

## Media Framing of China's Aerospace Achievement: A CDA Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method to explore how *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of Communist Party of China (CPC), constructs ideological narratives in 43 front-page headline news covering China's aerospace achievements from 2003 to 2023. Drawing on Fairclough's and van Dijk's frameworks, the research examines lexical choices and rhetorical strategies that frame aerospace advancements within China's state ideology. Findings reveal the systematic use of nationalistic vocabulary, collectivist pronouns, verb expressions with neat parallelism, and emotive language to link technological success in China's aerospace with political legitimacy. Rhetorical devices such as syntactic parallelism, metaphor, and presupposition reinforce narratives of national unity of Chinese and the historical destiny to develop aerospace. The discourse naturalizes CPC's leadership and positions readers into a shared identity centred on technological pride, and demonstrates how state media functions ideologically to shape public consciousness of building their nation and legitimize the legitimacy of the Party in power. This research enhances our understanding that technology-focused news coverage also serves a symbolic function in shaping China's political narrative.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature on China's aerospace communication by examining ideological discourse in *People's Daily*. This study is one of very few studies which have investigated aerospace news through Critical Discourse Analysis. The paper's primary contribution is finding that technological achievements are discursively framed to reinforce the political authority of the CPC and construct national identity.

## 1. Introduction

Recognising the strategic importance of aerospace technology, China has incorporated its space industry into its broader national development agenda. Since the landmark launch of Shenzhou 5 in 2003, which made China the third country to independently send a human into space (Kraus, 2004), China's space program has reached a series of remarkable milestones. These include the successful docking of Shenzhou 9 with the Tiangong-1 space laboratory in 2012, and the construction of the Tiangong Space Station in 2021 (State Council Information Office, 2022). These achievements, while marking significant milestones, reflect China's growing capabilities in manned spaceflight and orbital infrastructure, which, in turn, have become key points of focus in national discourse. Understanding how these advancements are framed in public discourse is crucial to comprehending their role in the nation-building project.

Media shapes public perceptions of aerospace advancements by framing these events in ways that contribute to national identity and technological legitimacy. By mobilizing national pride, media discourse plays a key role in fostering collective engagement and reinforcing these constructs. In China, aerospace development is closely tied to the nation-building strategy, guided by the centralized, top-down approach of the CPC, which shapes both policy discourse and media coverage of aerospace achievements (Wu & Chen, 2008; Goswami, 2018; Cai, 2021).

As the official newspaper of the CPC Central Committee, *People's Daily* plays a pivotal role in shaping public discourse on China's aerospace program. Not only does it communicate state priorities, but it also sets the agenda for other media outlets, functioning as the authoritative voice of the CPC and the Chinese government (Brady, 2016; Musalitina, 2022). Through its prominent narratives of self-reliance and technological advancement, *People's Daily* integrates these themes into broader national development discourses. This makes it a critical source for analysing how China's aerospace achievements are discursively constructed within the political and media system.

Nation-building, as a multidisciplinary concept rooted in political science, sociology, history, and economics, encompasses processes of state formation, globalization, soft power, and technological advancement (Mylonas, 2021). Scholars like Edgerton (2007) have emphasized that scientific and technological achievements serve not just as markers of modernization but as instruments for asserting national prestige and state legitimacy. In this regard, China's aerospace program has become a key symbol of national rejuvenation, reflecting technological independence, political strength, and cultural resurgence (Cechin & Bispo, 2022; Pollpeter, 2020).

While existing studies have explored the media's role in shaping national identity or framing technological progress, there has been limited systematic analysis of the linguistic and rhetorical strategies in *People's Daily's* front-page headlines, particularly within the context of high-political-salience communication. This study aims to fill that gap by applying CDA to analyse the framing of China's aerospace achievements across an extended period, from 2003 to 2023. Moreover, CDA has rarely been applied to this specific genre in relation to China's aerospace narrative across an extended historical period.

From a discourse-oriented perspective, nation-building is not only a political or economic process but also a linguistic and symbolic one. Anderson's (2020) theory of imagined communities foregrounds how nations are constructed through shared

narratives and mediated communication. Similarly, Billig and Núñez (1998) highlighted banal nationalism, through routine symbolic expressions in language and media, sustains national identity within established nation-states. Wodak et al. (2009) further argued that discourse is a key site where national identities are constructed, normalized, and legitimized. In this regard, media narratives, particularly those produced by state-affiliated outlets like *People's Daily*, serve as central platforms for articulating national ideology and staging technological triumphs as political legitimacy.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how lexical choices, rhetorical devices, and discursive patterns in *People's Daily's* coverage of China's aerospace development contribute to the discursive construction of national pride, political legitimacy, and ideological cohesion. This study situates aerospace discourse at the intersection of media, language, and nation-building in contemporary China. Specifically, it conducts a CDA of front-page headline news articles related to China's space program from 2003 to 2023. The study aims to investigate how language is used to construct ideological narratives surrounding national pride, scientific progress, and political legitimacy. Guided by Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework—Description, Interpretation, and Explanation—and Ruiz's (2009) sociological discourse approach, which includes textual, contextual, and interpretative levels, the study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ: In what ways do the lexical choices and rhetorical strategies employed in *People's Daily's* front-page headline news from 2003 to 2023 contribute to the construction and reinforcement of ideological narratives surrounding China's aerospace achievements?

