

Original Paper

Critical Discourse Analysis of American Mainstream Media Reports on China's Aerospace Development

Chuyi Zhong¹ & Yu Chen^{*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

^{*} Corresponding author: Yu Chen, Professor, Hubei University of Technology, China

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Abstract

Critique discourse analysis of the coverage provided by American mainstream media in The New York Times and The Washington Post on China's aerospace development from 2016 to 2025 is conducted in this paper. Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis system, quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative textual interpretation were conducted on about 28 news reports comprising around 16,200 words. Therefore, these outlets have systematically constructed a discourse of geopolitical competition and strategic risk for China's space program. High-frequency lexical clusters are centred on competition-related nouns, such as "rivalry", "race", and "competitor", and adjectives such as "aggressive", "uncontrolled", and "secretive" give the coverage a security-oriented connotation. Transitivity analysis shows that the material process of "China" presents an active challenge to US space hegemony, and verbal processes favor warnings from US officials over scientific assessments. Citation practices favour American political and security elites, and frame China's achievements, such as the Chang'e lunar sample return and construction of the Tiangong space station, as part of a zero-sum strategic competition rather than as contributions to human space exploration. This construction of discourse shows deep-seated Cold War mentality, the legislative inheritance of the Wolf Amendment, and broader geopolitical anxieties; it serves to ideologically justify continued technological containment and an expansion of military-space construction.

Keywords

China aerospace, critical discourse analysis, American mainstream media, The New York Times, The Washington Post, ideological framing, space race discourse

1. Introduction

In the past ten years, China's aerospace industry has grown rapidly, and what was once referred to as a

"latecomer" by American media is now a space power that Pentagon officials expect will surpass the United States in space by 2045. Between 2016 and 2025, China has achieved a number of remarkable feats: in January 2019, the Chang'e-4 probe successfully landed softly on the far side of the Moon and made first contact; in December 2020, the Chang'e-5 mission returned lunar samples to Earth and ended a 44-year period without new lunar material collection; the Chang'e-6 probe replicated this success on the far side of the Moon in 2024; by the end of 2022, the Tiangong Space Station reached full operational status; and the Tianwen-1 mission successfully deployed a rover on Mars in 2021. With the above developments, ambitious plans for crewed lunar landings before 2030 and an asteroid sample-return mission launched in 2025 have undoubtedly reshaped the world of space exploration.

However, the display of these achievements in American popular culture has often been conducted under the premise of strategic competition and national security concerns. The leading US media outlets have frequently included such coverage in their narratives of geopolitical competition, technological threats and ideological differences rather than focusing on China's robotic lunar landings or space station construction as scientific achievements. Headlines such as "China's Rivalry with the US". Both "One Step Farther: To the Moon" and "As China's Space Ambitions Grow, NASA Asks Congress for More Funds" indicate that, at present, many people still perceive China's aerospace development through the perspective of the United States. Although it is an undeniable technical achievement, such as the Chang'e-6 far-side sample return, the articles immediately shift to "views in Washington and elsewhere" and describe it as "the latest milestone in a 21st-century space race with geopolitical overtones".

This Discursive Pattern is worth studying systematically. Li (2016), Li and Liang (2021), etc., have studied how Chinese domestic media present the nation's aerospace image; however, few scholars have used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate how American elite newspapers portray China's space program. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that media talk does not present reality objectively but also creates and promotes specific worldviews among the public and institutions of power (Fairclough, 1992). Given the intensification of US-China strategic competition, this paper will analyze how leading American media present China's aerospace system linguistically to uncover underlying ideological assumptions and their socio-political functions.

Therefore, this paper takes the following research questions:

- (1) What are the lexical and syntactic features of the reporting of China's aerospace activities by The New York Times and The Washington Post?
- (2) How do the citation sources and presentation methods in these outlets construct particular narratives of China's space program?
- (3) What are the sociopolitical and ideological reasons for this strategy of discourse?

Based on the above questions, this study will investigate how American media presents scientific achievements as geopolitical threats in language and what kind of ideological work is achieved through such representations.

2. Literature Review

Recently, media talk has begun to explore how it relates to national identity and aerospace technology. The first research on space news mainly focused on national pride and scientific popularisation, and media coverage was viewed as an objective transmission of facts. However, in recent years, scholars of media have gradually begun to think about how the news of space activities is shaped by ideology and power structures.

