

Constructing Legitimacy and National Identity in Chinese State Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily (2018–2024)

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Abstract

This paper examines how Chinese state media construct national legitimacy and identity by portraying a positive national self in contrast to external others. The study analyses 120 articles published between 2018 and 2024 by People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily, covering political news reports, editorials and foreign-affairs commentaries. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper examines lexical choices, metaphorical framing, intertextual references and the links between textual features and wider socio-political practices. The findings show that China is repeatedly represented as stable, historically continuous, developmental and morally responsible, whereas external actors are often portrayed as inconsistent, intrusive or disruptive. These representations are produced through positive evaluative language, contrasts between cooperation and interference, and appeals to history and international norms. The article argues that such discursive practices support political legitimation by associating state authority with national achievement, moral governance and defensive nationalism. It contributes to the literature on media, power and identity by showing how legitimacy is constructed through routine discourse in contemporary Chinese state media.

Keywords

Chinese state media, political legitimacy, national identity, self/other discourse, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The relationship between media, nation-building and political legitimacy has long been a central concern in political communication and media studies. Media institutions do not merely relay information; they also shape social reality by influencing how audiences understand political power, national identity and international relations. In modern politics, legitimacy is maintained not only through institutional performance or legal authority, but also through symbolic and discursive practices. Media discourse has therefore become an important site where political power is articulated, justified and normalized. This role has been intensified by globalization, digital media and transnational communication flows, which have increased competition over meaning-making as states seek to shape narratives domestically and internationally. In this context, discourse

functions as a strategic resource through which political actors justify authority, advance policy interests and construct collective identity. National narratives should therefore be understood within wider struggles over representation, power and ideology [1–3].

China offers a significant case through which to examine these processes. Over recent decades, the country has experienced major economic, social and global transformation. In parallel, China's media system has changed substantially through the expansion of digital technologies and platforms, while significant state influence over major communication channels has remained. State media continue to play a central role in shaping public discourse, particularly in relation to political life, national identity and China's position in the world. These outlets do not simply report events; they interpret them within broader narratives that align with state priorities and ideological interests [4]. In recent years, Chinese state media have become increasingly assertive in presenting narratives of national development, political stability and global responsibility. These narratives are addressed to both domestic and international audiences, reflecting China's growing emphasis on global communication and discourse power. Nation-building in this context is an ongoing discursive process through which "who we are" is defined in relation to "who we are not". It depends on language, symbols and representation to construct a coherent and credible image of the nation [5,6].

A limitation of much existing research is that, although Chinese state media have been widely studied in relation to propaganda, censorship and nationalism, less attention has been paid to how legitimacy is constructed through the language of media texts themselves. A large body of work has focused on institutional regulation, policy functions and ideological effects, offering valuable insights into how media systems are organized and controlled. However, these approaches often pay less attention to the discursive processes through which political legitimacy is produced, normalized and reproduced in everyday media representation. In particular, the role of self/other construction as a dynamic mechanism of legitimation remains under-examined. Discourse theory shows that identities are not fixed or pre-given, but are continually constructed through communicative practice. In this process, the national self is often represented as coherent, moral and legitimate, while the other is represented as different, deficient or threatening. Such oppositions are especially important in state media because they help consolidate collective identity and legitimate political authority. This article addresses that gap by combining discourse theory with a systematic empirical analysis of Chinese state media texts. It moves beyond broad claims about propaganda by examining the linguistic and rhetorical means through which particular articles construct legitimacy. Theoretically, it demonstrates that legitimacy is not simply imposed by institutions or censorship, but is repeatedly achieved through discursive constructions of the national self and external others [7–9].

This article examines how self/other discourse constructs national identity and political legitimacy in Chinese state media. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it analyses the linguistic, narrative and discursive resources through which the national self and external actors are represented. The study is guided by three questions: how is the national self constructed in Chinese state media discourse; how are external actors represented; and how do these representations contribute to the construction and maintenance of political legitimacy? By centring these questions, the article moves beyond thematic description and focuses on the relationship between discourse and power, offering empirical evidence of how state media participate in national identity construction and political legitimation.

The study is relevant both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, it combines CDA with a self/other framework to offer a more precise account of legitimacy as a communicative and discursive achievement. From this perspective, legitimacy is not a fixed or naturally given attribute, but a process continually produced through language and representation. Empirically, the article provides a focused analysis of Chinese state media and identifies recurring patterns and strategies through which national narratives are constructed. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced account of how media operate within non-liberal, state-based communication regimes and how discourse contributes to the normalization of political power [10–13].

The findings contribute to our understanding of Chinese communication practices and the role of state media in shaping national identity and legitimacy. Through an analysis of representations of China and foreign actors in People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily, the study shows how the nation is produced through language. Although the analysis is grounded in this specific corpus, the findings also illuminate broader processes of identity-making and legitimacy-making in state media, especially in relation to how states

narrate themselves to domestic and international audiences. The article therefore contributes to debates on how discourse produces political and social realities in contemporary media environments [7,14–16].