## 2. Literature Review

Van Dijk (1998) argued that while ideologies exist as part of the social mind, a fusion of psychological and sociological elements. They become empirically observable primarily in concrete social practices, especially in discourse (e.g., text, talk, communication). Although discrimination may be ideologically motivated, it is through language and communication that ideologies are explicitly formulated, justified, learned, and propagated. Therefore, to truly understand what ideologies are, how they work, and how they are maintained or challenged, we need to look at how they appear in language and communication. Discourse, spoken or written language, is the key space where thoughts and social structures come together. It is through discourse that ideologies are expressed, spread, and used to shape how people see and experience the social world.

CDA provides a powerful framework for uncovering how language reflects, maintains, and challenges power structures in society (Fairclough, 1995). Within media discourse studies, Fairclough's (1995) and Ruiz's (2009) works focusing on the Textual, Contextual, and Interpretative layers offer systematic approaches to examine linguistic choices, rhetorical strategies, and broader socio-political meanings. Previous research using CDA has effectively revealed how media texts encode ideological positions and reinforce institutional authority (Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2006, Sahmeni & Afifah, 2019; Widuna, 2018), and highlighted the need for more inclusive language to promote unity (Jamil & NURNADILLA, 2023) and nation-building (Teik & Rahim, 2020), but few have focused on front-page headline news over an extended period. This study seeks to build upon this body of research by specifically examining how *People's Daily* frames aerospace achievements through CDA, focusing on a decade-long period (2013-2023), a gap in current literature.

Tanikawa (2017) found that front-page news in newspapers has shifted from event-centered reporting to more analytical and in-depth content. For *People's Daily*, its front-page headline news represents a highly organized form of political communication within China's centralized, one-party system. As the official newspaper of CPC, *People's Daily* functions not only as a vehicle for information dissemination but also as a key ideological instrument. Its front-page headlines are particularly significant than other news on the same day because they reflect CPC's strategic priorities, frame national narratives, and serve as authoritative guidance for both the public and Party cadres, acting an ideological and political indicator. In a word, these headlines offer insight into how the CPC articulates its vision of national development, mobilizes support for major initiatives, and constructs discursive legitimacy around its policies and leadership. Therefore, is the front-page headline news of *People's Daily* covering China's aerospace achievement merely for manifesting national strength? This question allures us to apply a CDA method to analyse the discourse of the front-page headline news of *People's Daily* in 2013-2023 to discover their ideological implications.

Previous studies have demonstrated how aerospace technology has been utilized for national prestige, economic development, and geopolitical positioning (e.g. Krige & Wang, 2015; Dick & Launius, 2006; Goldstein, 2002; Mendez & Estrada, 2025), or on case studies of discussing aerospace development from political or historical perspectives (Dai & Yu, 2014). However, there remains a notable gap concerning how specific linguistic strategies, particularly at the headline level, contribute to constructing ideological narratives over an extended period. By conducting CDA of *People's Daily's* front-page headline news from 2003 to 2023, this study aims to fill this gap, offering a textual and contextual examination of how aerospace achievements are discursively framed to serve the broader political and cultural agendas of contemporary China.

China's aerospace achievements are widely represented in official discourse as manifestations of national greatness and cultural destiny. Through extensive coverage of major milestones, from manned missions to planetary exploration, mainstream media not only inform but also ideologically frame these events within a broader narrative of national development. State media, particularly *People's Daily*, often portray aerospace accomplishments as symbols of CPC's leadership and national unity, intertwining scientific progress with patriotic pride (Zhang, 2022; Zhang & Zheng, 2021). In this process, aerospace technology is transformed into a form of symbolic capital that can reinforces the authority of the party in power and vision of national rejuvenation.

