 104) and identifies “the stories we live by” (Stibbe, 2021). By applying this framework to public mourning discourse analysis, this study seeks to examine how ethical business leadership is constructed and perceived through language in contemporary Chinese society, uncovering the Chinese way of understanding ethical business leadership (Lee and Wang, 2023).

While traditional critical discourse analysis used to focus on issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia (Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018; van Dijk, 2007), ecolinguistics argues that this approach, though important, is insufficient on its own. It emphasizes that true sustainability requires addressing both human-to-human relationships and human relationships with the natural world (Stibbe, 2024). Ecolinguistics conceptualizes language as something that exists within the interactions between humans, other species, and the physical environment—essentially, within the broader context of ecology (Cowley, 2018). In other words, human communication is shaped by mental, social, biological, and physical environments, and this communication, in turn, influences behavior, with significant consequences for the ecosystems that sustain life (Stibbe, 2024). Likewise, the ways in which Zong Qinghou was remembered on social media were influenced by the evolving business ecology of China, which, in turn, may shape future perceptions of ethical business leaders in the country.

The concept of “ecosophy” serves as a unifying thread between ecolinguistics and ethical leadership, referring to a philosophy of ecological harmony. Stibbe (2024) advocates a postmodern view of ethical leadership as performative and discursively constructed, rather than inherent to a particular type of person. This perspective sees leadership as something that can be enacted by anyone in any situation, through language and other symbolic modes. It involves resisting destructive societal narratives and reshaping reality by providing new, beneficial “stories to live by” (Stibbe, 2021). In this context, the public mourning discourse over Zong Qinghou on social media offers a unique opportunity to critically examine the discursive construction of ethical business leadership in present-day China and reveal the ecosophies underlying these constructions. This aligns with the ecolinguistic framework's emphasis on the role of language in shaping societal values and ecological awareness and can contribute to ecological harmony by revealing the values that are mutually valued by the business leaders and the public.

This study proposes to analyze public mourning discourse at three different levels: (1) description; (2) interpretation; (3) evaluation (He and Li, 2025). Description involves the description of textual features at the macro-level (such as topics, themes, frames or discourses), the meso-level (e.g., discursive strategies), and the micro-level (i.e., linguistic means and realizations). Interpretation involves the interpretation of the findings of textual analysis in terms of the communicative processes and their roles in construction of social knowledge, social relations and social identities. Evaluation concerns the evaluation of the discourse in terms of the underlying “ecosophies” and the socio-political and/or cultural context in which it is situated. Fig. 1 shows the integrated analytic framework.

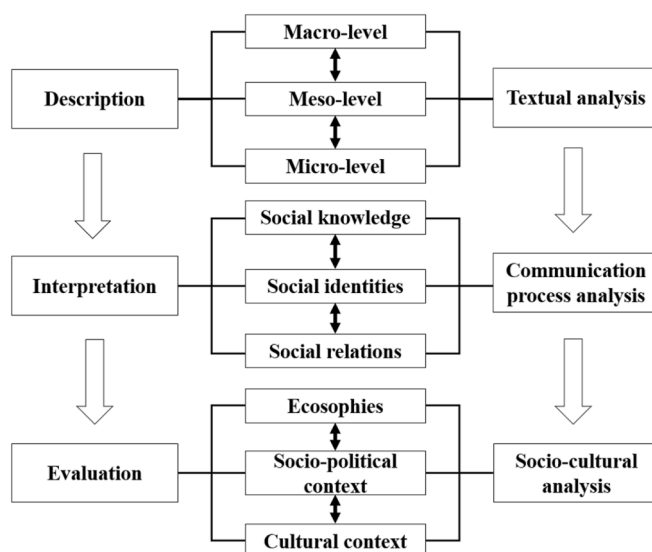


Fig. 1. An integrated analytic framework for ethical business leadership.

4. Data and methodology

4.1. Data collection and corpus building

This study focuses on analyzing Weibo posts related to the passing of Zong Qinghou, the founder of the Wahaha Group, using KH Coder as the primary analytical tool. Weibo, known as “China’s Twitter”, is one of the most popular social media platforms in China. Launched in 2009 by Sina Corporation, it combines features of microblogging, social networking, and multimedia sharing. As of 2025, Weibo boasts almost 500 million monthly active users, making it an essential platform for communication, information sharing, and public discourse in China (Weibo, 2025). It is an ideal platform for collecting public mourning discourse, because it caters to a wide range of demographics, from everyday users to public figures, organizations, and government entities.

The data collection period spanned from February 23, 2024, the date close to Zong’s passing, to March 15, 2024, when the project commenced. This timeframe captures the immediate reactions and ongoing discourse surrounding Zong’s passing, providing a comprehensive view of public sentiment and discussion. The dataset, consisting of 2121 Weibo posts, was initially extracted using Python. After further cleaning and preprocessing with Python, including filtering out irrelevant posts, removing duplicates, and eliminating non-textual elements such as emojis and URLs, the collected posts were compiled into a specialized corpus of mourning discourse. The corpus consists of 125,124 tokens and 13,455 types.

