

Article

## How *People's Daily* Frame Aerospace Issue (1975-2023)

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Received: 08 April 2025

Accepted: 20 June 2025

**Abstract:** This study examines how *People's Daily*, the party-affiliated newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC), has framed aerospace issues from 1975 to 2023, constructing narratives that serve its political and ideological goals in shaping public opinion. Aiming to uncover the dominant frames used in five periods and analyse their evolution in relation to China's political leadership and national goals, the study uses methodologies that combine inductive and deductive framing analysis to reconstruct dominant frames from a sample of 145 articles (from a sample population of 4,706). The study identifies six dominant frames: Space Race, Independently-develop Aerospace Projects, Dynamic Aerospace Development, Aerospace Achievement-Orientated, International Cooperation, and Nation-Building. These frames are traced across five generations of CPC leadership, revealing a discursive evolution from early portrayals of survival and international competition to narratives positioning China as a leading global space power. In the later periods, the framing increasingly ties aerospace advancements to China's historic dream of flight and national rejuvenation. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) further reveals the framing strategies and narratives of *People's Daily* contribute to reinforcing the legitimacy of the CPC, cultivating a heightened sense of nationalism, and gaining public backing for extensive social transformation. The findings suggest that *People's Daily* does not merely report on aerospace issues but actively induces its target audience to accept the interpretation of aerospace developments as symbols of national building and rejuvenation, socialist modernity, and the CPC's governance efficacy.

**Keywords:** Framing theory; *People's Daily*; aerospace news frames; critical discourse analysis; ideological implication

## Introduction

China's aerospace journey began in 1956 with the establishment of its first missile research institute, marking 69 years of development. As a cornerstone of national strategy, the aerospace industry has consistently been a pivotal component of China's broader development goals (Information Office of the State Council of PRC, 2022), and every successive leadership of the CPC has strongly supported the advancement of the aerospace sector. Over time, China's discourse on aerospace has evolved, particularly following significant breakthroughs in the field. This evolution has been closely mirrored in the media, which plays a critical role in shaping public perception of the issues of advancing aerospace science and technology.

*People's Daily*, as the official mouthpiece of the CPC, operates not as an independent news outlet but as a strategic instrument of ideological dissemination and policy alignment. Embedded within China's

centralized party-state system, the *People's Daily* plays a critical role in shaping public opinion (Xu & Sun, 2021), reinforcing CPC legitimacy, and maintaining political cohesion across a vast bureaucratic network (Brady, 2016; Tang & Iyengar, 2011). With over 98 million CPC members integrated throughout state institutions (CPC Organisation Department, 2023), *People's Daily* serves as a daily manual for political thought and conduct. Its framing of events fulfils both informative and ideological functions, reflecting shifting political priorities across successive CPC leaderships (Bo, 2010; Nathan, 2003; Yan, 2019). Thus, *People's Daily* is central to both domestic ideological control and China's broader efforts in global discourse shaping.

As the official mouthpiece of the CPC, *People's Daily* has consistently provided ideological continuity across five successive generations of CPC central leadership, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. Its portrayal of aerospace issues is not static but reveals a long-term discursive evolution, reflecting China's expanding space ambitions, changing position in the aerospace sector, and shifting political narratives. News media, especially state outlets like *People's Daily*, serve as the primary vehicle for communicating the strategic and symbolic importance of technological progress to the public.

While previous studies have examined Chinese media's coverage of aerospace topics through journalistic practices (e.g., Shen, 2022; Zhang & Zheng, 2021), specific event reporting, or framing theory (e.g., Cai, 2021), limited attention has been paid to how news frames of aerospace have evolved over time in response to shifting CPC political leadership and ideological priorities. Few studies integrate framing theory with CDA to uncover the deeper ideological implications of such reporting. Given *People's Daily's* role as the CPC's official mouthpiece, its long-term coverage offers a revealing lens into the party's political communication strategies. To address this gap, the present study investigates how *People's Daily* has framed aerospace issues across five generations of CPC leadership. By combining framing analysis with CDA, this research aims to uncover how the newspaper shapes public perceptions of aerospace and contributes to constructing the CPC's political legitimacy and sustaining ideological continuity.