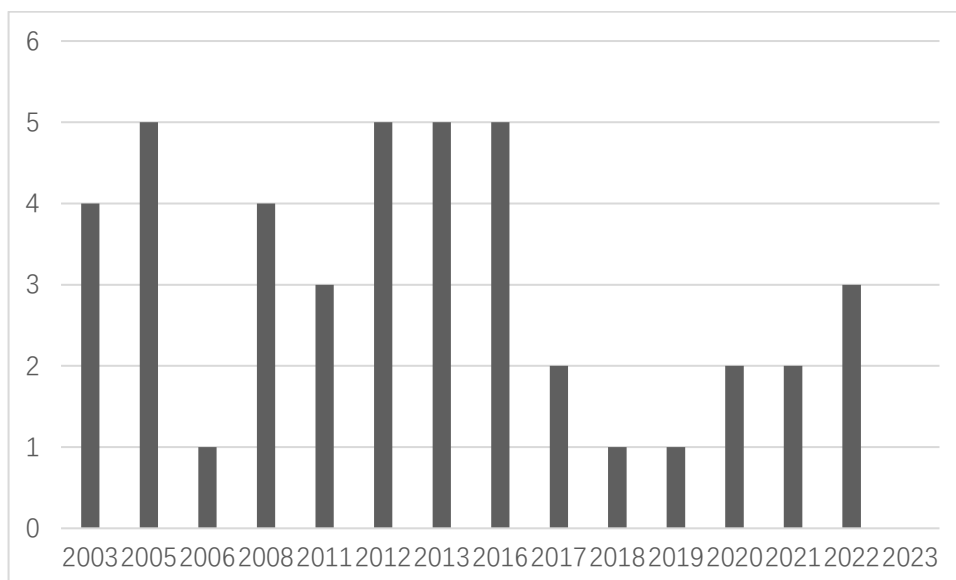
### 3. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative, text-based approach grounded in CDA to investigate how *People's Daily* constructs and frames the ideological narrative of nation-building through its front-page headline news on China's aerospace achievements. The data consist of front-page headline news focusing on national aerospace events published between 2003 and 2023, selected through automatic retrieval and manual screening. Guided by the core research question, the research is organized into two stages. First, the linguistic features of the front-page headline news texts are examined, focusing on vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices that contribute to shaping public perceptions. Second, the study interprets how these linguistic patterns reflect and reinforce dominant sociopolitical ideologies, particularly discourses of national strength, technological sovereignty, and national rejuvenation. Findings are contextualized within the broader ideological and historical frameworks of

contemporary China, highlighting how language functions as a tool for legitimizing political authority and promoting the nation-building agenda.

The data for this study was sourced from the People's Daily Full Text Database, which archives reports on all significant events in China since 1946. Firstly, we used the keyword *Hangtian* (translated as "aerospace" in this study) to search the news with titles and news texts containing the keyword *Hangtian*. The data scope had its origin from October 15, 2003, when China successfully launched its first manned spacecraft, *Shenzhou 5*, marking China's emergence as the third nation to achieve human spaceflight following the former Soviet Union and the United States and ended prior to the beginning of data analysis from June 30, 2023. The edition of the news was limited to the first edition on which the front-page headline news occurred. The retrieved result showed that there are 187 pieces of news on the first edition covering China's aerospace achievements. After completing manual screening by the researchers to filter out non-headline news, a total of 43 pieces of front-page headline news were included in the sample (See Table 1). The latest front-page headline news was on May 4, 2022. Their distribution during the two decades is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The distribution of front-page headline news in *People's Daily* covering China's aerospace achievements (2003-2023)



The distribution of front-page headline news generally reflects China's progress in space exploration. Notably, the year marked on the horizontal axis witnessed a peak of front-page headline news in *People's Daily*, coinciding with China's successful launch of aerospace missions listed in China's aerospace development history (Ren et al., 2021). Figure 1 also shows that there is no headline news covering aerospace achievement in 2023. The titles of 43 front-page headline news reports are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Dates and titles of front-page headlines in *People's Daily*

Serial Number	Publication Date	News Title (CN)	News Titles (EN)
1	2003-10-16	我国进行首次载人航天飞行“神舟”五号飞船发射成功	China Conducts First Manned Spaceflight: Shenzhou V Successfully Launched
2	2003-10-17	我国首次载人航天飞行获得圆满成功	China's First Manned Spaceflight Achieves Complete Success

