

Contesting securitization: Chinese media discourse on the politics and security of outer space

Author: McKenzie Linden
Supervisor: Nicholas Loubere



ABSTRACT

The international framework for the regulation of outer space activities that has been in place since the 1960s has come under increasing pressure in recent years. Concerns over the weaponization and militarization of outer space have grown more vocal and attempts to introduce new international agreements have fallen short. Within this context, the present study analyzes Chinese media discourse on the politics of outer space. Drawing on securitization theory, it develops a unique framework for the study of securitizing speech-acts and finds that Chinese media uses securitizing discourse in surprising ways. It is argued that the apparent contradiction between neo-realist predictions of conflict and China's espoused agenda for the peaceful use of outer space is contingent on theoretical assumptions about the nature of power. Based on an original dataset and a systematic empirical analysis, it is shown that de-securitizing discourses are most common, that China envisions itself as a leader in the realm of space technology and exploration, and that US policies, alliances, and strategic frameworks are elevated to issues of international security through macro-securitizing discourses.

Keywords: *Securitization; outer space; China; discourse analysis; international relations*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the result of much time and patience on the part of many people. I am extremely grateful for their support. Thank you to everyone at the Center for East and South-east Asian Studies at Lund University for making it possible to complete this thesis. Special thanks to my supervisor Nicholas Loubere and to Stefan Brehm for your guidance. To my partner, my family, and my friends: this work would not have been possible without you. May our common dreams shine in space!

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In April 2024, the United Nations Security Council rejected a draft resolution, introduced by the United States (US) and Japan, that would have reaffirmed Article IV of the Outer Space Treaty (OST), which prohibits the placement of nuclear weapons or any other weapons of mass destruction in outer space. Russia vetoed the resolution, while China abstained from voting. In Western headlines, the vote was framed as Russia vetoing a resolution to prevent an arms race in space (Russia Vetoes UN Resolution to Prevent Nuclear Arms Race in Space, 2024). However, China and Russia jointly proposed an amendment to this resolution that would have extended the ban to all types of weapons, not only nuclear weapons. This proposed amendment was rejected by a vote of 7 against, 7 in favor, and one abstention from Switzerland (United Nations, 2024).

The recent UN vote demonstrates a few key points that lie at the core of the present study. The first is that outer space governance is becoming a pressing international issue. The European Union recently approved its first strategy for security and defense in space (Council of the EU, 2023) and is currently drafting its first comprehensive European space law (Foust, 2024). These and other recent policies illustrate that the importance of outer space infrastructure for daily life as well as military and intelligence purposes is becoming ever more significant. Second, is that with this growing importance has come a growing fear over conflict, weaponization, and increased militarization of outer space. This fear is encapsulated in the securitization of space, which refers to the increasing tendency to discuss outer space activities as “crucial to the military, economic, and environmental security of leading states and international organizations,” (Peoples, 2010). Third, is that the way media and public statements discuss issues of space governance are far from transparent. Incomplete information, misleading headlines, and outright disinformation present an exceptional barrier to understanding the core issues of space governance, let alone finding their resolutions.

In part, this study is intended as a corrective to heedless assumptions. More accurately stated, it is intended as an exercise in perspective-taking or cognitive empathy. In contrast to affective or emotional empathy, cognitive empathy does not mean that one feels or accepts the views

someone else holds, rather than one intentionally adopting another point of view that is not one's own while remaining aware of this decision. The decision to approach the current issue from this perspective was based on methodological grounds; in the social constructivist worldview, your perceptions are equally as valid as mine. If I want to understand or explain your actions, it is from your worldview that I ought to begin.

In the realm of critical security studies, this approach has gone on to produce the vibrant field of ontological security studies.¹ Adopting a related approach, the present study draws from securitization theory to assess the role of discourse in Chinese media publications concerning the politics of outer space. The essay proceeds in six sections below. The first section identifies and discusses the relevant literature on the space politics. The second section presents the theories and methodology employed in this study. The third section outlines the methods used for source selection and data processing. The fourth section breaks down the data by analyzing the most relevant findings. The fifth section brings these findings into conversation with the existing theory and literature. Each sub-section presents an answer to one of the following research questions:

RQ1: How does Chinese media discourse contribute to or contest the securitization of space?

Sub-question 1: How do Chinese discourses on outer space compare to other discourses?

Sub-question 2: How does Chinese media envision outer space?

Sub-question 3: How does it envision China's relationship to outer space and to the future of space governance?

RQ2: Why does Chinese media de-securitize outer space, despite realist predictions that the country is preparing for an inevitable conflict over space dominance?

A concluding section summarizes the findings and explores the implication and relevance of the study. Finally, a note on citations: articles comprising the primary dataset are referenced with

¹ The concept of ontological security was derived from earlier psychology literature, specifically R.D. Laing's studies on schizophrenia (Laing, 1969). Laing's contribution was to attempt to approach the patient's life from their own perspective, and it proved influential in psychology and beyond.

footnotes and are included in Appendix A. Secondary, academic sources, analyses, and all other materials are cited using in-text citation, and full reference details can be found in the References section.

SECTION 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of the politics of outer space, sometimes referred to as ‘astropolitics’ or simply ‘space policy,’ is a sub-field of international relations that investigates the broader political dimensions of human use and exploration of outer space (Sheehan, 2007). The field has existed since human beings first acquired the ability to reach outer space and has grown rapidly in recent years due to the proliferation of space technologies which have become not only much more advanced but also much more accessible. Scholars approach the study of space policy from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, ranging from the familiar realist, liberal, and constructivist viewpoints to eclectic combinations of these and many others (Stroikos, 2022a). These different theoretical perspectives often inform researchers’ understandings of what constitute the most important variables of the space policy landscape, such as balance of power, institutions, geopolitics, or social imaginaries. This focus on a wide range of variables lends itself to a highly diverse and multifaceted body of literature on any particular topic in the realm of space politics, and in turn to a lively and innovative field. On the other hand, it also leads to significant disagreement over common core questions, as the literature on China’s space policy discussed below demonstrates.

China has always figured prominently in foundational space policy research (Burwell, 2019; Cobb, n.d.; Kaun & Åker, 2023). Yet, the study of China’s space programs and the country’s role in global space power and governance structures has received increasing attention from space policy scholars, owing especially to China’s rapid development and deployment of world-class space technologies. Despite increased attention, however, perspectives diverge widely on fundamental questions such as why China has chosen to pursue space technology development and what its programs and ambitions mean for the governance of space and for other powerful spacefaring countries (ed. Bormann, 2009; Moltz, 2011; Pekkanen & Blount, 2024; ed. Schrogl et al., 2015; Sheehan, 2007).

Scholars within the field of space policy share a general concern for the security of outer space and are sensitive to the complexity of human activity in space, which incorporates not only military and applications technology but also communications, scientific research, private space flight enterprises, weather and environmental monitoring, human space flights, and many other

aspects. Within this context, China is most often discussed as a power-player, a crucial aspect of the security architecture, and a defining influence on the future of outer space governance, security, exploration, and technology. China's role and its relations to other major space powers are becoming increasingly important as it continues to vigorously develop its space programs, as has been well-documented in several up-to-date empirical and historical studies (Chandrashekar, 2022; Harvey, 2019; Liu & Li, 2021; Solomone, 2013; Zhang, 2021).

One of the most intriguing questions that space policy studies seeks to answer is why countries pursue complicated and expensive space exploration programs that don't appear to have immediate or substantial economic or political returns (Handberg & Li, 2006). Although various arguments for resource-seeking (Goswami, 2018), balance of power (Stroikos, 2022b), and self-interest (Moltz, 2011) have been made, nearly every perspective eventually needs to incorporate some element of prestige, status, or identity-seeking (Cunningham, 2009). Furthermore, despite general agreement on China's importance in the realm of space politics, there is considerable disagreement concerning China's motivations, the implications of its space programs for the security of outer space, and how to best manage space relations with China.

Concerning China's motivations, at least two diverging perspectives can be identified: the 'national security perspective' and the 'prestige perspective.' According to the first perspective, national security is the primary motivating factor behind China's decision to dedicated resources to the development of space capabilities. Often resting on (neo)realist principles, and even sometimes attributing these principles to China's political decision-making, proponents of this perspective argue that Beijing's pursuits cannot be disentangled from the way the CCP conceives of the international environment, which is based on a realist mindset of competition, conflict, and balance of power (Pollpeter, 2024). According to this view, activities like the 2007 testing of China's anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon demonstrate that China is preparing for an inevitable conflict with the U.S. (Tellis, 2007). Others suggest that the national security motive stems from the original development and purposes of China's space program, which has always been tied to real technological goals and military applications (Bowen, 2023).

Others note, however, that China has never repeated the testing of its ASAT technologies, and the motivations and reasons for the original test are still highly contested (Gill & Kleiber, 2007; Lauer, 2022; Sönnichsen & Lambach, 2020; Stroikos, 2023). Moreover, many argue that the national security perspective is too simplistic, and that it fails to capture the complex reality of motivations and decision-making (Aliberti, 2015). As an alternative, many interpretations cite prestige or status-seeking as the main motivating factor (Sheehan, 2013). Those who adopt this perspective do not do so uniformly, however; some take a power-politics approach, interpreting prestige as a component of national power and an element of Beijing's drive to obtain dominance of space and space technology (Adlakha, 2023; Seedhouse, 2010). Other proponents of the prestige perspective are more inclined to see prestige and status-seeking as a component of China's cultural and historical project, for example, the drive to build a technologically advanced society (Solomone, 2013), attain national autonomy (Handberg & Li, 2006), or to experience a sense of national accomplishment (Kulacki & Lewis, 2009).

China's as well as other countries' motivations for pursuing space programs are important because these motivations influence whether and how regulations concerning outer space will be effective and how countries should seek to manage their relations with other spacefaring countries. If China is seeking to colonize and dominate outer space, then international treaties may only serve to weaken other states' ability to defend themselves (Tellis, 2007). No amount of diplomacy or arms control will guarantee safety from a state with malevolent intentions, and so security in space may depend on the ability of a single powerful actor to maintain a first-mover advantage by creating a military-security architecture that is powerful enough to deter an arms race (Dolman, 2005). On the other hand, if the underlying motivations for space program development are the pursuit of a project of safeguarding national security while peacefully developing economic and technological capabilities, then conflict over hegemony in outer space can be avoided (Stroikos, 2020, 2022b).

