

Constructing Cultural Identity in Chinese Media: A Critical Discourse Study of *China Daily*'s Aerospace Reporting

Ruxi Wang and Yi Zhang*

School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

Email: wangrx15@mail.nwpu.edu.cn (R.X.W.); yizhang@nwpu.edu.cn (Y.Z.)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract—This study investigates how *China Daily* constructs cultural identity through its reporting on aerospace technology. Through the Discourse-Historical Approach, the research analyzes a corpus of news articles published between 2022 and 2025 to uncover the discursive strategies used to frame China's role in global space exploration. The findings reveal how nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation strategies are employed to construct China as both a technologically advanced nation and a cooperative global actor. Aerospace achievements are not merely reported as scientific progress, but rather as symbolic resources reinforcing national pride, collective identity, and a vision of China's modernity. Such discursive constructions also serve as instruments of cultural diplomacy, facilitating the global communication of Chinese values and national narratives through the lens of technological excellence. The study argues that these media narratives function as instruments of technonationalism, projecting cultural values such as self-reliance, innovation, and global leadership. By exploring the interplay between media discourse, national identity, and cultural ideology, this research contributes to broader discussions on how language in media shapes public perception and reflects evolving societal norms in the context of digital-era science communication.

Keywords—Cultural Identity, Media Discourse, Aerospace News, Discourse-Historical Approach, National Image

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, China's aerospace achievements have become prominent symbols of national development and cultural confidence. As science and technology gain increasing rhetorical significance in media discourse, aerospace reporting functions not only as a record of progress, but also as a site for constructing national identity and projecting cultural values. This aligns with the sociocognitive perspective of discourse, which emphasizes the interplay between language, perception, and social norms [1]. In English-language media such as *China Daily*, these narratives are shaped for international audiences, making them key resources in China's external communication strategy.

This study examines how *China Daily* discursively constructs a culturally embedded image of China through its coverage of aerospace technology. Drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), the research analyzes how language choices reflect and reinforce technological cultural narrative ideals—linking technological advancement with national pride, global responsibility, and cultural continuity. Particular attention is paid to references drawn from mythology (e.g., “Chang’e”), collective expressions (e.g., “our country”), and discursive strategies that emphasize cooperation, leadership, and innovation.

By situating aerospace reporting within the intersection of

language, culture, and media, this study highlights the role of science communication in shaping public narratives and cultural identity. It argues that *China Daily*'s discourse goes beyond informational reporting, serving as a vehicle for symbolic meaning and soft power projection in the global media landscape.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Discourse-Historical Approach, developed by Reisigl and Wodak, offers a framework for analyzing how language reflects power relations, ideology, and historical context. While initially applied to political discourse, DHA has proven valuable in media studies, especially in examining how identities are constructed through language in news and digital communication. Since its development, DHA has been recognized as a key approach in critical discourse analysis for examining power and ideology [2].

Recent studies have explored DHA in cross-cultural and science-related contexts. For example, Liu *et al.* (2022) [3] investigated vaccine reporting across major newspapers, showing how discursive strategies convey political alignment and national stance. Zhang *et al.* (2022) [4] examined multimodal identity construction on TikTok, illustrating how digital media extends DHA's analytical reach beyond traditional text.

In the Chinese context, Jia and Liu (2020) [5] proposed a framework for understanding “Global China” discourse, emphasizing the role of civilizational narratives and cultural continuity in shaping national identity. However, research has rarely examined how science and technology—especially aerospace achievements—are used in media to convey cultural meaning and reinforce national identity for international audiences [6].

This study builds on existing DHA research by focusing on how *China Daily* constructs technological cultural narrative discourse through aerospace reporting. It seeks to understand how language not only informs but also performs cultural and ideological work, embedding national values in scientific storytelling. In doing so, it addresses a gap in current scholarship at the intersection of language, culture, and media.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), developed by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) [7], is one of the major methods in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), emphasizing the historical context of discourse and its impact on social power structures and ideological construction. As defined by Reisigl and Wodak (2009) [8], DHA examines meaning-making and stance expression in texts through five core discursive

strategies: Nomination Strategies, Predication Strategies, Argumentation Strategies, Perspectivization Strategies, Intensification/Mitigation Strategies. Nomination Strategies are used to define social actors, phenomena, and events, highlighting their characteristics, such as in the construction of national identity. Predication Strategies evaluate social actors or events through positive or negative descriptions. Argumentation Strategies justify or challenge certain claims by legitimizing positive or negative attributions. Perspectivization Strategies analyze how speakers or writers position themselves in discourse and express their degree of involvement. Intensification/Mitigation Strategies adjust the strength of discourse to reinforce or weaken specific discursive effects.