2. Media, Identity, and Discursive Legitimacy in Political Communication

2.1 Media and Political Legitimacy

Political legitimacy has been a central concept in both political theory and communication studies, and is generally defined as the perceived rightfulness, acceptability, and justification of authority. Previously, the concept of legitimacy was explained in terms of institutional design, legal validity, or state performance. However, more recent scholarship has not only begun to focus less on legitimacy as a fixed state but also legitimation as a continuous process by which authority is both justified and rendered acceptable in the discourse [17]. This difference matters, as it guides the analysis not only to the perception of power as legitimate, but also to the methods by which its legitimacy is discursively created, supported, and normalized.

Rather than treating legitimacy as a fixed quality, this study draws on literature that understands legitimation as a recurring communicative process. Strategies such as moral evaluation, rationalization, authorization and mythopoesis show how political actors justify power and policy to audiences. Media discourse is central to this process because it circulates and naturalizes these justificatory frameworks among wider publics. State media are therefore not merely observers of political power; they participate in the legitimation of political actors, decisions and institutions through representation, interpretation and framing. Focusing on legitimation as a communicative process provides a clearer basis for examining how authority is sustained, especially where state media occupy a central position in shaping public discourse.

A key distinction in the literature is between performance legitimacy and ideological or discursive legitimacy. Performance legitimacy rests on a government's perceived ability to deliver concrete outcomes, such as economic growth, social stability and crisis management. Media discourse supports this form of legitimacy by highlighting development success, poverty reduction, technological achievement and effective governance. Ideological legitimacy, by contrast, rests on values, beliefs and normative frameworks that justify authority. Media contribute to this process by circulating narratives aligned with dominant political ideologies, including nationalism, collectivism and modernization. In practice, these two forms of legitimacy are often intertwined: economic achievements are framed ideologically to link material success with the effectiveness or superiority of the political system. Media therefore do not simply reflect reality; they participate in constructing legitimacy through selective representation, framing and narrative organization [18–20].

2.2 National Identity and Media Representation

National identity is widely understood as socially constructed through shared narratives, symbols and representations. Rather than being natural or predetermined, it is produced and reproduced through everyday communicative practices. Media play a central role in this process because they circulate stories about the nation's past, present and future, enabling audiences to imagine themselves as members of a broader collective. The symbolic construction of national identity is closely linked to the idea of the nation as an imagined community. Media help sustain this imagination by producing narratives of continuity, unity and belonging. Repeated images of national history, cultural tradition and collective achievement become embedded in social memory and shape how individuals understand their relationship to the nation [21,22].

National identity is also formed through external differentiation. Media discourse often establishes boundaries between the national self and external actors, reinforcing a sense of distinctiveness and collective belonging. These representations may involve comparisons with other countries, cultures or political systems, usually emphasizing differences in values, practices or achievements. In doing so, media help produce a national identity that is internally cohesive and externally differentiated.

2.3 Self/Other Discourse in Communication Studies

Self/other discourse provides a critical lens for examining how identities are constructed through relational differentiation. Drawing on discourse theory and social psychology, this approach emphasizes that the identity of the self is formed in relation to the other. The self is often associated with legitimacy, morality and coherence,

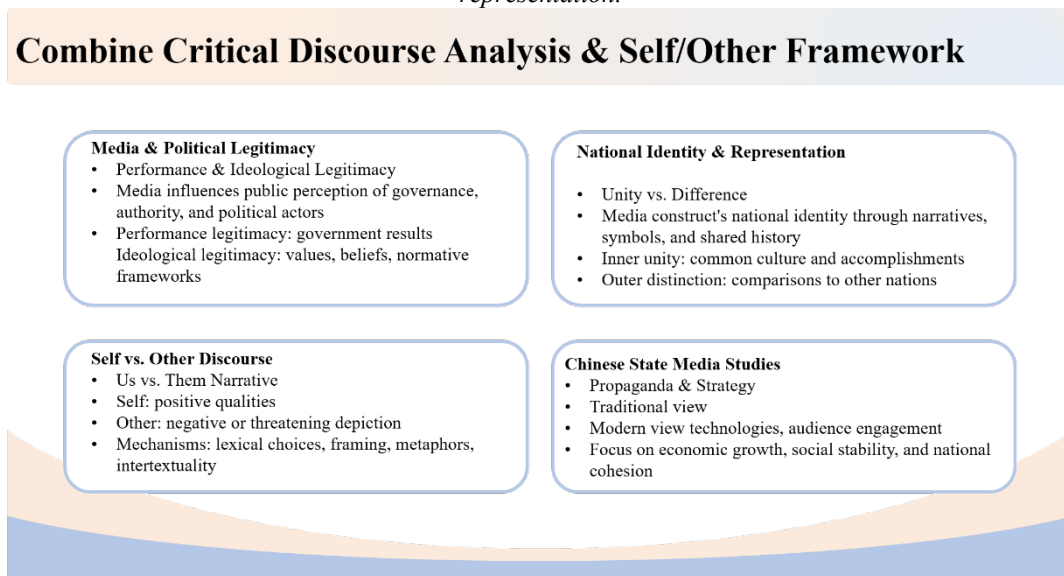
while the other is represented as different, inferior or threatening. In media discourse, othering may take the form of negative descriptors, selective framing of events and the attribution of undesirable qualities to external actors. Such representations are not neutral; they perform ideological work by reinforcing power relations and legitimizing the position of the self [9,23,24].

