

China's two-faced rhetoric:

Mobilising citizens and calming foreigners?

Summary

International relations theories depict China as a rising power, confronting the dominant power—the US. They do not, however, provide empirical evidence for how the rising power depicts rhetorically its challenge both to its domestic audience and to foreigners. My research captures the clash in rhetoric between China's messages to its citizens versus those to foreigners. It also identifies specifically the strategic topic areas highlighted by Xi Jinping as he has sought to expand China's world influence. My study covers the period from 2010-2017.

Research Questions

1. How has China characterised its global role vis-à-vis the US in its rhetoric targeted at its citizens in contrast to rhetoric targeted at foreigners?
2. How significant has the effect of Xi Jinping leadership been on the shift in Chinese rhetoric between 2010-2017?

Data

China's rhetoric is measured by using the state-run newspaper "People's Daily"¹ as the empirical indicator (the mouthpiece) of the Chinese Communist Party.

62,000 articles comprise the population of articles which mention the US between 2010-2017: **54,000** are in the **Mandarin language** version (targeted to a domestic audience) and **8,200** are in the **English version** (targeted to a foreign audience).

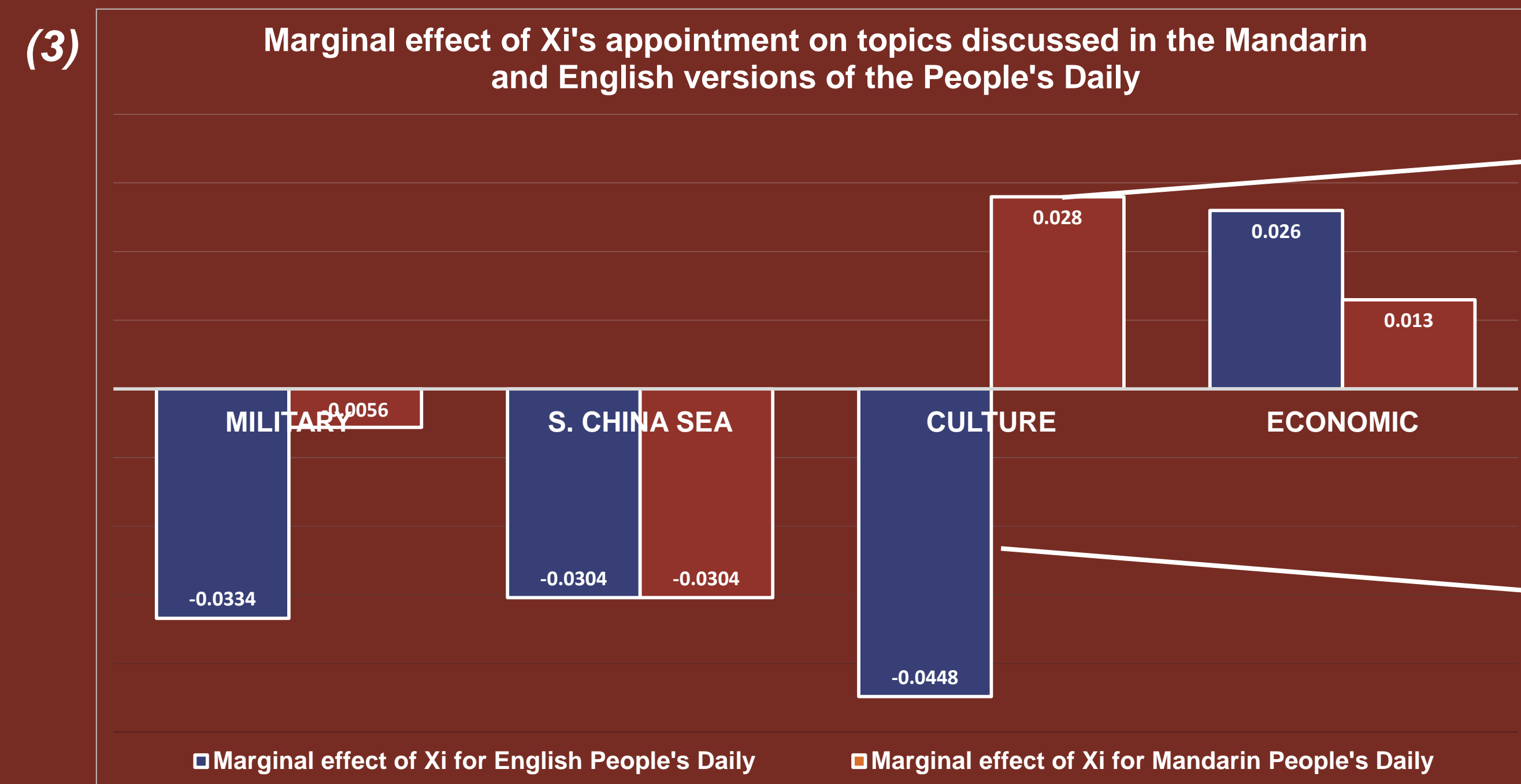
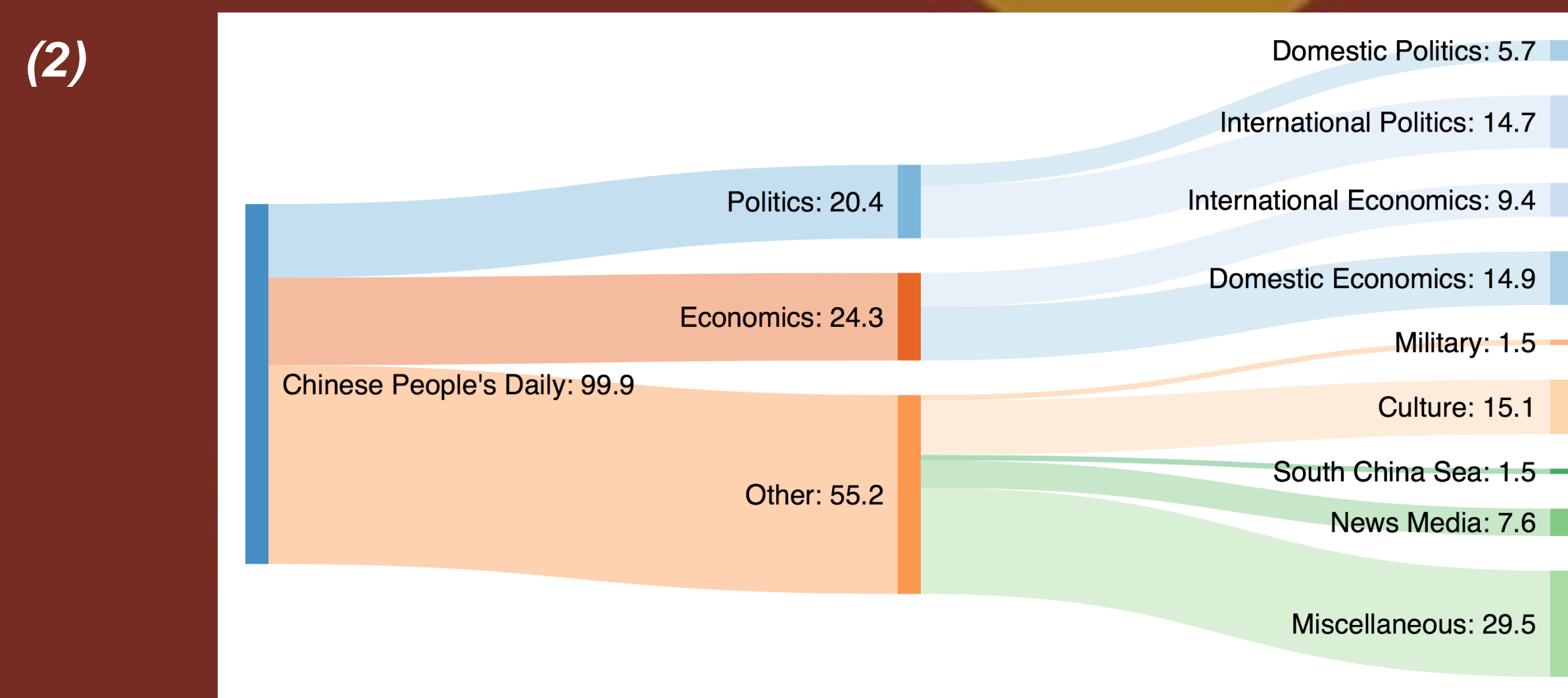
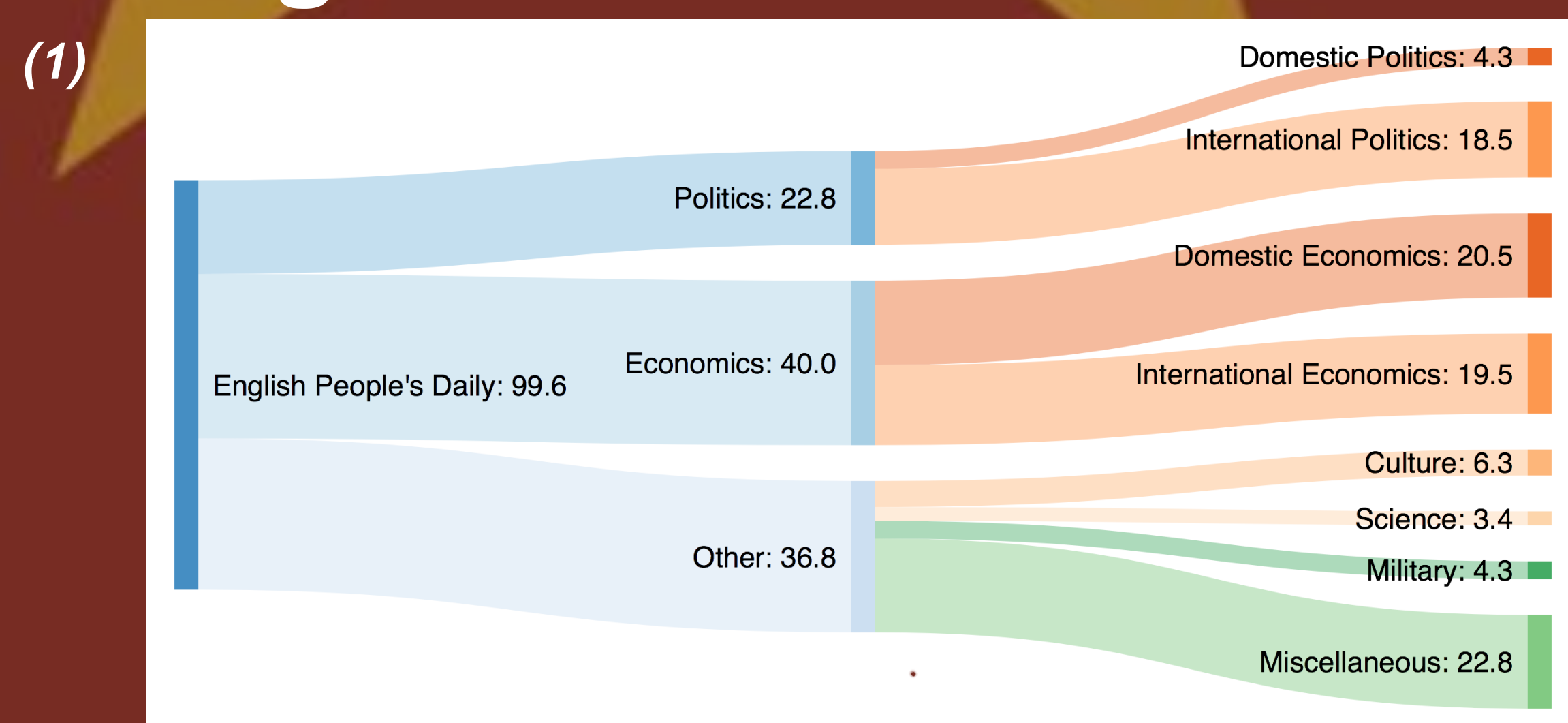
Methodology