RQ1: What frames are employed for covering aerospace issues in the news coverage of *People's Daily*?

RQ2: What is the ideological implication of the news frames during five different periods?

## Literature Review

Government agencies and public institutions have predominantly controlled aerospace technology development since the Cold War (Lin, 2020). In China, aerospace issues are of significant interest due to their strategic importance in national development (Stovpets & Svyrydenko, 2020). As a result, aerospace issues in China have been managed through a top-down approach (Tang et al., 2023), with government authorities exerting significant control over the decision-making and policy implementation (Goswami, 2018). Political discourse influences aerospace journalism practice to some extent in this context.

In China's one-party socialist system, where the CPC maintains centralised control over the state, military, media, and civil society (Dobson, 2022), the media discourse on aerospace issues is strategically aligned with state-led narratives, particularly those emphasising national development and nation-building (Wang & Zhang, 2022). Journalism in this context is shaped by ideological imperatives that align with political priorities. To better understand how such narratives are constructed and communicated, framing theory offers a useful analytical tool. Originally introduced by Goffman (1974) and further developed by scholars such as Entman (1993) and Tankard (2001), framing theory explains how the media emphasise particular aspects of reality while downplaying others, thereby influencing public perception. As Entman (1993, p. 52) observed, to frame is to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient... to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation".

Framing analysis is commonly used to explore diverse narratives in media coverage, aiming to uncover underlying political biases and their potential impact on audience perceptions (Wang et al., 2024). In the field of aerospace news, framing theory has been used to examine how the media portray space exploration and technological advancements. Studies have shown that China's state-owned media tends to frame domestic aerospace developments in ways that align with national interests, emphasising themes such as technological

superiority, peaceful cooperation, and national pride (Cai, 2021; Guo, 2013; Wang & Zhang, 2022; Zhang, 2021). Minimal research focused on the evolving news frames employed by state-owned media on aerospace issues. Framing can uncover the ideological implications behind news discourse, serving as a way to examine how news narratives express ideologies (Van Dijk, 2006).

Moreover, *People's Daily's* framing of aerospace issues is inevitably influenced by the evolving leadership of the CPC Central Committee over five generations; for example, the news reports covering China's aerospace achievements tend to cite the speeches of the presidents to legitimise the authority of the achievements. To investigate the frames used to guide the public in China, the news texts covering aerospace issues are investigated in the context of five generations of the CPC central leadership. As Table 1 shows, the guiding line for the CPC's publicity work with Chinese characteristics varies across different generations of leadership, which may influence the frames established in *People's Daily* news reports. Once the frame is built by *People's Daily*, the narratives of covering aerospace issues are followed by the subordinated media. Therefore, investigating narratives of the party-controlled media is necessary and representative for revealing the power and ideological implications of the news discourse.

Table 1. CPC publicity principles by leadership generation

Generation	Time Span	Leadership Core	Guiding line for the publicity work of the CPC
1	1930s-1978	Mao Zedong	Following revolutionary and reconstructive line
2	1979-1989	Deng Xiaoping	Serving the people and serving socialism
3	1990-2002	Jiang Zemin	Strengthening people with scientific theories, guiding them with correct public opinion, shaping them with noble spirit, and Inspire them with excellent works
4	2003-2012	Hu Jintao	Upholding unity and encouraging stability while giving precedence to positive publicity
5	2013-now	Xi Jinping	Strengthening Chinese culture confidence and adhering to the principles of creative transformation and innovative development

Source: Peng (2021) and Song (2013)

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

Framing analysis offers a unique lens to understand why media narratives differ or conflict in their presentation of facts (Andika, 2025). To address the primary research question, we adopted a content analysis approach, grounded in framing theory. Framing analysis was selected as the principal analytical tool to investigate how media discourse reflects ideological and political dynamics across different leadership periods in China. To further answer RQ2, we employed a CDA method to examine how language use in media reflects and reinforces institutional ideologies (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2006). By combining framing analysis with CDA, this research goes beyond identifying dominant frames and investigates their deeper ideological functions in the Chinese communication context.