3	2003-11-8	中共中央国务院中央军委隆重举行大会庆祝我国首次载人航天飞行圆满成功	CPC Central Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission Hold Grand Ceremony to Celebrate First Manned Spaceflight Success
4	2003-11-11	航天英雄杨利伟	Space Hero Yang Liwei
5	2005-10-13	神舟六号载人飞船发射成功首次将我国两名航天员同时送上太空	Shenzhou VI Successfully Launches Two Astronauts into Space Simultaneously for the First Time
6	2005-10-17	我国神舟六号载人航天飞行圆满成功	China's Shenzhou VI Manned Spaceflight Achieves Complete Success
7	2005-10-18	神舟回家 神州欢腾	Shenzhou Returns, Nation Celebrates
8	2005-11-27	中共中央国务院中央军委举行大会隆重庆祝神舟六号载人航天飞行圆满成功	CPC Central Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission Hold Ceremony to Celebrate Success of Shenzhou VI Manned Spaceflight
9	2005-12-9	神舟，从中南海启航	Shenzhou Sets Sail from Zhongnanhai
10	2006-10-14	中国航天事业创建五十周年纪念大会在京召开	The 50th Anniversary of China's Space Program Commemorated in Beijing
11	2008-9-27	确保神舟七号任务取得圆满成功 推动我国载人航天事业不断发展	Ensure Complete Success of Shenzhou VII Mission and Advance Manned Space Program
12	2008-9-28	我国航天员成功实施首次空间出舱活动	Chinese Astronauts Successfully Conduct First Spacewalk
13	2008-9-29	我国空间技术发展实现具有里程碑意义的重大跨越	China's Space Technology Reaches Major Milestone in Development
14	2008-11-8	中共中央国务院中央军委隆重举行庆祝神舟七号载人航天飞行圆满成功大会	CPC Central Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission Hold Ceremony to Celebrate Shenzhou VII Mission Success
15	2011-9-30	天宫一号目标飞行器发射圆满成功	Tiangong-1 Target Spacecraft Successfully Launched
16	2011-11-3	天宫一号与神舟八号成功实现首次交会对接	Tiangong-1 and Shenzhou VIII Achieve First Successful Docking
17	2011-12-19	放飞神舟 领航中国	Launching Shenzhou, Leading China
18	2012-5-8	挺直脊梁 强军富国	Stand Tall with a Strong Military and Prosperous Nation
19	2012-6-27	胡锦涛同神舟九号航天员亲切通话	Hu Jintao Speaks with Shenzhou IX Astronauts
20	2012-7-28	胡锦涛会见天宫一号与神舟九号载人交会对接任务航天员及参研参试人员代表	Hu Jintao Meets Astronauts and Contributors to Tiangong-1 and Shenzhou IX Docking Mission
21	2012-9-13	载人航天 千年飞天梦想成真 (科学发展 成就辉煌·十年回眸·重大事件亲历)	Manned Spaceflight Realizes Millennia-Old Dream of Flight (Ten-Year Review of Scientific Development)
22	2012-10-4	关于给景海鹏颁发“二级航天功勋奖章”授予刘旺、刘洋“英雄航天员”荣誉称号并颁发“三级航天功勋奖章”的决定	Decision to Award Jing Haipeng Second-Class Space Merit Medal and Liu Wang and Liu Yang the Title of Hero Astronaut with Third-Class Space Merit Medals
23	2013-6-12	神舟十号载人飞船发射成功	Shenzhou X Manned Spacecraft Successfully Launched
24	2013-6-25	习近平同神舟十号航天员亲切通话	Xi Jinping Speaks with Shenzhou X Astronauts
25	2013-7-26	谱写航天梦的壮丽篇章	Writing a Magnificent Chapter of the Space Dream
26	2013-7-27	习近平会见神舟十号载人飞行任务航天员和参研参试人员代	Xi Jinping Meets Shenzhou X Mission Astronauts and Contributors

## 表

27	2013-12-16	习近平到北京航天飞行控制中心观看两器互拍成像	Xi Jinping Observes Mutual Imaging of Spacecraft at Beijing Aerospace Control Centre
28	2016-4-25	坚持创新驱动发展勇攀科技高峰 谱写中国航天事业新篇章	Persist in Innovation-Driven Development and Scale New Heights in Science and Technology to Advance China's Space Endeavor
29	2016-11-4	长征五号直破云霄	Long March V Rocket Pierces the Clouds
30	2016-11-10	习近平同神舟十一号航天员亲切通话	Xi Jinping Speaks with Shenzhou XI Astronauts
31	2016-12-21	在航天事业发展征程上勇攀高峰 努力建设航天强国和世界科技强国	Climbing to New Heights in Aerospace Development, Building a Space Power and a Global Science Power
32	2016-12-27	关于给景海鹏颁发“一级航天功勋奖章”授予陈冬“英雄航天员”荣誉称号并颁发“三级航天功勋奖章”的决定	Decision to Award Jing Haipeng First-Class Space Merit Medal and Chen Dong the Title of Hero Astronaut with Third-Class Space Merit Medal
33	2017-4-28	天舟一号飞行任务圆满成功	Tianzhou-1 Mission Successfully Completed
34	2017-6-25	全面提高遂行发射和试验任务能力 为建设航天强国再立新功	Enhance Launch and Test Capabilities to Contribute More to Building a Space Power
35	2018-1-22	筑梦九天写忠诚	Dreaming Among the Stars, Writing Loyalty
36	2019-2-21	为实现我国探月工程目标乘胜前进 为推动世界航天事业发展继续努力	Advance Toward Lunar Exploration Goals, Contribute to Global Space Development
37	2020-4-25	敢于战胜一切艰难险阻 勇于攀登航天科技高峰	Dare to Overcome All Hardships and Scale the Heights of Aerospace Technology
38	2020-5-6	长五 B 运载火箭首飞成功	First Launch of Long March 5B Rocket Successful
39	2021-6-18	中国人首次进入自己的空间站	Chinese Enter Their Own Space Station for the First Time
40	2021-6-24	习近平同神舟十二号航天员亲切通话	Xi Jinping Speaks with Shenzhou XII Astronauts
42	2022-1-17	努力实现高水平科技自立自强 (总书记和我握过手)	Strive for High-Level Self-Reliance in Science and Technology (Handshakes with the General Secretary)
42	2022-4-15	强化使命担当 勇于创新突破 努力建设世界一流航天发射场	Strengthen Mission Commitment, Embrace Innovation, and Build a World-Class Space Launch Site
43	2022-5-4	弘扬“两弹一星”精神载人航天精神 为航天科技实现高水平自立自强再立新功	Promote the 'Two Bombs, One Satellite' and Manned Spaceflight Spirit to Achieve High-Level Technological Self-Reliance in Aerospace