4.2. Analytic methods and procedure

This study relies mainly on KH Coder, a powerful and versatile software tool designed for quantitative content analysis and text mining (Higuchi, 2016, 2017), for the automatic processing of data. Developed by Japanese sociologist Koichi Higuchi, this open-source application has gained popularity among researchers in various fields, particularly in the social sciences (Liu, 2024). KH Coder offers a comprehensive suite of analytical features, including word frequency analysis, collocation analysis, correspondence analysis, and co-occurrence network visualization.

With the help of KH Coder, the study starts with a co-occurrence network analysis of the corpus to identify its topics and themes (Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2022). It is followed by a network analysis of the words co-occurring with “宗庆后” (Zong Qinghou) in a sentence to identify the discursive strategies and the linguistic means and realizations for the construction of Zong Qinghou. Then we focus on the top 50 nouns/proper nouns, verbs and adjectives co-occurring with Zong Qinghou in a sentence respectively. An examination of top 50 strong co-occurring nouns/proper nouns can help to identify the nomination strategies used for Zong Qinghou, while an examination of the top 50 adjectives and verbs can help to reveal the predication strategies, i.e., what kind of qualities have been assigned to Zong (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016).

For the close analysis of the adjectives qualifying Zong Qinghou, the Judgement system in Appraisal theory is drawn upon to classify these adjectives, because Judgement refers to the evaluation of human behavior with respect to social norms (Martin and White, 2005). It consists of two sub-systems: (1) **social esteem**, and (2) **social sanction**. Social esteem relates to personal attributes that can increase or decrease one’s standing in the community, while social sanction concerns moral judgments and is often codified in writing (e.g., laws, rules). The former consists of **normality** (how special), **capacity** (how capable), and **tenacity** (how resolute), whereas the latter can be further divided into **propriety** (how moral) and **veracity** (how honest) (see Fig. 2).

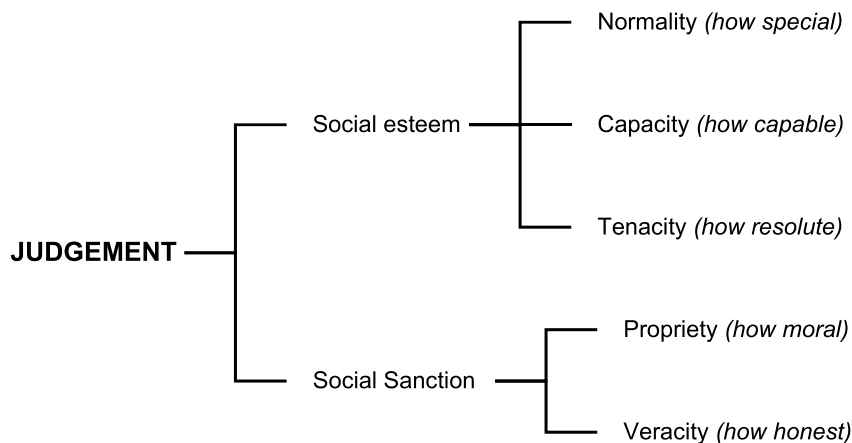


Fig. 2. Judgement system of Appraisal theory (Martin and White, 2005).

A further analysis of the action verbs directly related to Zong Qinghou in a sentence involves ergative analysis in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994). Ergative analysis focuses on the causation of the process, asking “Did the

Theme 1 foregrounds Zong's role as a **businessman** and concerns his business career. It consists of 宗庆后 (Zong Qinghou), 去世 (passed away), 逝世 (deceased), 娃哈哈 (Wahaha), 农夫山泉 (Nongfu Spring), 钟睺睺 (Zhong Shanshan), 达能 (Danone), 马云 (Jack Ma), 悼念 (mourning), 舆论 (public opinion), 网络 (internet), 水 (water)/纯净水 (purified water), and 卖 (sell). It foregrounds the relations between Zong Qinghou and his business (selling water) as well as his competitors (Zhong Shanshan, Danone, and Jack Ma). Zhong Shanshan is the founder of Nongfu Spring, another major Chinese beverage company and a competitor to Wahaha. Danone is a French multinational food-products corporation that had a joint venture with Wahaha in the past, which ended in a high-profile dispute (Krug and Rothlin, 2024). Jack Ma, a co-founder of Alibaba Group, came from the same city as Zong Qinghou. They became involved in a public dispute primarily in 2010–2011 concerning the tension between traditional retail and the emerging e-commerce sector in China. This theme paints a picture of Zong Qinghou not just as an individual businessman, but as a figure whose life and career were interwoven with the development of China's modern business landscape.

