



# Emotional governance at the street level: a content analysis of service slogans in China

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## Abstract

This paper explores emotional governance in Chinese street-level bureaucracy by conducting a content analysis of service slogans. Emotional governance involves the use of emotional management strategies in the process of public administration, with the goal of influencing interactions between administrators and citizens to achieve desired policy outcomes. We gathered service slogans from the social media accounts of public service agencies. Through content analysis, this study identifies common emotional governance strategies and discusses the implications for administrator-citizen interactions. Building upon the findings and relevant literature, this paper proposes recommendations to help Chinese street-level bureaucracy “walk the talk,” emphasizing the hands-on practice of effective emotional governance through managing employees’ emotional labor. The significance of this research lies not only in providing practical guidance for managers seeking to enhance public service performance but also in contributing to our understanding of emotional governance, an area that remains under-researched.

**Keywords** Affective governance · China · Public service · Street-level bureaucracy · Emotional labor

## 1 Introduction

Public administration, which forms the foundation of governmental operations, serves as the vital nexus between the state and citizens (Frederickson et al., 2015). Its significance lies in delivering public services that cater to the needs and

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expectations of the populace. Over the last few decades, the academic understanding of public administration has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a traditional, bureaucratic approach to one that recognizes the complexities and nuances of modern governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Kettl, 2000; Osborne, 2010). Within the realm of diverse public sector governance topics, a particular nuance that has garnered increasing scholarly attention is the notion of “emotional governance” (Richards, 2007).

Emotional governance refers to the utilization of emotional management strategies in the process of public administration, aiming to influence the interactions between administrators and citizens to achieve desired service outcomes. Emotions, from an individual’s perspective, are psychological and physiological responses that assist individuals in navigating and responding to stimuli or situations (Stemmler, 2004). However, when viewed in a broader social context, emotions also serve as a means of interpersonal communication and can even facilitate social bonding and cooperation (Luo & Yang, 2022). Hence, in the domain of public administration, emotions transcend private, individual experiences and have a significant impact on the outcomes of state-citizen interactions, holding the potential to be strategically harnessed in public sector governance (Rosas & Serrano-Puche, 2018).

However, the conventional mode of public administration tends to privilege the rational aspects of organizations, as proposed by Max Weber’s (1947) theory of bureaucracy. Weber suggested that bureaucracy represents the prevailing organizational form in a legal-rational society, characterized by efficiency, predictability, and impersonality. Consequently, the workplace was advocated as an environment devoid of emotions, where decisions were based solely on rational grounds (Fineman, 1999). Nevertheless, there are situations where effectively managing and expressing emotions becomes crucial, highlighting the limitations of rigid, emotion-free governance mechanisms. For example, administrators often encounter citizen complaints, grievances, or negative feedback, requiring them to remain composed, empathetic, and responsive while addressing citizen concerns. During crises, emergencies, or disasters, administrators need to provide reassurance and effectively communicate with those who are in distress. Such instances highlight the significance of governing emotions, both for administrators and citizens (Guy et al., 2008; Mastracci et al., 2012).

Therefore, emotional governance emerges as a critical complement to traditional public administration. It is seen as a governance tool infused with flexibility, humanity, and warmth (Tian & Zhang, 2019), providing the capacity to regulate and steer desired emotional states among various stakeholders. Consequently, the effective implementation of emotional governance has the potential to foster increased public trust and satisfaction, ultimately enhancing citizens’ experiences and perceptions of public services. In other words, emotional governance holds considerable promise in mitigating the avoidable costs associated with public sector governance, enabling governments to reduce the time and effort invested in conflict resolution, employee turnover, and public dissatisfaction (Fan, 2022).

Despite the high stakes involved, there is a dearth of scholarly discussions on emotional governance in the field of public administration. To advance knowledge in this important yet under-researched area, we propose to examine the experience of

China, which offers a unique yet relevant context for studying emotional governance. Deeply influenced by Confucianism, China exhibits distinct social dynamics that shape the perception, expression, and management of emotions. Traditional Chinese culture places significant emphasis on concepts like *guanxi* and interpersonal harmony (Wu, 2022), thereby highlighting the relevance and implications of emotional governance in this particular setting. Moreover, the Chinese government is currently undergoing an administrative reform process, displaying a commitment to establishing a service-oriented government and placing increasing emphasis on the delivery of high-quality public services (Chen, 2008). A crucial aspect of these reforms is the cultivation of a citizen-focused service environment, characterized by elements of emotional governance (Li, 2022). Considering these factors, China is a fitting choice for this study.

To study emotional governance in China, street-level bureaucracy provides an ideal setting because the concept of emotional governance holds high relevance in front-line public service work. Street-level bureaucracy is integral to public administration and serves as the primary domain where citizens most frequently interact with the state (Lipsky, 2010). As mentioned earlier, emotional governance can play a significant role in shaping state-citizen interactions at this level (Wang & Yin, 2023). For example, street-level bureaucrats engage in direct interactions with citizens, often in emotionally charged situations. They handle cases involving individuals in distress, crisis situations, or those seeking assistance or redress. The manner in which street-level bureaucrats regulate their own emotions and respond to the emotions of citizens can have far-reaching consequences, influencing the perceived quality of public services as well as citizen satisfaction and trust in government (Barnes & Henly, 2018; Mishra, 2021). Therefore, street-level bureaucracy provides a fertile ground for the comprehensive exploration of emotional governance in Chinese public administration.

