

Discourse, Power, and Ideological Contestation in the “Xibei Pre-made Food Incident”: A Norman Fairclough Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

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Abstract: In September 2025, the renowned Chinese restaurant chain Xibei became embroiled in a “pre-made food” accusation storm initiated by online opinion leader Luo Yonghao. The incident rapidly escalated from a personal consumer dispute into a nationwide public issue, profoundly touching upon societal sensitivities regarding food safety, business integrity, and consumer sovereignty. This study employs Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to conduct an in-depth analysis of four core news reports surrounding this event. The analysis reveals that the discursive practice of this event was essentially a fierce contest among official technical definitions, corporate legitimacy defense, and consumer lived experience perceptions. At its core lies a structural power conflict between the efficiency logic pursued by capital and the value logic desired by consumers. This study aims, through systematic discourse deconstruction, to reveal the implicit power asymmetries and ideological manipulations in public communication, offering a new theoretical perspective and practical case for understanding consumer rights movements and corporate social responsibility discourse under China’s contemporary market economy.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Fairclough; Pre-Made Dishes; Xibei; Right to Know

1. Introduction

Contemporary Chinese society is undergoing a profound “consumption revolution.” Consumer rights awareness has awakened unprecedentedly, and their demands for food have long transcended the basic level of “safety,” moving towards advanced pursuits of quality, transparency, and experience. Simultaneously, driven by capital and markets, the catering industry is steadfastly advancing on a path of industrialization and standardization centered around central kitchens and pre-made dishes. While this path enhances efficiency and expands scale, it also sows the seeds of potential divergence from traditional consumer perceptions of “wok hei” (breath of the wok) and expectations of “freshness.” The “pre-made food controversy” triggered in September 2025 between online celebrity Luo Yonghao and catering giant Xibei is a concentrated eruption and typical symptom of this deep-seated structural contradiction. The incident began with a social media complaint by Luo Yonghao, triggering comprehensive, multi-level discussions involving ordinary netizens, industry experts, market regulators, and national media. The focus of debate rapidly shifted from initial emotional accusations to several core points of “discursive” contention: What exactly is the authoritative definition of “pre-made dishes”? Do the ingredients and processes used by Xibei conform to this definition? Do restaurants have an obligation to proactively inform customers? Does their pricing strategy constitute deception? These questions all involve the construction of discourse, the exercise of power, and ideological justification. Discourse is by no means a transparent reflection of reality but a form of social practice that actively constructs social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief^[1]. The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) advocated by Fairclough aims precisely to reveal the often-overlooked hidden connections between language, power, and ideology. The proposed “three-dimensional analytical framework” – viewing any discursive event simultaneously as Text, Discursive practice, and Social practice – provides us with a powerful and systematic dissecting tool. Based on this, this study takes four news reports on the “Xibei incident” as core analytical corpora, attempting to answer the following questions:

1) At the textual level, what specific linguistic strategies (vocabulary, grammar, structure) do different actors (media, enterprises, consumers, regulators) use to construct their respective versions of “reality”?

2) At the discursive practice level, how are these texts produced, disseminated, and consumed? How do different discourses (business discourse, regulatory discourse, public discourse) compete in this process and form a dynamic “order of discourse”?

3) At the social practice level, what deeper socio-economic changes, power structures, and ideological conflicts in contemporary China does this discursive struggle reflect? How does it, in turn, react upon social practice, potentially promoting which institutional or normative changes?

By exploring these questions, this study hopes to transcend the news heat of the event itself and, from the level of discourse analysis, provide a profound academic footnote for interpreting the dynamic power relations among enterprises, consumers, and regulators in China’s market economy environment.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis originates from critical linguistics. Its core tenet is to explore how language operates in social practice and how power is exercised, maintained, and challenged through language^[2]. Among numerous CDA scholars, Norman Fairclough’s contribution is particularly outstanding. He successfully integrated linguistic analysis with social theory, avoiding both purely linguistic formalism and purely sociological determinism. Fairclough’s core proposition^[3] is that discourse is a three-dimensional concept: *a) Dimension of Text*: This is the most visible level, concerned with the linguistic features of spoken or written language, including lexical choice, transitivity system (who does what to whom), modality (possibility and necessity), presupposition, argument structure, etc. Analysis aims to reveal the ideological stance behind linguistic choices. *b) Dimension of Discursive practice*: This level concerns the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, i.e., “how texts are produced and received.” Key concepts include intertextuality and order of discourse. This connects micro-level text with macro-level social practice. *c) Dimension of Social practice*: This is the most macro level, interpreting discursive practice within the broader socio-cultural context, analyzing how it relates to power relations, ideology, and wider social structures (e.g., political-economic systems, social change). Discourse is both shaped by and shapes social practice. These three dimensions are not linear but form a dialectical unity. Social practice shapes discursive practice, which shapes text; conversely, text influences and reconstructs social practice through discursive practice.