Theme 2 foregrounds Zong's **nationality** and underlines his national contributions. It consists of 企业家 (entrepreneur), 中国 (China), 中国人 (Chinese), 首富 (the richest person), 财富 (wealth), 布鞋 (cloth shoes), 资本家 (capitalist), 人民 (people), 国 (country/nation), 家 (home/family), 民族 (national/ethnic group), 品牌 (brand), 支持 (support), 民营 (private-owned), 经济 (economy) and 发展 (development). By foregrounding Zong's nationality, it connects his personal story to the national narrative of development and progress. The juxtaposition of humble beginnings (cloth shoes) with great wealth reflects a common narrative in China's recent history. This theme suggests that Zong's life is being used as a lens to examine broader changes in Chinese society and economy.

Theme 3 foregrounds Zong's role as an **employer** and addresses his social contributions and treatment of employees. It consists of 企业 (company/enterprise), 员工 (employee), 辞退 (dismiss/fire), 能力 (ability/capability), 干 (do/work), 社会 (society), 贡献 (contribution), 国家 (country/nation), 老板 (boss/employer), 生活 (life/livelihood), 老 (old/aging), 工作 (work/job), 世界 (world), 健康 (health), 事情 (matter/issue). This theme focuses on Zong's management philosophy, particularly his treatment of older employees, i.e., refusal to fire old employees above 45 years old. It highlights how his business practices are being evaluated not just in terms of profitability, but also in terms of social responsibility and ethical leadership.

Theme 4 foregrounds Zong's role as a **father** and involves his family members. It consists of 儿子 (son), 钟总 (CEO Zhong/President Zhong), 女儿 (daughter), 宗馥莉 (Zong Fuli), 父亲 (father), 美国 (United States), 国籍 (nationality), 网友 (netizens), 资产 (assets), 国内 (domestic), 国外 (abroad/overseas). It foregrounds the contrast between Zhong Shanshan's son's American nationality and Zong's daughter Zong Fuli's Chinese nationality. In China, the nationality of wealthy individuals and their children can be a sensitive topic, often tied to perceptions of patriotism and commitment to the country.

Theme 5 foregrounds Zong's role as a **manufacturer** and addresses his products and business models. It consists of 产品 (product), 卖 (sell), 钱 (money), 老百姓 (the common people/consumers), 资本 (capital), 上市 (go public), 搞 (do/engage in), 想 (want/think), 喝 (drink), 喜欢 (like), AD钙奶 (AD calcium milk), and 饮料 (beverage). It highlights Zong's focus on the mass market and his decision to keep Wahaha privately held, suggesting that these aspects form a key part of his business legacy.

Theme 6 foregrounds Zong's role as a **human being** and involves his moral character. It consists of 宗老 (Zong Lao, Revered Elder Zong), 路 (road/path), 走好 (rest in peace), 缅怀 (commemorate/remember), 良心 (conscience/integrity). The fact that *conscience/integrity* (良心) is a key term in the mourning discourse suggests that ethical conduct is highly valued in evaluations of business leaders.

These themes paint a picture of a complex, multifaceted public discourse surrounding Zong Qinghou's passing. This rich, nuanced discussion reflects the significant impact Zong had on Chinese business and society as well as the complex expectations placed on business leaders in contemporary China. It is consistent with the Confucian philosophy of personal and social development, i.e., “修身 (cultivate oneself), 齐家 (harmonize the family), 治国 (govern the state), 平天下 (bring peace to the world)” (Li, 2023). This concept outlines a progressive journey from individual self-improvement to global impact, suggesting that effective leadership and positive societal change begin with personal moral cultivation. This holistic approach to leadership aligns closely with many of the themes identified in the public discourse surrounding Zong Qinghou, emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal character, ethical conduct, corporate social responsibility, and national development in evaluating business leaders' legacies.

5.2. Word association analysis

In order to examine the specific ways Zong Qinghou is constructed in the corpus, the following analysis gives a close examination of the top 50 nouns/proper nouns, adjectives and verbs co-occurring with Zong Qinghou in a sentence.

5.2.1. Top 50 strong co-occurring nouns

An analysis of the top 50 strong co-occurring nouns/proper nouns associated with Zong Qinghou reveals a multifaceted portrayal of his identity, encompassing personal, professional, and social dimensions (see Table 1). This linguistic representation aligns closely with Confucian concepts of social order and status (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023), while also reflecting the complexities of modern Chinese society's relationship with entrepreneurship and capitalism.

Table 1
Top 50 strong co-occurring nouns.