The present study aims to investigate emotional governance in China by conducting a content analysis of service slogans collected from street-level government agencies. The decision to focus on service slogans, although seemingly minor, holds significant importance as these slogans represent an essential medium of emotional governance that, according to our knowledge, has not yet been explored. Through the analysis of service slogans, this research seeks to shed light on the practice of emotional governance in China by identifying prevalent employee performance cues and assessing their implications for state-citizen relations. The empirical findings from this study will provide a foundation for formulating recommendations on optimal practices in emotional governance in China and beyond. These recommendations aim to offer practical guidance for policymakers and public administrators who aim to enhance the quality of public services and citizen satisfaction through effective emotional governance.

In the following sections, we will further elaborate on the concept of emotional governance and provide justification for studying service slogans. Subsequently, we will present the results of the content analysis of service slogans and thoroughly discuss the implications of these analytical findings, along with practical recommendations.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Emotional governance and its connection with emotional labor

Emotional governance, alternatively known as affective governance (Sorace, 2021), is a burgeoning concept within the realm of public administration that warrants further exploration. As far as our understanding goes, Richards (2007) is credited with introducing this concept in his book titled “Emotional Governance: Politics, Media and Terror.” While it has only recently gained scholarly attention, emotional governance has long been a fundamental aspect of strategies devised and implemented by not only public authorities but also political leaders. For instance, politicians often utilize media platforms and public speeches to evoke emotional responses and leverage them to rally public support for their political agendas (Richards, 2007). Throughout history, numerous prominent leaders have exemplified the importance of mobilizing the public on an emotional level as a defining characteristic of effective political leadership.

Emotions play a significant role not only in political mobilization but also in public policymaking and the delivery of public services (Pykett et al., 2016). For example, in her study of the UK’s anti-obesity “Change4Life” campaign, Mulderrig (2017) revealed how the government employed emotional manipulation, such as highlighting health risks associated with obesity, to guide parents and children towards adopting healthier lifestyles. During times of crisis, e.g., terrorist attacks and public health emergencies, emotional governance also becomes a potent tool to elicit emotions and foster a unified response to the common threats faced by a nation and its people (Cui & Tong, 2023; Song & Liu, 2023; Zembylas, 2022). These examples support the notion that while manipulation tactics may raise ethical concerns, emotions can nonetheless be utilized as a strategic tool in influencing stakeholder behavior and shaping policy outcomes.

As previously discussed, the idealized bureaucratic system, characterized by formalistic impersonality, has led to the marginalization of emotions in the discourse of public administration (Liu et al., 2022). Consequently, it often fails to effectively address the emotional needs of the public. Reflecting on the limitations of rational and impersonal bureaucratic processes, the academic community has begun to incorporate “emotions” into the study of modern governance frameworks. This recognition has given rise to the notion of emotional governance.

Recent endeavors have been undertaken to conceptualize the phenomenon of emotional governance, as outlined in Table 1. The provided definitions of emotional governance reveal a diversity of perspectives. Some scholars, such as Richards (2007), Sorace (2021), and Wu and Chen (2023), emphasize the proactive role of public authorities in shaping the psychological state of citizens through emotional manipulation. Building upon Koschut’s (2019) contention, Zembylas (2022) further expounds on how public authorities influence the emotional expressions of citizens by establishing societal norms known as feeling rules (also known as display rules).

**Table 1** Definitions of emotional governance

Authors	Definition
Richards (2007)	A deliberate and sophisticated attention, through mass-mediated communications, to the emotional dynamics of the public.
Johnson (2010)	Affective governance emphasizes the way in which intimate emotional relationships between citizens are endorsed and recognized by governments in personal life.
Han (2021)	基层公共治理者以及其他相关人员(行政人员、社会服务人员)与基层共同体成员运用情感策略, 通过满足居民的情感需求, 促进正向情感的再生, 协调基层各种社会关系, 构建基层治理共同体情感联结的行为和过程。 English translation: emotional governance is the behavior and process of grassroots public administrators and other relevant personnel (administrative personnel, social service personnel) and members of the grassroots community using emotional strategies to promote the regeneration of positive emotions, coordinate various social relationships at the grassroots level, and build the emotional connection of the grassroots governance community by meeting the emotional needs of residents.
Sorace (2021)	Affective governance refers to the state's proactive influence over citizens' feelings, morality, psychology, and nervous system.
Zembylas (2022)	The process through which states or institutions create emotional regimes in the public sphere that set the feeling rules of appropriate emotional expression, enacted via rituals and everyday practices.
Wu (2022)	情感治理通过深度互动体悟到他者的实际感受并且将这种体悟到的感受再传达给对方, 从而实现心理结构意义上的“认知”“理解”和“移情”。 English translation: emotional governance realizes the actual feelings of others through deep interaction and conveys the feelings of this realization to the other party, so as to achieve “cognition”, “understanding” and “empathy” in the sense of psychological structure.
Wu and Chen (2023)	Affective governance in China refers to the party-state mobilizing, manipulating, and regulating citizens' emotions to gain legitimacy.

Other scholars take a more interactive perspective in conceptualizing emotional governance. For instance, Johnson (2010) approached this concept from the perspective of interpersonal relationships and interactions, positing that emotional governance occurs when public authorities recognize the emotional exchanges between citizens. Han (2021), on the other hand, placed the emphasis on emotional governance at the street level, stressing the rational use of emotional strategies to foster positive emotions and harmony within communities. Furthermore, Wu (2022) highlighted the psychological foundations of emotional governance, providing a nuanced comprehension of the affective intricacies involved in the interaction process.