Several discursive mechanisms are central to self/other construction. Lexical choice matters because positive terms are often used to describe the self, while negative or critical terms are used to describe the other. Framing selects particular aspects of reality and makes them salient for interpretation. Metaphors simplify complex issues while embedding evaluative meanings. Intertextuality, including references to historical events or international norms, can further strengthen these narratives by placing them within wider contexts of meaning. Together, these mechanisms produce coherent discourses that not only differentiate self and other, but also attach value to that differentiation. Self/other discourse is therefore a powerful mechanism of identity formation and authority legitimation, especially where media institutions are closely connected to political power [25].

2.4 Chinese State Media Studies

Recent scholarship increasingly treats Chinese state media as a heterogeneous system of institutions, genres and audiences rather than as a single propaganda machine. In this article, the analytical object is a corpus drawn from three major state-owned outlets: People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily. These outlets are selected because of their official status, national significance and role in shaping domestic and international discourse. The analysis also distinguishes among genres and target audiences, including political news reports, editorials and foreign-affairs commentaries, since these forms do not operate in identical ways and may employ different discursive strategies. This distinction is especially important in the contemporary Chinese media environment, where market reforms and digital technologies have diversified modes of presentation and audience engagement, while the state continues to exert significant influence over major media institutions, particularly on issues of politics, national identity and China’s global position [26–28].

Figure 1: Integrated analytical framework combining critical discourse analysis and self/other discourse to examine how Chinese state media constructs political legitimacy, national identity, and strategic communication through media representation.



Current scholarship suggests that Chinese state media have moved from traditional propaganda toward more strategic forms of communication. State media do not simply transmit instructions; they also develop narratives that align with state interests while responding to audience expectations. Common themes include economic growth, social stability, national cohesion and cultural confidence. Chinese state media also frequently emphasize cooperation, mutual benefit and international responsibility, especially when responding to external criticism and pressure. However, while existing studies have examined the themes and functions of Chinese media, they often remain at a macro level and pay less attention to the micro-level linguistic and rhetorical processes through which meaning and legitimacy are produced [29].

Three gaps remain particularly relevant. First, studies of Chinese state media have not consistently integrated Critical Discourse Analysis with self/other discourse frameworks. Although both approaches are useful, they are often applied separately, which limits their ability to explain how language, identity and power interact in media discourse.

Second, much existing research adopts either a structural or thematic approach. Less attention has been paid to the specific linguistic and discursive mechanisms through which these themes are produced and expressed. This limits our understanding of how legitimacy is constructed at the level of everyday language and representation. Third, there remains a need for systematic empirical studies that combine discourse theory with structured textual analysis. A corpus-based qualitative approach can provide a stronger basis for examining how self/other discourse operates across different outlets, genres and time periods.

Against this background, the study develops an integrated analytical framework combining Critical Discourse Analysis and self/other discourse to examine how Chinese state media construct legitimacy and identity. Applying this framework to a systematically selected corpus of media texts allows the article to offer a more detailed account of discourse as a tool of governance and identity formation in contemporary China [30,31].

3. CDA and self/other Discourse in Legitimacy Construction

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, to examine how Chinese state media construct national identity and justify political authority. The corpus consists of 120 articles published between 2018 and 2024 in People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily, including political news reports, foreign-affairs commentaries and editorials. All texts were coded for linguistic and discursive features, with selected passages examined in detail to contextualize recurring patterns. CDA is operationalized through explicit analytic categories that connect textual features to meaning-making, identity construction and legitimation. At the textual level, the analysis examines actor representation and naming, agency, active and passive constructions, evaluation and stance, modality, transitivity and recurring metaphors such as cooperation, struggle, stability and threat. At the level of discursive practice, the study considers intertextuality and interdiscursivity, including references to historical narratives, policy documents and international norms, as well as genre-specific conventions. These patterns are then interpreted at the level of social practice, with particular attention to how representations of the national self and external others help justify and normalize political authority [32,33].

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis considers how texts are produced, distributed and consumed. This includes the institutional routines, editorial conventions and audience expectations that shape media texts. In the context of state media, discursive practice is closely connected to political organization and hierarchy, which influence what can be said, how it can be said and how it is circulated. Although audiences may interpret texts in different ways, the range of available meanings is often constrained in highly controlled media environments.

The third dimension, social practice, situates discourse within wider social, political and cultural contexts. At this level, the analysis examines how discourse contributes to the reproduction of power relations and ideological systems. In Chinese state media, discourse can be understood as part of a broader apparatus of governance in which language supports political authority, shapes national identity and organizes public meaning. By connecting textual analysis to social structures, CDA enables a fuller understanding of discourse as a form of power [34,35].

3.2 Legitimacy as Discourse

The main analytical concept in this article is legitimation, understood as a discursive process rather than as a fixed property of a political system. Within CDA, legitimation refers to the communicative practices through which political authority is justified, normalized and made acceptable to an audience. This distinction shifts attention away from legitimacy as an institutional outcome and toward the role of language and representation in shaping perceptions of governance. Legitimation is therefore treated as a recurring discursive practice that

represents political authority as appropriate, necessary and valuable. Such strategies may draw on performance claims, moral evaluation, historical continuity and appeals to international norms. Media discourse is central to this process because it selects, organizes and emphasizes particular representations of political actors and actions, while backgrounding or marginalizing alternative interpretations [36].