Realist and liberal approaches diverge here as a result of their respective assumptions about the determinative power of the anarchic international system and the power of states to constrain the inherent tendency toward conflict that is built into it. Realists and liberal institutionalists both assume structural anarchy, but liberals see a clear possibility of preventing conflict through

institutional arrangements, state-to-state cooperation and open markets (Baiocchi & Welser, 2015; Johnson-Freese & Erickson, 2006; Xinbo, 2018). Historically, the international legal framework has been a core aspect of liberal perspectives on outer space governance (Tannenwald, 2004), while more recently arguments in favor of a market-based approach to ensuring peace and stability in outer space have taken form (Burwell, 2019; Whitman Cobb, 2021). Realists, on the other hand, tend to see conflict and competition as an essential aspect of the current global architecture; even when military conflict can be avoided, competition in one form or another is germane to all relations between states, and outer space is no exception. Realist research on China's role in space is divided between those who see the security dilemma, arms racing, and military confrontation between the US in China as unavoidable (Dolman, 2005; Seedhouse, 2010; Tellis, 2007) and those who argue that, while highly likely, a security dilemma and the consequences it entails are not necessarily determined (Bowen, 2023; Townsend, 2020).

Both realist and liberal approaches rely on foundational theoretical assumptions to develop predictive theories of space politics. In contrast, constructivist perspectives on outer space are not theories of international politics *per se*; they don't usually make generalizable predictions but rather highlight the importance of social dimensions in global space politics (Sheehan, 2007). This is because constructivists generally adopt social ontologies that are not based on classical materialism, individualism, rationalism, or determinism (Wendt, 1999). Instead, constructivists accept, in one form or another, a social ontology that considers social constructs as commensurate with material "stuff" in terms of their importance in the study of the social world. In other words, ideas, beliefs, languages, histories, identities, and other social constructions that make up our experiences as human beings deserve at least as much attention, if not more than, the material "stuff" that makes up the physical world. One example of a constructivist approach to space politics from Sönnichsen and Lambach takes a skeptical view of the (materialist) argument that because most space technology is inherently dual use it will inevitably be weaponized. Instead, they argue that the use of space technologies depends on social dynamics, i.e., what people decide to do with them, and is not pre-determined by the physical capabilities that may be inherent in these technologies (Sönnichsen & Lambach, 2020).

Furthermore, constructivists see space as a realm about which people have speculated for thousands of years. As a human community and as collections of smaller communities we have imbued outer space with meaning, projected our beliefs onto it, and shaped our understanding of what space is, what it is for, and what it can become. Early European cosmology, for example, conceived of the sky as a finite, hemispherical orb, whereas Chinese cosmology from around the same time conceived of it as an infinite empty space through which the stars moved (Harvey, 2019, p.39). In contemporary space policy literature, the flexible nature of the way we envision outer space is no less important. In particular, recent attention has been called to the history of the Space Race between the US and the USSR and how this history has shaped current imaginaries of outer space (Cross, 2019, 2021; Stroikos, 2018). These perspectives call for a deeper understanding of the historical role of civil society and scientific communities which have largely promoted a peaceful and collaborative vision of space exploration that has subsequently been overshadowed by narratives of arms-races and the ‘ultimate high ground.’

In addition to interpreting both human understanding of space and the use of space technologies as socially malleable, constructivists have also interpreted space policy and decision-making as a fundamentally social process determined by complex political and social interactions (Mueller, 2003). The purpose of this kind of perspective is not usually to explain or predict space policies, nor to provide better ones, but to understanding the social contexts within which space policies have been formulated, how they have been articulated or changed, and how they have come to be seen as desirable or inevitable (ed. Bormann, 2009). In his study of the evolution of outer space regulation, for example, Peterson (2006) demonstrates how reasoning by analogy played a significant role in early legislative formation of space laws when governments were first beginning to try to make sense of outer space. Early analogies included space as similar to the high seas, or to airspace, and later to the arctic. The most useful analogy for space strategy is the also the argument of Bowen’s (2023) recent book, which proposes that, from a military-strategic perspective, space should be treated as a coastline rather than an open ocean. The importance of being able to see space policy as a product of social interaction is outlined in Moltz’ (2011) book which demonstrates how US- Soviet space cooperation was a gradual process of social learning that was certainly not inevitable, and the lessons of which can be easily forgotten. In short, a constructivist lens enables researchers to probe deeper into the social dynamics of space policy

without being bound by assumptions of inevitability or the positive effects of particular kinds of institutions.

In turn, this enables more open-ended interpretations of what motivates space program development and what a stable governance structure for outer space would look like. Whereas the liberal and realist perspectives outlined above tend to cite national security and prestige-seeking as the primary motivating factors, constructivists tend to cite identity formation and status-building as key (Paikowsky, 2017; ed. Venet et al., 2012). In terms of governance, constructivists have been critical of both offensive realist proposals to stabilize space via establishing a ‘benevolent hegemon’ as proposed by Dolman (2005) and liberal proposals to address space from collective institutional settings as Deudney (2020) suggests. According to Havercroft and Duvall (2012) both of these are likely to result in a new form of empire, the former by enabling hegemony and the latter by ignoring the reality of power asymmetries within international institutions. From the constructed nature of space technology to the meaning of outer space itself, constructivist perspectives open up the policy landscape to human intentionality. This is both promising and intimidating; there is no determined outcome, no guarantee that conflict is unavoidable, but also no roadmap for how to approach space governance, no fail-safe strategies or institutions that will ensure peace and stability.

Within this context of realist and liberal disagreement, and constructivist indeterminacy, the study of space policy is fractured along the same general lines as IR and foreign policy studies. In the realm of policy making, changes in the international environment and the simultaneous boom in space technologies have led to outer space being increasingly characterized as a threat, a source of instability, and above all, as a security issue. In particular, the US’ reliance on space infrastructure as a military ‘force multiplier’ and the inherent dual-use nature of most space technologies has meant that US space policy has become particularly sensitive to foreign cooperation and prone to portraying space as a national security issue (Blount, 2024). Informed by its status as the most powerful military actor and most influential decision-maker, US narratives have increasingly come to characterize other countries’ space programs - especially those with which the US has tenuous diplomatic relations such as China and Iran- as implicit threats to its national security (Gheisari & Bagheri, 2020; Hunter, 2018). However, the US is

certainly not alone; other space powers including the EU (Fiott, 2020; Klimburg-Witjes, 2021; ed. Venet et al., 2012), Japan (Peoples, 2013), and India (Saxena, 2023) have also developed sharper rhetoric surrounding outer space, as they and even non-spacefaring countries, come to rely heavily on space infrastructure for services that are essential for daily life, such as global navigation systems (Peoples, 2013).

Clearly, there is significant theoretical disagreement in the study of space politics. Yet the issues of technology proliferation and competition for influence are quickly becoming pressing social issues. The following section addresses the core methodological assumptions that have led to disagreement, and proposes that alternative social ontologies may provide new insight.

SECTION 2: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Methodology

In the early 20th century, a series of incredible breakthroughs were made in the field of physics, the result of which we know today as the field of quantum mechanics. The world of the quantum is a very strange one indeed, where the old rules of Newtonian physics no longer apply, where matter and light can exist simultaneously as particles and waves, and where precise prediction is impossible. While the field has gone on to produce applications like quantum computers with great efficacy, the ontological implications of quantum physics are as yet unclear. In part, this is because the field is relatively new and its fundamentals are still very much debated (Baggott, 2022). However, to quote philosopher and physicist Peter J. Lewis, “we can say quite confidently that quantum mechanics is metaphysically revisionary even if it is not clear what form these revisions should take,” (Lewis, 2016, p.17). What he means is that some aspect of the classical worldview must be revised.

This is relevant to the present study because a number of recent publications in international relations have sought to sketch the contours of what these metaphysical revisions might look like (Der Derian & Wendt, 2020, 2020; Wendt, 2022). In any case, the present study does not make any direct analogies to the quantum world, as for example Wendt (Wendt, 2015) does. It does, however, take up arguments and theories that revise classical assumptions about predictability, rationality, and the ontological nature of the world we inhabit. In particular, as Balzacq (2019) has observed, the theory of language as performative and the theory of securitization that follows, “runs counter to the correspondence theory of truth, which animates rational theories of international politics. The validity of a security utterance does not depend upon their correspondence to an external reality but upon their articulation according to conventionally accepted principles.” (Balzacq, 2019, p.333).

This, in the author’s view, is a step toward, “a theory of action other than utilitarianism,” and an ontology other than materialist individualism (Guzzini, 2022). Because the validity of language is determined intersubjectively, it is toward the embedded, relational meaning of language that

we must look for answers to social questions. This is what the constructivist project, writ large, intends to do. In order to do so, however, some initial ontological assumptions must be made about the nature of the social world. The social world, it would seem, is intangible; a collection of individual entities, that from the classical perspective, should be able to be analyzed individually and then re-amalgamated in a logical fashion. Perhaps. But, as many others have observed (ed. Powell & Dépelteau, 2013) this perspective misses the importance of the relationships between the individual components; you can take all the pieces of a bicycle and spread them out over your living room, but unless they are related to one another in a precise way, you don't really have a bicycle. In this respect, relational social ontologies have the upper edge (Jackson & Nexon, 2019). Perhaps one day, relational social ontologies and relational interpretations of quantum physics will meet (Rovelli, 2022). Until then, this essay makes the assumptions that social relationships are ontologically real, that language is one of the primary sources of empirical evidence about those relationships, and that studying language processes is one of the best epistemological tools available to scholars of the social world.

Finally, the discussion section of this essay also draws on Chinese theories of international politics to answer the second research question. These theories are considered applicable even given the alternative social ontology described above because they too problematize the classical world-view of individualism, rationalism, and predictability and propose instead a relational ontological perspective (Qin, 2018). Furthermore, especially in the context of area studies, they avoid the issue of theoretical travel, i.e. the problems associated with taking a theory from one cultural context and mis-applying it to another. If it is the case, as assumed above, that language derives its validity from social context, then the validity of the discourse studies here should be contextualized within that same context, or at least one that is shown to be compatible.