Consistent with DHA's procedural guidelines [9], DHA research typically follows three core steps. First, identifying discourse topics, such as the construction of national discourse systems in news reports. Second, analyze discursive strategies to examine how linguistic means shape meaning and stance. Third, investigate the realization of discourse, revealing the structural and historical evolution of texts.

Initially applied to political discourse, DHA has expanded to various fields, including identity construction, environmental discourse, and media representation. Recently, DHA has been integrated with corpus linguistics, leading to corpus-based research models [10], enhancing the systematic and objective nature of discourse analysis.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach based on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), supported by corpus tools. The corpus includes 112 aerospace-related news reports published by China Daily from February 2022 to February 2025. Articles were selected based on relevance to China's space programs and international technological engagement.

The analysis follows DHA's five discourse strategies — nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation—with particular attention to cultural references, evaluative language, and identity-related expressions [11]. Examples include the use of mythological symbols (e.g., “Chang’e”), collective pronouns (“our country”), and phrases emphasizing leadership or cooperation.

Concordance and collocation analysis were conducted using AntConc to identify recurring patterns and thematic frames. A combined synchronic and diachronic lens was applied to trace how discourse reflects shifts in national self-representation and the articulation of technological cultural narratives.

By treating aerospace reporting as a site of cultural and ideological meaning-making, the study explores how media language constructs China's identity as a technologically advanced and culturally confident global actor.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Thematic Selection

Based on the method of key semantic domain analysis [12], this section focuses on the top 50 semantic domains in China Daily's reports on aerospace technology. Observations

indicate that “Technology & Engineering (K5.1)” ranks first. High-frequency words in this domain include “satellite, rocket, engine, aircraft,” highlighting the emphasis on technological innovation and engineering breakthroughs in aerospace technology reports.

The second-ranking domain, Z2 (Government & Politics), contains high-frequency words related to “China's aerospace policies” and “international political dynamics,” such as “China, CASC, policy, strategy.” This suggests that aerospace development is not only a reflection of technological advancement but also a critical component of national strategy and international competition.

The third-ranking domain, “Space & Exploration (P1),” includes high-frequency words such as “orbit, launch, mission, Mars,” reflecting China's active engagement in space exploration, including Mars exploration, the “Chang’e” lunar missions, and space station construction.

The fourth-ranking domain, “M7 (Economy & Trade),” contains high-frequency words such as “industry, market, investment,” indicating that the aerospace technology sector is not only an embodiment of national technological strength but also a key driver of economic growth.

The sixth-ranking domain, W1 (International Relations), features “cooperation, partner, agreement” as the most frequent words, highlighting China's emphasis on international collaboration in aerospace, promoting global technological advancement through technology sharing and project cooperation.

In summary, aerospace news primarily revolves around “technological innovation, government policies, and international cooperation.” By emphasizing independent innovation in aerospace technology while balancing international competition and collaboration, China's aerospace discourse embodies the dual role of a “technological powerhouse” and a “global governance participant.”

Beyond the technical emphasis, these thematic patterns also reflect deeper cultural values embedded in China's national discourse. The representation of aerospace achievements as collective milestones resonates with longstanding values such as collectivism, self-reliance, and national rejuvenation. References to mythological names (e.g., Chang'e, Tiangong), phrases like “milestone for the nation,” and the framing of space missions as contributions to “all humanity” construct a narrative where technology becomes both a symbol of progress and a carrier of cultural identity. Such discourse not only affirms China's position as a scientific power, but also articulates a modern collective identity grounded in innovation, cultural pride, and a vision of peaceful cooperation. In this way, the aerospace narrative becomes a key medium for performing cultural continuity and projecting a uniquely Chinese model of technonationalism to global audiences.