Rank	Words	Freq.	LL	Rank	Words	Freq.	LL
1	娃哈哈 (<i>Wahaha</i>)	374	183.79	26	实业 (<i>manufacturing</i>)	11	11.32
2	创始人 (founder)	114	178.20	27	报 (<i>reward</i>)	6	11.10
3	老先生 (elder gentleman)	37	77.03	28	央视 (<i>CCTV</i>)	10	10.98
4	董事长 (chairman)	38	75.67	29	浙商 (<i>Zhejiang businessperson</i>)	13	10.84
5	企业家 (entrepreneur)	194	75.49	30	哀悼 (<i>mourn</i>)	9	10.72
6	女儿 (<i>daughter</i>)	74	66.11	31	改革 (<i>reform</i>)	14	10.22
7	集团 (<i>group</i>)	62	53.92	32	报道 (<i>report</i>)	12	9.21
8	杭州 (<i>Hangzhou</i>)	49	41.40	33	保健品 (<i>health products</i>)	5	8.73
9	马云 (<i>Jack Ma</i>)	34	28.05	34	公开信 (<i>open letter</i>)	5	8.73
10	任正非 (<i>Ren Zhengfei</i>)	31	26.61	35	农场 (<i>farm</i>)	5	8.73
11	曹德旺 (<i>Cao Dewang</i>)	20	25.56	36	对话 (<i>dialogue</i>)	5	8.73
12	国 (<i>country</i>)	35	25.26	37	罐头厂 (<i>canning factory</i>)	5	8.73
13	尊敬 (<i>respect</i>)	33	24.21	38	老大 (big boss/brother)	5	8.73
14	宗馥莉 (<i>Zong Fuli</i>)	64	23.95	39	老爷子 (old gentleman)	11	8.72
15	思考 (<i>ponder</i>)	14	19.05	40	商人 (businessperson)	13	8.69
16	追思会 (<i>memorial</i>)	13	16.96	41	商业 (<i>business</i>)	20	8.55
17	钟睺睺 (<i>Zhong Shanshan</i>)	82	16.36	42	同学 (<i>classmate</i>)	7	8.53
18	采访 (<i>interview</i>)	21	15.90	43	底线 (<i>bottom-line</i>)	7	8.53
19	达能 (<i>Danone</i>)	27	15.33	44	汉奸 (<i>traitor to China</i>)	7	8.53
20	人物 (figure)	17	15.15	45	葬礼 (<i>funeral</i>)	6	8.44
21	全国 (<i>nationwide</i>)	13	15.12	46	马化腾 (<i>Ma Huateng</i>)	6	8.44
22	首富 (richest person)	62	14.84	47	关系 (<i>relationship</i>)	17	8.33
23	市民 (<i>citizen</i>)	11	14.80	48	浙江 (<i>Zhejiang</i>)	15	8.02
24	传奇 (legend)	22	14.40	49	资本家 (capitalist)	21	7.82
25	中国 (<i>China</i>)	128	11.57	50	遗憾 (<i>regret</i>)	9	7.77

Note. LL = Log-Likelihood. The LL score indicates the statistical significance of the co-occurrence between the extracted noun and the node word ("Zong Qinghou") within the specified window span. Following the computational method in KH Coder, no external reference corpus was used; instead, the entire dataset of collected Weibo posts served as the internal reference baseline.

Personal identity descriptors such as 老先生 (*elder gentleman*), 老大 (*big boss/brother*), and 老爷子 (*old gentleman*) emphasize respect for age, wisdom, and authority. These terms resonate with traditional Confucian values that prioritize reverence for elders and those in positions of seniority. They also suggest a paternalistic leadership style often associated with Chinese business culture, where leaders are expected to embody both authority and benevolence, as in the following:

- (1) 很奇怪的事,宗庆后老先生走了。
It's a strange thing, **elder gentleman** Zong Qinghou has passed away.
- (2) 娃哈哈老大宗庆后进ICU了。
Wahaha's **big boss** Zong Qinghou has been admitted to the ICU.

Professional identity markers, including 创始人 (*founder*) and 董事长 (*chairman*), highlight Zong's formal roles and professional achievements. These terms establish his credentials as a business leader and innovator, underscoring his contributions to the business world and legitimizing his status within the business community and broader society, as in the following:

- (3) 娃哈哈创始人宗庆后去世,一代传奇落幕。
Wahaha **founder** Zong Qinghou has passed away, ending the era of a legendary figure.

The most nuanced category encompasses social identity labels, including terms like 企业家 (*entrepreneur*), 人物 (*figure*), 首富 (*richest person*), 传奇 (*legend*), 商人 (*businessperson*), and 资本家 (*capitalist*). These terms reflect broader social recognition and status, each carrying distinct connotations. The term 企业家 (*entrepreneur*) emphasizes innovation and economic contribution, often accompanied by qualifiers that highlight Zong's role in China's economic development, such as 民营企业企业家 (*private entrepreneur*), 民族企业家 (*national entrepreneur*), 杭州企业家 (*Hangzhou entrepreneur*), 第一代民营企业企业家 (*first-generation private entrepreneur*), and 人民企业家 (*people's entrepreneur*). The use of 首富 (*richest person*) acknowledges Zong's economic power, a status that carries both admiration and potential scrutiny in Chinese society. They are all positive labels used to describe the social statuses Zong has earned for himself through his life.