Currently, research to study business crises, food safety, and media discourse is quite abundant. For example, Zhang & O’Halloran analyzed the strategies and limitations of corporate apology discourse in milk powder safety incidents^[4]; Liu Yusi explored the role of media in constructing food safety risks^[5]. Research on “pre-made dishes” mostly focuses on industrial economics, food safety standards, or consumer attitudes. However, research from a CDA perspective, especially using Fairclough’s three-dimensional model to deeply dissect a public opinion event surrounding pre-made dishes, is still insufficient. The unique value of the “Xibei incident” lies in its perfect presentation of the struggle for the Power of Definition. The enterprise attempted to defend its legitimacy by invoking official technical definitions (“we are not pre-made dishes”), consumers countered based on lifeworld experience and common sense (“it feels like it is”), and the media played a role in framing competition and agenda-setting. This provides an excellent sample for applying Fairclough’s framework, particularly intertextuality analysis.

3. Research Methodology and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, guided by Critical Discourse Analysis as its methodology, and uses Fairclough’s three-dimensional model as the specific analytical framework.

3.1 Corpus Selection

The research corpus consists of four news reports on the “Xibei incident”: 1) Commentary from *China Daily*, “Pre-prepared meals sector needs effective supervision” (2025-09-16). This article represents an official stance, leaning towards a macro regulatory perspective. 2) News report from *China News Service* (Cnns.cn), “Chinese chain restaurant Xibei apologizes after pre-made food controversy” (2025-09-15). This article focuses on the event’s development, promptly reporting Xibei’s apology. 3) In-depth report from *Global Times*, “Dispute between influencer and restaurant reignites public debate over use of ‘pre-made dishes’” (2025-09-13). This article is the most detailed, presenting multiple viewpoints and the event’s context. 4) Follow-up report from *Global Times*, “Beijing municipal market regulator looking

into situation amid Xibei pre-made meal controversy: report” (2025-09-15). This article reflects potential actions by regulatory agencies. These four documents vary in source, publication time, and genre, forming a corpus capable of reflecting discursive diversity and dynamic development.

3.2 Analysis Process

The analysis will strictly follow the three-dimensional model, layer by layer.

1) Textual Analysis: We will conduct detailed linguistic analysis of the four documents, focusing on: a) naming and lexical choice (e.g., pre-prepared vs. pre-made); b) message sources and quotation methods (who is quoted, how they are quoted); c) use of modal verbs (must, should, can, etc.); and d) presuppositions (taken-for-granted, unquestioned premises).

2) Discursive Practice Analysis: We will focus on analyzing intertextuality phenomena in the corpus, identify other text types embedded within the texts (e.g., Weibo posts, corporate statements, government documents, expert comments, netizen voices) and analyze how they are “recontextualized” to serve the media’s own narrative framework. Simultaneously, we outline the competing “order of discourse” in the event.

3) Social Practice Analysis: We will connect the findings from the previous two layers with macro-social factors such as the industrialization of China’s catering industry, the consumer rights movement, the influence of social media as a new public sphere, and the characteristic Chinese model of market regulation, thus conducting a critical interpretation.

4. Findings and Analysis: Discourse Deconstruction of the “Xibei Incident”

4.1 Textual Dimension

1) The War of Naming

Different naming of the same entity is the most direct linguistic manifestation of ideology. Throughout the event, the naming of the core concept showed significant differentiation.

Official/Technical Discourse: The definition cited at length by *China Daily* and *Global Times*, from the 2024 “Notice” issued by the State Administration for Market Regulation and other departments, uses “pre-prepared meals.” This definition is full of technical details (“using one or more edible agricultural products as raw materials,” “without adding preservatives,” “industrially pre-processed,” “meeting the storage, transportation, and sales conditions indicated on the label”), aiming to establish clear regulatory boundaries. This naming strategy is a form of “Technisation,” using professional, neutral terminology to create an objective, authoritative image, thereby stripping away emotional connotations and moral judgments.

Corporate Defense Discourse: The response from Xibei founder Jia Guolong strictly adhered to the official technical definition: “under national regulations, none of Xibei’s dishes fall into the category of pre-made dishes.” He firmly denied providing “pre-made dishes,” building the legitimacy of their actions by attaching themselves to the official definition.

Consumer/Public Discourse: Luo Yonghao and the broader netizen community used “pre-made dishes/food.” This term circulates in consumers’ everyday language, its connotation leaning more towards “industrial products made in advance, requiring only simple heating,” often associated with negative experiences like “not fresh, poor texture, many additives.”