In this sense, legitimation operates at both cognitive and normative levels. Cognitively, media discourse shapes how audiences understand political reality by framing events, defining issues and assigning causes and responsibilities. Normatively, it promotes particular values and standards through which political authority is evaluated. For example, narratives emphasizing economic growth and social stability encourage evaluation through performance, while narratives emphasizing moral responsibility and international cooperation encourage evaluation through ethical criteria.

Legitimation is also relational. The legitimacy of the national political order can be strengthened by contrasting the national self with external actors and by delegitimizing alternative models or criticisms. Self/other discourse is therefore central to this process: legitimacy is supported not only through positive self-representation, but also through the negative or problematic representation of others [37].

3.3 Self/Other Framework

The self/other framework complements CDA by explaining how identity and legitimacy are produced through relational differentiation. The framework rests on the premise that identities are formed through contrast: the self becomes meaningful through its distinction from the other. In national discourse, the self typically refers to the nation as a collective political, cultural and moral entity, while the other may include foreign governments, international organizations, media institutions or ideological opponents. These categories are not fixed; they are dynamically constructed through language and representation in relation to specific contexts and communicative aims [9].

Othering operates through several discursive strategies. One common strategy is to portray the other as unstable, dishonest, intrusive or threatening. Another is contrastive framing, in which the actions or values of the other are placed in opposition to those of the self. For example, the self may be represented as cooperative and responsible, while the other is represented as confrontational or self-interested. These oppositions strengthen positive self-representation and help legitimize the actions and policies of the self.

The self/other framework also highlights inclusion and exclusion. Media discourse constructs collective identity by defining who belongs to the national community and who stands outside it. This process may affirm shared values and goals while marginalizing alternative perspectives. Self/other discourse therefore not only constructs identity but also defines the boundaries of political and social belonging [9,23,38].

3.4 Analytical Model

Self/other discourse functions as the key mechanism linking language, identity and legitimacy in this multi-level framework. Representations of the national self emphasize stability, development and moral responsibility, thereby strengthening legitimacy claims. Representations of external others, by contrast, often construct them as intrusive, inconsistent or disruptive, which reinforces the perceived coherence and correctness of the national self. These representations are not merely descriptive; they perform strategic work by shaping interpretation and supporting political authority. The integrated model therefore focuses on evaluative language, metaphorical framing and intertextuality as major discursive strategies through which legitimacy is constructed. Table 1 summarizes the framework used to analyze Chinese state media discourse [39,40].

Table 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Chinese State Media Discourse

Dimension	Concept	Key Components	Analytical Focus	Function in Study
Text Level (CDA)	Linguistic Features	Vocabulary, grammar, syntax, metaphors	How language constructs meaning	Identify self/other representation patterns
Discursive Practice (CDA)	Production & Consumption	Media institutions, editorial control, audience reception	How discourse is produced and circulated	Understand institutional influence on narratives

Social Practice (CDA)	Power & Ideology	Political system, cultural values, global context	How discourse reflects power relations	Link discourse to legitimacy construction
Legitimacy as Discourse	Political Authority	Performance, moral claims, historical continuity	How authority is justified through language	Explain discursive construction of legitimacy
Self-Representation	National Identity	Stability, development, responsibility	Positive framing of China	Reinforce internal cohesion and legitimacy
Other Representation	External Actors	Interference, instability, inconsistency	Negative or contrasting framing	Strengthen self/other distinction
Discursive Strategies	Meaning Construction	Lexical choice, metaphor, intertextuality	How narratives are shaped linguistically	Reveal mechanisms of persuasion
Identity Construction	Inclusion/Exclusion	Boundaries, belonging, differentiation	Who is included/excluded in discourse	Define national identity
Integrated Outcome	Legitimacy Formation	Combined discursive processes	Interaction of all dimensions	Demonstrate how discourse sustains authority

4. Qualitative Discourse Analysis of Chinese State Media

4.1 Research Design

This paper employs a qualitative research design grounded in CDA to examine how Chinese state media construct national identity and political legitimacy through self/other discourse. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables close analysis of language, meaning and ideology, rather than reducing the study to frequency counts. The analysis focuses on how discourse is organized, how meanings are produced and how these meanings function within wider social and political contexts. CDA provides both a theoretical and methodological basis for examining the relationship between language and power. Its interpretive and context-sensitive approach allows the study to identify assumptions, ideologies and power relations embedded in media texts. The analysis is conducted at textual, discursive and social-practice levels, linking micro-level linguistic features such as evaluation, agency and framing to macro-level political and ideological contexts [30,41].

The research design is exploratory and interpretive. It aims to identify recurring representational patterns rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. At the same time, the study is structured through clear research questions, coding categories and analytical procedures. This combination of interpretive depth and methodological transparency strengthens the reliability and credibility of the analysis.