Descriptors like 人物 (*figure*) and 传奇 (*legend*) elevate Zong to a status of broader cultural significance, suggesting his impact extends beyond mere business success. 人物 (*figure*) is used to nominate Zong as 一代传奇人物 (*a legendary figure of a generation*), 改革开放四十年来代表人物 (*representative figure of the 40 years of Reform and Opening-up*), 封神榜中的人物 (*a figure in the pantheon of gods*), etc. Besides, 传奇 (*legend*) is used to nominate Zong as 一代传奇 (*legend of a generation*), 一个时代的传奇 (*legend of an era*), 浙商传奇 (*legend of Zhejiang merchants*), etc.

They are in contrast to terms like 商人 (*businessperson*) and 资本家 (*capitalist*), which carry some negative connotations rooted in historical and ideological factors. Compared with 资本家 (*capitalist*), 商人 (*businessperson*) is comparatively more neutral, because it is used to refer to those people who do business. However, in traditional Chinese society, businesspeople/merchants (*shang*) were ranked low in the social hierarchy, below scholars (*shi*), farmers (*nong*), and artisans (*gong*) (Liu and Chen, 2023). This was due to the Confucian belief that merchants did not produce anything but merely profited from others' labor. While Zong's role as a businessperson is often acknowledged, it is also used to emphasize that Zong has acquired a status that distinguishes himself from other common businesspeople, as in the following:

- (4) 宗老不是商人他是人民企业家娃哈哈宗庆后
Revered elder Zong is not a **businessperson**; he is a people's entrepreneur Wahaha's Zong Qinghou.

资本家 (*capitalist*) carries strong negative connotations in China, because capitalists are often portrayed as those who profit from the labor of others without contributing directly to production themselves. During the Chinese revolution and subsequent periods, capitalists were targets of political campaigns and social criticism. While these negative connotations exist, China's economic reforms since the late 1970s have led to a more complex relationship with capitalism. The country now operates under a system often described as "socialism with Chinese characteristics", which incorporates elements of market economics (Wu, 2021). As a result, successful entrepreneurs are often respected, but the term 资本家 (*capitalist*) still retains much of its negative meaning. It is often used in negation to deny the labeling of Zong Qinghou as a capitalist, as in the following:

- (5) 宗庆后: 我不是资本家, 是企业家, 为老百姓造福才会受人尊敬
Zong Qinghou: I am **not a capitalist** but an entrepreneur. Only by benefiting the common people will one earn respect.

This linguistic portrayal reflects key Confucian concepts of social order and status, as outlined by Herrmann-Pillath (2023). In Confucian thought, society is structured by status hierarchies. The multifaceted nature of Zong's constructed identity aligns with the Confucian notion that individuals occupy different positions within a social hierarchy, which are context-dependent and expressed through social interactions. Confucianism allows for social mobility, with status being earned and individuals having opportunities for advancement. Zong's journey from humble origins to a successful entrepreneur exemplifies this belief. The emphasis on his age and wisdom also mirrors the traditional Confucian reverence for seniority. While celebrating Zong's success, the narrative carefully frames him beyond the role of a wealthy capitalist, and highlights his contributions to national development as an entrepreneur. This nuanced representation reflects the evolving perception of business leaders in contemporary China, balancing traditional Confucian values with modern economic realities.

5.2.2. Top 50 strong co-occurring adjectives

The analysis of adjectives used to describe Zong provides a fascinating window into the complex interplay between traditional Confucian values and modern business leadership in China. This linguistic portrayal reflects the enduring influence of cultural norms on public perception and discourse, even in the context of rapid economic modernization. Central to this analysis is the concept of "face" in Chinese culture, which comprises both *mianzi* (social status/reputation) and *lian* (moral status) (Hwang and Han, 2010). The adjectives used to describe Zong carefully balance these two aspects, painting a picture of a leader who excels in both professional achievement and moral integrity (see Table 2).

Table 2
Top 50 strong co-occurring adjectives.

Rank	Words	Freq.	LL	Rank	Words	Freq.	LL
1	优秀 (<i>excellent</i>)	19	18.68	26	庞大 (<i>massive</i>)	3	2.58
2	坏 (<i>bad</i>)	7	13.53	27	正派 (<i>upright</i>)	3	2.58
3	女 (<i>female</i>)	17	12.80	28	经典 (<i>classic</i>)	3	2.58
4	便宜 (<i>cheap</i>)	7	10.62	29	自觉 (<i>self-aware</i>)	3	2.58
5	老 (<i>old</i>)	35	10.08	30	虚 (<i>empty</i>)	3	2.58
6	成功 (<i>successful</i>)	31	9.11	31	不一样 (<i>different</i>)	2	2.19
7	国有 (<i>state-owned</i>)	6	8.44	32	圆满 (<i>perfect</i>)	2	2.19
8	坚强 (<i>resilient</i>)	6	8.44	33	坚定不移 (<i>unwavering</i>)	2	2.19
9	著名 (<i>famous</i>)	6	6.58	34	敌对 (<i>hostile</i>)	2	2.19
10	前 (<i>former</i>)	9	5.65	35	激动 (<i>excited</i>)	2	2.19
11	朴素 (<i>simple</i>)	15	5.32	36	精密 (<i>precise</i>)	2	2.19
12	奇怪 (<i>strange</i>)	5	4.74	37	自豪 (<i>proud</i>)	2	2.19
13	亲切 (<i>kind/friendly</i>)	4	4.38	38	长远 (<i>long-term</i>)	2	2.19
14	不孝 (<i>unfilial</i>)	3	4.22	39	陈旧 (<i>outdated</i>)	2	2.19
15	仁慈 (<i>benevolent</i>)	3	4.22	40	顺利 (<i>smooth</i>)	2	2.19
16	低级 (<i>low-level</i>)	3	4.22	41	光辉 (<i>glorious</i>)	4	2.13
17	厚道 (<i>honest</i>)	3	4.22	42	杰出 (<i>outstanding</i>)	5	1.96
18	白 (<i>white</i>)	6	4.07	43	唯一 (<i>only</i>)	9	1.94

