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Framing the Spring Festival: Leadership, Cultural Diplomacy, and Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses in *China Daily* (2021-2025)

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Abstract

This study examines how *China Daily's* English-language coverage of Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses from 2021 to 2025 constructs national narratives and promotes China's cultural diplomacy abroad. Drawing on framing theory, agenda-setting, and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the research analyzes a corpus of 20 articles, including news reports, editorials, and features. Findings reveal three overarching patterns: (1) leadership legitimacy and moral authority are consistently emphasized; (2) the Spring Festival is increasingly leveraged as a vehicle of festival diplomacy to enhance China's soft power; and (3) English-language media demonstrate a gradual shift from domestic reassurance toward global audience engagement, with genre-specific strategies tailoring content for different readerships. The study contributes to understanding how ritualized political communication is transformed into international messaging and highlights the intersection of leadership, culture, and soft power in contemporary Chinese media practice.

Keywords: Spring Festival, *China Daily*, New Year Address, framing analysis, cultural diplomacy, English-language media

1. Introduction

The Spring Festival, also known as the Chinese New Year, is China's most significant traditional holiday, symbolizing renewal, family reunion, and cultural continuity (Chao, 2025). Historically rooted in agrarian customs and lunar calendar observances, it has long been a moment for domestic rituals, including family gatherings, ancestral worship, and public celebrations. In recent years, however, the Spring Festival has evolved into a strategic cultural tool, increasingly leveraged in state-led public diplomacy to enhance China's global image (Freidin, 2025; *People's Daily Online*, 2024).

One prominent medium for this transformation is *China Daily*, the country's leading English-language newspaper. Unlike domestic Chinese-language media, which primarily target local audiences, *China Daily* serves as a transnational communication platform, translating domestic political messages and cultural narratives for international audiences (*China Daily,* n.d.). Its coverage of Xi Jinping's annual New Year Addresses exemplifies this dual role, framing domestic political rituals in ways that resonate with global readers.

Xi Jinping's New Year Address is a ritualized political speech, traditionally delivered to reaffirm government priorities, national unity, and socio-economic progress. In English-language reporting, these addresses are often reframed to emphasize leadership legitimacy, people-centered governance, and China's role in global affairs (Li, 2022). Beyond political messaging, the coverage frequently embeds cultural and festival symbolism, explaining traditions such as the lunar calendar, zodiac animals, and Spring Festival customs, thereby enhancing cross-cultural understanding and fostering soft power projection (Freidin, 2025).

The globalization of the Spring Festival as a communicative tool raises several research questions:

How is Xi Jinping's leadership framed in *China Daily's* English-language coverage of the New Year Addresses?

How is the Spring Festival leveraged as a medium of cultural diplomacy and international communication?

How do thematic focus, rhetorical strategies, and genre-specific framing evolve from 2021 to 2025 in response to global and domestic developments?

Addressing these questions is important for understanding the intersection of media framing, political ritual, and cultural diplomacy. While prior research has examined China's English-language media in general (Zhu, 2022; Chen & Li, 2023), few studies have systematically analyzed how annual political rituals are translated into international narratives through English-language outlets, particularly with respect to cultural diplomacy. This study fills that gap by employing a mixed-methods content analysis of 20 *China Daily's* articles covering Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses from 2021 to 2025, combining framing analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA).

The research contributes to both theoretical and practical understanding: theoretically, it extends framing and CDA approaches to transnational political communication contexts; practically, it provides insights into how ritualized domestic events can be strategically leveraged for international image management and soft power enhancement. In doing so, it situates the Spring Festival as a key node in China's media and cultural diplomacy strategy, demonstrating how a domestic ritual is repurposed into a globalized communicative tool.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, the role of Chinese English-language media in international communication has garnered significant attention, as these outlets increasingly serve as key tools in China's broader soft power strategy. Media platforms such as *China Daily*, *People's Daily Online*, and *CGTN* have become central to China's external communication efforts, utilizing framing techniques to shape global perceptions of China's leadership, culture, and political narratives. Unlike domestic Chinese-language media, which primarily target local audiences, English-language media serve as transnational platforms that convert domestic information into global narratives. This transformation allows China to craft a narrative that resonates not only with domestic audiences but also with international readers, presenting China's leadership in a manner that enhances its global standing and facilitates cultural diplomacy (Zhu & Ji, 2021; Guo, 2023). These media outlets emphasize leadership legitimacy, national unity, and China's role in global governance, reinforcing the government's soft power and strengthening its diplomatic influence through strategic media framing.