#### 4. Results and Discussions

To systematically analyse discursive strategies, the study examined 43 front-page headline news from *People's Daily*, which were sequentially numbered from 1 to 43 based on their order of appearance. The primary analysis reveals that the achievements of China's aerospace program are framed as highly significant for enhancing national pride and collective identity, strengthening the legitimization of state authority, and upholding historical continuity while inspiring future aspirations. For instance, one headline news states: "The successful completion of the Tiangong II and Shenzhou XI

manned flight missions is of great significance to further enhance China's comprehensive national strength, scientific and technological strength, and national cohesion, and inspire the whole Party, the whole army, and people of all ethnic groups across the country to constantly create a new situation in the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (#32). By employing a CDA method, the study addresses the core research question through two analytical phases: (1) How does *People's Daily* employ lexical-rhetorical devices to construct nation-building narratives in front-page headline news? (2) What ideological frameworks of nation-building emerge from this discourse?

#### **4.1. Lexical-rhetorical devices to construct nation-building narratives in front-page headline news**

Lexical choices play a crucial role in CDA, as they can construct social identities, shape ideological positioning, and reinforce or challenge power relations (Fairclough, 1995). Specifically, one important function of lexical choices lies in constructing social identities through the creation of in-group and out-group distinctions when describing social actors, thereby shaping how these identities are perceived. In the context of China's national discourse, terms such as "Chinese nation" and "the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation" are frequently used to refer to the Chinese people, while "Shenzhou Earth" is employed to denote China as a geographical and cultural entity. These lexical choices employed in the front-page headline news (see #1, 23, 29) not only construct a cohesive national identity among Chinese people but also reinforce the ideological narrative of unity in the context of advancing aerospace achievements and nation-building.

In addition to constructing national identity, lexical choices in front-page headline news also serve to emphasize the role of Chinese collective achievements in fostering a sense of unity and pride among the Chinese people. Terms such as a complete success, a magnificent poetry), a major leap, brilliant achievements, historical achievement, and milestone (see #2, 3, 6, 8, 14, 21, 25, 28, 33) are frequently employed to describe China's aerospace advancements. These hyperbolic and metaphorical lexical choices strategically amplify the magnificence of these achievements while simultaneously suppressing alternative or critical perspectives on China's aerospace development. By systematically embedding these expressions into state-controlled media discourse, this narrative of national exceptionalism is repeatedly reinforced and naturalized, positioning China as an undisputed leader in the global aerospace arena.

The use of possessive pronouns like "our" and "we" in front-page headline news, such as "our Shenzhou Mission" and "our own space station" (see # 1, 2, 6, 40), serves as a powerful linguistic strategy to strengthen in-group identity by creating a shared sense of ownership and participation. From a CDA perspective, this use of inclusive language not only fosters a collective identity among readers but also aligns individual identity with the nation's achievements (Caballero, 2015). By encouraging Chinese readers to view themselves as active participants in China's aerospace journey rather than passive observers, these lexical choices subtly build consensus of the Chinese in "continuously create new glory in China space, make new and greater contributions to the realization of the "two centenary goals" and the realization of the Chinese dream of great national rejuvenation (#29). Through framing these achievements as collective successes, the front-page headline news implicitly attributes the accomplishments to the collective efforts of the "Chinese nation", thereby reinforcing the ideological narrative that every member of the nation has contributed to and benefits from these advancements.