Table 2 (continued)

Rank	Words	Freq.	LL	Rank	Words	Freq.	LL
19	强大 (<i>powerful</i>)	5	3.56	44	富裕 (<i>wealthy</i>)	7	1.89
20	善良 (<i>kind-hearted</i>)	8	3.53	45	激烈 (<i>intense</i>)	3	1.59
21	年轻 (<i>young</i>)	13	3.33	46	牛 (<i>awesome</i>)	3	1.59
22	强 (<i>strong</i>)	11	3.32	47	短 (<i>short</i>)	3	1.59
23	清晰 (<i>clear</i>)	4	3.06	48	离谱 (<i>absurd</i>)	3	1.59
24	朴实 (<i>unpretentious/sincere</i>)	5	2.66	49	蠢 (<i>stupid</i>)	3	1.59
25	单身 (<i>single</i>)	3	2.58	50	贵 (<i>expensive</i>)	3	1.59

Table 3

Typical adjectives used to describe Zong Qinghou

Judgement	sub-types	Words
Social esteem	Normality (how special)	优秀 (<i>excellent</i>), 成功 (<i>successful</i>), 著名 (<i>famous</i>), 杰出 (<i>outstanding</i>), 圆满 (<i>perfect</i>), 不一样 (<i>different</i>), 光辉 (<i>glorious</i>)
	Capacity (how capable)	强大 (<i>powerful</i>), 强 (<i>strong</i>), 牛 (<i>awesome</i>)
	Tenacity (how resolute)	坚强 (<i>resilient</i>), 坚定不移 (<i>unwavering</i>)
Social sanction	Propriety (how moral)	朴素 (<i>simple</i>), 亲切 (<i>kind/friendly</i>), 仁慈 (<i>benevolent</i>), 善良 (<i>kind-hearted</i>), 朴实 (<i>unpretentious/sincere</i>)
	Veracity (how honest)	正派 (<i>upright</i>), 厚道 (<i>honest</i>), 自觉 (<i>self-aware</i>)

The categorization of these adjectives using the Judgement system (Martin and White, 2005) reveals a nuanced portrait of Zong (see Table 3). Adjectives relating to Social Esteem highlight his exceptional business acumen and resilience, while those pertaining to Social Sanction emphasize his moral character and integrity. This balanced representation reflects the enduring relevance of the Confucian concept of the “gentleman” (君子), i.e., a person who is both capable and morally upright. Particularly noteworthy is the prevalence of adjectives that support the notion of paternalistic leadership, a style deeply rooted in Confucian thought. The inclusion of the term 自觉 (*self-aware*) is particularly significant, as it highlights the Confucian concept of “self-cultivation” (修身) and individual moral autonomy (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023). Even in the context of modern business leadership, there is an expectation for leaders to engage in continuous moral self-improvement and self-reflection. While celebrating Zong’s business success and global influence, these adjectives also firmly root him in traditional ethical standards.

5.2.3. Top 50 strong co-occurring verbs

Those verbs associated with Zong offer insights into the construction of agency for this prominent Chinese business figure, particularly in the context of his passing. Confucianism posits that moral agency and individual development are not innate characteristics but achievements cultivated over time through social interaction (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023). In Confucian philosophy, the concept of the individual self (己) is central to moral agency, but it is viewed as a developmental process: anyone has the potential to become a “sage” or “gentleman” (君子) through continuous self-improvement and social engagement. To examine how agency is constructed for Zong Qinghou, this analysis focuses on the top 50 verbs that strongly co-occur with his name in a sentence (see Table 4).

Table 4

Top 50 strong co-occurring verbs.