2.2 Securitization theory

In addition to the methodological assumptions outlined above, the present study also adopts the view that the concept of security is a fundamentally contested concept. This is to say that there is no 'neutral definition' of security, that the term is subject to re-definition, widening, broadening, stretching, contracting, etc., so that it is not a static variable but rather a human construct that is

made and re-made by intentions, uses, and associations. There are many who caution against this understanding of security, arguing that if the concept is allowed to become too malleable it will lose its significance, or perhaps even provoke unwarranted political actions (Bowen, 2014). These concerns are quite valid; there are dangers in extending the meaning of security too far, just as there are dangers in extending the meaning of anything too far.² Threats to security, however, are not static; they change not only materially, as in the creation of new forms of weaponry, but also abstractly, as in the threats of climate change or TikTok. It follows that if the nature of threats changes, the notion of security must also change. It is not useful to maintain a rigid material definition of security when material threats are small in comparison to other threats, when the real existential threats are made to some other aspect of social existence, e.g., identity, values, history, culture, or political system.

Sufficed to say, when the concept of security is recognized as flexible, changes in security studies follow. This is what happened in the 1990s, in confluence with major changes in IR which sought to move beyond the classical theoretical framework in the wake of the Cold War. Major ‘inter-paradigm debates’ ensued, resulting in the fracturing of IR studies along the theoretical lines that we see today (Hamilton, 2017). One of the most influential concepts to emerge from these debates has been that of *securitizing*. Broadly speaking, the concept denotes the social processes of threat construction, i.e., how something is transformed by social processes from being a benign, irrelevant, or every-day issue to one that is hostile, threatening, or in some way dangerous to a referent object, often the state. In its initial formulation by Ole Waever, Barry Buzan, and others at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI), the key element in this process was the *securitizing speech-act* which drew on the linguist John Austin’s theory of illocution (Austin, 1975). Austin’s insight was that language performs different functions depending on how it is used. For example, language can obviously be used to state something

² In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice’s encounter with Humpty Dumpty playfully summarizes the political nature of language in a short dialogue, when Humpty, looking at a calendar observes that, “... there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get *un*-birthday presents... and only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There’s glory for you!” ‘I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said. Humpty smiled contemptuously, ‘Of course you don’t- till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’ ‘But glory doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’ Alice objected. ‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master- that’s all.’” (emphasis original) (Carroll, 2003)

like, “It is raining outside,” but language can also be used to *do* something, for example, “I bet you three crowns it will rain tomorrow,” or “I forbid you to place illegal bets.” Illocutionary acts, or speech-acts, are uses of language that *do* things with words.

In the initial formulation of securitization theory, speech-acts were taken to be the core process by which securitizing takes place. By ‘speaking security,’ an actor can create or reinforce a security threat by portraying it in a certain way, even if the material reality of it is identical to something else. To take a well-known example, the UK and North Korea both possess nuclear weapons, but the US doesn’t consider the UK’s missiles threatening, while North Korea’s certainly are (Wendt, 1995). They may be materially the same, equally powerful, equal in number, etc., but it is the social and political alliances and enmities that create the sense of threat. In other words, politicians, elites, media, and others *designate* the North Korean missiles as threatening and the UK’s as non-threatening. The primary method for us as human beings to designate and to propagate designations of this sort is through language. So, when a person with some amount of influence speaks about North Korea’s nuclear weapons as a security threat, they are in a very real sense, creating or reinforcing this threat, irrespective of the material conditions.

The progress of securitization theory since the 1990s, including its various successes, challenges, and controversies has been well-explained elsewhere, and won’t be covered here (Balzacq, 2019; Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2021). Instead, the remainder of this section will focus on those aspects that are most relevant to the present study. Perhaps the foremost concern in the present context is that this study deals with materials from a non-Western country, while securitization theory originated in and has largely evolved within a Western, particularly the European context.³ How can a theory developed in a particular time and place and for particular purposes be useful in an entirely different context? This issue has been dealt with extensively by Juha Vuori (2008, 2011), who unpacks securitizing speech acts and identifies five ‘strands’ of securitization. He argues that in order for securitization theory to ‘travel’ beyond the boundaries of the context in which it was formulated, more categories of securitizing speech acts must be introduced.

³ While there is some debate as to the extent of the trans-Atlantic divide, it seems that securitization studies has not taken root as firmly in American scholarship as it has in the European context. Scholars in North America have pursued a ‘parallel’ body of work drawing from political communication studies and framing (Watson, 2012).

The reason for this unpacking and recategorizing lies in the original formulation of the theory. According to the original Copenhagen literature, securitizing language can be used by political actors in order to intentionally push an issue *off* of the normal political agenda of regular, day to day politics, and *onto* the security agenda which is characterized by a realm of ‘special politics’ where political actors have different options available than they would normally have (Buzan et al., 1998). Because security threats are by nature, existential threats, extraordinary means are sometimes justified when addressing them. Savvy politicians, the theory goes, are aware of this and may attempt to characterize a given issue as an existential security threat in order to open up avenues for action on their particular policy priorities. With this in mind, it’s not difficult to see why migration in Europe has been a widely discussed topic in securitization studies (Huysmans, 2006).

More to the point, in order for an issue to be pulled off of the ‘normal policy’ agenda, such an agenda needs to exist in the first place. In authoritarian political systems, it is often the case that policy makers are not constrained in the same way as their counterparts in democracies. Without the hinderances of democratic deliberation, they may be more free to act with whatever tools they choose on a particular issue of interest. In such a case, they may never need to securitize an issue at all. While there is some merit to this argument, it not the case that authoritarian political actors operate unilaterally or free of context. While the political system as a whole may not be held directly accountable to its citizens, the actors within that political system are accountable to one another in some form. In Vuori’s words, “Even tyrants need someone to do their bidding...” (Vuori, 2011, p.180).

So, securitizing speech acts may not take precisely the same form in other countries or political systems as they do in Western liberal democracies; political actors there may have other motivations for characterizing something as a security threat, other than to avoid cumbersome democratic processes. But securitizing speech acts are almost certainly still there. According to the original speech-act theorists, Austin and later Searle, illocutionary speech-acts are built into all human languages. While the universality of these kinds of linguistic attributes is still open to debate, there is considerable evidence that in the specific context of Chinese political discourse, the concept of illocutionary speech-acts is a useful tool. Michael Schoenthal’s (1992) collection

of essays poignantly demonstrates the importance of illocutionary language in both classical and contemporary Chinese political philosophy, and in particular what he calls formulations, more commonly known as *tifa* (Qian, 2012). Schoenhals, writing in the 1990s, lamented the relative lack of scholarly attention to ‘the art of doing things with words’ in Chinese politics. Fortunately, more recent efforts in China studies have begun to bring more attention to the role of language in CCP politics (ed. Malin & Drinhausen, 2021; Snape, 2019; Zeng, 2020).

In sum, securitization theorists have reflected upon the applicability of the theory to other contexts and sought to modify it accordingly. This, in and of itself, is a good sign for the marriage of securitization theory and China studies; theories that are able to adapt in the face of new or different empirical contexts are bound to be more resilient, less prone to atrophy, dogmatism, or mal-placement. That area studies experts had identified illocutionary speech-acts as a key component of Chinese political life well before securitization theory had taken root is another sign that thinking in this direction is not only possible but perhaps also quite interesting.

Aside from the issue of theoretical travel, there are a number of concepts and terms used in this study that need clarification. In particular, securitization as it is used in this study is considered a complex process of elevating, down-playing, and identifying language that acts to change the status of an issue. Drawing from a number of recent theoretical and empirical studies in securitization studies, it incorporates de-securitization, macro-securitization, and counter-securitization, all of which have been discussed in the literature previously (Biba, 2014; Jamal, 2020; Thomas & Lo, 2020; Vuori, 2024). In addition to these, the study proposes a new category, which emerged from the dataset and played a particularly important role in Chinese media portrayals of the politics of outer space, namely that of *identifying* securitizations. Identification of securitizing speech acts take the form of pointing out what someone else has said and drawing into focus how this language has been used to elevate the security status of an issue, as discussed further below.

SECTION 3: METHODS

3.1 Source and data selection

The data for this study consisted of an original dataset of 72 articles⁴ collected online from the tabloid newspaper, the *Global Times* (GT). GT is a daily publication on international news and current affairs owned by its parent newspaper, *People's Daily*. Unlike *People's Daily*, GT is only a semi-official publication, which means that it doesn't necessarily represent the official views of the CCP. The publication is considered China's most influential marketized, conservative news outlet on international affairs both domestically and internationally (Huang, 2016). The English-language version of GT was launched in 2009 and, despite maintaining high levels of readership abroad, has been thoroughly criticized as nationalistic, sensationalistic, and as a frontrunner in the 'wolf warrior diplomacy' style of rhetoric (Baculinao & Frayer, 2017; Powers-Riggs & Jaramillo, 2022). These accusations likely stem from its sharp, often vitriolic tone that is frequently and openly directed at foreign countries and their policies. Indeed, one of the frequently occurring codes that emerged in the present study was "accusatory claim," with 109 references. The tabloid is not shy about owning up to this caustic rhetoric either; according to the paper's home page: "The Global Times has always insisted on not avoiding sensitive topics..." and, "From the day it was launched, the Global Times tentatively broke away from the journalistic tradition seen as normal in the Chinese media landscape, which avoids touching upon conflict and confrontation." (Global Times, 2024).

All of this clearly raises the question of source credibility. What kind of reliable information can be gained from a source that has been roundly dismissed by Western media, and that frequently uses inflammatory rhetoric to criticize other countries? It would be easy to dismiss The Global Times as CCP propaganda and provocation, both of which it certainly is, to a degree. But this perspective captures only a one-sided view of the tabloid. Instead, GT is more usefully seen as a unique and complex public diplomacy initiative that gives readers a way to tune in to what conservatives in China are saying. Given that it is one step removed from direct CCP influence,

⁴ The original dataset consisted of 104 articles. Unfortunately only 75 of these were included in the analysis due to an error importing the files to NVivo.

the voices and opinions it contains are likely to be more authentic than news sources that speak directly for the CCP. This does not, of course, mean that it promotes true freedom of expression in the sense we in liberal democracies interpret it. It is still constrained by censorship and still largely follows Party narratives. But, as the paper's former editor in Chief, Hu Xijin, has put it, the tabloid is able to serve as an outlet for the publication of, "what party officials privately think, but don't express in public," (Baculinao & Frayer, 2017).