As discussed, lexical choices can subtly delineate boundaries between China and other nations, constructing an ideological distinction between the in-group (China) and the out-group (other countries). For example, phrases like moving towards a presence in space and entering the ranks of international leaders (#30) frame China's space achievements within a narrative of progress and ascent. However, rather than explicitly positioning China as superior, these phrases function to reinforce a discourse of national rejuvenation and aspiration. By emphasizing China's movement toward an advanced status, such wording fosters a sense of collective national ambition and destiny among Chinese people.

Together with lexical choices, rhetorical strategies also play a pivotal role in both shaping the ideological narratives embedded in front-page headline news, strengthening and spreading ideology. Common rhetorical strategies in CDA are syntactic parallelism (Fairclough, 1995, 2001), metaphor (Chilton, 2025), authorization (Fairclough, 1995), and presupposition (Van Dijk, 1998), etc. The following illustrates the employment of the above said rhetorical strategies in constructing ideological narratives of nation-building.

**Syntactic parallelism.** Syntactic parallelism is an important feature of Chinese expression, especially in the fields of classical Chinese, rhetoric, political discourse, etc. (Sheng, 2016). Compared with English, Chinese relies more on parallel structure, which not only enhance symmetry and rhythm but also to strategically embed ideological messages, ensuring that national goals are seamlessly aligned with individual responsibilities (Fairclough, 1995).

In *People's Daily*, syntactic parallelism is employed both in the news headline and news text. For instance, "To press forward in achieving China's lunar exploration goals, and to continue contributing to the advancement of global space exploration" (see #36) establishes a binary frame that positions China's space achievements as both a national success and a global contribution. Similarly, "Dare to overcome all difficulties and obstacles, bravely climb the peak of aerospace science and technology" (see #37) employs repetitive syntactic patterns to reinforce a narrative of tenacious struggle and technological breakthrough in China's aerospace cause. Parallelism is similarly employed in the following example, "vigorously promote the tradition of relentless hard work under extreme and arduous conditions to solve critical problems and achieve successes, continuously make brilliant achievements through unremitting self-improvement, tenacious struggle, unity, cooperation, and innovation" (see #2). As Fairclough (1995) noted, parallelism is a powerful tool for reinforcing ideological narratives, as it aligns individual achievements with collective goals. The above examples show that the parallelism link the endeavours of Chinese astronauts with broader national aspirations of becoming a presence in space. By structuring front-page headline news in a repetitive and symmetrical manner, the discourse naturalizes the alignment between individual contributions and the state's ideological vision, reinforcing collective unity and national pride.

**Metaphor.** Metaphors are frequently used in headline news to transform complex scientific achievements into relatable and emotionally resonant narratives. In the front-page headline news, China's aerospace cause is likened as war. For example, that the astronauts carried out the mission is described as going on an expedition (#15, 23), and the astronauts are likened as "Flying Warriors". The three astronauts of Shenzhou XII successfully entered the Tianhe core module and they were dubbed as "The Trio on the Business Trip to the Space" (#41). Journey metaphors (e.g., China's journey to the moon), military metaphors (e.g., go on an expedition, breaking through barriers), etc. make the

aerospace endeavours more relatable and inspiring to the general public. From the perspective of CDA, the journey metaphor compares China's space development to a road, constructing a narrative that China's aerospace development path is of irreversibility and directionality, while the military metaphors enhance the competitiveness of aerospace development in the world, further constructing the legitimacy of China's collective endeavours in aerospace.

Authorization. Authorization is one of the four major categories of legitimation strategy: "that is, legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). In the front-page headline news of *People's Daily*, personal authority, expert authority, role model authority, impersonal authority, the authority of tradition (Van Leeuwen, 2007) are employed to legitimize the goal of building China into a space power and strengthening nation-building. The following table gives examples of the authority strategies in the front-page headline news of *People's Daily*.

Table 2: Authority strategies employed in headline news in *People's Daily* covering China's aerospace achievements (2003-2023)

Authority Strategies	Definition	Examples
The authority of tradition	legitimate authority of the tradition, habit, etc.	"The flying dream has been a cherished wish of the Chinese nation for thousands of years" (see #3). Dunhuang flying sky, Chang'e flying to the moon, apsaras of Dunhuang, etc.
Personal Authority	legitimate authority vested in a person because of their status or role in a particular institution (Van Leeuwen, 2007: 94)	speeches by Presidents and Premiers of P.R.C. in the headline news (e.g. President Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, Premier Wen Jiabao, Li Keqiang)
Expert Authority	legitimate authority provided by expertise (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94)	words of Sen Zezhou, the Chief designer of Tianwen-1 Mars probe; words of Zhou Jianping, chief designer of manned space program, etc.
Role Model Authority	legitimate authority of role models or opinion leaders	Qian Xuesen (the founder of China space program), Yang Liwei (China's first astronaut) etc.
Impersonal Authority	legitimate authority of laws, rules and regulations.	China Space White Papers, the founding of "China Space Day", etc.