As shown above, the absence of a universally acknowledged definition highlights the nascent stage of this emotional governance research, underscoring the necessity for additional endeavors in this area. In view of the preceding discussion, it becomes evident that emotional governance is closely intertwined with the well-established concept of emotional labor. Emotional labor refers to the conscious management of emotions by workers to align with organizational expectations,

enabling organizations to elicit desired affective states, such as satisfaction, in service recipients (Hochschild, 1983). At the core of the concept of emotional labor are the display rules, which are the organizational guidelines for appropriate emotional expression (Ekman, 2006). According to Koschut's (2019) and Zembylas's (2022) perspectives on emotional governance, display rules, exemplified through official rituals and organizational routines, outline which emotions are deemed suitable for specific situations and how they should be conveyed to others (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Consequently, the display of emotions in the workplace is regulated by organizations for instrumental purposes—a form of labor that contributes to desired organizational outcomes. For instance, the effective management of emotional labor through adherence to display rules can contribute to heightened levels of customer satisfaction. By engaging in positive emotional interactions, wherein customers feel understood, supported, and valued, organizations can foster a sense of connection and enhance customer experiences (Hsieh & Guy, 2009; Humphrey et al., 2015; Hur et al., 2015).

The concept of emotional labor has profound implications for the interactions between the state, administrators, and citizens, making it a crucial element in discussions on emotional governance. By recognizing the importance of managing the emotions of administrators and citizens in these interactions, policymakers and managers can better address the emotional aspects of public sector governance and improve the overall quality of citizen experiences. Therefore, we define emotional governance as the utilization of emotional management strategies in the process of public administration, with the aim of influencing the interactions between administrators and citizens to achieve desired policy outcomes.

To sum up, emotional governance and emotional labor are intricately connected within organizational contexts. Emotional governance establishes the framework of organizational policies, norms, and expectations that dictate appropriate emotional expressions by setting up display rules. On the other hand, emotional labor refers to the effort exerted by employees to conform to these prescribed rules and elicit desired emotional responses from citizens. In essence, emotional governance enables effective management of emotional labor, and it is through this emotional labor that the intended objectives of emotional governance are achieved.

## 2.2 Service slogans as display rules

As mentioned earlier, display rules play a crucial role in the practice of emotional governance. When searching for display rules within Chinese street-level bureaucracy, our attention was immediately drawn to service slogans. Service slogans refer to phrases or sentences used by service organizations to explicitly articulate their service philosophies and commitments (Seli et al., 2021). They serve as a means to convey the organization's expectations for service workers. Although service slogans encompass a variety of service performance cues other than display rules, they provide a valuable opportunity to assess the emphasis placed on emotional governance within agencies. In the following section, we will

delve further into the meaning of “service slogans” and their role in public service provision.

The term “slogan” can find its origin in the Gaelic term “slaughghairm,” which initially referred to a “war cry” or “battle cry” used to inspire clan members to fight for protection or honor (Sharp, 1984). Over time, slogans have become essential tools in various domains, including marketing, social movements, and political propaganda. Their widespread use can be attributed to their concise and persuasive nature, effective communication of ideologies and values, and their ability to serve as catalysts or guides for action (Denton Jr, 1980). Among the diverse functions of slogans, one aspect that is often overlooked is their governance capacity. The rhetorical appeal of slogans is a prerequisite for their incorporation into public discourse (Reboul, 1979), allowing them to have a profound impact on policy-related issues (Makovicky et al., 2019). Slogans serve as important instruments for public policy advocacy or awareness campaigns, capable of achieving multiple objectives in public sector governance, such as highlighting a policy, raising awareness of specific issues, and influencing opponents’ views on policies (Denton Jr., 1980). As a form of governance, slogans can convey clear and understandable information in the simplest way possible, more effectively than any other linguistic medium. They disseminate linguistic symbols containing political information to the public, who then process, modify, and selectively absorb them based on their values, leading to corresponding behaviors.

Slogans have emerged as a predominant form of political communication and are widely employed by the Chinese government as a standard governance tool (Kim, 2011; Song & Gee, 2020). These political slogans possess the power to simplify complex ideas and exert a significant influence, leading the Chinese government to extensively utilize them in shaping individuals’ thought patterns and values and guiding their socio-political decisions and actions (Lu, 1999). The slogans employed by Chinese public institutions are often meticulously planned (Karmazin, 2020), utilizing specific linguistic expressions such as dialects, rhymes, and antithetical rhetoric, enabling widespread dissemination and easy comprehension (Hou et al., 2022).

In the context of this study, the service slogans utilized by street-level public institutions serve a vital purpose in the day-to-day operations of frontline public services. Their presence is intended to foster a culture of service excellence while reinforcing the government’s emphasis on professionalism, efficiency, citizen-centricity, and other public service values. Consequently, service slogans often revolve around instilling a sense of dedication to service excellence among workers. Simply put, these slogans provide employee performance cues that consistently reinforce required attitudes and behaviors, cultivate a strong service consciousness, and create a service-oriented atmosphere in the workplace (Gould-Williams, 1999; Hartline & Jones, 1996). For instance, in situations where emotional labor is crucial in public services, slogans can act as display rules that demand desired emotional performance from workers and thus play a pivotal role in influencing the outcome of administrator-citizen interactions.

As aforementioned, a crucial aspect of service slogans is their explicit aim to elicit desired emotional responses from targeted individuals (Shankel, 1941).