For researchers interested in understanding Chinese perspectives and experiences, GT is therefore a valuable resource, especially in a country where media rhetoric is usually more carefully constrained and where language barriers present no small obstacle. The combination of these factors- wide readership and influence, open engagement in contemporary conservative thinking, relative freedom to stray from strict Party lines, and English-language accessibility- all contributed to the selection of this source as the most appropriate for this study. After considering other possibilities, such as official government documents or speeches, as well as other newspapers, GT ultimately presented the most accessible and well-rounded source of data.

Using their home website's advanced search function, a database of around 75 articles⁵ was compiled consisting of published articles on China's outer space exploration. A search for articles whose title contained the keyword "space" and which had been published in the last five years (2019-02-09 to 2024-02-09) yielded a total of 746 records. The keyword "space" was considered broad enough to incorporate a representative set of articles, and five years gives a wide enough range to observe potential policy shifts or significant events while still focusing on contemporary material.

From the original 746 articles, around 75 were then selected based on their relevance to this study (some would be reconsidered and excluded during the coding process, resulting in 72 articles analyzed in total). The majority of the articles were excluded because they contained primarily informative or technical content, for example, many articles discussed recent research

⁵ Unfortunately, the original dataset was intended to be 104 articles, but due to a technical error importing the files to NVivo, only 75 were processed. The exclusion of these articles is not expected have altered the validity of the findings, given that the dataset was still quite large. Some interesting articles were unfortunately excluded, however, for instance on China- Pakistan cooperation.

and launch activities in technical and scientific terms and contained very little content on the perceived importance or implications of these activities. Other excluded articles discussed, for example, astronauts' personal experiences, details on particular missions, or financial aspects of the commercial space industry. Still other articles were excluded because they did not deal with outer space but were picked up by the broad search parameters.

Generally speaking, the articles that were selected contained a clearly subjective or politically motivated statement, discussed the signing of international agreements or the space programs of other countries, or promoted a certain claim or viewpoint about space exploration. The purpose of this selection process was to compile a dataset of articles that primarily discussed intentions, expectations, international cooperation, the politics of outer space, opinions on the use of outer space, and other intentional, subjective aspects of China's activities in outer space. It sought to exclude articles that discussed primarily technical and scientific advances or recent activities from the dataset, not because these are uninteresting or irrelevant, but because time constraints demanded a narrower focus.

However, the exclusion of the technical and informative articles necessitates a fair bit of discussion, especially because the excluded articles do, after all, represent the majority of the articles published on outer space by GT. This means that even though the present study chose to focus on those articles that presented a clear interpretive or subjective claim, these articles represent only about 10% of the total. The fact that a majority of the articles discuss technical and scientific advancements should not go unaccounted for, since this also demonstrates a very interesting and important aspect of GT's space-related content, namely, that the newspaper tends to focus on this kind of information. Any analysis of the data, then, needs to take into consideration the observation that, although subjective content is highly present, it is not the norm, and represents only a small proportion of an otherwise highly factual presentation of China's space activities.

3.2 Data processing and coding framework

The first step of data processing was to download the selected articles and import them into the qualitative software analysis program, NVivo. In the case of video content, the audio was first transcribed then saved as a text document and imported. Using a software program like NVivo enables an in-depth and more systematic engagement with qualitative material than coding or analyzing by hand, and some functions of the program were used to automatically detect key words, compare codes, and map the data, to be discussed further in the analysis section. However, as useful as this kind of software is, it can only go so far and is not considered a replacement for close, qualitative reading of the material. The qualitative analysis therefore proceeded in two stages, the first an inductive coding round, and the second a deductive, more theoretically informed coding round. Each is described in detail below.

3.3 Inductive coding round

The first round of coding was a largely inductive process based on an in-depth reading of the articles. Codes were developed according to what was presented in the articles, and were broadly intended to pick up on key themes, emotions, words, phrases, actors, institutions, suggestions, etc. The purpose of this kind of ‘open coding’ was to create a wide collection of codes in order to identify the range of discussion points and get a feel for the way language was being used to make or support those points.

As the reading progressed, some codes began to frequently repeat while others appeared only once or twice. Noticeable language patterns began to emerge. One early observation was that the texts contained at least two very different types of statements made consistently throughout. Consider the following example from a video of the former Editor in Chief of GT, Hu Xijin:

“China and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding on the joint construction of an international lunar research station Tuesday. The plan has garnered support from the Chinese and Russian public. Humankind’s space research is obviously in the early stage, but in the long run most of the resources needed for human development will come from outer space.”⁶

⁶ Article 54

The first sentence is intuitively objective and verifiable; it's either true that they did sign an agreement on Tuesday, or it's false and they didn't sign an agreement on Tuesday. The second sentence legitimizes the first by stating that the public approves of the memorandum, and the third sentence adds further legitimacy by making a conjecture about the future. Both of the latter sentences are rather less verifiable, and much more subjective. Since it is the subjective, interpretive material that is most pertinent to this study, these kinds of sentences were systematically coded as "claims". The primary purpose of doing so was simply to aggregate the relevant material to make it easier to analyze later. A secondary purpose came from the observation that the concept of claims is particularly important in securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998; Vuori, 2008; Waever, 1995). The background readings that were done for the present study did not identify any significant treatment of the concept, but the literature does confirm that it is used quite consistently to refer to both securitizing claims (i.e., securitizing speech acts) and to the proposed 'special rights' to which a successful securitizer may lay claim. Furthermore, a grouping of theoretical articles by Vuori (2008) and Stritzel (2012; 2014; 2015) identify what they call a 'generic structure' of securitizing speech-acts which follow the ideal-type pattern of claim- warning- directive (or, according to Vuori, claim- warning- x, depending on the strand). The important part of this for the present study is that securitizing acts are often *treated* as claims and that within the generic structure that has been proposed, each securitizing speech act *begins* with a claim.

By separating the claims from the factual statements, therefore, it is both easier to parse out the relevant sections, and to identify securitizing language. This is not to say that the factual statements are unimportant- it's obviously interesting and relevant to know what kinds of treaties have been signed and what kinds of new technologies have been developed. But for the purpose of this study, it was useful to separate the two kinds of information into subjective claims and objective statements, so that they can be analyzed separately. This is, of course, not an exact or perfectly replicable method. Some sentences are difficult to categorize, e.g., "China's space launch capabilities are getting stronger," is both objectively verifiable and subjectively self-legitimizing. With the majority of the material, however, it is quite clear which sentences or phrases are claims and which are factual statements.

One important feature of the articles that emerged during the inductive coding process was ‘identification of securitizing’. This code was applied to statements and claims that clearly brought up securitizing speech acts or securitizing moves that someone else had made, for example:

“A recent report by US magazine The National Interest demonized China’s achievements in space by interpreting China’s space exploration missions... as ‘threats to US leadership in space’ and a ‘detriment to US national security.’”⁷

In this example, the language is not clearly securitizing, counter-securitizing or desecuritizing, but rather *identifying* the securitizing language that has been used in a US magazine and is directed at China. The theme of “identification of x” was present for many other codes as well, e.g. “identification of ill-intent” was coded when the article sought to point out a perceived threat or insult.

After the initial round of coding was complete, there were a total of 475 individual codes, and 385 identified claims. Although some attention was paid to theoretical concerns during this initial process, the main purpose of the reading was exploratory, intended to draw out the information that was presented without imposing unnecessary theoretical assumptions. This way of approaching the data enables it to “speak for itself” and can help to avoid shoehorning data into preconceived conceptual boxes, a process that is especially relevant for cross-cultural and constructivist studies. Two theoretically-derived codes in particular – contingent and generic lexicon- were coded during this round. Other theoretical codes like securitizing, desecuritizing, and counter securitizing were also applied but it was noticed that the consistency of these codes suffered due to the overload of inductive codes that needed to be processed. For this reason, a second, more deductive round of coding was also called for, to enable a more theoretically focused reading of the material but also as a quality-check; many of the theoretically relevant statements that were coded as securitizing, de-securitizing, counter-securitizing etc. were tricky to categorize and frequently overlap. A second reading of the material focusing on these statements was therefore necessary.

⁷ Article 28

3.4 Deductive coding round

In this second round, a coding scheme was developed by drawing from the securitization literature, in particular from Baele & Rousseau (2023), Stritzel & Chang (2015), and Vuori (2008; 2024). Vuori’s (2008) article provided the foundations for Stritzel’s (2012) framework, which was then re-worked in Stritzel & Chang (2015) to address resistance in securitization theory, or counter-securitizing speech acts. Baele and Rousseau’s recent publication adds further depth to the study of ‘semantic repertoires’ by distinguishing five lexical and semantic dimensions that contribute to language function, while Vuori’s (2024) book discusses the phenomenon of macrosecuritization in Chinese foreign policy discourse.

The coding round proceeded systematically through the articles, focusing on the codes and concepts in Tables 1, 2, and 3 below. Table 1 outlines the types of securitization speech-acts identified in the dataset, followed by a supporting explanation and example. Tables 2 and 3 follow the same format regarding the components of securitizing speech acts and semantic repertoires, respectively.