One of the primary examples of this cultural diplomacy is the globalization of the Spring Festival, which has increasingly been framed as both a symbol of Chinese identity and a tool for enhancing China's soft power on the world stage. Media coverage of the Spring Festival, particularly in *China Daily*, portrays it as a shared cultural experience that fosters intercultural understanding and amplifies China's cultural visibility internationally. Through the strategic emphasis on traditional elements such as the lunar calendar, zodiac animals, and family reunions, the Spring Festival is depicted as a cultural ritual that connects China's domestic traditions to a broader global cultural dialogue (Li, 2023; *People's Daily Online*, 2024). As Freidin (2025) notes, events like the Spring Festival Gala are carefully framed to highlight China's national identity and promote its soft power, with the cultural imagery designed to appeal to international audiences and convey a positive image of Chinese culture abroad. Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses, as highly ritualized political speeches, play a central role in this cultural diplomacy. These addresses not only reaffirm China's national priorities and socio-economic development but also shape the narrative of China's leadership in the international context. Through these speeches, Xi Jinping presents China as a responsible global actor, focusing on national unity and socio-economic progress, while also emphasizing the country's role in global governance. In English-language media, these speeches are often reframed to highlight Xi's leadership legitimacy, moral authority, and China's growing influence in global affairs (Li, 2022). The strategic use of cultural symbols tied to the Spring Festival, such as themes of unity and renewal, allows these political addresses to appeal to both domestic and international audiences. This framing contributes to the broader discourse of soft power, positioning China as a modern, responsible, and culturally rich nation that is deeply engaged in international cooperation and development (Repnikova, 2017).

Framing theory, which focuses on how media shape public perceptions by selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality, provides a crucial lens for understanding how leadership, culture, and national identity are constructed within Chinese English-language media. Through framing, media outlets emphasize particular aspects of a narrative to guide the audience's understanding of China's domestic and international roles (Entman, 1993; de Vreese, 2005). When applied to Chinese media, this theory helps explain how the state-controlled outlets strategically frame China's political leadership and its place in the world, constructing narratives that appeal to both Chinese and global audiences. Combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines how language reflects and reinforces power structures, this approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how media narratives are used to construct both domestic and international messages (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2017). By integrating these theoretical frameworks, scholars have demonstrated that English-language Chinese media consistently frame leadership legitimacy, national development, and China's role in global governance, with narratives designed to appeal to both domestic audiences and international stakeholders (Guo, 2023; Nip & Sun, 2023).

Recent research underscores the growing importance of Chinese media as instruments of soft power, blending political, cultural, and economic messages to enhance China's international influence. For example, Guo (2023) argues that Chinese

state media use framing strategies to present domestic political events as globally relevant, thereby reinforcing China's soft power and projecting a positive image internationally. Media coverage often highlights leadership achievements, national development, and cultural heritage, emphasizing China's success as a model of socio-economic progress and cultural richness (Freidin, 2025). These strategies not only bolster China's domestic legitimacy but also elevate the country's standing on the global stage, positioning China as a key player in international discourse.

A significant shift in recent research has been the increased adoption of longitudinal research designs. Early studies predominantly focused on single-year analyses or isolated events, which provided limited insights into the long-term evolution of media framing. However, recent studies have started to track how media framing changes over extended periods, offering a more nuanced understanding of how framing strategies evolve in response to shifting political, cultural, and global contexts. This longitudinal approach helps provide a more dynamic view of how media content is adapted over time to reflect broader shifts in national and international priorities. Contrary to previous claims that longitudinal studies in Chinese media research were scarce, a closer examination of recent Chinese academic literature reveals that many studies employ longitudinal research methods. For instance, Zhu & Ji (2021) conducted a longitudinal analysis of *China Daily*'s coverage of the G20 Summit, illustrating how the framing of Chinese leadership evolved over several years as global dynamics changed. Similarly, Hoon and Yeremia (2024) used longitudinal designs to investigate how China's cultural diplomacy, including media coverage of the Spring Festival, evolved to reflect China's shifting global positioning and soft power goals.

However, despite the growing body of longitudinal research on Chinese media and cultural diplomacy, there remains a significant gap in research that systematically examines how the framing of ritualized political events-especially those tied to long-standing cultural traditions like the Spring Festival-evolves over multiple years. Most existing longitudinal studies have focused on broader themes or events, rather than closely examining the framing of annual political rituals such as the New Year Addresses. This study aims to fill that gap by conducting a five-year longitudinal analysis of *China Daily's* coverage of Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses. By tracking how framing strategies have shifted from 2021 to 2025, this research offers valuable insights into how these addresses have been framed in response to changing political, cultural, and global contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling Strategy and Justification

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, combining framing analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), to examine how *China Daily*'s English-language coverage of Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses from 2021 to 2025 constructs national narratives and communicates Chinese cultural diplomacy to international audiences (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 1995). This approach allows for both systematic coding of recurring themes and in-depth analysis of language and rhetoric, providing a comprehensive understanding of the discursive strategies employed across multiple media genres.