Therefore, it can be argued that their impact relies on effectively appealing to emotions (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). Well-crafted service slogans should have the power to establish emotional connections between the state and citizens through the work of administrators. Whether handling citizen complaints or assisting those in crisis, administrators are directed to cater to the emotional needs of citizens, thereby fostering relational bonds essential for the functioning of public administration. In the literature on service management, the relational interaction between service providers and recipients is referred to as "relational service quality," in contrast to "functional service quality" (Peiro et al., 2005). Sánchez-Hernández et al. (2009) define functional service quality as reliability, efficiency, and competence with which the core service is provided, while relational service quality is concerned with essential emotional cues, such as caring, understanding, empathy, and courtesy, which facilitate the relational bonds between citizens, administrators, and the state. These relational service elements form the foundation of effective emotional governance.

In summary, in the realm of Chinese street-level bureaucracy, service slogans are not mere catchphrases but pivotal instruments of emotional governance. These succinct and impactful slogans distill and communicate the core messages and values that the government seeks to embed within its frontline administrative workforce. They function as performance indicators, directing employees towards the desired behaviors, attitudes, and a service-centric ethos, thereby facilitating the government's efforts to cultivate a particular public service environment. This strategic utilization of service slogans to manage emotions reflects a sophisticated interplay between emotional governance and instrumental rationality. By shaping the emotional displays of frontline service workers, the government not only modulates the dynamics of their interaction with citizens but also steers these interactions towards achieving specific administrative objectives. The integration of emotional governance into the bureaucratic function exemplifies a approach that extends beyond the traditional confines of instrumental rationality. It acknowledges that the efficient and logical attainment of goals can be enhanced by attending to the emotional element of public administration. Therefore, the incorporation of emotional governance, exemplified through service slogans, represents an astute fusion of emotional regulation and rational strategy. It reinforces the notion that the effective administration is not solely a product of systems and technology but also of the deliberate and strategic governance of emotions to fulfill the objectives of the Chinese government. This makes the study of service slogans within Chinese street-level bureaucracy an especially pertinent subject for analysis, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of how instrumental rationality can encompass and benefit from the governance of emotions.

### 3 Methodology

To investigate emotional governance within the Chinese street-level bureaucracy, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of service slogans obtained from frontline service agencies. Content analysis is a valuable method that treats text as data, enabling the identification of explicit and implicit patterns, similarities, differences,



and correlations within the text (Graneheim et al., 2017). It also provides the ability to visualize the text, offering significant potential for uncovering valuable insights into specific phenomena (Kondracki et al., 2002). In this study, the content analysis serves as an essential tool for quantifying and visualizing the slogans, as well as exploring implicit messages and underlying themes embedded within them.

For the processing and analysis of the text data, we employed KH Coder, an extensively used open-source software tool specifically designed for content analysis and text mining. Its usage has been endorsed by scholars across various disciplines (Guo et al., 2022; Yamaoka & Matsumoto, 2016; Zhang & Hwang, 2023). In social science research, for example, it has facilitated the analysis of text data, enabling the discovery of hidden patterns and trends (Cheng et al., 2015).

In June 2023, we collected the slogans from various locations, including government approval halls, administrative approval centers, government offices, service halls, and community service centers in different localities. The data



**Fig. 1** Examples of service slogans. The top left picture is from Yijiang Jiayuan Community Service Hall, Yijiang District, Wuhu City, Anhui Province. Its English translation is “serving residents with a smile; sincere dedication to the community.” The top right picture is from the South Street Community Service Hall, Junxian County, Hebi City, Henan Province. Its English translation is “face to face in handling matters; heart to heart in service.” The bottom left picture is from the Sunjiagou Village Service Hall, Zijin Town, Gucheng County, Xiangyang City, Hubei Province. Its English translation is “serve with my sincerity to exchange a smile of satisfaction from you.” The bottom right picture is from the Linsheng Village Service Hall, Wangchang Town, Qianjiang City, Hubei Province. Its English translation is “speaking from the heart; building a bridge to the heart; sincerely helping the public to solve their problems.”

collection primarily relied on images of the service slogans displayed in the workplaces, which were shared on the official WeChat public accounts and Weibo accounts of the institutions (see Fig. 1 for some examples of service slogans). In total, we gathered 273 slogans, ensuring broad geographic coverage across China. These slogans were sourced from 21 mainland provinces, 5 autonomous regions, and 4 municipalities directly under the central government, guaranteeing geographical representation across the vast administrative regions of mainland China.

The collected service slogans exhibit diverse display formats, ranging from banners to electronic screens, with some presented in elegant calligraphy art. Furthermore, most of these slogans are presented on a grand scale, aiming to create a conspicuous and potent visual impact. However, in this study, our focus lies on the messages conveyed by these slogans, as they utilize the language of mobilization, advice, and guidance to govern interactions between administrators and citizens. It is evident that the content of these slogans allows for succinct and clear communication of organizational expectations and requirements for frontline service workers. Consequently, these slogans possess the potential to unveil the emotional governance strategies employed by Chinese street-level bureaucracies in order to evoke desired emotional responses from both administrators and citizens.