Fairclough (1989, 1992) and Wodak and Meyer (2001, 2015) have established a strong theoretical system for analysing the ideological tendencies in such a way through critical discourse analysis. Fairclough's three-dimensional model of analysis consists of elements such as text analysis, discourse practice analysis and social practice analysis, etc., and has been used to study the connection between news discourse and social reality. The model will be applied to micro-linguistic research and macro-social analysis to examine the function of language in achieving ideology at a deeper level. As Fairclough (1989: 92) puts it, discourse is a type of social practice that shows both the world and creates it. Using this idea, scholars have studied how word choice, the pattern of transitivity and intertextuality in news, etc., are used to create a national "other" that serves domestic political goals.

Liang Xiaobo (2013) has systematically studied how conceptual metaphors are used in news discourse to construct national images in the field of national image research, and has identified four main types: animalisation and personification, stability and transience, nationality, and ideology. He pointed out that the Metaphors used in foreign reports are never without an ideological basis. More recently, Zhang Tiantian (2023) conducted an all-encompassing CDA of American mainstream media coverage of China's Shenzhou spacecraft series from 1999 to 2022, including The New York Times, USA Today and CNN. Her study found that war metaphors made up the largest proportion of metaphors in the American reports, and terms such as "ceding space", "great victory", and "public relations coup" were used to portray China as a nation focused on social-military domination and space supremacy. Zhang also found that the transitivity patterns presented China as a follower of Western technology, a danger in the space domain, and a strictly regulated system of society.

Guan Linli and Liu Bing (2024) applied an overseas ecological discourse analysis method to compare the Chinese and American media depictions of China's aerospace sector based on data from China Daily and CNN. According to the above studies, CNN focused on building an ecologically neutral image of China's space program, offered a beneficial picture secondarily, and only occasionally showed a destructive one. However, considerably, in discourse where China was presented as a social non-living factor, CNN repeatedly drew comparisons with the United States to attempt to create a negative image of China as a rival to the US. In light of the above, American media coverage of China's rise in technology often employs frames of threat and strategic competition, frequently uses militarized metaphors, and employs negative evaluative language that obscures the scientific nature of the changes.

Huang Qiang (2021) studied the discourse of American mainstream media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and found that organisations such as CNN and FOX News used various linguistic methods

to shape the perception of news "truth" and damage China's reputation. Although Huang focused on pandemic coverage, his analytical framework and results can be directly applied to aerospace reporting; both areas are high-tech, globally significant problems that are nevertheless filtered through ideological lenses of "us versus them" and Cold War mentality.

Jiang Yuechun (2019) studied the coverage of the 19th National Congress of the Party by American mainstream media and found that although the reports had become more objective than in the past, deep-seated ideological biases still existed. This "more objective but still biased" pattern is consistent with the research by Zhang Tiantian (2023) and Guan Linli and Liu Bing (2024) on aerospace coverage; although American media may acknowledge Chinese technical achievements, they consistently present these achievements in a way that ultimately portrays China as a threat to American interests.

Li Xianglin (2016) used conceptual metaphor theory to study Chinese aerospace news and editorials in China Aerospace News. Based on her research, Metaphors in Chinese aerospace discourse focus on national pride, technological progress and peaceful cooperation. Li's research on Chinese self-representation and Zhang's (2023) findings on American representation of China show that the self-shaped and other-shaped images differ significantly; scholars have pointed out this discrepancy in their work as a problem for China's national image communication (Li, 2018; Sun, 2002).

Li Xueying and Liang Xiaobo (2021) analysed the reports on the Chang'e-5 mission in China Daily and identified eleven main conceptual metaphor categories, such as "traditional culture", "endeavour", "significance", "time", and "journey". Their study shows that Chinese English-language media create a positive image of China as a nation striving for the distant dream, building and achieving that dream, displaying confidence and optimism, pioneering new frontiers, and contributing to a community with a shared future for mankind. The former is not the same as the threat-oriented frame in the US media.