Rank	Words	Freq.	LL	Rank	Words	Freq.	LL
1	去世 (<i>pass away</i>)	95	132.86	26	踏实 (<i>steady</i>)	6	8.44
2	逝世 (<i>decease</i>)	44	77.13	27	过世 (<i>pass on</i>)	6	8.44
3	悼念 (<i>mourn</i>)	39	62.65	28	富 (<i>wealthy</i>)	16	7.79
4	离世 (<i>depart [this life]</i>)	26	36.12	29	开除 (<i>fire</i>)	16	7.79
5	说 (<i>say</i>)	127	22.39	30	回答 (<i>answer</i>)	9	7.77
6	走了 (<i>gone</i>)	13	19.09	31	干 (<i>do</i>)	19	7.39
7	想到 (<i>think of</i>)	22	18.69	32	建议 (<i>suggest</i>)	8	7.33
8	送别 (<i>farewell</i>)	9	18.48	33	白手起家 (<i>build from scratch</i>)	8	7.33
9	怀念 (<i>miss</i>)	21	15.90	34	怕 (<i>afraid</i>)	13	6.94
10	结婚 (<i>marry</i>)	11	14.80	35	记住 (<i>remember</i>)	7	6.92
11	创业 (<i>start a business</i>)	35	13.34	36	泪目 (<i>tear up</i>)	6	6.58
12	带领 (<i>lead</i>)	11	12.92	37	生子 (<i>have a child</i>)	6	6.58
13	提出 (<i>propose</i>)	11	12.92	38	留在 (<i>stay</i>)	6	6.58
14	致敬 (<i>pay tribute</i>)	22	12.62	39	作出 (<i>make</i>)	4	6.42
15	缅怀 (<i>commemorate</i>)	29	12.03	40	吊唁 (<i>condolences</i>)	4	6.42
16	自发 (<i>spontaneous</i>)	15	11.80	41	堪 (<i>capable</i>)	4	6.42
17	留下 (<i>leave behind</i>)	15	10.73	42	接手 (<i>take over</i>)	4	6.42
18	纪念 (<i>remember</i>)	12	10.37	43	暴增 (<i>surge</i>)	4	6.42
19	奋斗 (<i>struggle/strive</i>)	16	9.38	44	献上 (<i>offer</i>)	4	6.42
20	值得 (<i>worthy</i>)	31	9.11	45	祝愿 (<i>wish</i>)	4	6.42
21	受人尊敬 (<i>respected</i>)	5	8.73	46	受 (<i>receive</i>)	12	6.40
22	备受 (<i>receive</i>)	5	8.73	47	参与 (<i>participate</i>)	5	6.36
23	回顾 (<i>reflect</i>)	7	8.53	48	演变 (<i>evolve</i>)	5	6.36
24	永垂不朽 (<i>immortalized</i>)	6	8.44	49	说的 (<i>said</i>)	5	6.36
25	读书 (<i>study</i>)	6	8.44	50	走 (<i>leave</i>)	19	6.24

Among these, 27 verbs directly describe Zong and can be classified into three groups based on his role in the clause (see Table 5).

Table 5

Ergative analysis of concerned verbs.

Types	Role	Words
Ergative	Medium	悼念 (<i>mourn</i>), 送别 (<i>farewell</i>), 怀念 (<i>miss</i>), 致敬 (<i>pay tribute</i>), 缅怀 (<i>commemorate</i>), 纪念 (<i>remember</i>), 受人尊敬 (<i>respected</i>), 记住 (<i>remember</i>), 泪目 (<i>tear up</i>), 吊唁 (<i>condolences</i>), 祝愿 (<i>wish</i>)
	Agent	创业 (<i>start a business</i>), 带领 (<i>lead</i>), 留下 (<i>leave behind</i>), 开除 (<i>fire</i>), 干 (<i>do</i>), 白手起家 (<i>build from scratch</i>), 作出 (<i>make</i>), 接手 (<i>take over</i>), 参与 (<i>participate</i>)
Non-ergative	Medium	去世 (<i>pass away</i>), 逝世 (<i>decease</i>), 离世 (<i>depart [this life]</i>), 走了 (<i>gone</i>), 奋斗 (<i>struggle/strive</i>), 过世 (<i>pass on</i>), 永垂不朽 (<i>immortalized</i>)

When Zong occurs as a Medium in non-ergative clauses, these terms describe events in his life, particularly his passing. Words like 去世 (*pass away*), 逝世 (*decease*), and 离世 (*depart [this life]*) refer to his death in varying degrees of formality. 奋斗 (*struggle/strive*) describes his life's work, while 永垂不朽 (*immortalized*) suggests his lasting impact. These terms frame his death as part of a larger, inspirational life journey.

When Zong appears as an Agent in ergative clauses, these terms emphasize Zong's entrepreneurial spirit and self-motivated achievements. Words like 创业 (*start a business*) and 白手起家 (*build from scratch*) emphasize his entrepreneurial spirit. 带领 (*lead*) and 作出 (*make*) underscore his leadership role. These terms paint a picture of Zong as a dynamic, hands-on leader instrumental in building his business empire. Interestingly, the term 开除 (*fire*) is often used in negation, emphasizing Zong's refusal to fire middle-aged employees, as in the following:

- (6) 宗庆后被外媒称赞: 不忽悠、不移民、不转移资产、不与外资勾结、不搞圈钱、不谋求暴利、不上市套现、不沉溺男女关系、不剥削员工、不开除中年以上员工。
Zong Qinghou was praised by foreign media: He doesn't deceive, doesn't emigrate, doesn't transfer assets, doesn't collude with foreign capital, doesn't engage in money-grabbing schemes, doesn't seek exorbitant profits, doesn't go public to cash out, doesn't indulge in affairs, doesn't exploit employees, doesn't **fire** employees over middle age.