4.2 Data Collection

The corpus comprises 120 articles from three major Chinese state-owned media outlets: People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily. These sources were selected because of their official state affiliation, breadth of national and international coverage, and central role in circulating official narratives to domestic and international audiences. The corpus covers articles published between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2024, a period marked by important developments in domestic governance and China's changing international position.

The bilingual structure of the corpus is central to the study. It includes 80 Chinese-language texts from People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency and 40 English-language texts from China Daily and Xinhua English, allowing comparison between domestically oriented Chinese-language discourse and outward-facing English-language discourse. Articles were located through official outlet websites and, where available, searchable news databases such as LexisNexis and Factiva for English-language content.

Sampling was purposive and based on keywords relating to national identity and external relations. Search terms included China, development, stability, cooperation, international community, foreign interference and

global governance, together with their Chinese equivalents. Articles were included if they: (1) discussed China’s domestic governance or international role; (2) contained evaluative or interpretive framing of China or foreign actors; and (3) belonged to one of three genres: political news reports, editorials or foreign-affairs commentaries. Short factual bulletins without evaluative framing, articles unrelated to politics or national identity, and duplicated items were excluded. All articles were accessed, stored and analyzed between January and March 2026.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

The final corpus comprises 120 articles from People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily. The title and framing of the article have therefore been adjusted to reflect all three sources. The corpus was developed through purposive and stratified sampling, with the aim of capturing analytically relevant discursive contexts rather than achieving statistical representativeness. Stratification ensured variation in the construction of the national self and external others and enabled comparison across outlets, genres and years.

Articles were stratified into three categories: domestic political news, international news, and editorials/commentaries. Domestic political news covers governance, development and social policy, providing material for analyzing how the national self is constructed through stability, progress and legitimacy. International news covers China’s relations with other states and international organizations, providing material for analyzing representations of external others. Editorials and commentaries were included because they contain explicit interpretation and evaluation, making them especially useful for identifying ideological positions and legitimation strategies. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of the corpus across outlets and genres.

Table 2: Corpus distribution ($N = 120$)

Outlet	Domestic News	International News	Editorials/Commentary	Total
People’s Daily	15	10	15	40
Xinhua News Agency	15	15	10	40
China Daily	10	15	15	40
Total	40	40	40	120

The corpus was distributed evenly across the years 2018–2024, with approximately 17–18 articles per year. This temporal spread allows the study to identify recurring patterns and possible shifts in discourse across the selected period. The sample size of 120 articles is manageable for qualitative close reading while still providing enough variation for comparison across outlets, genres and time.

4.4 Analytical Procedures

The analysis followed a systematic coding scheme informed by CDA and the self/other framework. It began with close reading of the selected texts to identify recurring patterns in language use, representation and evaluation. The coding scheme organized the analysis into four domains: self-representation, other-representation, legitimation and discursive strategies. Self-representation was coded through positive evaluation, collective naming and agency patterns in which China appears as an active problem-solver. Other-representation was coded through negative or contrastive evaluation, attribution of agency and relational contrasts with China. Legitimation was coded through performance-based claims, moral evaluation, historical continuity and appeals to international norms. Discursive strategies were coded through metaphor, modality and intertextual references to policy documents, historical narratives or global norms.

A concise codebook is included in Appendix A to clarify the operational categories. Each interpretation follows a text-to-code-to-interpretation process. For example, in the sentence “China has always encouraged stability and cooperation in the international community”, “always encouraged” is coded as high-certainty modality and positive agency, while “stability” and “cooperation” are coded as positive evaluative self-representation. Together, these codes support an interpretation of China as a responsible and trustworthy international actor, contributing to performance- and morality-based legitimation. Conversely, in the sentence “Certain countries still interfere in the internal affairs of other countries”, “interfere” is coded as negative evaluation of the other, while “certain countries” is coded as generalized external attribution. This coding supports an interpretation of external actors as disruptive and intrusive.

These examples illustrate the systematic connection between lexical choice, agency, evaluation and broader legitimation processes. The codebook and worked examples make the interpretive process traceable, allowing readers to follow how raw textual material is converted into analytical claims.

4.5 Reliability and Validity

For qualitative CDA, rigor is best understood in terms of transparency, reflexivity and auditability rather than in terms of mechanical reproducibility. This study documents each stage of the analytical process, including data selection, coding and the operationalization of key categories. Coding decisions are explained through textual examples so that readers can trace interpretations back to specific linguistic features. An audit trail was maintained through annotated texts, coding memos and successive revisions of categories. The study also acknowledges the researcher's interpretive role in identifying patterns and assigning meaning. To reduce overdetermined interpretation, coding categories were developed iteratively through both theoretical guidance and engagement with the data, and alternative readings of important passages were considered during analysis.

Because the corpus is bilingual, the analysis paid particular attention to translation. Chinese-language texts from People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency were analyzed in the original Chinese wherever possible, and selected excerpts were translated into English by the researcher. The translations preserve evaluative meaning, modality and rhetorical structure as far as possible. English-language excerpts from China Daily and Xinhua English are presented in their original wording. This approach allows comparison between domestic and outward-facing discourse while keeping interpretations grounded in the original textual material.