B. Discursive Strategies

1) Nomination strategies

Nomination refers to the process of categorizing social actors, entities, phenomena, social events, processes, and actions within a specific community to construct discourse and establish identity. This study primarily focuses on the national image of China as reflected in noun phrases

associated with this discursive subject. By utilizing the indexing and collocation functions of AntConc, the analysis reveals that the nomination strategy in China Daily is mainly reflected in the references to national entities, technological achievements, and international cooperation. A high-frequency word analysis indicates that terms such as China, CASC, policy, and strategy frequently co-occur, emphasizing China's dominant role in the aerospace sector. Additionally, the naming of China's space programs and key technologies—such as satellite, rocket, and engine—reinforces the country's image as a technological innovator.

Example 1: *“China's space station will become a global research hub, providing scientists worldwide with access to advanced facilities.”*

This example illustrates how the phrase “China's space station” operates not only as a technical designation but also as a symbolic claim of leadership and openness.

Beyond these institutional references, the use of culturally resonant names such as Tiangong (“Heavenly Palace”) and Chang'e (a mythological moon goddess) reveals an additional layer of cultural meaning embedded within technological discourse. These names evoke elements of Chinese mythology and traditional cosmology, linking modern aerospace achievements to a civilizational heritage. By naming its space programs after mythical figures and celestial concepts, China symbolically positions its technological progress as a continuation of historical and cultural narratives, rather than a rupture from them.

This nomination practice reflects a form of cultural continuity and collective memory-making. It projects the idea that space exploration is not only a scientific endeavor but also a cultural mission—a modern expression of ancient Chinese aspirations to “reach the heavens.” Such naming strategies enable China Daily to construct a national identity rooted in both innovation and tradition, reinforcing a uniquely Chinese model of technonationalism that blends scientific power with cultural symbolism.

In this way, nomination strategies in aerospace reporting serve not only to identify actors and actions but to infuse them with meaning, aligning technological milestones with broader narratives of national pride, cultural confidence, and collective belonging.

2) Predication strategies

Predication refers to the discursive construction of attributes related to social actors, entities, phenomena, social events, processes, and actions through specific vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical techniques. This construction can frame subjects in a positive or negative manner, evaluating them as good or bad, just or unjust, reasonable or unreasonable, among other dichotomies.

Predication refers to the discursive construction of attributes related to social actors, entities, and actions through evaluative language. In China Daily's aerospace coverage, predication is primarily realized through the frequent use of positively connoted adjectives and descriptive phrases. These linguistic choices not only enhance the credibility of China's space achievements but also function rhetorically to project cultural values such as innovation, leadership, and global responsibility.

For example, adjectives like breakthrough, leading, world-class, and groundbreaking are commonly used to characterize

China's technological milestones. These evaluative terms create a semantic environment in which scientific success is framed as both expected and exceptional.

Phrases such as “remarkable progress,” “historic achievement,” or “leap forward in space science” further construct China as a pioneering force in global space exploration.

Example 2: *“China has made a groundbreaking achievement in space technology, with its new space station module successfully docking in orbit.”*

In this example, the phrases “groundbreaking achievement” and “successfully docking” serve not only as a positive evaluation of technological capability but also as a marker of national pride and collective confidence. From the perspective of discourse-historical analysis, during the “Global China” phase, China has increasingly shaped its national image through aerospace technology, emphasizing its technological leadership and capacity for innovation. Such descriptions not only reinforce the autonomy of China's aerospace industry but also construct the image of a trustworthy technological power, thereby enhancing international recognition of China's space cooperation.

This predicational pattern reflects a distinct form of technological cultural narrative identity, wherein the boundary between technological advancement and cultural expression becomes blurred. By praising achievements in emotionally resonant and symbolically loaded language, China Daily not only informs its readers but also mobilizes them around a shared vision of modernity rooted in both innovation and national pride.

3) Argumentation strategies

Argumentation strategies are used to justify, legitimize, or challenge particular actions, ideologies, or identities. In China Daily's aerospace reporting, these strategies frequently draw on common topoi such as causality, usefulness, numbers, and authority. These argumentative structures serve not only to explain technological success but also to embed it within broader national and cultural narratives.