Table 1: Types of Securitization (adapted from Vuori, 2008; 2024 and Stritzel & Chang, 2015)

Securitizing	Heightens the perceived threat level.	“Space has ‘fundamentally changed’ in just a few years due to a growing arms race.” ⁸
De-securitizing	Reduces the perceived threat level or presents the topic in a ‘normal’ or ‘neutral’ manner.	“China’s routine space vehicle test a transparent act for peaceful use, not militarization.” ⁹

⁸ Article 12

⁹ Article 69

Counter-securitizing	Identifies a securitizing move by someone else and counters it by “securitizing back”.	“Accusing China of occupying the moon exposes American ambitions to monopolize space.” ¹⁰
Macro-securitizing	Elevates space exploration to the level of global security or decision-making.	“There are urgent security issues that need to be solved through international cooperation.” ¹¹

Table 2: Components of securitizing speech-acts (adapted from Stritzel & Chang, 2015)

Claims*	Presents a statement that something <i>is</i> the case, without it being obvious to the reader that it is so.	“The game between China and the US in space cooperation is changing completely.” ¹²
Warnings	Warns that a threat can become realized if something is (not) done.	“Observers urged the NASA chief to stop playing with a Cold War mentality in the space field, which could only damage both countries’ interests in the long term.” ¹³
Demands	States that something must be done.	“China, Russia must resolutely respond to arrogant US space goal.” ¹⁴

¹⁰ Article 55

¹¹ Article 71

¹² Article 30

¹³ Article 27

¹⁴ Article 34

Suggestions	Suggests that something should be done.	“Competition should be allowed to promote the development of human space exploration.” ¹⁵
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*In contrast to Stritzel & Chang who only discuss securitizing claims, this study identified claims more broadly, as discussed in the section on the first coding round.

Table 3: Semantic repertoires & indicators (adapted from Baele & Rousseau, 2023)

Generic & contingent lexicon	Generic lexicons consist of ‘hard security words,’ e.g. ‘conflict’, ‘security’, ‘threat’. Contingent lexicons consist of words that can have a securitizing effect in a particular context.	“It is feared that more military presence in space will only accelerate the arms race there and undermine peace.” ¹⁶ “China must abandon all illusions and resolutely develop its capabilities.” ¹⁷
Semantic context	Identifies other narratives and contexts within which securitizing repertoires occur.	“US shows ambitions for space hegemony amid grim COVID-19 situation.” ¹⁸
Stylistic devices	Linguistic devices like metaphors, analogies, historical references, or personification which shape	“When the carrier rocket propelled the Shenzhou-12 manned spacecraft into space, it was like a spear that pierced the US’ severe technical blockade.” ¹⁹

¹⁵ Article 53

¹⁶ Article 37

¹⁷ Article 29

¹⁸ Article 65

¹⁹ Article 30

	the meaning and intended perception of a statement.	
Parts of speech	Adverbs, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, and other parts of speech that alter a claim or convey special meaning, e.g., strengthening a statement or invoking the concept of a community.	“Japan, US sign new space cooperation pact, exposes ‘obvious anti-China color’... but also the vicious goals of developing military forces... Japan should avoid becoming a US lackey in space....” ²⁰

²⁰ Article 50

SECTION 4: DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis below proceeds in three stages. The first stage discusses the use of the keyword ‘security’ in the dataset. To organize this stage, usages of the term are loosely grouped into discussions of 1) proposed solutions to space security issues 2) identifications of the greatest threats to space security and 3) the role of China’s space program in promoting security. Keeping in mind the distinction between the term ‘security’ and securitizing speech-acts, the second stage discusses securitizing discourses as presented in Table 1, 2 and 3 in the methods section above. The analysis pays particular attention to the theme of international cooperation, which was found to be a core theme of the dataset. A final section analyzes the way space as an environment is portrayed, and China’s visions of itself in space exploration and governance.

4.1 Security discourses: solutions, threats, and the role of China’s space program

4.1.1 Solutions to space security and governance

Overall, the term ‘security’ was mentioned 76 times throughout the dataset but was present in only 24 of the 72 articles analyzed (about 33 percent). The article with the most mentions (18 in total) was a somewhat outlying article on cyber security, which contains little information on outer space security except to note that unspecified parts of China’s aerospace program have been the target of recent cyber-attacks.²¹ The second highest number of mentions appeared in an interesting article on establishing the norms of responsible behavior with regard to space governance.²² The overall argument of the article is that willingness to support the negotiation of an arms control agreement on outer space is the best metric for gauging whether or not a country should be considered a responsible space power. Quoting Li Song, the Chinese ambassador for disarmament and China’s ambassador to the UN, the article discusses security as the result of superpowers promising not to seek hegemony in space and argues that space security will not result from great power competition or alliance building, but rather from cooperation. The article

²¹ Article 4

²² Article 39

further notes that space security should not be used as an excuse to limit peaceful use of outer space by other countries.

In a similar article drawing from Li Song's statements at the 2021 Outer Space Security Conference, security is discussed as a long-standing common interest of the international community and as a shared responsibility for all countries, especially space powers. International treaties are further discussed here as feasible law-based solutions for space security. Both of these articles draw attention to international legal agreements, especially between major space-faring powers, as the primary means to achieve security in space. The appeal to international agreements and cooperation between space powers is repeated consistently throughout the dataset, but other articles also highlight international collaboration on scientific projects,²³ collaboration with other space agencies,²⁴ promotion of popular culture,²⁵ as well as joint management of issues like debris and traffic²⁶ as effective means of building and maintaining an international space security architecture.

4.1.2 Threats to space security

Aside from recommendations on how best to achieve or support space security, a number of articles also discuss what are perceived to be the most salient threats to the security of outer space. In the articles that contain the word security, the US is consistently referenced as the greatest source of instability and the "biggest threat in space."²⁷ In particular, reference is made to recent US defense policies that identify space as a military or combat domain,²⁸ the US' effort to "fuel militarization and weaponization of space" in order to "pursue hegemony,"²⁹ as well as the "Cold War mentality"³⁰ that justifies the pursuit of unilateral military dominance in space. One article further identifies the recent expansion of US space policy as historically unique, aiming not only to possess air to ground strike capabilities but to establish absolute hegemony in

²³ Article 31

²⁴ Article 20

²⁵ Article 56

²⁶ Article 35

²⁷ Article 28

²⁸ Article 41

²⁹ Article 12

³⁰ Article 27

space by denying access to other countries.³¹ A particularly poignant paragraph from same article states that, “The kind of security Washington is pursuing does not exist. Its pursuit of absolute security only increases instability in the world and creates an unfamiliar security dilemma with greater risks and uncertainties.”

Concerning the argument that China’s programs have destabilized space security, one article acknowledges that China’s development of its space programs has ‘put pressure on the US,’³² but further argues that the intentions are not to provoke competition. “Outer space is not an arena for countries to wrestle,”³³ states one article, and continues with the claims that, “China has no interest in competing with the US in a space race.” Instead of space racing, which is routinely cited as a figment of US imagination, the articles generally emphasize that China intends to pursue space exploration, “at a pace suited to its own development agenda.”³⁴ Aside from US policies, other threats to space security are identified, including space traffic and debris³⁵ as well as incidents involving commercial satellites.³⁶

4.1.3. The role of China’s space programs in domestic and international security

A final group of instances discuss China’s role in promoting space security. It is clear that China sees its space efforts as a part of its own national security agenda, based on statements such as: “Outer space security is becoming a new cornerstone of China’s overall national security,”³⁷ and that technology development in this sector is part of the broader national agenda to, “promote high-quality economic and social development.”³⁸ An article highlighting comments from Xi Jinping further notes that safeguarding monitoring and control capabilities, and enhancing emergency, survival, and information systems are all important aspects of “the spirit of China’s space technology development, featuring patriotism, hard work and courage, to scale new

³¹ Article 29

³² Article 64

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Article 27

³⁵ Article 71

³⁶ Article 70

³⁷ Article 34

³⁸ Article 67

heights in science and technology.”³⁹ On the subject of using space technologies to safeguard national security, one article notes that, “in the future, under pressure from the US, or after the US has militarized its use of space to threaten China's national security, China would be forced to turn its advanced space technologies into military use.”⁴⁰ Aside from the national security angle, however, security is also frequently discussed in universalizing terms that reference the security of humanity as a whole, e.g., “space is a global public sphere and a key factor in humanity’s security and wellbeing.”⁴¹ In particular, the openness of China’s space programs to international cooperation is seen as a key factor in, “the establishment of cooperative platforms and safeguarding of human security.”⁴²

4.2. Securitized discourses

In addition to examining how space security is discussed in Chinese media, one of the primary purposes of this study is to examine how these articles contribute to or contest the securitization of outer space. The following section discusses the main data points on securitization and related topics. It begins with a brief overview of how securitizing codes (identified in Table 1) were distributed throughout the dataset, before turning to a discussion of international cooperation. International cooperation was identified as the core narrative running through the dataset, and the section below dissects the securitizing language surrounding this topic. Finally, a brief note on contingent and generic lexicons concludes the section.

4.2.1 Overview of securitization codes

Among the sub-set of codes related to securitization, de-securitizing claims were identified most frequently, followed by securitizing claims. Instances of identifying securitization and macrosecuritizing claims had similar frequencies, and countersecuritizing claims were coded least often. Because these codes were not considered mutually exclusive, many of them

³⁹ Article 35

⁴⁰ Article 69

⁴¹ Article 12

⁴² Article 71

overlapped as shown in Table 2. It should also be remembered that de-securitizing is the most inclusive category, including language that presents the topic in a neutral manner as well as language that actively reduces a sense of threat, which could partially explain why this code appeared most frequently.

Table 4: Secuitization codes

Code	Number of Articles	Total Number of References
Countersecuritizing	13	37
Desecuritizing	47	139
Identifying securitization	33	88
Macrosecuitizing	33	86
Securitizing	36	114

While overlap between securitizing and desecuritizing may seem contradictory, consider the following example: “Chinese experts urge avoidance of space weaponization amid commercial space capability deployment in Ukraine.”⁴³ This statement is securitizing in the sense that it is intended to heighten the perceived threat level surrounding the war in Ukraine and the potential for placing weapons in space as a means to fight the war. But it is also desecuritizing in the sense that it calls for non-escalation of the conflict. In Wæver’s words, “Even when talking security in order to achieve desecuritization, it is possible that one contributes to securitization by the very fact of producing more security talk,” (Wæver, 2000). These instances were relatively few, but they point to the complex nature of security rhetoric that can simultaneously call attention to a security concern and call for its removal.