When Zong appears as a Medium in ergative clauses, the verbs reflect the public's response to his passing and the respect he garnered. Words like 悼念 (*mourn*), 缅怀 (*commemorate*), and 致敬 (*pay tribute*) indicate collective acts of remembrance. 受人尊敬 (*respected*) highlights the high regard in which he was held. These terms show a strong emotional and respectful public response to Zong's passing, indicating that his death is seen as a significant loss.

- (7) 马云发挽联悼念宗庆后宗庆后是企业家, 不忘初心。
Jack Ma sends a memorial couplet to **mourn** Zong Qinghou: Zong Qinghou is an entrepreneur who never forgot his original aspiration.

This verb analysis reveals that Zong's agency is constructed not only through his actions and achievements but also through the public's reaction to his legacy. The respectful and emotional response to his passing serves as a testament to his remarkable achievements in the business world, reflecting the interdependent nature of individual development in Confucian thought (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023).

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study has introduced a data-driven approach to the particular ways of imagining Zong as a Chinese ethical business leader in public mourning discourse on social media. The study foregrounds several key themes of Zong: business acumen, national contributions, management philosophy, family management, consumer relations, and moral integrity. These themes address multiple identities of Zong as a businessman, a Chinese, an employer, a father, a manufacturer, and a human being. Strong co-occurring nouns/proper nouns highlight different identity labels used to emphasize Zong's esteemed status. Co-occurring adjectives praise both his distinguished professional performance and outstanding personal virtues. Strong co-occurring verbs underscore Zong's agency and autonomy in his life journey and achievements, as well as the public response to his passing and memory.

Zong was constructed as exemplifying the Confucian merchant spirit, a trait highly valued in Chinese culture. He garnered widespread respect, not because of his vast wealth, but due to his commitment to simplicity, diligence, and a rigorous work ethic, which aligns with the esteemed "Zhejiang merchant" tradition (Zhou, 2024). The philosophical underpinnings of the Zhejiang merchant culture are further elaborated through the ideas of Ye Shi, a prominent figure of the Yongjia School of Neo-Confucianism during the Southern Song Dynasty. He advocated for "combining kingly way and hegemony, equally emphasizing righteousness and profit" (王霸兼行, 义利并重) and "respecting righteousness while nurturing profit, sharing profits with others" (崇义养利, 以利与人) (Zhou, 2024). This partially aligns with common perspectives on corporate social responsibilities (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020; Velte, 2021), but extends beyond them by emphasizing self-

cultivation and moral integrity, thus representing Confucian ecosophies on ethical business leadership (Herrmann-Pillath, 2023).

It went viral because it also aligned with the Chinese government's promotion of the third distribution of wealth, characterized by high-income groups voluntarily distributing social resources and material wealth. Since 2006, China has placed greater emphasis on corporate social responsibility due to the unfavourable effects of rapid economic growth, such as imbalanced regional development and environmental degradation (Wang, 2020). Organizations are now urged to take more socially responsible actions, and the new-generation entrepreneurs need to demonstrate a higher awareness of responsibility for all stakeholders (Lee and Wang, 2023). This approach aligns with Confucian ideals, suggesting that great leaders should extend their genuine care beyond their immediate circle to a broader range of stakeholders. The public mourning for Zong reflects a collective appreciation for a leader who embodied traditional values while achieving modern success, never losing sight of his role in contributing to the broader welfare of society. It also reflects public longing for new business ecologies in China, where wealthy entrepreneurs are expected to shoulder greater responsibilities in working toward the goal of common prosperity at this new stage of socio-economic development.

Therefore, this research contributes to the broader field of business ethics by examining how ethical leadership is discursively constructed in a non-Western context. It offers a nuanced understanding of how cultural values, economic realities, and social expectations intersect in shaping public perceptions of business leaders. This study not only enhances our understanding of China's evolving corporate culture but also offers valuable insights into the role of social media in shaping and reflecting public opinion on matters of business ethics and leadership. The integrated analytic framework established in this research can also be applied to the ecological discourse analysis of the discursive constructions of ethical business leadership in other contexts (He and Li, 2025). It can contribute to the uncovering of linguistic and discursive mechanisms through which ethical business leadership is constructed, negotiated, and celebrated. Overall, this approach promises to yield valuable insights for scholars, business leaders, and policymakers alike, as they navigate the complex landscape of business ethics in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ming Liu: Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, funding acquisition. **Han Li:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Data curation. **Wei He:** Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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