2) Message Sources and Quotation

The media skillfully constructs the event’s authenticity and bias by selectively quoting whom and how.

Dominance of Elite Voices: The core sources in the four reports are corporate elites (Jia Guolong, Xibei official) and influential figures (Luo Yonghao). Their statements are directly quoted or indirectly reported, forming the backbone of the narrative. This reflects the media’s routine reliance on “authoritative sources,” but also invisibly reinforces the dominance of elites in public discourse.

Strategic Introduction of Public Voices: Notably, *Global Times* specifically inserted two netizen comments. One pointed out: “In fact, people only have two questions. First, whether it is a pre-made dish...Second, whether consumers should be informed...”. The other was more pointed: “you can’t

deceive consumers by saying you make the dishes fresh, and you can't sell them at the price of freshly made dishes. That's deception". The media here plays the role of an "amplifier," collecting dispersed, often marginalized consumer voices and bestowing them a strategic position to corroborate and reinforce their critical framework towards the enterprise. This quoting is not for balance but for argumentation.

Framed Quoting of Expert Voices: *Global Times* concluded by quoting Associate Professor Zhu Yi from China Agricultural University and economic commentator Liu Ge. Zhu Yi pointed out the disconnect between "official standards" and "consumer perception," attributing the root cause to enterprises "failing to simultaneously respect consumers' right to know." Liu Ge attempted to demonize pre-made dishes, emphasizing "the core of the debate should never be about rejecting pre-made dishes themselves, but about how to standardize their use, ensure transparency." Experts are here mobilized, on one hand explaining the root of the conflict, and on the other hand attempting to guide public sentiment towards "constructive" solutions, thus providing a rational outlet and framework for the discursive conflict.

3) Modality and Responsibility

Modal verbs (e.g., must, should, need to) reveal the necessity of action and the attribution of obligation. *China Daily*, as a commentary, is filled with high-value modal verbs, such as "needs effective supervision," "has never been more urgent," "must be implemented," "must be heated or cooked." These phrasings construct a context of regulatory absence and imminent crisis, thereby providing urgency and justification for its core argument – the necessity of strengthening supervision. The obligated subjects are clearly directed towards "food safety authorities" and "prepared meal producers." Xibei's apology letter adopted a different modality strategy: "We realized that...", "We deeply apologize...", "We would like to extend...". By using the past tense "realized" and present-tense apology promises, it attempted to construct an image of a responsible enterprise that acknowledges mistakes and corrects them, shifting the modal focus from "must comply with external rules" to "we proactively promise," aiming to regain trust.

4.2 Discursive Practice Dimension

1) Intertextuality

The media coverage of this event is a classic example of high intertextuality. Each text is not isolated but a "mosaic" pieced together by numerous other "textual fragments."

Diversity of Embedded Genres: Analyzing the *Global Times* report, we see it seamlessly embeds Weibo posts (Luo Yonghao's initial complaint and bounty), corporate statements (Xibei's public letter), government documents (detailed clauses of the 2024 "Notice"), legal statements (Jia Guolong's declaration to sue), on-the-scene news reporting (journalist's kitchen visit), live stream transcripts (Luo Yonghao displaying frozen fish ingredient list), expert comments, and netizen opinions. This diversity creates textual richness and drama.

Recontextualization and Framing Contest: The key lies not in what is embedded, but in how it is embedded. For instance, the media, after quoting the official definition, immediately switches to consumer questioning and kitchen photos of frozen fish. This juxtaposition itself is a commentary. It "recontextualizes" the official definition, placing it within a framework full of skeptical consumer experience, thereby subtly shaking the former's absolute authority and constructing an implicit narrative of "official definitions being detached from reality." Similarly, the packaging bag printed with various water retention agents, displayed in Luo Yonghao's live stream, is "recontextualized" as ironclad evidence accusing the enterprise of "deception," even though these additives might be within regulatory limits. This process is precisely the contest of discursive frames.

2) Conflict in the Order of Discourse

In the Xibei incident, three main discourses constitute a competitive "order of discourse." First is the Regulatory and Technocratic Discourse. Based on official definitions and technical standards, it emphasizes classification, boundaries, safety baselines, and industry orientation. Its power stems from institutional authorization, pursuing order and controllable development. Second is the Corporate and Managerialist Discourse. Xibei's discourse was flexible and strategic. Initially, it appropriated regulatory discourse for defense ("we are legal"); when the defense failed, it swiftly switched to public relations and penitence discourse (apology, promise of transparency, open kitchen). Its core is maintaining brand legitimacy and commercial interests. Its power stems from capital and economic strength. Finally, the Lifeworld and Consumer Rights Discourse. Triggered by Luo Yonghao and based broadly on netizen

comments, it is rooted in daily experience, common-sense morality, and rights consciousness. Its core demands are the “right to know” and “fair trade,” opposing “deception.” Its power stems from public opinion pressure and collective identity, amplified and converged through social media. The media is not a neutral platform but an active participant in this “order of discourse.”