⁴³ Article 42

Table 5: Co-occurrence of securitization codes

	Countersecuritizing	Desecuritizing	Identifying securitization	Macrosecuring	Securitizing
Countersecuritizing	37	2	6	0	2
Desecuritizing	2	139	14	20	5
Identifying securitization	6	14	88	2	1
Macrosecuring	0	20	2	86	8
Securitizing	2	5	1	8	114

4.2.2. International cooperation

The terms “international” and “cooperation” were the seventh and eighth most frequent words in the dataset after “space”, “China”, “station”, “Chinese”, “global”, and “times”, appearing 199 and 180 times respectively. A qualitative analysis also corroborates the importance of these key terms as nearly every article emphasizes the importance of international cooperation in one form or another. But how is international cooperation in space portrayed? What forms does it take, who is involved in cooperation, and why is it considered so important?

To a large extent, articles called for the negotiation of multilateral legal agreements preventing the placement of weapons in space⁴⁴ and for the US to “stop obstructing negotiations on legal documentation.”⁴⁵ Both the current lack of an up-to-date agreement and the US’ perceived role in preventing the negotiation of such an agreement were elevated to the macro-security level as presenting significant threats to the international community.⁴⁶ In another article, Li Song, is quoted as stated that, “After the Cold War, especially in the past 20 years, the US has tried repeatedly to shirk its existing treaty obligations on arms control, and has refused to be bound by new legal instruments in domains such as outer space. Exactly because of its national strategy of ‘Space Dominance,’ the US rejected the CD’s [council for disarmament] effort to start treaty negotiations on PAROS.”

⁴⁵ Article 52

⁴⁶ Article 39

Elsewhere it was recognized that, “How to restrain a headstrong US has now become the greatest challenge of the international community.”⁴⁷ In terms of achieving effective international cooperation on outer space issues, the US is clearly identified as a source of obstruction, especially standing in the way of PAROS and the PPWT, and repeated calls are made for the US to cooperate with the international community, e.g., “China hopes that relevant countries will demonstrate the political willingness to correct erroneous political practices and actively participate in the negotiation of legal documents,”⁴⁸ and “Safeguarding outer space security is a shared responsibility for all countries, especially space powers. Negotiating a legally binding instrument for PAROS is long overdue....”⁴⁹

Against the backdrop of the US preventing international cooperation on arms control agreements, China and frequently Russia are portrayed as facilitators of international cooperation, especially through their joint proposal of the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons Treaty (PPWT),⁵⁰ and China’s openness to collaboration on lunar missions and the Tiangong space station.⁵¹ “For many years, China, Russia and other countries have been working hard and trying to reach an international legal instrument to fundamentally prevent the weaponization of outer space or an arms race there.”⁵² China’s collaborative enterprises with other countries are also cited: “Since 2016, China has signed 46 space cooperation agreements or memoranda of understanding with 19 countries and regions and four international organizations. It has actively promoted the global governance of outer space and carried out international cooperation in space science, technology, and applications through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms.”⁵³

⁴⁷ Article 29

⁴⁸ Article 42

⁴⁹ Article 31

⁵⁰ Article 39

⁵¹ Article 71

⁵² Article 61

⁵³ Article 28



Illustration: Xia Qing/GT

Image credit: Article 72

Overall, on the global multilateral stage the lack of an arms agreement, recent US space policy and strategy, and the US' perceived role in blocking the negotiation of a treaty are all treated in macro-securitizing terms. Other issues that were raised to the macrosecurity level but not discussed as extensively included debris and space traffic,⁵⁴ as well as satellite internet.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, China's own space activities are mostly treated in de-securitizing language as routine, developmental, and scientific, and calls for new legislation on arms control are equally portrayed as de-securitizing, emphasizing China's efforts to bring the issue of weaponization back into the realm of routine policymaking.

In addition to global multilateral cooperation, a number of articles also discussed bi-lateral and regional agreements, some of which are treated in securitizing terms, others with optimism, indifference, or impassivity. Concerning China's own bi-lateral agreements, neutral or optimistic

⁵⁴ Article 71

⁵⁵ Article 58

language was generally used, and rarely, if ever with reference to security concerns, with the noticeable exception of China's cooperation with Russia. One sharply worded article on the development of a deep space advanced radar capability (DARC) by the US and its allies claims that the technology represents a "significant escalation" and that "China and Russia must strongly oppose the US' efforts to extend military competition... (and) expose the US' shameless practice to further develop space warfare capabilities."⁵⁶ Other articles discussed China and Russia's space cooperation as "enhancing international influence"⁵⁷ and of "immense significance for humanity's understanding of the moon and for advancements in the field of cosmic science."⁵⁸

However, not all perspectives on international cooperation were so stern. One particularly enthusiastic article on an agreement between China and Namibia to build a satellite tracking station in the Namibian desert states that, "China's space industry belongs not only to China, but also to Africa and mankind at large," and concludes with a somewhat bombastic, "May the common dream of China and Namibia shine in space!"⁵⁹ In a more neutral tone, a memorandum of understanding between China and South Africa marking South Africa's formal participation in the ILRS (international lunar research station) is solemnly noted as, "of great significance to promoting the progress of space science and technology."⁶⁰ In equally monotone language, an agreement between the BRICS countries involving data sharing from a constellation of remote sensing satellites is described as a "mechanism to better help the socioeconomic development of the BRICS countries and meet common challenges such as climate change, disaster relief, and environmental protection."⁶¹

Adopting a more critical tone, Australia's decision to set up a Defense Space Command in 2022 raised questions about the country's intentions. Comments noted that "... it seems that Australia's ambitions to have more military presence in space aim at confrontation rather than 'deterrence' or 'countermeasures.' ... There's nothing wrong that Australia intends to vigorously develop its

⁵⁶ Article 34

⁵⁷ Article 33

⁵⁸ Article 8

⁵⁹ Article 66

⁶⁰ Article 46

⁶¹ Article 16

activities in space, as long as they are not hostile or bellicose toward anyone. It is feared that more military presence in space will only accelerate the arms race there and undermine peace.”⁶² Likening Australia’s cooperation with the US to “lifting a rock only to drop it on its own feet”, another article comments that, “The Australian and US militarization of space targeting other countries could lead to a space arms race, and it could also negatively influence other countries' peaceful use of space.”⁶³

The response to recent Japanese cooperation with the US is likewise largely securitizing, containing elements of both serious concern and mocking ridicule. Concerning a bi-lateral agreement signed between Japan and the US in 2023 one article identifies the “underlying anti-China color of the agreement” as “worryingly obvious,” citing remarks from Antony Blinken that “China is the greatest strategic challenge” to the US and Japan and that “an attack in space would trigger a mutual defense provision in the US-Japan security treaty.”⁶⁴ Elsewhere, on Japan’s participation in the Artemis program, comments scorn Japan’s plan to put astronauts on the moon as “laughable” and “a joke.”⁶⁵ Ultimately, the articles warned that “what lies behind Japan's increasing closeness with the US in the space domain is not only the ambition of becoming a space power with US technology assistance, but also the vicious goals of developing military forces of an offensive nature in space.”⁶⁶ Finally, in contrast to the securitizing rhetoric on Australia and Japan, the Swedish Space Corporation’s decision to not renew China’s contract to a facility in western Australia is portrayed with indifference, “We can still visit and utilize the facility in Western Australia for many years to come, and even losing access to it would hardly affect China's upcoming space exploration and key manned space programs.”⁶⁷

The analysis presented here demonstrates that international cooperation is a highly contested topic within Chinese discourses on outer space. In the realm of global cooperation, discourses tend to elevate recent US policies, its perceived intransigence in negotiations, and the lack of an

⁶² Article 37

⁶³ Article 62

⁶⁴ Article 50

⁶⁵ Article 18

⁶⁶ Article 50

⁶⁷ Article 48

arms control agreement to the level of international security issues that require international cooperation to address. China sees its own efforts as de-securitizing, especially its attempts to introduce legislation on arms control and its emphasis on scientific collaborations and partnerships. At the same time, China's cooperation with Russia is seen as a security partnership resisting what they perceive to be US escalation and obstinance, while recent agreements between China and South Africa, BRICS, Namibia and others are presented as scientific and developmental. Finally, recent agreements between the US and Australia and Japan are seen as concerning and provocative, while Sweden's decision to limit access to space facilities is dismissed as largely irrelevant.

4.2.3. Keyword analysis: generic and contingent lexicons

As discussed in the methods section above, codes were applied to so-called generic and contingent lexicons in order to identify language patterns that are relevant to securitizing rhetoric. While this practice is most useful for quantitative analyses that are beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to note the overlap between the lexicon codes and the securitization codes (in table 6). Keywords identified as generic lexicon (i.e., words that are intuitively about security like war, threat, conflict, etc.) overlap most frequently with phrases that were also coded as securitizing, including macrosecuritizing and identifying securitization. This seems to support the intuition that, when reading about generic security-related topics certain language tends to be associated with raising the perceived threat level; securitization happens when security lexicons are present. On the other hand, de-securitizing phrases overlap with contingent lexicon (i.e., phrases that may be relevant to security in a particular context but aren't commonly associated with it.) This could indicate that de-securitizing rhetoric may be more context specific.

Table 6: Co-occurrence of contingent and generic lexicons

	Contesting Securitization	Counter- securitizing	De- securitizing	Identify Securitization	Macrosecuritizing	Securitizing
Contingent lexicon	4	4	21	9	14	14
Generic lexicon	0	7	3	20	13	34

4.3. Imaginaries of space and visions of itself

In addition to addressing various security concerns and issues of international cooperation, the dataset also describes Chinese visions of what outer space is, what it will be like in the future, and how China envisions itself in the overall scheme of space exploration and governance. The ways in which space as an environment are portrayed are referred to here as ‘imaginaries of space’, meaning the qualities that human beings attribute to outer space and the ways in which it is depicted through language and imagery. As others have pointed out, outer space is a wholly mediated environment, meaning that we as individuals have no direct experience of it; all of our knowledge is mediated through what others tell us and the ways we imagine outer space to be (Kaun & Åker, 2023). This makes social imaginaries of space especially susceptible to manipulation, whether consciously or not. The imaginaries of space that are depicted in media are therefore a vital component in understanding a society’s disposition toward it. How does Chinese media depict outer space? Moreover, how does it depict China’s relationship to outer space?