Despite the above developments, CDA has yet to be applied to aerospace news discourse. Most previous research has focused on political, economic or general international issues, and has not deeply studied the highly technical and symbolic space exploration through critical linguistics. Although recent studies have explored how Chinese English-language media present a positive and cooperative image of the aerospace industry to foreign audiences, systematic, in-depth critical discourse analysis (CDA) research on the discursive construction of China's space identity by American mainstream media is still lacking. Zhang Tiantian's (2023) study focused on the Shenzhou series specifically and employed a purely qualitative approach; Guan Linli and Liu Bing (2024) used an ecological discourse framework instead of the full Fairclough model. This paper will address this deficiency by conducting a full-coverage critical discourse analysis of the coverage of China as an "aggressive competitor" in the celestial field in The New York Times and The Washington Post, and explore how linguistic features, citation strategies and sociopolitical contexts are used together to construct this image.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

The New York Times and The Washington Post will serve as the primary data sources. The two newspapers are typical examples of the American elite press and have had a considerable impact on policymakers' thinking and the public's awareness abroad. Their aerospace reports have achieved considerable success in the U.S. media system and have also provided important references for other countries around the world on their space programs. The time range is from January 2016 to November 2025, and the corpus should cover significant developments in China's aerospace industry over the past ten years, such as the Tiangong-1 and Tiangong-2 prototype stations, the construction and operation of the Tiangong permanent base, the Chang'e-4 to Chang'e-6 lunar missions, Shenzhou crewed space flights, the Tianwen-Mars mission, and issues of space debris and rocket re-entry incidents.

Thematically filtered reports directly related to China's aerospace development, such as lunar exploration, crewed spaceflight, construction and operation of space stations, deep-space exploration plans, Mars missions, and overseas aerospace cooperation. To ensure the depth of the analysis, short news briefs and other non-narrative materials were excluded. Sort and filter to obtain 28 valid reports with a total word count of around 16,200. Compile the above reports into a standard corpus, and for each text, annotate information such as the time of publication, author and main subjects for later retrieval and analysis.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis by Fairclough (1989, 1992) will be employed in this study. The first type is text analysis; it studies the language characteristics of the reports, such as word choice (e.g., frequent words, positive or negative evaluation words, professional aerospace terms, and geopolitical metaphors), sentence structure (especially transitivity processes, modal verb usage, and voice), and other rhetorical devices. The second type is discourse practice analysis, which studies the production and reception of texts by exploring intertextuality, that is, how reports reference official pronouncements, scholarly views, foreign studies, etc., to create meaning; how this information is selected and organised for a specific narrative goal. The third dimension is the analysis of social practice; that is to say, how U.S.-China strategic competition, the legislative inheritance of the Wolf Amendment, Cold War mentality, and institutional norms for media production influence discourse creation. The three-tiered structure will be used to examine the links among aerospace discourse, power and ideology comprehensively.

3.3 Research Procedures

A few quantitative analyses of a corpus and some qualitative interpretations are presented here. First, corpus preprocessing was conducted to format and normalise the collected reports, and then extraneous information, such as advertisements and image credits, was excluded. Second, corpus analysis tools were used to perform quantitative analysis of linguistic features to extract high-frequency words and keyword clusters, identify core thematic vocabulary and their frequencies, and calculate the distribution of transitivity processes. Thirdly, qualitative analysis of discourse strategies was carried out: Based on the quantitative results, representative texts and core discourses were selected for in-depth study to examine their persuasive effects through citation strategies and ideological connotations of syntactic structures.

Fourthly, in light of research on US aerospace policy and congressional acts, as well as geopolitical factors, the large-scale social conditions that fostered discursive selection were also examined. Finally, the results were supported by cross-case and theoretical triangulation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Text Analysis

4.1.1 Lexical Choice

Lexical selection is the first place where ideology appears in language. Quantitative analysis of the corpus shows that The New York Times and The Washington Post use different patterns in lexicalising China's aerospace activities.

Table 1. High-frequency Vocabulary in the Corpus (Top 20)

Rank	Vocabulary	Frequency	Word Category
1	China	341	Noun
2	Space	122	Noun
3	mission	74	Noun
4	NASA	61	Noun
5	Competition	48	Noun
6	moon	44	Noun
7	Threat	36	Noun
8	Technology	33	Noun
9	Chang'e	31	Noun
10	Tiangong	28	Noun
11	race	27	Noun
12	Advance	24	Verb
13	Challenge	22	Noun
14	Secretive	18	Adjective
15	Ambitious	17	Adjective
16	Military	17	Adjective
17	Rival	16	Noun
18	Achieve	15	Verb
19	Dominate	14	Verb
20	cooperation	13	Noun

As shown in Table 1, high-frequency nouns fall into three main groups: aerospace entities and achievements (e.g., "moon", "station", "Chang'e", "Tiangong"), security and risk terminology (e.g.,

"debris", "military", "threat", "uncontrolled"), and competition discourse (e.g., "competitor", "rival", "race"). Although words that mention China's actual achievements appear frequently, they are consistently accompanied by or placed in a context of danger, opacity or strategic difficulty. The words "debris" (57 times) and "uncontrolled" (34 times) appear frequently, mainly due to the large-scale coverage of the Tiangong-1 reentry in 2018 and the Long March 5B booster incidents in 2021 and 2022; thus, an image of Chinese irresponsibility in space stewardship has been formed.