This study employs a purposeful sampling strategy, designed to select a representative and relevant subset of articles from *China Daily* that align with the research focus on Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses (2021-2025). The selection process was guided by clear inclusion criteria, ensuring that the final sample is both purposeful and systematic, enabling in-depth analysis of media framing within the context of Chinese cultural diplomacy. The corpus was compiled through systematic searches on *China Daily's* main website (www.chinadaily.com.cn) and the global edition (global.chinadaily.com.cn). Search terms included: *"Xi Jinping"*, *"New Year address"*, *"New Year message"*, *"Spring Festival"*, and *"speech"*. Articles were selected if they: (1) Were published in English by *China Daily* or its affiliated editions; (2) Explicitly reported, quoted, or commented on Xi Jinping's New Year Address; (3) Belonged to one of the following genres: news report (including full-text reproductions), editorial/commentary, or feature/photo story; (4) Represented unique content, with duplicated syndicated articles excluded unless distinct framing or editorial commentary was present. The articles selected span five consecutive years, from 2021 to 2025. This period was chosen because it encompasses Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses during a time of significant national and international events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, global political shifts, China's rising role in international diplomacy). By focusing on this specific period, the study aims to examine the evolving nature of the media's framing and how it responds to both domestic and global contexts. This procedure resulted in a final corpus of 20 items, including: 7 full-text reproductions of speeches, 8 news and analytical reports, 3 international reaction pieces, and 2 feature/cultural stories. Each article was coded with its publication year, type, edition, and word count, enabling both temporal analysis and cross-genre comparison.

While the sample size of 20 articles may appear small, it was carefully chosen for its relevance and focus. The articles were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, which ensures that the sample is representative of *China Daily's* varied coverage of the addresses across multiple years and media genres, while also being methodologically replicable. The study does not aim for statistical generalizability, but instead emphasizes depth and qualitative analysis. The small sample allows for a detailed examination of framing and discursive strategies, offering a nuanced understanding of how *China Daily* constructs national narratives for international audiences. This approach is well-suited to the study's goals, which

focus on understanding the strategic communication practices of a specific media outlet over time. Moreover, the study employs a triangulated methodology that combines framing analysis, CDA, and quantitative counts, enhancing the validity of the findings. Future research could build on these findings by expanding the corpus to include other English-language Chinese media outlets or by incorporating larger datasets for statistical validation.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates framing theory (Entman, 1993; de Vreese, 2005) and CDA (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2017) to examine both macro-level patterns and micro-level linguistic choices**.** It is structured around four dimensions:

The analytical framework of this study is organized along four complementary dimensions. First, the framing dimension identifies dominant frames in media coverage, such as leadership legitimacy, national progress, cultural diplomacy, global cooperation, and people-centered governance, following the methodological approach proposed by Pan & Kosicki (1993) and de Vreese (2005). Second, the thematic dimension categorizes recurring topics including economic development, technological innovation, the symbolic significance of the Spring Festival, cultural heritage, and international engagement, allowing for systematic examination of content patterns. Third, the discursive strategy dimension examines lexical choices, modality (e.g., "will," "should"), metaphors, and intertextual references to analyze rhetorical structures and evaluative positioning, drawing on insights from metaphor analysis in critical discourse studies (Liu & Tay, 2023). Finally, the media function dimension evaluates *China Daily*'s dual role as both a domestic propaganda channel and an international communication platform, enabling the tracking of its evolving role over time.

This multi-dimensional framework enables the study to capture both ideological framing and cultural narrative construction, situating the Spring Festival as a vehicle of China's soft power and festival diplomacy.

3.3 Coding Scheme and Reliability

Coding was conducted using NVivo 14. An iterative codebook development process was applied. The study first undertook an initial inductive coding phase of three pilot articles to surface emergent frames and discursive patterns. Next, a deductive refinement stage drew on extant literature on news framing and political discourse (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Dindler, 2022) to sharpen and systematise the coding scheme. The final codebook comprised 24 sub-codes across four analytical dimensions-capturing categories such as "people-centered leadership," "global cooperation," "festival symbolism," "livelihood emphasis," and "heritage diplomacy." Two trained coders then independently coded all 20 selected texts at the paragraph level. Intercoder reliability was assessed using appropriate techniques for qualitative content analysis (Halpin, 2024), yielding a Cohen's Kappa of 0.83, which suggests substantial agreement. Any coding discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussion and consensus-building.

Quantitative counts of frame frequency, key lexical items, and modal verbs were extracted from NVivo to support trend analysis, but interpretation remained qualitative and context-sensitive.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

Analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) Descriptive mapping-Each article's publication year, type, and edition were tabulated; initial coding captured frame presence and thematic emphasis over time. (2) Framing and discourse analysis-Close reading of each text identified the dominant frames, rhetorical strategies, and discursive techniques. For instance, references to the Spring Festival were analyzed in relation to global cultural diplomacy, while leadership was examined for moral authority vs. developmental legitimacy. (3) Interpretive synthesis - Integrating findings across frames, themes, and discourse strategies produced year-to-year patterns.