To begin with, it was noted earlier that sources were selected based on their clear presentation of political views or intentions, but that the majority of GT’s content on outer space was informatively oriented, presenting overviews of launches and scientific space exploration activities. The main conclusion drawn from this observation is that most of the space related

content published by the GT is intended to be informative rather than political. Viewed from the perspective of securitization theory, this can be considered de-securitizing in the sense that it portrays outer space activities in normal, every-day language that doesn't contribute to a heightened sense of concern or threat. The portrayals of outer space in the dataset corroborate the observation that space as an environment is presented mostly in de-securitizing terms, mainly as a realm for common human endeavors, including science and ensuring collective security. However, to the extent that outer space itself is discussed as threatening or unpredictable, the referent object is humanity as a whole which points toward a macro-securitizing discourse.

In an article on the sci-fi prequel movie *The Wandering Earth II*, outer space is depicted as an opportunity for human collaboration in the face of uncertainty and harsh environmental conditions.⁶⁸ Quoting from UN ambassador Li Song, space is imagined as, “an ocean of stars” that “offers unlimited space for the dreams, development and progress that can be made by humankind.”⁶⁹ In the first movie, based on a short story by the influential sci-fi author Liu Cixin, planet Earth is faced with imminent destruction and humanity collectively decides to take the planet with them on a journey into outer space rather than building spaceships as a refuge for humankind. Quoting from Li Song again, one article states that the movie “illustrates that the destiny of humanity is interconnected, and in the face of global challenges, no country can survive alone.”⁷⁰ The imagery of humanity working together to literally move the planet is a unique and powerful vision. It suggests that humanity's problems will not be resolved by fleeing the planet, and that if outer space is to present a threat it will be to humanity as a whole.

China's role in this imagination of space is portrayed as that of a visionary, a source of inspiration, and a bulwark against the selfish actions of other countries who would put their own interests first. Many articles reference China's openness to international cooperation in space, especially on its lunar missions and international space station, contrasting this to the US which has, “restarted its exclusive back-to-the-Moon project, which only involved several Western countries,” while China has, “opened its arms in space exploration and creation.”⁷¹ In the context

⁶⁸ Article 56

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Article 71

of outer space security, then, China envisions itself as enabling international cooperation that will ultimately be the key to maintaining peace and security in space. It stands against security blocs and unilateral actions to ensure the security of a few, and portrays China's endeavors as morally upstanding, far-sighted, and for the common good.⁷²

⁷² Article 39

SECTION 5: DISCUSSION

The following section turns toward a discussion of the major findings of this study in relation to existing literature. The section is organized into sub-sections, each addressing one of the research questions outlined in the introduction. It begins with discussions of securitization, including the role of Chinese media in the securitization of outer space, a comparison between the Chinese discourses studied here and Western discourses that have been identified in previous studies, and how Chinese media envisions outer space. The final section addresses the question of why Chinese media uses these discourses.

5.1 Securitizing space or contesting securitization?

RQ 1: How does Chinese media discourse contribute to or contest the securitization of space?

As discussed above, the securitization of outer space refers to the increasing tendency to discuss outer space activities as “crucial to the military, economic, and environmental security of leading states and international organizations,” (Peoples, 2010). The results of this study demonstrate that Chinese media discourse on outer space tends to use universalizing, normalizing language with reference to outer space as an environment, and securitizing, counter-securitizing, or macrosecuritizing language with reference to the US and to issues of outer space governance. This is an interesting observation for studies of the securitization of space because it indicates that it is not the space environment *per se* that is securitized in Chinese discourse, but rather the actions and intentions of other space powers. In contrast, for example, to the narrative of space as “congested, contested, and competitive,” space itself is portrayed as a global commons and an arena for research and cooperation (Blount, 2024). The portrayal of the space environment as “normal” can be considered a de-securitizing move in the sense that the discourse actively seeks to maintain a sense of normalcy around space, even while recognizing other discourses that present space in securitizing terms.⁷³

⁷³ Article 65

On the topic of recognizing securitizing discourses, one of the most interesting findings of this study is the extent to which Chinese media *identifies* securitizing discourses of foreign media, officials, and policy documents. To a large extent, articles follow a pattern of identifying a securitizing move in Western politics or media, responding with either counter-securitizing, delegitimizing, or dismissing, and concluding by legitimizing China's actions with narratives on multilateral cooperation, scientific development, and the backwardness of Western policies.⁷⁴ For securitization theory, this is interesting because it demonstrates an awareness of securitizing moves and an active effort to contest them by de-securitizing, counter-securitizing, or, most frequently, raising the initial move(r) to the status of a macro-security issue. It suggests, moreover, a reflexive awareness of the power of securitizing discourses.

Although not one of the main debates in securitization theory, this is an important concern in other areas of critical security studies especially ontological security studies; do people *know* when they defending their ontological security or when they are 'speaking security' (Balzacq, 2019; Krickel-Choi, 2021)? The articles analyzed for this study would suggest that there is a considerable degree of awareness in Chinese media discourse that outer space is more frequently being discussed in security terms. Furthermore, counter narratives that (generally) reduce threat perceptions appear to be deliberate, given their consistency, and attempts to pull the issue of outer space security back into the realm of ordinary international politics are explicit. The notion that Chinese politics is highly attentive of the power of words has a long history, and would help explain why these discourses appear to deliberately recognize securitizing language and actively respond to it (Schoenhals, 1992).

So, if space itself isn't being securitized then what is? Based on the data analysis and discussions above, it is clear that US policies and the lack of international regulation are the subject of securitizing discourse in this dataset. In terms of threat construction, these are presented as the most salient and critical issues and continually discussed in terms that heighten the readers sense of insecurity. This is an interesting point for a few reasons, first because it appears to be a part of a complex securitizing-counter-securitizing dynamic at play between China and the US, but also because the topic of the securitizing moves are the actions (or lack of actions) on the part of other

⁷⁴ Article 36

states. Security isn't being broadened to include non-traditional categories, as securitization theory would suggest, but is being applied to relationships between states. This is most clear in the section above on international cooperation, where discourses on China's security relationship with Russia, non-security relationships with other countries, and securitizing discourses on the US and international agreements are discussed. The tendency to pay more attention to the relationships between states than to sectors of society, e.g., economic or environmental, and to attribute security properties to these relationships are consistent with Chinese theories of international relations, which privilege the primacy of relationships (Qin, 2018; Yan, 2019).

5.2 Comparisons to Western discourses

RQ 1 Sub-question 1: How do Chinese discourses on outer space compare to other discourses?

Although this study has focused on the narratives and discourses in Chinese media, other studies of the securitization of space have sought to pinpoint Western discourses. How do the discourses found in this study compare to those that have been identified in the literature on other countries and regions? To begin with, one of the most recognizable narratives in English language media has been that of outer space as “congested, contested, and competitive,” (Blount, 2024). The phrase appears frequently in Western news articles as a typical characterization of contemporary outer space, referring to the rapid increase in satellite traffic and debris, the growing importance of outer space and its relevance to security issues, and the development of the private space industry. The terms “congested, contested and competitive” only appear once within the data set as a quote from the Australian defense minister.⁷⁵ Even separately, “congested” and “contested” do not appear, and “compete” appears a few times sporadically in various contexts. This indicates that this particular narrative hasn't made its way into Chinese discourse on space security, at least not verbatim. The themes of space traffic, contestation, and private competition certainly do appear occasionally, but only contestation can be considered a major theme throughout.

⁷⁵ Article 62

Another narrative that has gained increasing prevalence in Western discourse is that of space as a military or warfighting domain (Congressional Research Service, 2021; Dolman, 2022). While it may be the case that outer space has always been, to some extent, militarized (Bowen, 2023), it hasn't always been spoken of this way in public or official discourse (Cross, 2019). At issue here is not the actual presence of military operations or the use of space for military activities, but rather whether outer space is generally conceived of and spoken of as a military theater. The Chinese media surveyed for this study draws very explicit reference to the incorporation of space as a military domain into US policy, and demonstrates that from the Chinese perspective, this is a serious cause for alarm.⁷⁶ To reiterate, it is not only the actual military usage of outer space that is cause for alarm, but also the public label of space as a combat domain that is worrying.

Finally, the commercial sector is frequently discussed in Western media as the new leading face of outer space exploration and as a potential solution to security problems (Burwell, 2019; Kaun & Åker, 2023; Whitman-Cobb, 2024). China sees the commercial space sector as an important aspect of the country's overall development and has been opening up avenues and encouraging continued growth in the private sector.⁷⁷ The commercial sector also raises security concerns, however, as one article points out in the context of the Russian- Ukrainian war.⁷⁸ There is little discussion of the commercial industry as a pathway to greater security in outer space. The kind of "New Space" imagined in Burwell (Burwell, 2019) and in Kaun & Åker (Kaun & Åker, 2023), characterized by an emphasis on free enterprise and the promises of commercialization, is similarly lacking in Chinese media discourse. Instead, commercial space is depicted as an integral component of China's national development, as symbol of achievement rather than a practical tool for the future governance of space.

5.3 Visions and imaginaries

RQ 1 Sub-questions 2&3: How does Chinese media envision outer space? How does it envision China's relationship to outer space and to the future of space governance?

⁷⁶ Article 41

⁷⁷ Article 58

⁷⁸ Article 51

Outer space has been an object of human fascination for many thousands of years. We have mapped the stars, written novels, made movies, launched probes and landers, even detonated a nuclear bomb in space (Mulvihill, 2024). In contrast to terrestrial squabbles over land and resources, people have imagined space as a shared realm for cooperation, a clean slate for collaborative scientific activity (Cross, 2019). Whether these imaginaries accurately represent the ‘reality’ of space is a matter for debate. We are, after all, human actors bound by terrestrial politics, histories, and societies. Perhaps space is no exception to our baser political instincts to colonize, exploit, and establish exclusionary zones (Graefe & Duvall, 2024). In Western media, the promise of commercialized space flight and the inevitability of privately owned mining rights seem all but determined to be our future relationship with outer space (Kaun & Åker, 2023). As a national security issue, it seems equally inevitable that outer space will be a central concern especially as entire economies, infrastructures, and global power balances depend on space-based assets (Pace, 2024). In short, it’s not hard to imagine the future of outer space as a continuation of terrestrial politics, as just another region for competition over resources and security.