1. **Topic model (LDA)**—probabilistic algorithms for summarising text data. Produces a pre-determined number of characteristic topics as well as representative documents for each topic.
2. **Difference-in-difference regression**—finds the difference in the impact of Xi Jinping for English and Chinese publications.

Analysis

1. The Mandarin language corpus and the English corpus are each analysed using the LDA. See figures (1) and (2).
2. Following interpretations from the literature², I identify four key topics that are indicative of the areas in which China has sought to assert itself vis-à-vis the US (**military, South China Sea, culture and expansion of economic influence**).
3. To capture the **effect of Xi Jinping's assumption of leadership** in 2013 on China's assertive rhetoric, I use a difference-in-difference regression on these four topics (see figures (3) and (4)).

Findings



(4) **Representative document from the Mandarin "Culture" topic:**
"More than a dozen foreign students from Britain, the United States, India, Mexico and other countries came to pick and drink tea in Qinshan Village, Zhenhai District, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, and felt the traditional Chinese tea culture. The picture shows foreign students in the tea garden..."

Representative document from the English "Culture" topic:
"... China will never allow external interference, says white paper ... Universal values have suddenly become synonymous with Western hegemony ... In the modern era, Europeans have equated modernity with universality. After the torch of Western civilization was passed to the United States, universal values have been used more frequently to ensure U.S. hegemony. The rise of China and other emerging economies have dealt a major blow to Western universal values, resulting in various..."

Conclusions

My findings provide a statistically robust measure for what had previously been anecdotal evidence characterising Xi Jinping's less confrontational stance vis-à-vis the US. His leadership has witnessed a decrease in the use of more overt confrontational rhetoric on the military and South China Sea, and increased in subtler topics such as promoting China's distinctive culture and Chinese international foreign direct investment. Conspicuously, China has significantly lessened its military rhetoric to foreigners relative to its citizens, while at the same time significantly increasing its rhetoric on expanding its economic influence to foreigners relative to domestic audiences.