Adjectives and evaluative modifiers exhibit a strong negative semantic prosody. "Aggressive", "secretive" and "unpredictable" are used to describe China as a disruptive power. At the same time, when referring to American activities in parallel constructions, the lexical environment is generally "responsible", "transparent" and "established best practices"; for example, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson criticized Beijing for "failing to share crucial data about its trajectory" and warned that debris "could very well result in major damage or loss of life". The adjective "aggressive" is almost exclusively used for China, and most notably, Nelson's repeated description of Beijing as "a very aggressive competitor" has appeared in many reports and become a fixed epithet.

Geopolitical Metaphors further spread the coverage. Vice President Mike Pence explicitly used the "space race" metaphor to warn that China wanted "to seize the lunar strategic high ground and become the world's spacefaring nation", and Administrator Nelson described it as a "Cold War-like space race, only this time against China instead of the Soviet Union", thus turning scientific exploration into a zero-sum military competition. Verbs such as "seize", "challenge", "clash" and "rival" are common in the action-oriented vocabulary, while "cooperation" and "share" appear much less frequently and are often used to describe Chinese overtures that are implicitly treated with suspicion.

4.1.2 Transitivity

According to Halliday's system of functional linguistics, transitivity analysis examines the arrangement of processes and their participants to attribute responsibility and moral evaluation. The proportion of material processes, relational processes, verbal processes and mental processes in this corpus are approximately 46%, 31%, 16% and 7% respectively. The distribution is not random; it is likely that the materials are related to events and actions, and the designation of subjects and purposes may also carry an ideological meaning.

Example 1: "China achieved a new high in space exploration on Thursday and landed a spacecraft on the far side of the moon for the first time in history", - The country's space agency announced (Myers & Mou, 2019).

China serves as the subject of the material process chain ("reached", "landing") and celebrates the achievement. However, the headline of the same article, "'New Chapter' in Space Exploration as China Reaches Far Side of the Moon," immediately shifts to a competitive framework, quoting an analyst who says that "China has reached an advanced world-class level in deep space exploration" and adds that "We Chinese people have done something that the Americans have not dared to try." Thus, the material process of achievement is used to create a relational process of national comparison that positions the American

reader as the inferior party.

Example 2: Nelson's strategy is the same as that of the Trump administration: to make China a competitor in the race to the moon and for leadership in space more broadly (Davenport, 2021).

In this relationship and speech, the subject is not China but the NASA official. The transitive verb "cast" shows that the competitive frame has been explicitly built; China is not an external competitor in the clause but is created as such by discursive work. However, this meta-discursive moment is infrequent; more often, the competitive identity is considered to be natural and self-evident.

Example 3: "On Tuesday, China sent a group of three taikonauts to its new space station, and this is another achievement for a country with high hopes for space exploration that is now competing with the United States" (Davenport, 2022).

The material process "launched" refers to a regular crew change, but the participial clause "rivaling the prowess of the United States" transforms a technical operation into a competition. Circumstances are added to the main clause, and thus no Chinese achievement can be understood in isolation from bilateral competition.

Example 4: "The Long March 5B rocket... released its empty 23-ton first stage in orbit, looped around the planet for several days, and then headed for a difficult-to-predict landing in a flight path" (Hassan & Shepherd, 2022).

This material process uses an inanimate subject ("rocket") for the dangerous act and thus avoids direct responsibility for China. However, the following verbal process re-humanises the blame: "NASA criticized Beijing for failing to share important data." By changing from an inanimate subject to a person who can be criticised, a syntactic pattern is created where China is linguistically absent from the mechanical failure but present as the moral subject to be condemned. Such transitivity shifts are ideologically motivated and can both present technical facts and assign political blame in the text.

4.2 Discursive Practice Analysis

4.2.1 Citation Sources

Citation behaviour in the corpus shows a clear hierarchy of voices that favours American political and security elites and marginalises Chinese speakers and international scholars. The following are some source examples:

First, the U.S. government officials and politicians are the most authoritative and frequently cited sources. NASA Administrators Bill Nelson and Jim Bridenstine, Vice President Mike Pence, and Congressman Frank Wolf are listed as named sources for the evaluative statements. Nelson's warning, "Watch the Chinese", and his description of China as "a very aggressive competitor" have been directly quoted in many articles and serve as the main content that later reports have supported. Pence's 2019 statement that China aims to "seize the lunar strategic high ground" is also regarded as a clear-cut strategic aspiration rather than political talk.