Before conducting the content analysis, we translated the slogans into English. To ensure the accuracy of translations, we enlisted individuals proficient in both Chinese and English, including all the authors of the present study. Within the 273 slogans examined in this study, a total of 1924 words were identified, comprising 536 distinct words. After removing conjunctions and prepositions, the final dataset comprised 1629 words, with 514 being unique.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Word counts

As part of our content analysis, we present the word counts in Table 2, which provides a comprehensive view of the words that appeared in the collected service slogans. The listed words are those that have a frequency equal to or greater than 10. Given that service slogans explicitly aim to achieve desired service outcomes together with citizens, such as service satisfaction, it is not surprising that words such as “citizen” appear most frequently, with a total of 114 occurrences. Moreover, to meet service objectives, public service agencies encourage frontline administrators to engage in a wide range of actions, such as “serve” ( $f=51$ ), “do” ( $f=26$ ), “make” ( $f=17$ ), “work” ( $f=16$ ), “build” ( $f=14$ ), “listen” ( $f=11$ ), “solve” ( $f=11$ ), and “create” ( $f=10$ ), in order to provide the necessary “service” ( $f=99$ ) and address the “matter” ( $f=10$ ) or “problem” ( $f=10$ ) faced by citizens.

In relation to the dimensions of service quality, it is evident that these slogans emphasize relational service quality more than functional service quality. That is, while functional cues, such as “efficiency” (including “efficient”) and “convenience” (including convenient) appear only 45 times in total, relational or emotional cues are

**Table 2** Frequency of words appeared in service slogans

Word	Frequency	Category	
citizen	114	Subject	
community	14		
government	14		
serve	51	Action	
do	26		
make	17		
work	16		
build	14		
listen	11		
solve	11		
create	10		
service	99		
matter	10		
problem	10	Content	
heart	56		
smile	38		
sincerity (including sincere and sincerely)	36	Relational (Emotional) Cue	
warmth (including warm and warmly)	27		
civilization (including civilized)	18		
love	15		
care	14		
hand	13		
zero-distance	11		
enthusiasm (including enthusiastic)	15		
family	10		
efficiency (including efficient and efficiently)	28		Functional Cue
convenience (including convenient)	17		
satisfaction	14		Satisfaction

frequently present in service slogans, such as “heart” ( $f=56$ ), “smile” ( $f=38$ ), “sincerity” ( $f=36$ ), “warmth” ( $f=27$ ), “civilization” ( $f=18$ ), and “love” ( $f=15$ ), among others. This highlights the core values and expectations that Chinese public service organizations intend to impart to their workers, as they prioritize a people-centric approach to service, advocating for service interactions rooted in warmth, care, and sincerity.

#### 4.2 The co-occurrence network of words

Upon conducting a further correlational analysis of slogan words, we have generated a co-occurrence network illustrated in Fig. 2. This network visually represents the relationships and interconnections among different words extracted from

the collected service slogans. The network consists of nodes (words) of varying sizes and colors, as well as edges (lines) that indicate the co-occurrence relationships between these nodes. The size of each node corresponds to its frequency, with larger nodes representing words that appear more frequently. For instance, “citizen,” noticeably one of the largest nodes, signifies its prominence in the data. Additionally, the nodes are color-coded according to the “Subgraph” legend, which assigns them to distinct subcategories. This color differentiation helps to identify specific thematic clusters or associations within the data. Words connected by an edge often appear together in the slogans, suggesting a thematic or semantic linkage.

The first cluster, colored in cyan, consists of words such as “community,” “together,” “hand,” “build,” “civilized,” and “love.” These words reflect the value placed on effective relational interactions with citizens by street-level public services. A slogan that exemplifies this cluster is “Hand in hand to provide service with a smile; you and I build our community together” (手相牵微笑服务; 美好家园你我共建), which conveys an ethos of mutual cooperation and collective effort in creating a civilized living environment.

The second but most noticeable cluster is the one marked in yellow, featuring words such as “citizen,” “service,” “heart,” and “smile.” This cluster signifies organizational expectations for service workers to prioritize the citizen-centric principle. The proximal positioning of “heart” to “warm” underscores the significance of warmth and care in frontline services. An illustrative slogan for this cluster is “Serve residents with a smile, serve the community with sincerity” (微笑服务居民; 真情服务社区), signaling the theme of heartfelt and amiable engagement with citizens.

The grey cluster consists of words like “enthusiasm,” “patience,” and “careful,” depicting a service commitment to providing high-quality relational interactions, including enthusiastic reception, patient problem-solving, and meticulous attention to detail in service delivery. A sample slogan, “It takes enthusiasm to receive citizens; patience in solving problems; be careful in handling matters” (接待群众需热心; 解决问题需耐心; 办理事项要细心), exemplifies the dedication required of public servants to ensure the satisfaction and well-being of those they serve.

Alongside these relational and emotional themes, Fig. 2 also reveals clusters that emphasize functional service quality. For instance, the orange cluster integrates relational and emotional cues such as “sincerity” and “harmony” with a functional cue, specifically “efficiency.” These terms illustrate the dual focus on the emotional dimension of service excellence and the effectiveness of the processes involved. Moreover, the pink cluster, featuring “efficiency” and “convenient,” is represented by the slogan “Convenient services for the citizen; diligent and efficient” (便民服务; 勤政高效), which encapsulates the commitment of street-level organizations to streamlining administrative procedures and enhance the convenience and efficiency of their core services. These clusters demonstrate a multifaceted approach to public service, combining emotional governance with a drive for operational excellence to optimize citizens’ experience with public administration.



problems. Interestingly, the word “civilized” is co-shared by the Eastern and Western regions. Despite geo-cultural and socio-economic differences, the provision of civilized and orderly services remains a common aspiration in these regions.