### 2. Sampling

*People's Daily* was selected as the primary data source due to its status as the official newspaper of the CPC Central Committee and its authoritative role within China's media landscape. Widely regarded as a leading agenda-setter, it plays a central role in disseminating the ideological positions and political narratives of the party. To identify relevant texts, this study focused on news articles thematically related to aerospace. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure relevance and representativeness. Three specific inclusion criteria were applied during the manual screening phase:

- i. if the news title explicitly contained the keyword *Hangtian*, the news was directly included;

- ii. if the news title did not contain the key word, but the text or theme of the article involved aerospace-related content or closely related topics, the news was also selected;
- iii. if neither the title nor the main body of the article involved aerospace topics or related expressions, the news was excluded, even if the text contained minor references to aerospace.

These strict criteria were applied to ensure that the selected news items could effectively invoke the framing of aerospace issues. The screening process was conducted by two experienced college lecturers: one with professional experience in propaganda and institutional media writing, and the other with a background in communication studies. Their combined expertise ensured a rigorous and contextually informed screening process. Figure 1 illustrates the final sample distribution across the study period.

### 3. Data Collection

All news articles were retrieved from the *People's Daily* Full Text Database, a comprehensive digital archive of the newspaper's published content since the year of 1946. To ensure comprehensive coverage and accuracy, we used the Mandarin term *Hangtian* (translated as aerospace in this study) as the keyword to search for news texts and headlines in the *People's Daily* Full Text Database, retrieving 17,270 news items, then manually screened the news articles. At last, a total of 4,706 aerospace news texts were included in the sample population, with the first entry of an aerospace news containing the keyword and covering aerospace issue occurring on September 25, 1975. We then divided the sample population into five groups, aligning with the time span in Table 1. We found that China's aerospace development trajectory aligns with the coverage of aerospace issues in the sample population. For example, the successful launch of Shenzhou V in 2003 led to a surge in the number of aerospace news articles published in *People's Daily*. In light of the uneven distribution of the much larger sample population in 48 years, stratified random sampling method (Acharya et al., 2013) is adopted to randomly select the sample size from each year with the sample ratio set as 3% (Feng, 2005; Zhou, 2014; Liu, 2021). Finally, 145 sample texts were drawn out and organised chronologically for further analysis. The distribution of sample population and sampled news text for each year is presented in Figure 1.

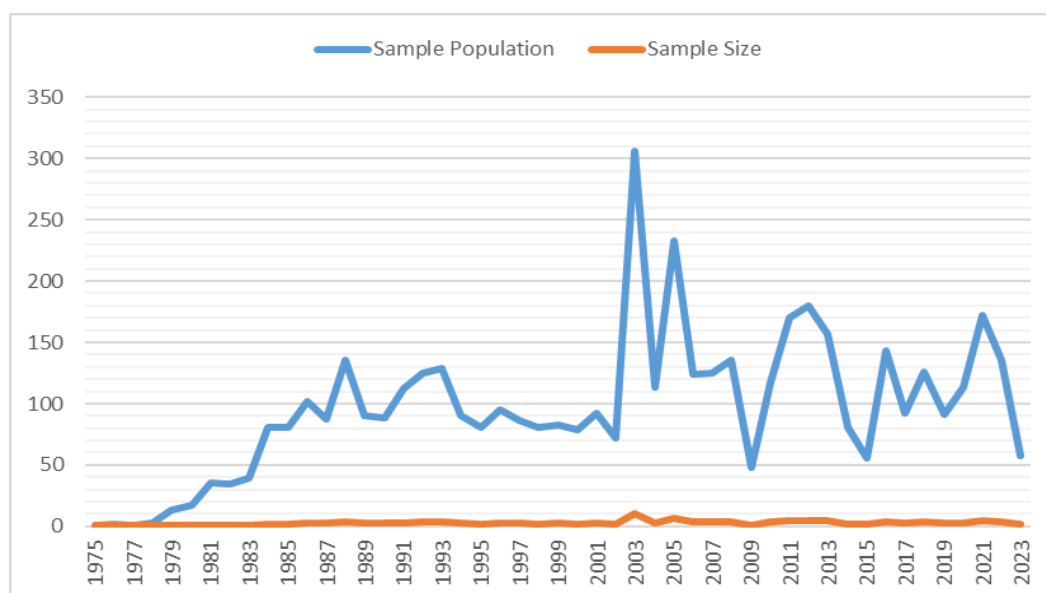


Figure 1. The distribution of sample population and sampled news text in each year