As indicated by Table 2, the legitimation of "building China into a space power and strengthening nation-building" is constructed by the above five strategies employed in the headline news. Together, these authority strategies construct a multifaceted discourse to reinforce China's aerospace endeavours as both technologically justified and ideologically aligned with national goals.

Presupposition. According to Levinson (1983), a presupposition refers to the implicit information conveyed by a sentence, which persists unchanged when the sentence is

negated. In the mass-mediated dissemination of ideologies in contemporary society, newspapers often exert a far more substantial influence than face-to-face interactions through their textual and one-sided visual communication (Van Dijk, 1998). In *People's Daily's* front-page headline news covering China's aerospace achievement, the discursive strategy of presupposition is widely employed. Drawing on Van Dijk's (1998) framework of ideological discourse structures, presuppositions are understood not merely as linguistic phenomena, but as tools for naturalizing dominant ideologies within communicative events. For example, the statement "This year marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of China's space industry" (see #31) presupposes a historically continuous and institutionally sanctioned development of China's national aerospace efforts. It implicitly affirms the legitimacy and success of state-led science and technology under the leadership of CPC. Similarly, phrases such as "under the strong leadership of the Party Central Committee" (see #1, 38) presuppose that such leadership and consensus have always existed and are fundamentally responsible for success, thereby rendering the role of alternative actors invisible or irrelevant.

As for echoing to the question why Chinese should build China into a space power and strengthening nation-building, the expression "realizing our ancestors' dream of flying to the skies" embeds a presupposition that current technological achievements fulfil China's long-standing civilizational aspiration. This blends modern science with cultural nationalism, situating space exploration within an inherited national mission. Moreover, the assertion that "the Party and the people will never forget the extraordinary contributions made by aerospace personnel" (Sun et al., 2003, p.1) presupposes that these contributions are universally acknowledged and morally heroic, promoting an emotional alignment between national pride and individual sacrifice. Further, the repeated reference to self-reliance, core technologies, and independent innovation presupposes the existence of foreign technological dependence or containment, subtly invoking an "us versus them" binary. This aligns with what Van Dijk (2006) terms semantic macrostructures, in which global meaning is organized to support ideological themes such as national resilience and systemic superiority. The above discourse ends by claiming that China's aerospace successes prove the strength of its socialist system, suggesting that this model is not just effective but essential for scientific advancement. By framing it this way, political rhetoric turns China's debatable aerospace achievements into absolute facts, reinforcing the narrative of national revival and the Party's legitimacy.

In sum, the strategic use of rhetorical devices such as syntactic parallelism, metaphor, authorization, and presupposition in *People's Daily* effectively reinforces the ideological narratives surrounding China's aerospace achievements: 1) China's endeavours in aerospace is legitimized; 2) individual sacrifice to aerospace achievements is aligned with national pride; 3) China's aerospace successes prove the strength of its socialist system and the legitimacy of CPC, aiming at shaping readers' perceptions of national achievements and authority in aerospace.

#### **4.2. Ideological narrative construction of nation-building**

Fairclough (1995) emphasized that language functions ideologically when it becomes a means through which dominant social structures are legitimated. In this study, we have examined how lexical elements and rhetorical strategies are employed in the front-page headline news of *People's Daily* to construct ideological narratives surrounding China's aerospace achievements. In analysing the discursive strategies, we found repeated use of patriotic language, celebratory words, and distinctively Chinese ideological terms, mainly

emphasizing national pride, technological breakthroughs, and shared achievement in China's aerospace. Techniques like parallel phrasing, metaphors, appeals to authority, and implicit assumptions strengthen the ideological discourse, making them more emotionally compelling and convincing. Together, these rhetorical devices help solidify a vision of China's national success in aerospace: one where scientific prowess and government-guided progress create an unquestioned, unified identity. Thus, *People's Daily's* coverage on achievement is not mere for manifesting national strength, but serves as a site of what Wodak and Meyer (2001) called discursive legitimation to justify power, consolidate state authority, and shape public belief in the moral and institutional superiority of the ruling regime.

**Embedding Aerospace Achievements into National Narratives.** As evidenced in *People's Daily's* front-page headline news of space missions, individual technological achievements are systematically framed within broader nationalist narratives. For instance, the front-page headline news articles (see #1, 7, 13, 21) not only report a scientific milestone but also strategically employs the phrase "fulfils its dream" to echo the political slogan of the "Chinese Dream". This lexical choice explicitly ties aerospace achievement to the meta-narrative of nation-building and national rejuvenation. Through such framing, the discourse promotes the equation of technological success with national strength, thereby positioning CPC's leadership as both the driver and beneficiary of national resurgence. From a CDA perspective (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), such framing constitutes a form of affective governance (Sorace, 2021; Wu & Chen, 2023), where emotional discourse resources of pride, collective memory, and aspirational futurism are mobilized to cultivate public allegiance and legitimize the Party-state. This aligns with studies on techno-nationalism (Feigenbaum, 2003), wherein scientific achievements are recast as symbols of civilizational superiority and political virtue. Framing space exploration as a symbol of national identity exemplifies Van Dijk's (2006) 'ideological square', privileging national success narratives while marginalizing underlying structural challenges.