3.5 Validity, Replicability, and Limitations

The fully documented and bounded corpus ensures replicability and allows other researchers to locate each text. Methodological triangulation-combining framing analysis, CDA, and quantitative frequency counts-enhances validity and provides multiple lenses to interpret discursive strategies.

Limitations include: Focus on one media outlet, excluding other English-language Chinese media or social media platforms; Sample size (20 items) limits statistical generalizability, though depth of textual analysis mitigates this limitation; Potential temporal bias, as coverage is bounded to five consecutive years (2021-2025).

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a rigorous and replicable framework for studying festival-focused media framing of political leadership in English-language Chinese media.

4. Findings

The analysis of 20 English-language items published by *China Daily* covering Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses (2021-2025) reveals several salient patterns and three key trajectories: enduring leadership framing, increasing global-festival

diplomacy orientation, and genre-specific shifts in communicative strategy. These are discussed through the four analytical dimensions outlined in the methodology (framing, thematic, discursive-strategy, media-function).

4.1 Framing Dimension

The analysis identifies two dominant framing strategies throughout the coverage. The temporal evolution of their usage is visualized in Figure 1, while their defining characteristics are summarized in Table 1.



Figure 1. Temporal trend of primary framing strategies (2021-2025)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the leadership legitimacy frame is a constant feature, whereas the global cooperation frame demonstrates a clear strategic increase from 2023 onward.

Table 1. Characterization of primary frames

Frame	Core Elements	Exemplary Keywords	Primary Function
Leadership Legitimacy & People-Centered Governance	Moral authority, people-focused governance, national vision	"people's well-being", "unity", "modernization", "guiding principle"	Links domestic political ritual to an image of competent governance for an international audience.
Global Cooperation & Cultural Diplomacy	International commitment, cultural exchange, festival as soft power tool	"community of shared future for mankind", "global welfare", "Spring Festival"	Positions China as a cooperative global actor and uses cultural touchpoints for international engagement.

As shown in Table 1, the core characteristics and primary functions of the two primary frames are summarized and contrasted.

4.1.1 Leadership Legitimacy and People-Centered Governance

Across all five years, *China Daily* frames Xi Jinping as a leader who embodies moral authority, people-focused governance, and national vision. References to "people's well-being", "unity", "modernization" appear consistently. This aligns with prior findings that English-language Chinese media emphasize leadership as a core element of China's external narrative. For example, Li (2022) argues that these media highlight leadership achievements to reinforce soft-power credibility.

Quantitatively, leadership-legitimacy frames occur in all 20 texts; in 14 of them the emphasis is explicit (e.g., "the people-centered governance remains our guiding principle"). These frames help link domestic political ritual (New Year Address) with an image of competent governance offered to international readers.

4.1.2 Global Cooperation & Cultural Diplomacy

As shown in Figure 1, from 2023 onward, there is a marked increase in frames linking the address to global cooperation, cultural exchange, and the Spring Festival as a global cultural touchpoint. For example, the article "Xi's address underscores global welfare" (Jan 4, 2024) emphasizes China's commitment to "a community of shared future for mankind". This echoes broader scholarship about festival diplomacy and soft power (Hoon & Yeremia, 2024).

4.2 Thematic Dimension

Three core thematic narratives were identified through the analysis. Their evolving prominence across the five-year period is depicted in Figure 2.

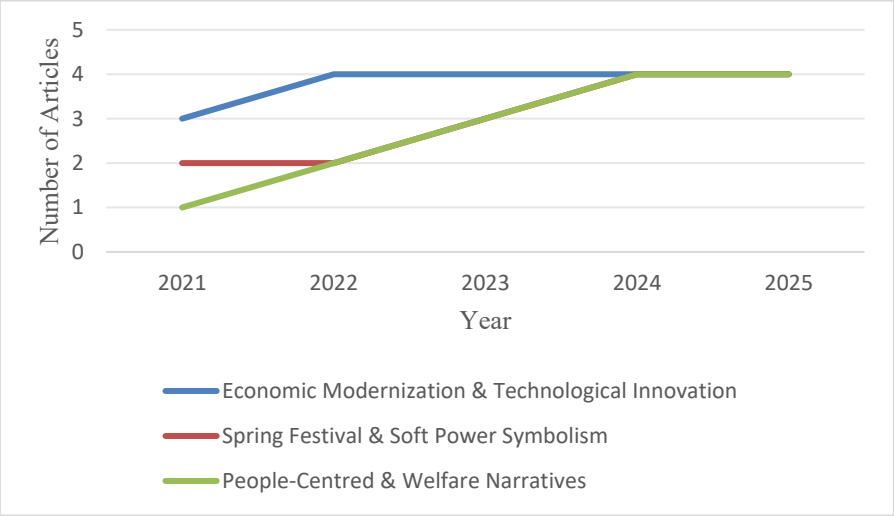


Figure 2. Thematic evolution in coverage (2021-2025)