### 4. Data Analysis

To address the primary research question, framing analysis was conducted in two stages. First, inductive open coding was applied to identify frame packages in aerospace-related reports across five generations of CPC leadership. Drawing on Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) framework, four framing devices of catchphrases, metaphors, historical examples, and depictions were identified. Reasoning devices of causal statements,

consequences, moral evaluations, and proposed solutions, based on Entman (1993), were also incorporated. These elements were organised into a frame matrix, as proposed by Van Gorp (2010), with rows representing frames and columns representing the associated framing and reasoning devices.

After completing the framing analysis, the constructed frame packages were categorized and placed in a matrix (see Appendix 1). The analysis revealed variations in the frames used by *People's Daily* across different generations of CPC central leadership. To ensure reliability, inter-coder reliability was validated. Apart from the researcher, an independent coder—a college instructor specialising in communication was enlisted to independently code the sample texts ( $N = 145$ ). After coding and processing with SPSS 26.0 software, the intercoder reliability of frames during different periods was assessed, as summarised in the table below. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient used to assess the inter-coder reliability of aerospace news frames capped the minimum acceptable level of .70 (Cronbach, 1951; Cortina, 1993), which means the content analysis into news frames is reliable.

Table 2. Inter-coder reliability of the news frames identified in different periods

	1975-1978 (N=4)	1979-1989 (N=21)	1990-2002 (N=36)	2003-2012 (N=47)	2013-2023 (N=37)
Cronbach's Alpha	1	.977	.899	.969	.926

To address the second research question, a discourse-historical approach (DHA), developed primarily by Wodak (2015) was employed within the theoretical framework of CDA to reveal the ideological implications during five different periods based on analysis of the news frames. Focusing on how discourse constructs and reproduces power, identity, and ideology over time, DHA can help uncover how the news discourse was embedded with values, perspectives, and underlying agendas (Fairclough, 1995).

## The Findings

### 1. Six Frames Identified in the Aerospace Coverage by *People's Daily* (1975-2023)

According to the above analysis, the overall application of the news frames is presented as Figure 2. As the frame application varies against different generations of CPC leadership, a description of the news frames is needed to look into the details of the frames identified in the above part.