4.3 Social Practice Dimension

1) Catering Industrialization and the Logic of Capital

The deep root of this discursive storm is the irreversible industrialization process of China’s catering industry. Central kitchens and pre-made dishes are the inevitable products of capital’s pursuit of standardization, economies of scale, de-skilling, and cost control. The emphasis on “efficiency” and “supply chain” in corporate discourse is essentially a manifestation of capital logic. However, this logic directly conflicts with the consumer logic based on “handmade,” “freshly stir-fried,” and “wok hei.” Consumers seek experiential value and cultural identity, while industrialized production provides standardized products. The discursive conflict is a representation of this deeper socio-economic contradiction.

2) The Rights Revolution in Consumer Society and Social Media Empowerment

Chinese consumers have evolved from “pursuing availability” to “pursuing quality,” and further to “pursuing discursive power.” In this event, consumers were no longer satisfied with passively accepting products but actively demanded participation in definition and supervision processes. Luo Yonghao’s role was crucial. As an “influential consumer,” he leveraged his social media capital to successfully transform personal dissatisfaction into collective action, achieving a challenge and check on traditional corporate discursive power. This exemplifies how social media reshapes the power dynamics of the public sphere.

3) The Modernization Dilemma of Characteristic Chinese Regulation

The event also reflects challenges faced by China’s regulatory system. Regulators attempt to regulate emerging formats through refined technical standards, but this “technocratic governance” model can sometimes disconnect from the public’s common-sense understanding. The *Global Times* report showed that the Beijing Municipal Market Supervision Bureau “is paying attention and further verifying the situation,” indicating the high responsiveness of the regulatory system to public opinion pressure. The impending implementation of amendments to the “Food Safety Law,” emphasizing “strengthened supervision,” “clarified responsibilities,” and “implementing closed-loop supervision,” can be seen as a direct response of regulatory discourse to this public opinion crisis. This indicates that public discursive practice can effectively react upon social practice, promoting adjustments and changes at the institutional level. Regulators must strike a difficult balance between the economic mission of promoting industrial development and the social mission of protecting consumer rights.

4) Ideological Contestation

Ultimately, this discursive struggle is catalyzing the formation of a new dominant ideology. In the past, corporate legitimacy might have been based more on “product safety” and “compliance with national standards.” In this event, a higher-level norm was clearly constructed through discursive practice: transparency and integrity became the new cornerstone of corporate legitimacy. *China Daily*’s conclusion is most representative: “When governance, corporate responsibility and consumer awareness align, pre-prepared meals can offer both convenience and safety.” This marks the reaching of a consensus: future competition is not only about products and prices but also about information transparency and ethical integrity. Discourse is not only a tool for argument but is constructing new social reality and business ethics.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study, through Fairclough’s three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis, conducted an in-depth dissection of the “Xibei incident,” revealing a profound social contest over discursive power, the power of definition, and legitimacy that far exceeds food safety itself. At the textual level, the analysis discovered carefully orchestrated naming strategies, strategic sourcing and quotation, and responsibility attribution revealed by modality verbs – all these linguistic choices served different ideological positions. At the discursive practice level, the research highlighted how high intertextuality became the core field of framing contention. The media, by juxtaposing and recontextualizing government documents,

corporate statements, netizen comments, and on-site evidence, constructed a narrative framework highlighting “cognitive disconnects” and “corporate failure of responsibility.” The three discourses of regulation, enterprise, and consumers competed and negotiated within a dynamic order of discourse. At the most macro social practice level, this study anchored the discursive struggle to the structural contradiction between China’s catering industrialization and consumer rights awakening. The conflict between the efficiency logic pursued by capital and the experiential logic of the consumer lifeworld is the fundamental driver of this controversy. Simultaneously, the research also demonstrated how public discourse successfully exerted pressure on the regulatory system and may drive institutional change, ultimately participating in the construction of a new business ideology norm centered on “transparency” and “integrity.” In summary, the “Xibei incident” is a prism refracting the complex interaction of multiple forces, multiple logics, and multiple discourses during China’s social transformation period. Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis provides us with a powerful set of tools, allowing us to penetrate the surface of language, discern the power and ideology operating behind it, and thus understand the era we live in more profoundly.

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