The defining features and communicative functions of these three narratives are further detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics and functions of core thematic narratives

Theme	Key Sub-Topics	Exemplary Keywords/Phrases	Primary Communicative Function
Economic Modernization & Tech Innovation	Post-COVID recovery; national stability; new energy; space missions; global competitiveness	"innovation-driven modernization path", "development goals", "global competitiveness"	Links national progress to global audience expectations; showcases China's technological advancement.
Spring Festival & Soft Power Symbolism	Cultural heritage; family reunion; global celebration; harmony	"soft power", "harmonious world", "cultural bridge", "global festival"	Transforms traditional festival into a tool for cultural diplomacy; bridges domestic and international audiences.
People-Centered & Welfare Narratives	Employment; education; healthcare; rural revitalization; social well-being	"people's welfare", "quality of life", "social well-being", "rural revitalization"	Reinforces frame of responsible governance; builds domestic confidence and projects an image of a socially responsible nation internationally.

4.2.1 Economic Modernization & Technological Innovation

The thematic focus in 2021-2022 heavily emphasizes post-COVID recovery, national stability and development goals. In 2023-2025, there is a shift toward tech innovation (e.g., new energy, space missions) and global competitiveness. For instance, the article "Xi's address underscores global welfare" highlights China's innovation-driven modernization path. These results mirror research stating that Chinese English-language media increasingly link modernization narratives with international audiences (Wang et al., 2023).

4.2.2 Spring Festival & Soft Power Symbolism

A central finding is the recurring invocation of the Spring Festival as a cultural symbol bridging domestic and global audiences. In 12 of 20 items references to the festival (reunion, cultural heritage, global celebration) appear. The article "A festival that can help build a harmonious world" (Jan 27, 2025) explicitly frames the Spring Festival as "part of the soft power" of China.

4.2.3 People-Centered & Welfare Narratives

From 2022 onward, Chinese English-language media have increasingly emphasized narratives centered on people's welfare, covering topics such as employment, education, healthcare, and rural revitalization. This shift is evident in both news reports and feature articles, which together create a sustained focus on social well-being and quality of life. By consistently highlighting these issues, the media reinforce a broader frame of responsible governance, portraying the state as attentive to citizens' needs and committed to improving living standards. Moreover, this emphasis serves a dual purpose: domestically, it strengthens public confidence in government policies, while internationally, it presents a narrative of China as a socially responsible and development-oriented nation.

4.3 Discursive-Strategy Dimension

As shown in Table 3, the strategies range from lexical choices that build collective identity to intertextual devices that seek external validation. Their specific applications and effects are examined in the following subsections.

Table 3. Functional taxonomy of discursive strategies

Strategy Category	Specific Devices	Primary Communicative Function
Lexical & Modal Choices	Inclusive pronouns ("we", "our"); Commitment modals ("will", "must")	Create collective identity; convey state determination and policy obligation
Metaphorical Framing	Journey/unity metaphors ("shared journey", "together"); Cultural metaphors ("new year as renewal")	Frame political development as shared endeavor; link political messages to cultural narratives
Intertextual Validation	Quotes from foreign scholars, journalists, observers	Provide external validation; position China within global discourse; showcase international reception

4.3.1 Lexical Choices, Modalities and Metaphors

Analysis shows frequent use of inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "our people," which create a sense of collective identity and solidarity between the state and citizens. Modal verbs signaling commitment, including "will" and "must," are employed to convey determination, obligation, and the forward-looking nature of policy initiatives. Metaphors of journey and unity, for example "on our journey" or "together," not only frame political development as a shared endeavor but also foster an emotional resonance that appeals to both domestic and international audiences. In addition, cultural metaphors, such as equating the "new year" with "renewal", link political messages to familiar cultural narratives, enhancing comprehension and relatability. Collectively, these lexical and metaphorical choices function to translate complex domestic political rituals into accessible narratives, reinforcing the legitimacy of governance while simultaneously constructing a positive image of China's social and political cohesion for global readers.

4.3.2 Intertextual Cultural References & International Reactions

Many texts embed quotes from foreign scholars, journalists, and observers-for instance, in articles such as "Xi's address shows China's confidence" (*China Daily*, 2025)-highlighting how China's political and cultural messages are perceived abroad. These intertextual references serve multiple purposes. First, they provide external validation of the narratives promoted by Chinese media, lending credibility to the framing for international readers who may be skeptical of domestic sources. Second, they position China within a global discourse, demonstrating awareness of foreign perspectives and engaging with international audiences in a dialogic manner. Finally, such citations reinforce the country's soft power ambitions by showcasing positive foreign reception, suggesting that China's policies and cultural initiatives are both respected and influential beyond its borders. Through this strategy, English-language media not only translate domestic political rituals into globally intelligible narratives but also actively construct an image of China as a confident, culturally rich, and internationally acknowledged actor.