Yet, the imaginaries of outer space that have been published in Chinese media don’t match the imaginary of outer space as a determined realm for competition. Instead, they identify this competitive imaginary as problematic, even as one of the greatest threats to the peace and security of outer space. How can an imaginary, especially one that tries to stay firmly rooted in concrete reality, be seen as problematic? Doesn’t it just describe how things are? From a classical perspective, the ways in which we imagine space are simply stories we tell ourselves, irrelevant to the actual goings-on which are determined by predictable, material conditions. This is realm of traditional security studies, of rationalist approaches to foreign policy analysis, and a classical social ontology. On the other hand, if the imaginaries we construct and the stories we tell are active components in creating the relationship between human beings and outer space, if they are not, as we once thought, irrelevant stories, then some imaginaries can be dangerous. If a story professes to predict a conflict, but in reality, creates it, then it is likely to be considered threatening by those who acknowledge the performative role of discourse. More to the point, if there are in fact many different ways to portray out space and to construct our collective imaginations of it, then the competitive realist vision is only one among many. It is a compelling

vision, one that feels familiar to a Western audience and compliments existing political dispositions. But it is still just one imaginary.

In the world of discourse, as this essay has sought in part to demonstrate, there are other stories, other visions and imaginaries that construct the relationship between humans and outer space differently. Perhaps they do so for nefarious reasons, to deceive or to hide true intentions, to persuade or to win over an audience, or perhaps not. Whatever their authors' intentions, these discursive imaginaries are very real, and they have been shown to play decisive roles in a wide variety of contexts. From the idea of space as a sanctuary (Dickey, 2020), to the written histories of space exploration (Cross, 2019; Siddiqi, 2010; Stroikos, 2018), and even the various rationales for creating the recent US Space Force (Ruff et al., 2022), narratives, imaginaries, and discourses are an important factor that shapes human relationships to outer space.

This is true no less in the context of other countries' outer space policies. China's imaginaries of outer space contained in the dataset analyzed here construct a realm that must be regulated through multilateral institutions, where scientific collaboration should be open, and where threats to national security certainly do exist but cannot be avoided by unilateral or bloc action. Outer space as an environment presents challenges but is not inherently threatening. China considers itself an example of proper conduct that will inspire others to follow suit, and a bulwark against dangerous ideas and policies of countries that seek security only for themselves, especially the US and those who choose to follow its lead. This imaginary contains elements of the early optimism surrounding space exploration that enabled international scientific collaborations like the International Geophysical Year, which birthed the launch of Sputnik (Cross, 2019). But China's imaginary also incorporates an element of moral leadership that was not present in those early visions. This is a component of much of China's foreign policy and is central to the theory of moral realism discussed below. It remains to be seen whether this will prove influential enough to gain the level of influence in decision-making and rule-setting that China seeks, but it is certainly a unique, consistent, and discernable theme in China's space and foreign policies.

5.4 Power in international politics: explaining the logic of China's de-securitizing discourse

RQ 2: Why does Chinese media de-securitize outer space, despite realist predictions that the country is preparing for an inevitable conflict over space dominance?

We have seen from the discussion sections above that Chinese discourse on outer space tends to macro-securitize matters of US policy and strategic thinking. We have also seen that, in comparison to Western discourses which portray the outer space environment as a security issue, Chinese discourses tend to problematize relationships between states. The GT articles studied here further paint an image of space as a zone for international cooperation and scientific endeavors, where China figures prominently as a moral leader, visionary, and protector of international cooperation. We now turn to the question of the logic behind this discursive strategy.

According to neo-realist assessments as discussed in the literature review above, CCP strategy conforms astonishingly well to realist principles. China supposedly assumes that war is inevitable, takes a zero-sum view of world affairs, and pursues advanced space technology in order to maintain a balance of power. The narrative of seeking international cooperation is a façade; China has no real intentions of abiding by a binding international agreement on arms control in outer space, since this would endanger its ability to defend itself against US aggression.

Yet, the empirical record discussed above runs contrary to these assertions in many ways. There is no evidence in the data that China assumes a war is inevitable. Chinese discourse explicitly and frequently denounces the zero-sum view of world affairs and supports a positive sum view in its place. Instead of embracing the concept of a new space race, the idea is curtly rejected. Chinese media does not portray the country as engaged in competition, or bound for conflict, though it does hint at the need for a balance of power. If conflict, competition, and hegemony are China's real intentions why, when able to speak freely in a newspaper known for its inflammatory rhetoric, are these goals ridiculed and dismissed? If China is preparing for an inevitable conflict with the US over outer space dominance, why is space de-securitized? It would be in China's interest to securitize space, to portray outer space as a zone for legitimate conflict so that when conflict arises it can refer to past narratives of space as a military domain to

justify its military actions. Yet this study has demonstrated that outer space is de-securitized in Chinese media, and that US policies that establish space as a military domain are pulled up to the macro-security level.

That power, prestige, and influence are China's motivations for its pursuit of space capabilities is relatively agreed upon in the literature, from various theoretical camps. These motivations are acknowledged in media discourse as well.⁷⁹ Yet, from the discussions above, it seems that conflict, competition, space-racing, and dominance of a vital strategic terrain are not included in the vision of China as a space power that the country promotes. What explains this apparent contradiction?

Turning away from existing perspectives that project Western international relations theories onto Chinese decision-making is a sound place to begin solving this puzzle, because it is within the realist framework that power and conflict are inextricable from one another. If we problematize this relationship, and look at alternative theories of international relations for answers, we find that power can be conceptualized very differently, not only in various Western schools of thought (Guzzini, 2013) but also in Chinese theories of international relations. Two such theories have made their way into Western academic discussions: moral realism, as developed by Yan Xuetong (Yan, 2019), and Qin Yaqing's (Qin, 2018) theory of relational international politics. According to moral realism, power is not primarily derived from material capabilities but from credibility. The drive for credibility, for legitimacy in international politics, is a better explanation for China's support of multilateral arms control agreements than the argument that China is attempting to deceive the international community. This is because the drive for credibility is consistent with multiple existing theoretical explanations as well as the empirical evidence and China's stated intentions, while the explanation of deceit is based only on realist assumptions.

More to the point, Qin's theory of relational international politics provides an insightful explanation for China's apparent quest for power and staunch discursive renunciation of conflict and competition. Relational international politics conceives a type of power which is located in

⁷⁹ Article 33

the relationship between actors, a notion that has corollaries in Western thought as well (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970). Most importantly for the question addressed here is that, according to Qin, power has both a negative side and positive side, it “enables actors to overcome and destroy, but also enables them to empower and produce,” (Qin, 2018, p.18). In this reading of power, conflict is only one alternative; the realization of power in its relational form, on the other hand, enables, “the ability to orchestrate and cope with relations,” yielding a form of influence that is not domineering, not interested in direct force, but rather exercises influence by organizing, by conducting the flow of relations between individuals (Qin, 2018, p.288). It makes more sense that China sees itself as pursuing this type of power than it does to assume China is acting on realist principles. In the case of relational power, we would expect China to emphasize international cooperation, and expect it attempt to exert coordinating influence over this cooperation. We would expect to see de-securitization of potential conflict areas such as outer space, because conflict in these regions would be counter-productive to the perceived goals of facilitating a positive flow of relationships. Finally, we would expect to see China pointing out perceived agitators within the international system, all of which are consistent with the findings of this study.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to explain how Chinese English-language media discusses the politics and security of outer space. It has sought to address the two main research questions and three sub-questions presented in the introduction. In doing so, it has made a number of interesting observations, provided possible explanations, and explored some previously uncharted areas. The main findings and contributions are therefore outlined below.

As a whole, this study represents the first approach to China's space policy from the perspective of securitization theory. Other studies have approached China's space policy from related theoretical perspectives (Blanc et al., 2022) and securitization theory has been used as lens for other aspects of contemporary Chinese policy (Biba, 2023) but no studies discussing the securitization of outer space could be identified. It is also relevant to securitization theory in three ways. First, for its attempt to synchronize existing methods into a workable framework for identifying relevant information. Second, for its identification of a new tools for analyzing securitization processes, described here as 'identifying securitization' and the observation that de-securitizing language tends to overlap with contingent lexicons. Third, study contributes an integrated empirical analysis with transparent source selection and data analysis in a field characterized by an over-emphasis on theoretical development (Baele & Jalea, 2023; Balzacq, 2019).

Finally, the results of this study are relevant to ongoing work in China studies, security studies, and space policy studies. In the context of China studies, it has sought to draw attention to the role of discourse in Chinese foreign policy and argued that language, imaginaries, and visions of the self are important tools for analyzing China's actions on the world stage. Drawing from critical security studies it has demonstrated that Chinese space policy is de-securitizing towards outer space as an environment, and macro-securitizing toward US policies and alliances. It has further argued that China envisions itself as a leader in the future of outer space technology and exploration, but its character of leadership and understanding of power in the international system are not readily explainable with reference to Western IR theories alone. The study has

therefore sought to draw attention to alternative methodologies, and ways of understanding the international landscape.

Despite these contributions, this study also has its shortcomings. In particular, the data used here is limited to English-language sources, while Chinese language sources would provide a more complete picture of the Chinese policy landscape. It has also drawn heavily from discourse and media, while neglecting much of the material development of China's space programs. Future research should correct this over emphasis, paying more attention to technological advances, financial trends, and organizational developments in China's space industry. Additionally, while this study has focused on adopting alternative perspectives in order to open up new ways of thinking through old problems, the issue of military capabilities and dual use technologies cannot and should not be avoided in the study of China's space politics. Other studies have, fortunately, covered these aspects well and should serve as supplements to the relative lack of attention to these matters given here.

In conclusion, the future of outer space governance appears to be at a critical turning point. With great powers openly competing for influence, many now fear that outer space will become an outright military domain. What can be done? The perspective adopted here has suggested that understanding another's intentions requires understanding their perspectives. Part of the answer may lie in being capable of thinking contrary to one's own held beliefs and opinions and going out of the way to do so. On that note, I'll let Douglas Adams, one my favorite visionaries of outer space, have the last words; "For instance, on the planet Earth, man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much—the wheel, New York, wars and so on—whilst all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins had always believed that they were far more intelligent than man—for precisely the same reasons," (Adams, 1995).

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