Causal reasoning is often used to link China's aerospace achievements with long-term investment and strategic planning. For instance, phrases such as “due to continuous investment” or “as a result of technological innovation” frame scientific breakthroughs as the logical outcomes of a rational, future-oriented national effort.

Example 3: *“Due to continuous investment in research and development, China's space industry has reached world-class standards.”*

This statement invokes the topos of causality, positioning technological success as a consequence of perseverance, long-term vision, and state-guided innovation—a logic that resonates with collective effort and cultural values of endurance.

Example 4: *“China's space program not only contributes to technological progress but also enhances global scientific cooperation.”*

Here, the topos of usefulness justifies space exploration not merely in national terms, but as a contribution to shared human progress. This reflects China's soft-power strategy of presenting its scientific endeavors as morally beneficial and culturally inclusive.

Beyond technical justification, such argumentative

structures reflect a deeply rooted cultural narrative: that of self-reliance leading to collective success, and national progress framed as service to humanity. These discursive patterns evoke values like “科技兴国” (revitalizing the nation through science and technology) and “兼济天下” (benefiting the world through shared advancement), deeply embedded in China’s modern identity discourse.

In this way, argumentation in China Daily does more than explain. It persuades, normalizes, and naturalizes a vision of China as both a technological power and a culturally responsible global actor. The logic of cause and effect is thus aligned with a cultural logic of identity, responsibility, and modern rejuvenation.

4) Perspectivization strategies

Perspectivization involves the positioning of the speaker or writer within discourse and reflects how subjectivity, evaluation, and ideological stance are expressed. In China Daily’s aerospace coverage, perspectivization is realized through two dominant strategies: the use of inclusive first-person pronouns and the incorporation of external viewpoints.

The first strategy involves collective expressions such as we, our country, and our scientists, which construct a sense of national unity and shared purpose. These expressions position technological success not as the achievement of isolated experts but as a collective cultural milestone. In the context of aerospace, such phrasing contributes to the formation of a “space dream”—a shared national ambition that links individual innovation to the broader narrative of China’s rise.

Example 5: “Our country has achieved remarkable progress in space exploration, bringing benefits to humanity.”

Here, the term “our country” fosters emotional alignment with the state and its achievements, embedding technological success within a framework of national pride and moral responsibility.

The second strategy uses third-party references such as “according to international analysts” or “experts say” to establish legitimacy and mitigate perceptions of state propaganda. By quoting foreign experts or institutions, China Daily increases the credibility of its narratives for international audiences. It also frames China’s advancements as recognized and endorsed by the global scientific community.

Example 6: “According to international analysts, China’s lunar mission is a milestone in space exploration.”

This not only lends external validation but also reflects a soft power strategy, whereby China’s technological narrative is internationalized, transcending national borders and reframing aerospace achievements as contributions to global progress.

These perspectivization strategies shape a dual identity: China as a unified cultural entity with a shared technological destiny, and as a responsible, globally engaged actor. They allow the discourse to oscillate between inward solidarity and outward cooperation, reinforcing a model of technonationalism that is both domestically resonant and internationally strategic.

5) Intensification/mitigation strategies

Intensification and mitigation strategies shape the tone and

emotional force of media discourse. In China Daily’s aerospace reporting, these strategies are carefully employed to amplify national pride and technological confidence, while simultaneously downplaying confrontation in international contexts.

Intensification is commonly realized through the use of emphatic adjectives, adverbs, and metaphorical phrases. Terms such as significant progress, remarkable achievement, and breakthrough are repeatedly used to describe China’s aerospace milestones. These expressions elevate technological events into emotionally charged national symbols, reinforcing a narrative of unstoppable innovation and collective pride.

Example 7: “China has made significant progress in developing reusable rockets, marking a breakthrough in aerospace technology.”

The collocation of “significant progress” and “breakthrough” not only underscores technical success but frames it as historically meaningful—projecting an image of China as a dynamic and forward-looking power.

These rhetorical intensifiers serve a cultural function as well: they link scientific accomplishment to values such as “奋斗” (striving), “自主创新” (independent innovation), and “民族复兴” (national rejuvenation). Thus, the language of intensification becomes a means of emotional mobilization and cultural identity reinforcement.