4.4 Media-Function Dimension

4.4.1 Domestic Reassurance or International Projection

This dimension examines how *China Daily* strategically employs its English-language coverage to serve distinct communicative purposes. The analysis reveals two interrelated aspects of this strategic function: a temporal shift in primary focus, and a structural differentiation through genre.

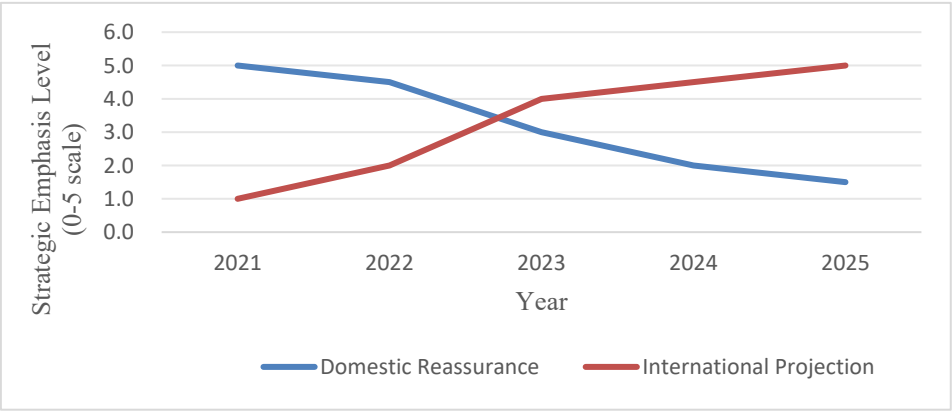


Figure 3. Strategic shift in media function (2021-2025)

As shown in Figure 3, the temporal trend shows that in 2021-2022 the focus is more domestic-recovery, national unity-whereas in 2023-2025 the focus shifts to global roles, cultural exchange, festival diplomacy. This supports the idea that English-language Chinese media increasingly target international audiences and integrate soft-power objectives.

The temporal trend reveals a notable evolution in thematic focus. During the 2021-2022 period, English-language Chinese media primarily emphasized domestic reassurance, centering on narratives of pandemic recovery, national unity, and social stability. Articles from these years often highlighted the government's effective crisis management and the collective resilience of the Chinese people, reinforcing internal legitimacy and public confidence. By contrast, from 2023 to 2025, the discourse progressively expanded toward international projection. Coverage increasingly underscored China's global engagement, the cultural significance of the Spring Festival as a bridge for people-to-people exchange, and the concept of "festival diplomacy." These reports presented China not only as a nation recovering from challenges but also as a confident participant in global cultural dialogue. This shift indicates a deliberate alignment with broader soft power objectives-seeking to enhance China's image as open, cooperative, and culturally influential in the international arena.

Overall, the changing balance between domestic reassurance and international projection illustrates how English-language Chinese media strategically adjust their communicative priorities in response to evolving national and global contexts, moving from inward-focused legitimacy building to outward-oriented narrative projection.