Table 3: Methodological Framework and Analytical Design

Component	Description	Purpose	Application in Study
Research Design	Qualitative CDA	Explore discourse and meaning	Analyze legitimacy and identity construction
Data Source	Chinese state media articles	Provide empirical material	120 articles (2018–2024)
Sampling Strategy	Purposive, stratified	Ensure relevant and diverse data	Domestic, international, and editorial texts
Data Categories	Self, Other, Legitimacy, Strategy	Structure analysis	Coding framework
Analytical Method	Critical Discourse Analysis	Examine language and power	Multi-level analysis (text, discourse, society)
Coding Process	Thematic + linguistic coding	Identify patterns	Repetition, framing, contrast
Reliability	Consistent coding procedures	Ensure rigor	Clear definitions, systematic analysis
Validity	Transparency and triangulation	Strengthen credibility	Multiple data types and perspectives

5. Discursive Construction of National Identity and Political Legitimacy

The analysis is organized into four thematic sections: (1) construction of the national self, (2) representation of external others, (3) discursive strategies and (4) mechanisms of legitimation. Rather than relying only on summary claims, the subsections draw on selected textual excerpts from the corpus. Chinese-language passages from People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency are analyzed in the original language where possible and translated into English for presentation, while English-language passages from China Daily and Xinhua English are reproduced in their original wording.

Each subsection follows a text-to-code-to-interpretation logic. Relevant passages are first presented, then coded according to operational categories such as evaluation, agency and legitimation strategy, and finally interpreted in relation to broader discursive patterns. This approach makes each analytical claim traceable to specific linguistic and rhetorical choices.

5.1 Construction of the National Self

The corpus shows that national self-construction is grounded in recurring textual patterns that emphasize stability, progress and capacity. For example, an article in People's Daily on economic development states that China "continues to experience steady economic growth" and is moving toward "high-quality development". The phrases "steady economic growth" and "high-quality development" operate as positive evaluative frames, constructing a narrative of managed progress and planned modernization. Similarly, a Xinhua News Agency report on technological innovation states that China "continues to advance" innovation and development, with the verb phrase "continues to advance" indicating agency, continuity and sustained national capacity.

Across the corpus, positive evaluative terms and verbs of agency recur in news reports, editorials and commentaries. These linguistic patterns represent China as stable, competent and progressive. The national self is therefore not constructed through abstract claims alone; it is produced through repeated lexical and syntactic choices that present China as orderly, capable, economically successful and morally responsible.

Headlines and lead paragraphs frequently combine economic and moral evaluation. For instance, a China Daily editorial describes China's development model as "responsible" and "inclusive", linking economic outcomes directly to moral legitimation. Repeated lexical patterns such as stability, development, innovation and win-win cooperation construct China as both economically successful and ethically responsible. Economic development is therefore not presented as a neutral material condition; it is turned into a key legitimation strategy through positive appraisal, high agency attribution and moral framing.

Social harmony also plays a central role in constructing the national self. The narratives tend to present society as coherent and cooperative, while internal tensions are either backgrounded or represented as temporary and manageable. This emphasis on stability implies that the nation possesses the institutional and cultural resources needed to maintain order and unity. Historical continuity provides another important dimension: references to past achievements, cultural traditions and long-term development link the present to a broader national timeline. Contemporary success is therefore represented not as accidental, but as the outcome of sustained and purposeful national progress [36,42–44].

The national self is also strongly moralized. The discourse emphasizes responsibility, peaceful development, cooperation and mutual benefit, presenting China as a constructive international actor. This ethical framing reinforces internal cohesion while positioning China positively in the international arena. Overall, the national self is constructed through the combined themes of material prosperity, social cohesion, historical continuity and moral responsibility [45].

5.2 External Threats and the Reinforcement of National Identity

In contrast to the coherent and confident national self, external actors in the corpus are often represented as disruptive, inconsistent or threatening to national boundaries. These actors include foreign states, international organizations, Western media outlets and transnational NGOs. For example, an article in People's Daily states that "some foreign governments" interfere in China's domestic affairs while ignoring local circumstances and sovereignty. The verb "interfere" is coded as negative evaluation of the other, while "some foreign governments" functions as generalized external attribution. This construction presents external actors as intrusive and illegitimate, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of domestic governance.

Similarly, a Xinhua News Agency report states that some Western media "misrepresent" China's policies and "undermine" international cooperation. The verbs "misrepresent" and "undermine" are coded as negative evaluative acts that portray these actors as obstructive and unreliable. In the English-language corpus, China Daily presents some transnational NGOs as criticizing China "without understanding local realities", a formulation that attributes ignorance and external intrusion to these actors. Across the corpus, such textual patterns represent external actors as disruptive, disrespectful or inconsistent. Through contrast with a positive and agentic image of China, these representations construct a moral and political boundary that strengthens national identity and supports legitimation.

A second recurring pattern is the representation of the other as inconsistent or unreliable. This is achieved through references to shifting policies, contradictory statements or perceived double standards. Such contrasts allow the national self to appear stable and principled, while external actors appear unpredictable or opportunistic. The other is also associated with destabilization, including economic pressure, political criticism

and ideological challenge. These representations justify defensive responses and reinforce the perceived need for unity and vigilance. Importantly, these depictions are not uniformly negative in every context; they are strategically mobilized to perform a relational function. By marking boundaries and emphasizing difference, the discourse strengthens collective identity and purpose [46–48].