**Embedding Aerospace Achievements into Constructing National Rejuvenation and Power.** The portrayal of China's national rejuvenation and rising power in *People's Daily* front-page headline news is systematically achieved through strategic lexical choices and temporal framing. Recurring terms like "self-reliance", "independent innovation, and world-leading" construct a narrative of China's autonomous strength in global competition. For example, in the headline (see #31), the expression "The groundbreaking achievements in aerospace technology have significantly bolstered the Chinese people's confidence in innovation, providing tremendous impetus for a nationwide culture of innovation and creativity", and "Through a steadfast commitment to indigenous innovation and technological self-sufficiency, China has made strategic breakthroughs in key aerospace technologies" simultaneously asserts technological sovereignty and distances China from perceived Western dependency. This discourse also employs temporal framing to forge historical continuity, as seen in the headline (see #31), "This year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of China's space program." By evoking past hardships and juxtaposing them with current successes, the narrative echoes the 'century of humiliation to national rejuvenation's framework (Wang, 2014), thereby reinforcing the ideological association between CPC's leadership and national revival.

This study has employed CDA to investigate the linguistic and ideological construction embedded in the front-page headline news of *People's Daily* concerning China's aerospace achievements from 2003 to 2023. Through a detailed examination of lexical

choices and rhetorical strategies, as well as their broader social and political implications, the study sheds light on how national media discourse operates as a vehicle for ideological reproduction and nation-building. In particular, the findings highlight the repeated use of military-style and triumphant language, collective pronouns such as *we* and *our*, and consistent praise for national progress. These patterns work collectively to project a unified narrative of China's scientific and technological success. Such lexical choices are reinforced by rhetorical devices, including parallel sentence structures, metaphors of strength and victory, appeals to authority, and implied assumptions that position the Party-state as the primary driver of aerospace progress. Even in reports that appear neutral in tone, these strategies serve to embed ideological messages that support the legitimacy of the political system.

Furthermore, the study identified purposeful silences in the discourse. Critical perspectives, references to global competitors, or mentions of setbacks and challenges are notably absent (Wu & Chen, 2008). These omissions reflect a deliberate strategy (King et al., 2013) to maintain a seamless ideological narrative that elevates China's aerospace achievements as symbols of national strength and unity. The discursive construction thus aligns with Fairclough's (1995) and Van Dijk's (1998) assertions that media texts operate not only as conveyors of information but as instruments of ideological reproduction.

While this analysis provides valuable insight into the linguistic construction of nation-building discourse, future research could strengthen the findings through a quantitative dimension. For instance, a corpus-based study of lexical frequency, collocation patterns, or sentiment analysis might provide empirical support for the identified patterns. It would also be beneficial to compare how these strategies evolve across different political periods or major aerospace milestones, as well as to examine audience reception to these discourses in shaping national identity.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *People's Daily's* front-page headline news articles from the past twenty years serve not simply for manifesting China's national strength, but as sophisticated vehicles of ideological messaging. Through their strategic framing of aerospace accomplishments within narratives of China's national strength, social cohesion, and technological advancement, these front-page headline news articles actively mould public perception of that developing aerospace sector and upholding CPC's leadership is necessary and legitimized. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of how media discourse in highly centralized polity functions ideologically, particularly through the symbolic elevation of scientific achievement as a marker of national strength. In doing so, this research reinforces the view that discourse is not merely a reflection of reality, but a constitutive force that shapes public perception, collective memory, and political legitimacy (Briguglio, 2019; Filardo, 2008).

Nevertheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study focused solely on front-page headline news, which, though ideologically potent, represent only one level of media discourse. Future research could extend this analysis to full news articles, visual imagery, or social media dissemination to capture a more holistic view of China's aerospace discourse. Moreover, a comparative study with other state media (e.g., Xinhua News Agency or Global Times) or with media from different geopolitical contexts could further contextualize the findings and reveal cross-cultural variations in the discursive construction of national achievements.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics guidelines and did not involve human participants, human subjects, or the collection of personal data. The study employed a CDA method to explore how *People's Daily* constructs ideological narratives in 43 front-page headline news sourced from the People's Daily Full Text Database. Therefore, informed consent was not required.

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The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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