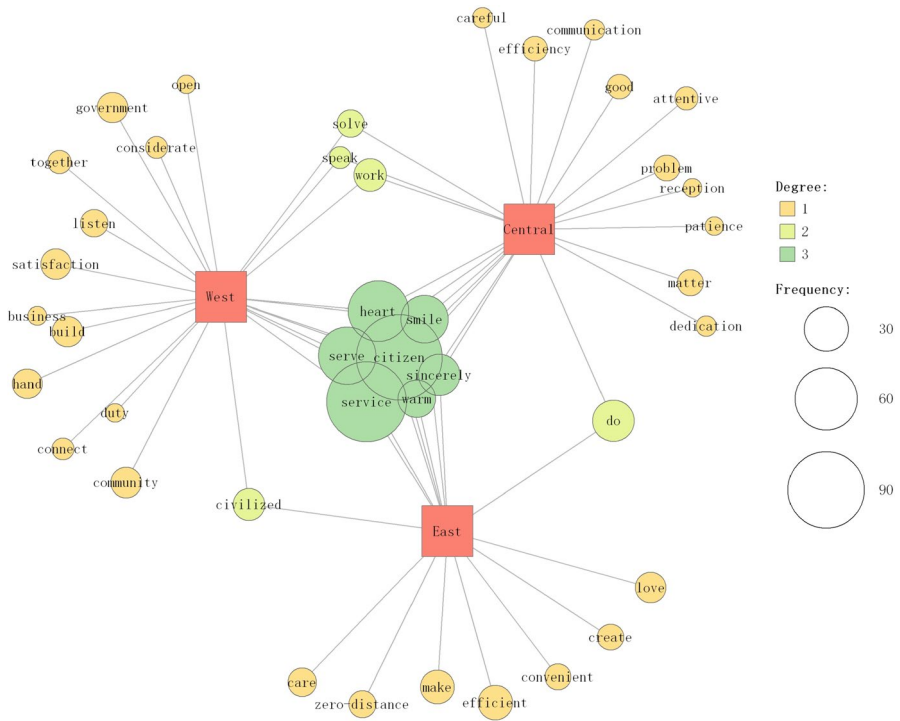
Figure 3 also provides insights into the distinct characteristics of each region. For instance, words like “build,” “hand,” “listen,” “considerate,” “community,” “government,” “together,” and “satisfaction” are exclusive to the Western region, which highlights the region’s focus on fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and community well-being. As for the Central region, slogan words including “dedication,” “attentive,” “careful,” “communication,” “efficiency,” “problem,” and “matter” reflect a commitment to cultivating a high-quality and responsive service culture that is both efficient and empathetically attuned to citizens’ needs and concerns. On the other hand, the service slogans from the Eastern region incorporate words such as “efficient,” “convenient,” “zero-distance,” “care,” “love,” “make,” and “create.” These terms demonstrate the region’s commitment to fostering a service environment that not only prioritizes high performance and convenience but also embodies a caring and forward-thinking ethos.

The collected slogans were then categorized based on the city level, utilizing the Ranking of Cities’ Business Attractiveness in China ([www.datayicai.com](http://www.datayicai.com)). Among the 273 slogans examined in this study, 64 slogans are from first-tier and new first-tier cities, 53 slogans from second-tier cities, 61 slogans from third-tier cities, and 95 slogans from fourth-tier cities and below. Figure 4 presents the co-occurrence networks for different city levels, providing valuable insights into the shared characteristics and distinctions among them.

Certain words such as “citizen,” “service,” “heart,” “serve,” “smile,” and “do” consistently co-occur across all city levels, indicating a shared aspiration for citizen-centric, heartfelt, and action-oriented public services. The term “efficient” closely follows, appearing in first- and new first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier cities. This presence highlights the recognition of the importance of public service efficiency, particularly in higher-level cities where the pace of life is fast and the demand for services is high. Besides, there are other slogan words that are prevalent across the majority of city levels. For example, the terms “sincerely” and “warm” are commonly found in first and new first-tier, third-tier, and fourth-tier cities, while “love” is a shared term among first and new first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier cities. It is apparent that, regardless of the city level, there is a universal emphasis on the emotional aspect of service performance.

Moreover, other terms that frequently co-occur include “work,” “create,” and “civilized,” which are common to both first and new first-tier, and second-tier cities. Furthermore, the term “convenient” is shared between second-tier and third-tier cities, while “satisfaction” is a term common to both second-tier and fourth-tier cities. These results underscore a collective strategic emphasis on the continual refinement of public services, as well as the importance of citizen satisfaction and service convenience.

In addition to a shared aspiration to enhance citizens’ service experience, there appear subtle differences in the service slogans of each city level. For instance, the unique words such as “let,” “community,” “together,” and “careful” in first and new first-tier cities paint a picture of public service provision in which the



**Fig. 3** The co-occurrence networks of words by region

interactivity of services is prioritized. Public service agencies in second-tier cities, which are typically at a crucial phase of growth and development, focus on words like “government,” “first,” “care,” and “make,” which communicate a service vision that is action-oriented and centered on caring for their citizens. Third-tier cities emphasize terms such as “build” and “efficiency,” indicating a greater focus on urban development and service efficiency. As for fourth-tier cities, slogan words like “matter,” “problem,” “connect,” and “solve” also reflect how street-level agencies strive to build connections with citizens and find practical solutions to their problems.