5.3 Discursive Strategies

The analysis shows that discursive strategies are used to construct the national self and external others in ways that guide interpretation and support legitimation. Three major strategies are identified: lexical framing, metaphorical representation and intertextual reference. Lexical framing involves the use of evaluative words and phrases. The national self is frequently described through terms such as stable, prosperous and cooperative, which foreground internal unity, development and competence. For example, a People’s Daily report on high-quality development states that China is sustaining growth and strengthening coordination across regions. In this context, “stable growth” and “coordinated development” function as positive lexical frames that support an image of controlled and competent governance. By contrast, foreign actors are often described through terms such as interference, instability and unilateralism, which position them as disruptive or problematic.

Metaphorical representation reinforces these evaluative patterns. China is symbolically constructed as a pillar of stability, a driver of growth or an engine of innovation, metaphors that imply leadership, reliability and capacity. Conversely, external pressure is often represented through metaphors of storms, chaos or intrusion, which frame external actors as sources of disruption. Such figurative language simplifies complex political relations and embeds value judgments, guiding readers toward an interpretation of China as capable and external actors as destabilizing.

Intertextual references provide another mechanism of legitimation. Texts draw on historical narratives, international norms and policy documents to anchor present claims in wider frameworks of authority. References to development goals, Five-Year Plans, international cooperation and global governance norms support claims about stability and progress, while references to foreign criticism or past intervention strengthen representations of external interference. Together, lexical framing, metaphorical representation and intertextuality create recurring interpretive patterns that legitimize the national self while problematizing the external other.

Table 4: below summarizes the main discursive strategies and their functions:

Discursive Strategy	Description	Function in Narrative Construction
Lexical Framing	Strategic choice of words and phrases	Shapes perception through connotation and emphasis
Metaphor Usage	Use of symbolic or figurative language	Simplifies complexity and embeds value judgments
Intertextual References	Linking to existing texts or narratives	Enhances credibility and reinforces continuity

5.4 Mechanisms of Legitimacy Construction

This subsection examines how legitimacy is actively produced in texts rather than assuming that audiences are necessarily persuaded. Legitimacy is treated as a narrative and discursive process enacted through three main strategies: performance narratives, moral framing and defensive nationalism. Performance narratives emphasize material achievements such as economic development, technological innovation, social progress and improved well-being. For example, a Xinhua News Agency report on technological innovation states that China continues to make breakthroughs and that industrial innovation is producing concrete results. Such wording foregrounds observable effectiveness and constructs a discourse of competence and performance-based legitimation [49]. Moral framing complements this by presenting China as acting according to values such as fairness, responsibility and peaceful coexistence. For example, a People’s Daily report describes China as pursuing mutually beneficial cooperation and maintaining peace and stability in international relations. These formulations place China’s actions within a moral register and present policy as ethically grounded. Together, performance narratives and moral framing show how Chinese state media construct legitimacy within the text itself by selectively foregrounding achievements and values.

Defensive nationalism provides a third mechanism. In response to external criticism or perceived threat, the discourse emphasizes sovereignty, self-determination and national unity. This framing turns external pressure into a collective challenge and legitimizes defensive responses. The three mechanisms work together: performance narratives provide evidence of competence, moral framing provides ethical justification, and defensive nationalism strengthens solidarity under pressure. Together, they form a coherent system through which authority is discursively supported and national identity reinforced [50].

6. Discourse, Legitimacy, and Future Research Directions

This section situates the findings within wider debates on discourse, legitimacy and political communication. It discusses the interpretive implications of the analysis, the theoretical contribution of the article and future research directions. The findings show that discourse is not simply a tool of communication, but a central process through which political legitimacy is produced and maintained.

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings emphasize discourse as a dynamic and strategic means of constructing political legitimacy rather than as a passive channel of information. Media discourse shapes perceptions, organizes meaning and constructs political reality by repeatedly presenting authority through particular representational patterns. One central mechanism is the binary opposition between the national self and external actors. In the corpus, the national self is frequently represented as morally responsible, progressive and stable, while external actors are represented as inconsistent, intrusive or disruptive. These binaries function as cognitive and ideological tools that simplify complex realities and make them emotionally and morally meaningful. At the same time, the analysis acknowledges the limits of a simple self/other dichotomy. Representations of both China and external actors vary across outlet, genre and audience, showing that the self/other distinction is not an absolute truth but a discursive strategy selectively mobilized in particular contexts [36].

This binary organization supports identity boundaries in several ways. First, it fosters internal cohesion by providing a sense of unity and shared purpose. Second, it reduces ambiguity by offering clear interpretive categories for understanding international relations. Third, it legitimizes political authority by presenting leadership as necessary for defending the nation and sustaining development [51].

Another important finding is the interdependence of material and symbolic dimensions. Economic growth, technological achievement and social stability are presented as evidence of effective governance, but these material claims are also embedded in symbolic frameworks that give them moral and political meaning. Economic growth, for example, is not framed merely as prosperity; it is also represented as evidence of responsibility, national strength and governance competence. Repetition across texts and genres contributes to the naturalization of these representations, making particular interpretations appear coherent and self-evident over time.