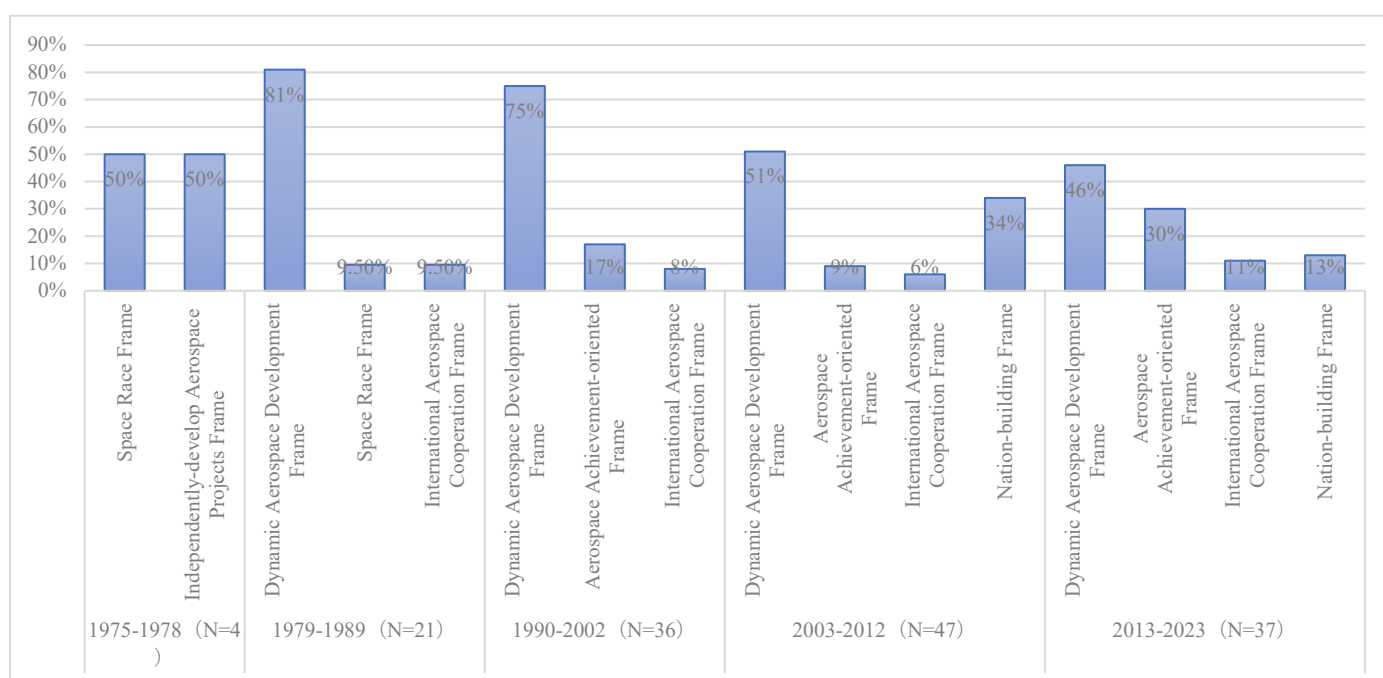


Figure 2. An overview on the overall application of news frames (1975-2023)

*Space Race Frame (SRF).*

The framing analysis highlights the significance of SRF. The coverage on aerospace issues aligned with the historical international context of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union in space exploration (Lin, 2020), as well as the domestic turmoil during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The framing effect of SRF can be reinforced by numerical depictions, such as reports stating that "Of the 709 satellites launched by the Soviet Union since 1962, more than 80% were military satellites" and noting the frequency of Soviet reconnaissance satellite launches (*People's Daily*, 1975). During the intense competition between United States and the Soviet Union, this frame underscored the essence of the space race between these nations, by contextualizing the audience within that historical backdrop.

*Independently-develop Aerospace Projects Frame (IAPF).*

This frame was characterized by its emphasis on self-reliance and technological autonomy, embodied by slogans "Pursue the Principle of Independence, Initiative, and Self-reliance" (*People's Daily*, 1976; *People's Daily*, 1977). Emerging in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split and amid the intensifying Cold War rivalry, this frame was a response to the dual pressures of external technological monopolization by superpowers and internal challenges, including severe natural disasters and economic constraints. By framing aerospace development as a matter of national survival, *People's Daily* aimed to mobilize the public support and reinforce the ideological narrative of self-reliance as a cornerstone of nation building.

*Dynamic Aerospace Development Frame (DADF).*

As depicted in Figure 2, this frame has emerged as a prominent narrative in the context of the rapid expansion of both international and domestic aerospace activities. This frame employs distinctive rhetorical strategies, such as the evocative catchphrase "Building a House in the Universe" (Xiu, 1986) and the metaphorical imagery of a space truck, to render complex advancements in space station technology more accessible and relatable to the public. Additionally, the frame incorporates vivid descriptors like "historical wonder" and "remarkable", alongside pragmatic discussions of challenges such as the management of "space junk" (Jin, 1989), thereby presenting a balanced portrayal of both the triumphs and obstacles inherent in aerospace progress.