In conclusion, the co-occurrence networks presented in Figs. 3 and 4 offer valuable visual insights into the priority themes and service ethos of grassroots public service organizations across regions and city levels in China. Because the size of the circles in these figures represents the frequency of word occurrence, it is evident that, despite some subtle differences, regions and cities are more alike than different in the choice of slogan words. Notably, these words consistently emphasize the relational aspect of public service delivery. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the subsequent section.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

### 5.1 Making sense of research findings

The notion of emotional governance highlights the importance of effectively governing the emotions of both administrators and citizens and establishes a link between this endeavor and the overall outcome of public sector governance. To enrich the limited literature on this important topic, our study specifically focuses on emotional governance at the grassroots level of public administration, for it serves as the direct point of contact between the state and citizens. In addition, our study expands the scope of emotional governance research by exploring service slogans in China. Service slogans are an important medium through which emotional governance is practiced and communicated to both administrators and citizens. Through a content analysis of 273 service slogans collected from Chinese street-level agencies, we uncover the emotional governance strategies employed by these institutions. The discussion of our key findings unfolds as follows:

Firstly, one recurring theme identified in our content analysis is that while the slogans address the relational and functional aspects of service quality, there is a clear emphasis on the relational dimension. This is evidenced by the fact that

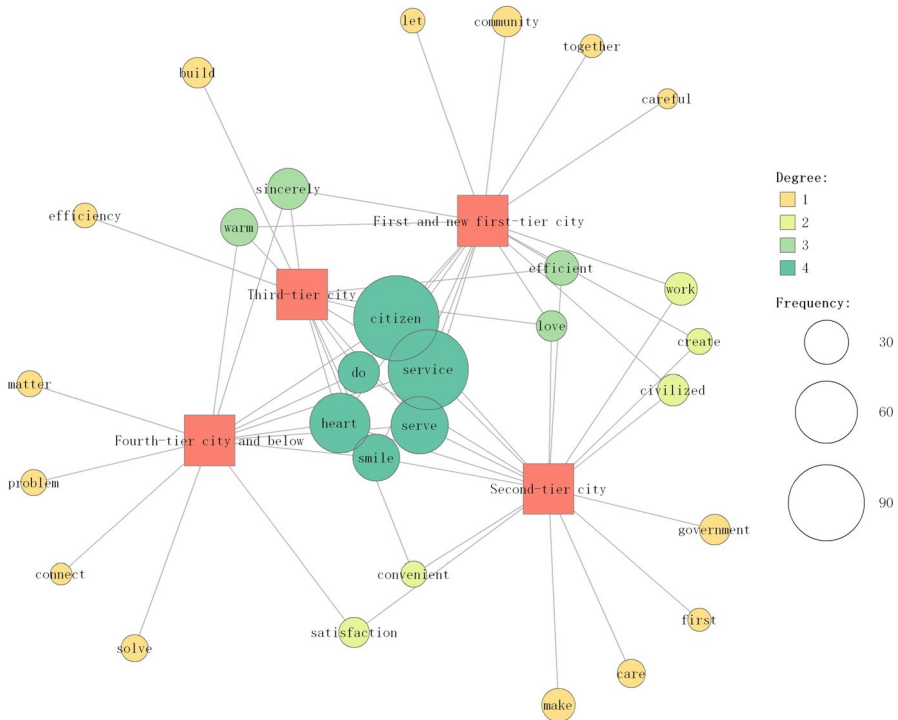


Fig. 4 The co-occurrence networks of words by city level



“citizen,” “service,” “heart,” “serve,” and “smile” are among the most frequently occurring words across regions and cities. Furthermore, despite differences in word choices, there is a universal recognition of the importance of emotional governance. For example, “care” and “love” are found in the Eastern region, “careful” and “patience” in the Central region, and “considerate” in the Western region. This lexical uniformity demonstrates a noticeable focus on fostering a citizen-centered ethos in Chinese street-level bureaucracy, which urges service workers to adopt a warm and considerate service disposition. This ethos emphasizes the continuous pursuit of more positive exchanges with citizens and enhancing their experiences and perceptions of public services.

Secondly, our analysis of service slogans across different regions and cities reveals slight variations in the demand for relational and functional service quality. The results imply that the tone and content of service slogans may be influenced by the broader external environment in which a public service organization operates. In regions characterized by rapid economic growth, the focus often extends beyond service attitude and includes creativity and technology to ensure seamless and efficient public services. For instance, slogan words like “efficient,” “make,” “create,” and “convenient” are found exclusively in the economically advanced Eastern region, and “efficient” is also associated with first and new first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier cities. Vibrant economics, coupled with a growing population, leads to high demands for efficient public services from both enterprises and residents (Bu, 2014). In response to such an expectation, street-level agencies must strive to streamline administrative procedures to promptly address citizen demands.

In a similar vein, due to proximity to the central government, cities in the Central region are pressured to respond to the national directive to establish a service-oriented government by providing high-quality public services (State Council, 2021). Therefore, they tend to focus more on terms such as “dedication,” “attentive,” “communication,” and “reception.” On the other hand, in Western areas with concentrated ethnic minorities, service slogans place greater importance on inclusivity, interpersonal respect, and communal harmony. Terms like “listen” and “civilized” indicate the region’s focus on these emotional governance areas. Cultural diversity has also reshaped the service landscape of first and new first-tier cities due to the influx of talent from other parts of China. The occurrence of slogan words such as “civilized,” “let,” “community,” and “together” underscores the cultivation of a community consciousness in these cities. As cities witness changes in their populations, there is a need for a shift in service focus. Proactive measures are necessary to adapt to these changes by developing services tailored to the needs of the evolving citizenry.