Second, American security analysts and space experts offer seemingly objective verification. Scott Kennedy of the Center for Strategic and International Studies believes that "there are no technologies

used in space that are not dual-use", and thus supports the securitisation of all Chinese aerospace activities. Amy J. Nelson of the Brookings Institution refers to the space station as "a manifestation of the current U.S.-China competition in yet another domain," and these expert citations provide scholarly support for the threat narrative, even when the experts themselves offer nuanced views; the articles frequently extract only the competitive aspect of their analysis.

Third, Chinese voices appear almost exclusively through mediated or indirect channels. Statements by the China National Space Administration or Chinese astronauts are generally introduced as "state media reported" or "the space agency announced", and are thus considered potentially propagandistic. Chinese officials' words are often presented in opposition to the American attitude of doubt. For example, after China released data from the Chang'e-4 mission, the report immediately stated that "this claim could not be verified at present" and drew attention from Capitol Hill because of the Wolf Amendment prohibition. Fourth, international scientists who advocate cooperation are included but positioned as marginal voices. Clive Neal's remark that he dislikes the international space race because it is unsustainable appears in a generally political section; thus, his scientific cosmopolitanism amounts to nothing more than an emotional deviation. Planetary geologist Long Xiao describes Chang'e-6 as "a reason to celebrate for all of humanity", but this is immediately countered by "views in Washington and elsewhere that Tuesday's achievement is merely the latest step in a 21st-century space race driven by geopolitics".

4.2.2 Citation Presentation Methods

The Presentation of citations also modifies their rhetorical effect. Direct quotations are reserved for dramatic, emotionally charged warnings, such as "Watch the Chinese", "seize the lunar strategic high ground", and "a very aggressive competitor"; they are easy to remember and serve as ideological soundbites. Chinese statements of peaceful cooperation are more frequently presented in the form of indirect quotations or embedded clauses, thus reducing their illocutionary force.

Scare quotes and distancing devices appear regularly when reporting Chinese claims. Sometimes, the word "success" in the context of Chinese missions is qualified with "attribution to state media" to suggest that it is biased rather than factual. When The Washington Post reports that an official at the Chinese mission control centre called the Shenzhou-15 launch a "complete success", quotation marks and attribution subtly prompt readers to question this assessment, a phenomenon that NASA's self-assessments rarely show.

4.3 Social Practice Analysis

4.3.1 Geopolitical and Legislative Context: The Wolf Amendment and Strategic Competition

The discourse strategies above cannot be separated from the material context of U.S.-China relations. In 2011, the Wolf Amendment was introduced to forbid NASA from using federal funds for bilateral cooperation with China, and as a result, China was added to the "enemy" list in space according to the law. Based on the above reasons, the media will assume that Chinese development is a threat rather than an opportunity for cooperation and, consequently, avoid cooperating with it. When the New York Times said that NASA "is prohibited by law from cooperating with China on space activities without specific

authorisation from Congress", it can also be seen that this lack of cooperation has been considered a reasonable response to China's opacity and not a political construction.

Establishment of the United States The Space Force in 2019 and the Artemis Accords have further formalised the competition model. According to the media, China's space station will be completed in 2022, but there are concerns about the aging of the International Space Station and NASA's need for a private-sector partner, so China is rushing to become the top orbital research power. Therefore, the vocabulary will feature more instances of "rivalry" and "challenge".

4.3.2 Ideological Context: Cold War Mentalities and the Securitization of Science

The corpus is still appealing to people in the Cold War era today. The direct comparison of the current tension with the US-Soviet space race—"only this time against China and not the Soviet Union"—indicates that the main interpretive frame is still bipolar confrontation. The Cold War mentality has led to the merger of civilian and military areas. Although China's Chang'e missions are robotic scientific experiments and the space station is run in cooperation with foreign organizations, there are still many concerns about the "dual-use" nature and military application of these projects. According to the news agency, the Jiuquan Launch Center has built "camouflaged vehicles" and signs alluding to the Dongfeng ballistic missile program to integrate the civilian space programme with the concept of nuclear deterrence. Securitisation of science refers to giving the data on lunar sample return more weight than other information. Chang'e-6 has collected the first far-side samples in history, but what is shown in Washington and elsewhere is merely "another step in a 21st-century space race". The scientific significance of these samples, such as the reasons for the different hemispheres of the Moon, will only be discussed after addressing geopolitical concerns, and the desire to know will be subservient to anxiety about power.