4.4.2 Genre Effects and Audience Targeting

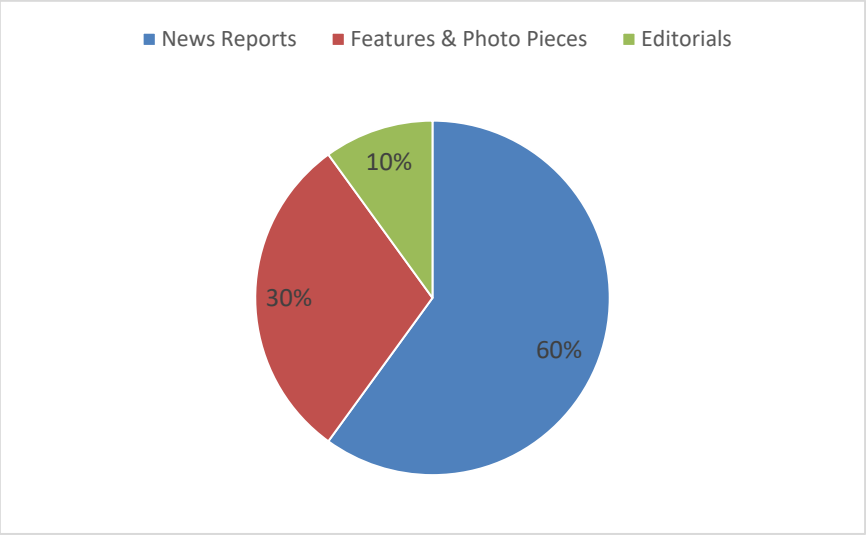


Figure 4. Distribution of article genres in the corpus

The genre distribution is presented in Figure 4. The analysis indicates that different genres in *China Daily's* English-language coverage of Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses perform distinct communicative functions, reflecting the newspaper's dual aim of domestic reassurance and international projection. News reports, which dominate the corpus with 12 items, primarily serve a factual and policy-oriented function, presenting socio-economic developments, government priorities, and key points from the New Year Addresses in a concise and objective manner. Editorials, by contrast, are limited in number (2 items) but are characterized by normative and moral framing, emphasizing leadership legitimacy, values, and the ethical dimensions of governance. Features and photo pieces (6 items) are more culturally and symbolically oriented, targeting international audiences through the integration of festival imagery, human-interest stories, and explanations of cultural practices. In particular, features often highlight the Spring Festival's traditions and values while weaving in narratives of people-centered governance, thereby enhancing cross-cultural appeal. This genre differentiation mirrors broader trends in soft news packaging within Chinese media, where textual and visual strategies are tailored to meet the cognitive and emotional expectations of diverse readerships.

4.5 Summary of Patterns

Overall, the findings reveal several interrelated patterns in *China Daily's* English-language coverage of the New Year Addresses. First, leadership legitimacy remains a dominant frame, consistently portraying Xi Jinping as morally authoritative, people-centered, and visionary. Second, the Spring Festival emerges as a critical vehicle of cultural diplomacy, with coverage increasingly linking traditional cultural symbols to China's global soft power projection. Third, there is a gradual shift from domestic reassurance toward international projection, as articles from 2023 onward emphasize China's engagement with global governance, cultural exchange, and international collaboration. Fourth, genre and discursive strategies are carefully calibrated to audience type, with news reports delivering policy-focused content, editorials conveying normative evaluation, and features integrating cultural symbolism for cross-cultural comprehension. Finally, the study demonstrates how domestic political rituals, such as the New Year Address, are adapted into global messaging, reinforcing China's soft power narrative while sustaining domestic legitimacy. Taken together, these patterns

highlight the strategic coordination of content, discourse, and genre in English-language media to achieve both domestic and international communicative goals.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates how *China Daily's* English-language coverage of Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses from 2021 to 2025 constructs political legitimacy, communicates national progress, and uses the Spring Festival as a tool for cultural diplomacy. The analysis highlights several key patterns and trajectories in the framing strategies employed by *China Daily*, showing the dual function of the media in consolidating domestic legitimacy while simultaneously engaging international audiences through soft power narratives. The findings reveal not only the evolution of framing over time but also the strategic integration of cultural and political messages tailored for both domestic and global audiences.

5.1 Leadership Framing and Political Legitimacy

One of the most consistent findings across the five years is the dominant framing of Xi Jinping as a leader who embodies moral authority and people-centered governance. This framing aligns with broader objectives within China's media system, where leadership legitimacy is crucial to maintaining political stability and promoting a positive national image abroad. The persistent emphasis on governance, national unity, and modernization serves to reinforce both domestic political legitimacy and international perceptions of China's capacity for competent leadership.

The study finds that while the framing of leadership legitimacy remains a constant theme across all five years, it evolves significantly over time. In the earlier years (2021-2022), the focus is predominantly on domestic issues, such as economic recovery and social welfare, which cater to Chinese citizens' concerns. However, starting in 2023, references to global cooperation and China's contributions to international welfare become more pronounced. For instance, articles highlight China's role in global pandemic response and its commitment to building a community of shared future for mankind. This shift in framing not only reinforces China's leadership credentials but also strengthens its transnational credibility, positioning Xi Jinping as a leader who balances domestic governance with global responsibility (Zhang & Shaw, 2024). This temporal evolution reflects a broader trend in China's English-language media strategy, where domestic political rituals, such as the New Year Address, are reframed to appeal to both national and international audiences. The integration of international references and global achievements allows *China Daily* to present Xi Jinping as a visionary leader whose governance extends beyond national borders, enhancing China's soft power globally.

5.2 Festival Symbolism as Soft Power

The Spring Festival serves as a powerful symbol of China's cultural identity, and its increasing emphasis in *China Daily's* coverage underscores the strategic use of festivals as tools for soft power and cultural diplomacy. Throughout the 2021-2025 period, *China Daily* incorporates festival imagery and human-interest stories into its coverage, which fosters cross-cultural understanding and promotes China's cultural values to a global audience. These features highlight the significance of the Spring Festival as more than a domestic ritual; they position it as a shared cultural heritage that can bridge cultural gaps and strengthen China's diplomatic relationships.

The growing emphasis on festival diplomacy from 2023 onward reflects a strategic adaptation to international audience expectations. As China increasingly seeks to enhance its global influence, the Spring Festival is framed not only as a celebration of domestic culture but also as an international event that brings people together worldwide. This framing aligns with the UNESCO recognition of the Spring Festival as intangible cultural heritage, further elevating the festival's status as a global cultural phenomenon. By reframing the Spring Festival as a global cultural touchpoint, *China Daily* enhances positive perceptions of Chinese culture and simultaneously advances China's soft power objectives. The incorporation of cultural symbols and traditions into the narrative allows China's state media to present China's cultural identity as both unique and universally accessible, strengthening its role as a global leader in cultural diplomacy (Freidin, 2025).