*Aerospace Achievement-oriented Frame (AAF).*

During the period 1990-2002, *People's Daily* increasingly emphasised China's accomplishments, aligning with the CPC's broader propaganda framework. This shift corresponds to the CPC's ideological directives, which prioritise a narrative of national progress and scientific triumph and underscore the necessity of portraying heroism and socialism as primary journalistic tasks with critiques playing a subordinate role (Wu & Chen, 2008). By employing thematic framing, which presents news within broader contexts (Iyengar, 1991), the frame consistently situates China's aerospace achievements within a larger ideological and developmental narrative of national rejuvenation. Additionally, this frame also relies on episodic framing through narratives that highlight individual engineers' contributions and technological breakthroughs, reinforcing CPC's emphasis on scientific nationalism.

*International Aerospace Cooperation Frame (IACF).*

This frame emerged as a counterpoint to the SRF and coexisted with it from 1979 to 1989. While SRF emphasised geopolitical rivalry, this alternative frame outlined the role of multilateral collaboration in aerospace advancements. A notable example appears in the news report, which cites the French president's congratulatory message: "This achievement is the result of exemplary cooperation between France, Germany, Belgium, and their European partners" (*People's Daily*, 1979). This statement employs a causal reasoning device that explicitly attributes aerospace success to international collaboration, reinforcing the notion that collective efforts yield superior technological and economic outcomes.

Moreover, this framework integrates consequence-based reasoning devices by emphasising strategic benefits. For instance, statements such as "breaking the monopoly of America in satellite launching and

obtaining half share of the market” and “Cooperation was the only way out” (Ma, 1987) construct a narrative wherein international partnerships serve as a pragmatic necessity rather than an ideological choice. By framing aerospace achievements as products of global partnerships rather than unilateral national efforts, these narrative challenges zero-sum perceptions of technological dominance and suggests a cooperative model for future aerospace endeavours.

#### *Nation-building Frame (NF).*

As the name suggests, this frame is employed to inspire Chinese people toward nation-building. It emerged prominently following China’s successful launch of its first manned spacecraft in 2003, an event that elicited widespread national rejoicing and reinforced collective pride, as said in Liu et al. (2003). A detailed analysis of this news frame reveals an increasing emphasis on national loyalty and identification, both of which are crucial components of nation-building (Wimmer, 2023). In *People’s Daily’s* reports on aerospace achievements, the news discourse systematically establishes a shared cultural foundation and symbolic markers of Chinese national identity. Drawing on cultural framing, historical narratives such as Chang’e flying to the moon and Wanhua flying into the sky (Liao, 2008) function as mythic framing devices (Pantti, 2019), embedding China’s modern space exploration within a longstanding civilisational trajectory. These references create cognitive resonance (Snow & Benford, 1988), enabling the public to perceive contemporary aerospace achievements as a fulfilling of deep-rooted historical aspirations. Additionally, *People’s Daily* employs reasoning devices to legitimise state-led mobilisation in aerospace development by reinforcing loyalty, national pride, and the symbolic importance of contributing to national building and rejuvenation.

## 2. The Ideological Implication of the News Frames under Five Different Generations of CPC Central Leadership

As depicted in Figure 2, the application of news frames varied across different generations of CPC leadership. The subsequent section illustrates the ideological implication of the news frames under five different generations of CPC central leadership, drawing from the insights presented in Table 1.

### *The First-generation Leadership of the Central Committee of the CPC: 1975 -1978*

Figure 2 shows that SRF and IAPF account for 50% of the sample size, respectively. Facing Soviet-American hegemony abroad, the Cultural Revolution, and natural disasters at home, China’s aerospace developments were positioned as an extension of class struggle and socialist industrialisation. What’s more, the achievements were attributed as a victory of “Mao Zedong Thought” and “the Great Communist Collaboration” (*People’s Daily*, 1977), rather than specific technological or scientific factors. The ideology here was influenced by the historical narratives that the country had to achieve success through China’s own strength despite the blockade of the Soviet Union and external pressure during 1950-1970. By politicising the scientific and technological achievements in state discourse, the news discourse during this period also reinforced Mao Zedong’s Cult of Personality, the legitimacy of the CPC, and the highlights of collectivism.