The discourse is also context-sensitive. It interacts with wider social, cultural and political conditions and responds to changing circumstances. Representations of external actors may become more intense during periods of international tension, while narratives of unity and resilience may be strengthened domestically. This adaptability demonstrates the fluidity of discursive legitimation [52].

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to theoretical debates in Critical Discourse Analysis by integrating self/other analysis into the study of political legitimation. While CDA has long examined the relationship between language and power, this article foregrounds how identity formation operates through relational differentiation. By focusing on the relationship between the national self and external others, the study shows how discourse constructs not only meaning but also social and political boundaries. Identity is therefore understood not as a fixed object, but as a process of differentiation and negotiation [53].

A second theoretical contribution is the conceptualization of legitimacy as a communicative process. Rather than treating legitimacy as a status measured only through institutional performance or public opinion, the article shows how legitimacy is continually produced and reproduced through discourse. This shifts attention from outcomes to processes and encourages closer examination of how legitimacy is formulated, circulated

and contested. It also highlights the role of language as a key site where competing narratives struggle for dominance.

The study also contributes to debates on ideology and hegemony. By showing how the national self is constructed as morally responsible and external actors as problematic, the analysis demonstrates how discourse can align public interpretation with official narratives. The combined analysis of lexical framing, metaphor and intertextuality provides a more detailed account of how persuasive narratives are produced through the interaction of multiple discursive strategies [54].

6.3 Comparative Insights

The analysis shows that Chinese state media emphasize not only collective national identity but also state authority and leadership. Leadership is represented as central to national success, and narratives repeatedly link governance to stability, progress and innovation. Legitimacy is built through performance-based claims, moral claims and historical continuity. Together, these elements construct a discourse in which the state appears effective, competent and morally justified. Because the corpus does not include Western media texts, the article does not make empirical claims about Western media practices; any comparative observations are limited to contextual discussion based on existing literature [55].

The representation of external forces is another important finding. In Chinese state media, the other is often constructed in ways that support narratives of national unity and defense. Existing scholarship suggests that Western media systems may represent other countries in more plural and varied ways, depending on political orientation, editorial position and audience expectations. However, this article treats such comparisons cautiously and does not present them as findings of the present corpus. Future research could address this limitation through a genuinely comparative design involving Chinese and non-Chinese media texts.

Future research could extend this study in several directions. First, longitudinal analysis could examine how discursive patterns change over time and how they respond to political, economic and social contexts. Second, comparative studies could move beyond binary comparisons between Chinese and Western media by including additional media systems and political contexts. Third, future work should examine audience reception, since the present study focuses on discourse production rather than on how audiences interpret and respond to these narratives.

Fourth, digital and social media analysis could show how official discourses are modified, challenged or amplified in interactive online spaces. Fifth, interdisciplinary approaches combining CDA with political science, sociology and communication studies could further explain how discourse relates to institutional structures and social practices. Finally, future research could examine visual and multimodal discourse, including images, video and design, since these forms increasingly shape political perception and may work differently from written text [56].

7. Conclusion

This paper has shown that Chinese state media actively participate in constructing political legitimacy through self/other discourse. Based on an analysis of 120 articles from People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily published between 2018 and 2024, the study finds that the national self is repeatedly represented as unified, morally responsible, consistent and stable, while foreign actors are often represented as disruptive, inconsistent or threatening. These binary constructions are not accidental; they help produce internal solidarity, reinforce nationalism and support the legitimacy of the political order. By linking identity and legitimacy, the analysis shows how Chinese state media connect moral, performance-based and historical claims in ways that present authority as competent and justified. The study also demonstrates the value of a multi-genre, bilingual corpus, showing variation between domestic and outward-facing discourse and across outlet, genre and audience. At the same time, the study has limits. It examines how legitimacy is constructed in media texts, but it cannot measure audience reception, interpretation or internalization, and it cannot make causal claims about public opinion or political effects beyond the texts themselves. Overall, the study contributes to research on media, power and identity by providing empirical evidence of how legitimacy is produced through discourse. It also develops Critical Discourse Analysis by integrating self/other relational

identity construction and by treating legitimacy as a dynamic communicative process rather than as a fixed attribute of political authority.

Empirically, the study shows how themes of economic development, social stability, peaceful progress and external threat are used to legitimize authority and foster national unity in Chinese state media. Future studies can build on these findings through comparative, mixed-method and audience-focused research, as well as through analysis of digital and multimodal media environments.

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Appendix A. Concise Coding Framework

Self-representation: positive evaluation, collective naming and active agency attributed to China; used to identify how China is constructed as stable, competent and responsible.

Other-representation: negative evaluation, generalized external attribution and contrastive agency attributed to foreign actors; used to identify how external actors are constructed as intrusive, inconsistent or disruptive.

Legitimation: performance claims, moral evaluation, historical continuity and appeals to international norms; used to explain how authority is justified through discourse.

Discursive strategies: lexical framing, metaphor, modality, transitivity and intertextuality; used to trace the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms through which self/other representations are produced.