4.3.3 Media Institutional Context: Sensationalism and the "Debris" Narrative

The American media industry is very competitive, so most institutions prefer sensational and threatening news. In 2018, the uncontrolled re-entry of Tiangong-1 worried people, and the headline was "Out of control?". China's Tiangong-1 space station will re-enter the Earth's atmosphere, and a Chinese space station will soon fall to Earth. "You'll probably be fine." This is a typical sensationalist way of writing that attracts people's attention with a dramatic headline but is not serious in content. Therefore, the overall impression is that Chinese space activities are considered dangerous and irresponsible.

The Long March 5B booster re-entered in 2021 and 2022, and was also alarmed about. According to reports, NASA Administrator Nelson's comment that China had not followed the "established best practices" did not mention the 1979 uncontrolled re-entry of the American Skylab station. Skylab is listed as a good historical place ("President Jimmy Carter offered an apology"), but the reasons for China's re-entries are shown to be problems in systemic governance. The contrast could not be more pronounced: when American hardware fell, it was almost the subject of jokes about littering fines; when Chinese hardware descends, the same publications use the language of existential risk. The above indicates that the media is spreading nationalist bias under the guise of objectively monitoring the world's safety

standards.

4.3.4 The Marginalization of Scientific Cosmopolitanism

Against the main threat narrative, the corpus also contains dissenting views advocating for international scientific cooperation. Planetary geologists such as Clive Neal and Long Xiao have proposed that lunar exploration is "a joint effort by all people", and some American experts have warned that describing the Chinese space station as "such a serious threat is an error because it serves China's own political goals". However, these voices are consistently marginalised in terms of placement and framing. They appear near the end of the article after the competitive narrative has been fully presented, or they are immediately followed by an official warning. Thus, the discursive architecture will include dissent but not disrupt the main frame.

4.3.5 Integrated Interpretation

Lexical, syntactic and intertextual patterns cooperate to create a system of ideas. Mainstream American media has reported on the development of China's aerospace engineering; generally speaking, they show that China is a strong force and frequently present its scientific achievements as a threat to American interests. High-frequency clustering of security vocabulary, transitivity patterns that attribute moral blame to China but reserve evaluative authority for American officials, and a citation hierarchy favouring political elites over scientists all function to legitimize the current direction of U.S. space policy: technological containment under the Wolf Amendment, militarisation via the Space Force, and diplomatic consolidation through the Artemis Accords. This speech aims to create a sense of approval for more aerospace investment and to block collaboration; thus, space will continue to be a sphere of power competition rather than human cooperation.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Major Findings

Use Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis system to investigate the discourse of American mainstream media on China's aerospace development in this study. Research shows that from 2016 to 2025, the reports by The New York Times and The Washington Post systematically used threat-oriented frames. Lexical choices at the level of text cluster around competition, military connotations and risk; high-frequency words include "rival", "aggressive", "debris", "uncontrolled" and "secretive"; transitivity analysis shows that material processes emphasize Chinese agency in challenging American dominance, and verbal processes focus on warnings by U.S. officials. Citation sources are organised hierarchically at the level of discursive practice to favour American political and security voices; Chinese statements are conveyed via distancing attribution, and international scientific cooperation advocates are marginalised. At the level of social practice, these discursive strategies reflect and reproduce the legislative inheritance of the Wolf Amendment, Cold War ideological templates, and institutional incentives for American media sensationalism.

5.2 Implications and Future Studies

The two directions of this study are: Theoretically, it expands the application range of critical discourse analysis to aerospace news and shows that even highly technical fields of journalism are ideologically constructed. In practice, it can be seen that Chinese international communication strategies should directly address the "aggressive competitor" frame by highlighting the scientific openness already demonstrated in the Chang'e sample-sharing program and the UN-sponsored experiments on board Tiangong, and criticizing the asymmetric application of safety standards.

This study is limited to the content of the two American outlets. In the future, research will add more broadcast media, conservative and liberal digital platforms, and social media discussions to cover all parts of American media coverage. Add the coverage by European and Russian media on China's space program to determine whether the threat frame is solely American or typical of general Western journalism. Finally, gather studies that examine how American policymakers and the public apply these media frames in practice to extend the application of discourse analysis to political influence.

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