### *The Second-generation Leadership of the Central Committee of the CPC: 1979 -1989*

The dominance of the DADF (accounting for 81% of the sample size) suggests that *People’s Daily*, deliberately prioritized narratives of progress, innovation, and technological advancement over a purely competitive or confrontational framing. This choice reflects a broader ideological shift in China during the post-Mao era under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, where economic modernization, technological development, and pragmatic diplomacy were emphasized over class struggle and ideological confrontation. IACF indicates China’s growing emphasis on global engagement and diplomatic pragmatism in science and technology, for example, Ma (1987) highlighted that cooperation was the only way for the Western Europe to develop aerospace. When looking into the news frames, we found that *People’s Daily* focused on the worldwide aerospace issue. The narrative reflects China’s desire to avoid overt confrontation with the U.S. and Soviet Union, which aligns with Deng’s “Tao Guang Yang Hui” (hiding capabilities and biding time) strategy (Zhao, 2004).

### *The Third-generation Leadership of the Central Committee of the CPC: 1990-2002*

This period saw the rise of techno-nationalism, with *People's Daily* framing aerospace advancements as evidence of China's growing power (see Xu, 1990; Xi & Chen, 1996). The sampled reports identified with AAF highlighted China's scientific progress and national achievements, reinforcing the idea that China was catching up with the West. From a CDA perspective, the authority of the China Central Military Commission legitimised that space achievements were milestones in China's quest to reclaim its historical greatness. Similar to the ideological implication of Mao's era, China's achievements were portrayed as the result of conscientiously implementing the CPC Central Committee's strategy of rejuvenating the country through science and education and a series of important instructions from Comrade Jiang Zemin, carrying forward the great spirit of "two bombs and one satellite", and being scientific and realistic, tenacious, hard-working, and innovative, which obviously tied the CPC's legitimacy to the advancement of aerospace.

*The Fourth-generation Leadership of the Central Committee of the CPC: 2003-2012* Figure 2 identifies four news frames, with DADF dominating and NF accounting for one-third of the sample size during this period. After the successful launch of Shenzhou V (China's first manned spaceflight) in 2003, *People's Daily* emphasised aerospace achievements as a collective national dream of flying for thousands of years fulfilled, another extraordinary feat of the Chinese people's unremitting self-improvement (Zhang, 2003). Similar narrations can be found in the aerospace news reports covered by Liu et al. (2003), Liao (2008), and Liu et al. (2012) in *People's Daily*.

From the perspective of the three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1995), the emphasis on nation-building aligns with a state-led modernisation narrative, portraying technological success as part of China's broader national rejuvenation. Rhetorical strategies of mythologisation and historical continuity further reinforce the notion that China's present aerospace achievements are deeply rooted in its civilisation. The IACF built by *People's Daily* also functions as proof to emphasise China's desire to innovate and contribute globally, focusing on cooperation instead of competition in space. This also echoes President Hu Jintao's Harmonious Society narrative (Zheng & Tok, 2007). The nationalistic and moral discourse, echoing the socialist values of hard work, dedication, and national sacrifice, legitimises China's aerospace success as a result of national unity rather than individual or market-driven innovation. Moreover, the causal argumentation strategy makes use of causal relationships to emphasise the decisive role of political stability in China's aerospace achievement (Liu et al., 2003), reinforcing the legitimacy of CPC political leadership.

### *The Fifth-generation Leadership of the Central Committee of the CPC: 2013-2023*

During this period, the types of news frames identified are the same as those during 2003-2012; the ideological implication still underwent changes under Xi's leadership. Firstly, the report adopting DADF highlighted "firsts" and "historic achievements" (Xie, 2013) of Russia's aerospace in a positive light, which implicates that *People's Daily* is amplifying Russia's technological strength, indirectly showing support for Russia's international positioning. This positive framing aligns with China's broader diplomatic strategy of strengthening ties with Russia as a counterbalance to Western powers, signalling China's diplomatic goodwill toward Russia.