Overall, our findings indicate that there is a notable degree of similarity among the service slogans collected across China. While efficiency and convenience are acknowledged as crucial aspects of satisfactory service delivery, these slogans primarily emphasize the significance of relational service quality. This suggests that street-level agencies in China recognize the importance of effectively conveying care, warmth, and sincerity from administrations to establish an emotional connection with citizens. This, ultimately, serves as the pathway to achieving effective emotional governance.

## 5.2 Walk the talk: building capacity for effective emotional governance

Our study has demonstrated that service slogans can be a powerful tool for cultivating an office culture that supports emotional governance. Public institutions should consider the use of well-designed service slogans that embody positive emotional appeals, aiming to strengthen the public service ethos of administrators. Of course, it is important to periodically review and update slogans to align with evolving governance needs. Additionally, the formulation of slogans should be adapted to local contexts, with those resonating with regional service demands potentially yielding superior outcomes.

Nonetheless, service slogans alone represent only the initial step toward achieving effective emotional governance. If we consider slogans as the “talk”, it is important to recognize that there are additional actions that must be taken to truly “walk the talk” and fulfill the promises made in these slogans. In other words, implementing effective emotional governance demands substantial efforts beyond the mere creation of slogans. With this in mind, we provide several practical recommendations for optimal practices in emotional governance.

First and foremost, to foster effective emotional governance, agencies are advised to cultivate an organizational culture that promotes it. To achieve this, agencies are advised to focus on leadership as a critical driver. It is the responsibility of leaders to demonstrate a strong commitment to fostering a service climate and to integrate it into the organization’s vision and mission. This can be accomplished by establishing clear values, standards, and expectations that outline the desired behaviors and attitudes of employees. Top-level management must ensure all levels of the organization align with the objective of effective emotional governance. Furthermore, they should also ensure that employees have access to the necessary resources to deliver exceptional service.

Secondly, as service slogans can identify the most important employee performance cues, they can be instrumental in various aspects of human resource management. In the context of employee selection, the identified performance cues can guide organizations in defining the criteria for recruitment. These cues can be used to filter potential candidates during the recruitment process. Interview questions and selection tests can be designed to assess whether applicants possess these qualities. Then, emotional governance’s success largely depends on the emotional competence of the service workers. Therefore, it is vital to institute regular training and development programs that enhance emotional intelligence among street-level bureaucrats, which can encompass learning to understand, manage, and appropriately respond to their own and citizens’ emotions. In addition, slogans that emphasize the positive impact and value of public service can serve as motivational tools for employees. By aligning their efforts with the overarching goals and mission reflected in the slogans, employees can find purpose and meaning in their work. Perhaps most importantly, service slogans provide the criteria for assessing employees’ service performance and monitoring its impact on service outcomes. Regular performance feedback can provide valuable insights into areas that require improvement and help refine emotional governance strategies over time.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that service slogans, which function as display rules, may inadvertently induce stress, as evidenced by studies on emotional labor (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Hsieh, 2014; Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Therefore, while citizen-centered emotional governance practices are essential, support mechanisms to enhance emotional resilience and well-being among service workers should also be prioritized. Institutions should implement employee assistance programs, offer counseling services, and regularly assess employee well-being. It is crucial to foster a culture that values employee well-being by establishing open channels of communication, providing organizational support, and recognizing and appreciating the emotional labor exerted by public service workers. A positive work environment that promotes self-care practices and addresses the emotional challenges faced by employees can significantly enhance their well-being and engagement, leading to improved service delivery and outcomes.

### 5.3 Research limitations and future directions

The study employs a content analysis of service slogans as a unique approach to studying emotional governance in China. By analyzing the content of these slogans, the study identifies common emotional governance strategies used by Chinese street-level institutions, expanding our understanding of this under-researched topic in public administration. However, it is important to acknowledge that our study has inherent limitations. For instance, the collection of service slogans was conducted primarily through the official WeChat public accounts and Weibo platforms of grassroots government entities. This approach might have resulted in the underrepresentation of certain regions and cities with less developed social media infrastructures. Despite these constraints, we have collected as comprehensive a collection of slogans as possible from almost all the provinces in China. As such, the present study should be viewed as a preliminary examination of emotional governance at the street level in China. Our study may lay the groundwork for future research, which we hope will extend our initial efforts into a more complete investigation.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the translation of Chinese slogans into English for content analysis introduces potential concerns due to the nuanced linguistic differences between the two languages. Despite our diligent efforts to employ a meticulous translation process to ensure semantic equivalence between the original and translated slogans, concerns regarding translation accuracy persist, particularly when it comes to word choices and their inherent meanings, which may vary between Chinese and English. Therefore, it is crucial to exercise caution when interpreting the results of our study.

Even with these limitations, this research is significant not only in providing practical guidance for managers seeking to enhance public service performance but also in contributing to the knowledge of emotional governance, an area that remains under-researched. Given the scarcity of research specifically investigating emotional governance in the field of public administration, our study serves as a starting point to stimulate further research interest in this critically important

topic. To advance this research, we encourage future studies to go beyond the Chinese street-level bureaucracy and explore emotional governance in diverse contexts and settings, enabling a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of its implications and potential applications. By continuing scholarly endeavors in this area, we can shed more light on effective practices and open the door to a future where emotional governance plays a central role in shaping the excellence of public administration.

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**Data availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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