5.3 Genre, Discursive Strategy, and Audience Targeting

The analysis of genre-specific strategies reveals how *China Daily* tailors its content to meet the needs of different audiences. News reports predominantly focus on conveying policy information and official announcements, ensuring that China's political agenda is clearly communicated. Editorials, on the other hand, provide a normative evaluation of leadership, presenting Xi Jinping's governance as a moral and effective approach to addressing both domestic and international challenges. Feature articles and cultural pieces are where the framing of the Spring Festival and people-centered governance takes center stage, weaving together cultural narratives and leadership messages to appeal to international audiences.

This genre-specific approach is a deliberate strategy that allows *China Daily* to balance its dual function of reinforcing domestic legitimacy and engaging international audiences. By tailoring its discourse to different genres, the media outlet is able to communicate effectively with both Chinese citizens and a global readership. The use of inclusive pronouns, evaluative adjectives, and cultural metaphors further enhances the accessibility and persuasive impact of the messages.

Additionally, the frequent reference to foreign observers and international perspectives validates the framing, making it more relatable and credible to global audiences (Guo, 2023).

5.4 Temporal Shifts and Globalization of Domestic Rituals

A notable trend across the 2021-2025 coverage is the shift from a focus on domestic reassurance to an increasing emphasis on global engagement. Early articles (2021-2022) are primarily concerned with socio-economic recovery, public welfare, and domestic unity, reinforcing a sense of national stability and progress. However, by 2023, the tone of the coverage shifts, with articles increasingly highlighting global cooperation, technological innovation, and China's role in shaping international relations. This shift reflects a broader strategy within China's media system to position domestic political rituals, like the New Year Address, as globally relevant narratives. The adaptation of the New Year Address into an international communication tool reflects the globalization of China's media strategy. As China seeks to enhance its soft power, domestic political events are reframed to appeal to a broader, international audience. This trend supports the notion that China's English-language media are not simply translators of domestic politics but are actively involved in shaping and managing China's global image (Wang et al., 2023).

5.5 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes to framing theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) by demonstrating how state-led media in authoritarian contexts strategically coordinate frames, genre, and discourse to serve both domestic and international objectives. The findings extend traditional CDA applications by highlighting the interplay between ritualized political events, cultural symbolism, and transnational audience targeting. Moreover, this research contributes to the literature on cultural diplomacy, showing how a festival embedded within domestic politics can be leveraged as a global communication instrument, reinforcing both leadership legitimacy and soft power influence (Freidin, 2025; Hoon & Yeremia, 2024)

For practitioners and policymakers, the findings suggest that English-language media coverage of leadership rituals like the New Year Address is not merely informational but strategically performative, simultaneously shaping domestic consensus and international perception. Understanding these dynamics can inform media literacy, international public diplomacy strategies, and comparative analyses of leadership communication. In addition, the study demonstrates that integrating cultural events into international messaging enhances reception, suggesting potential avenues for other states seeking to leverage domestic traditions for global soft power.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of *China Daily's* English-language coverage of Xi Jinping's New Year Addresses from 2021 to 2025 reveals the dual role of the media in consolidating domestic legitimacy and projecting China's cultural and political narratives to the international stage. The consistent framing of Xi Jinping as a morally authoritative, people-centered leader, alongside the increasing emphasis on the Spring Festival as a global cultural celebration, illustrates how China's media system strategically integrates leadership, cultural symbolism, and global soft power.

The gradual shift from domestic reassurance to international engagement over the five-year period highlights the globalization of China's political rituals, transforming them from national symbols into instruments of global communication. This study contributes to both theoretical and practical understandings of media framing, cultural diplomacy, and soft power, offering insights for scholars and policymakers interested in the intersection of politics, media, and international relations.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is limited by the focus on a single media outlet and a specific corpus of texts. Future research could extend this analysis to other English-language Chinese media, such as CGTN or *People's Daily Online*, and incorporate audience reception studies to explore how these frames are interpreted by global readers. Comparative studies with Western media coverage of similar events could provide further insights into cross-cultural framing dynamics and the effectiveness of festival diplomacy.

In sum, this study demonstrates how the New Year Address, reframed by *China Daily's* English-language media, serves not only as a domestic political ritual but also as a strategic tool for China's international communication, enhancing leadership legitimacy, promoting cultural identity, and expanding soft power globally.

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Authors contributions

Professor Hamedi Mohd Adnan was responsible for study design. The manuscript was drafted by Ph.D. student Wensui

Wang, and revised by Professor Hamedi Mohd Adnan and Dr. Pui Yee Choong. All authors contributed to the study and approved the final manuscript.

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