In contrast, the reports covering American dynamic development were neutral. Secondly, for reports adopting IACF, China's emphasis on inclusive cooperation with all countries and regions on the peaceful use of outer space (see Yu et al., 2016; Cao, 2022; Han, 2023) positions China as an advocate of open, multilateral space governance, in contrast to Western-led exclusionary policies. In *People's Daily's* report on China-Africa space cooperation, China was shaped as an equal trusted development partner, a catalyst for African technological advancement, and a helper to provide knowledge and capacity-building, as said in Zou (2021), "China actively provides high-quality training to African scientific researchers in satellite design, manufacturing, launch and control, and has trained a group of local African aerospace talents." This challenges the Western narratives portraying China's involvement in Africa as resource-driven or neo-imperialist (Hill, 2021).



## Discussion

This study has reconstructed six categories of news frames used by *People's Daily* to define and interpret aerospace issues from 1975 to 2023. The findings reveal that these frames are composed of culturally resonant symbols and rhetorical strategies, which are adapted across different historical periods to shape public opinion positively toward China's aerospace development. By selectively emphasising certain aspects of technological progress and national goals, *People's Daily* fulfils not only an informational role but also a symbolic and interpretive function (Figoureaux & Van Gorp, 2020), serving as a guide for public understanding of what aerospace achievements mean within China's broader national narrative. In the context of *People's Daily*, the identified frames, such as SRF, AAF, and NF, function ideologically to support CPC's evolving strategic goals. These frames do more than report events; they shape a coherent discourse that aligns technological progress with national objectives.

Moreover, from a CDA perspective, the evolution of narratives from early themes of survival and international competition to current depictions of China as a global space leader indicates a shift in ideological emphasis. This transition reflects what Fairclough (2003) calls the "recontextualisation of social practices", wherein technological development is discursively reframed as a political achievement. The aerospace discourse becomes a symbolic asset used to consolidate CPC authority and project a positive national image both domestically and internationally.

Finally, this study contributes to a more profound understanding of how news framing functions within China's state-controlled media system. It supports previous research on China's strategic use of media to construct and promote a desired national image (Zhu & Krever, 2022; Zhang, 2024). *People's Daily's* framing of aerospace as both a national achievement and a global contribution exemplifies how ideological narratives are carefully managed to favour the political, cultural, and diplomatic objectives in developing aerospace, which aligns with the view of Dan et al. (2020) that strategic communicators engage in strategic framing to influence interpretations and outcomes in their favour. Compared to pluralistic media systems where frames often compete (Chong & Druckman, 2007), China's state media, particularly *People's Daily*, presents a unified ideological narrative that consolidates the CPC's legitimacy.

## Conclusion

The evolving diversity of frames underscores that *People's Daily* tries to adapt its coverage to align with China's shifting national priorities and interests. This study highlights that the narrative of building China into a space power in reporting serves multiple strategic functions: reinforcing the legitimacy of the CPC, fostering a sense of nationalism, and mobilising public support for broader social transformation (Wang, 2014). Future studies can investigate how both domestic and international audiences perceive these news frames, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of China's aerospace communication strategies. Particular attention should be paid to analysing how China can effectively communicate its space achievements without being perceived as pursuing resource nationalism in outer space, which could potentially lead to international concerns about its space power status.

Though this study provides valuable insights into the news framing of aerospace issues in *People's Daily* over nearly five decades, several limitations should be acknowledged. Although the sample of 145 articles was carefully selected from a larger population of 4,706 items using systematic criteria, the qualitative nature of frame reconstruction may involve some degree of researcher interpretation, which is unavoidable in doing news framing analysis (Van Gorp, 2010). While steps were taken to ensure consistency and rigour, subjectivity in identifying and categorising frames is an inherent limitation of frame analysis. The study primarily relies on textual analysis and does not incorporate audience reception data. Therefore, although it sheds light on the framing of aerospace issues, it fails to ascertain the public's reception, interpretation, or internalisation of these frames. Future research could incorporate interviews and surveys to explore the impact of such framing on audience perceptions and attitudes.

**Acknowledgement:** The authors acknowledge Ms. Yan Mengmeng, Mr. Xia Zhiyu for their support in inter-coder reliability test.

**Conflict of interests:** The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article.

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