Conversely, mitigation strategies are often used when addressing international competition, particularly Sino-U.S. space relations. Rather than framing these dynamics in adversarial terms (e.g. rivalry), reports prefer softer formulations such as technological competition or parallel development. This mitigated tone reflects China’s diplomatic stance of peaceful development and cooperative advancement.

C. Construction of Cultural Identity through Media Discourse

Beyond the linguistic realization of discursive strategies, the construction of China’s aerospace narrative in China Daily ultimately serves a deeper ideological and cultural function: it performs and reproduces a collective identity rooted in technonationalism. This identity is not merely political or economic, but deeply cultural — positioning scientific achievement as an expression of national character, shared values, and historical continuity.

Through nomination strategies, the use of names such as Tiangong and Chang’e embeds space exploration within Chinese mythological and civilizational heritage. These cultural references reframe modern aerospace achievements as symbolic continuations of traditional cosmological imagination. Predication strategies enhance this effect by using evaluative language to present China’s space missions not only as technical successes, but as affirmations of national pride, perseverance, and self-reliance.

Argumentation strategies further justify this narrative by aligning technological progress with collective investment and global contribution. The logic is clear: what benefits the state benefits the people; what advances China technologically enhances its global legitimacy. Perspectivization, through inclusive pronouns and third-party citations, reinforces unity at home and credibility abroad—constructing a national self-image that is both modern and

morally resonant.

Even intensification and mitigation strategies contribute to this cultural project. While positive expressions celebrate scientific advancement as a national milestone, mitigated tones around international competition reflect a Confucian ideal of harmony and responsibility. Together, these discursive moves project an image of a technologically ambitious, yet diplomatically cautious China.

In sum, the discourse of aerospace in China Daily naturalizes a vision of science and technology as intrinsic to China's cultural identity and historical destiny. It promotes a narrative in which space exploration is not simply a domain of scientific progress, but a medium through which a modern Chinese identity—innovative, proud, peaceful, and globally engaged—is imagined and performed. This cultural-linguistic construction of technonationalism reflects the strategic fusion of scientific discourse with symbolic resources drawn from tradition, ideology, and collective aspiration.

Such findings underscore the importance of understanding media language not just as representation, but as cultural action. In doing so, this study highlights how even highly specialized domains like aerospace become crucial sites for the articulation and performance of national identity in the era of global science communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has explored how China Daily constructs cultural identity and technological cultural discourse through its reporting on aerospace technology. By applying the Discourse-Historical Approach, the analysis revealed how a set of linguistic strategies—nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, intensification and mitigation—collectively shape a narrative that presents China not only as a scientific power, but as a culturally self-aware and globally responsible nation.

Far from being neutral or purely informational, aerospace reporting in China Daily operates as a symbolic act of nation-building. It weaves together scientific achievement, traditional symbolism, and moral legitimacy to project a modern Chinese identity grounded in innovation, pride, and peaceful cooperation. Names like Chang'e and Tiangong, evaluative phrases such as breakthrough and world-class, and inclusive expressions like our country work in tandem to naturalize a vision of space exploration as a continuation of China's civilizational mission.

Importantly, these discursive practices do more than describe reality—they shape it. They frame technological advancement as an expression of national character, mobilize collective emotion around scientific progress, and promote a globally oriented yet culturally rooted identity. In doing so, they reflect the ideological logic of technonationalism: the fusion of technological development with cultural pride and political legitimacy.

The use of DHA in this study has shown its strength in uncovering how language mediates the intersection of media,

culture, and power. By situating media texts within their sociopolitical and historical contexts, it allows us to see how even highly technical domains like aerospace become sites for cultural meaning-making and identity performance.

Future research may extend this study by comparing Chinese and international media discourse on space technology, or by integrating multimodal data (e.g., video, visuals) to explore how cultural narratives are communicated across platforms. Ultimately, this research underscores the vital role of media language in shaping not only how we perceive science, but also how we imagine ourselves in the global cultural order.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ruxi Wang conducted the research, collected the corpus, conducted corpus analysis, and wrote the paper; Yi Zhang was responsible for data analysis and verification work; both authors had approved the final version.

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