



Research Article

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Narrating DeepSeek to the Self and the Other: Discursive Constructions of Technological Power in Chinese Official Media

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Abstract: This article examines the Self-to-Self and Self-to-Other discursive construction of China’s technological advancement through media coverage of DeepSeek, a Chinese AI start-up that gained international visibility after releasing new models in early 2025. Using this event as a case study, the contribution investigates how the company’s rise is narrated to domestic and international audiences through a contrastive analysis of Renmin Wang, the Chinese online edition of the Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), and its Italian-language counterpart, Quotidiano del Popolo. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study adopts a qualitative, corpus-assisted approach to examine how DeepSeek is framed as a symbol of national achievement through the political concept of “strong country,” which casts innovation as a national, state-guided effort. While RMW situates the story within a collective discourse that downplays individual agency in favour of Party-led progress, QDP adopts a more assertive tone, portraying China as a “technological powerhouse.” The comparison reveals discursive asymmetries – international-oriented texts place greater emphasis on China’s global competitiveness – and discursive ambiguity – both corpora convey ambivalence, depicting China as a rising power, a cooperative actor of the Global South, and a formerly marginalised nation seeking postcolonial recognition. This fluid positioning reflects China’s attempt to reshape its global image while maintaining solidarity with (and support by) developing countries.

Keywords: Chinese official media; critical discourse analysis; Global South; technological power; Deepseek

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1 Introduction

At the end of January 2025, DeepSeek (深度求索), a Chinese start-up founded by young tech expert and venture capital entrepreneur Liang Wenfeng (梁文锋), released its then latest generative AI models, referred to as versions V3 and R1. Across the Pacific, the share price of U.S. microchip manufacturer NVIDIA experienced a sharp decline on 27 January 2025. The downturn was attributed to statements made by DeepSeek's founder, who revealed that their model had been trained at a fraction of the cost required for ChatGPT, while achieving comparable performance with significantly fewer chips and lower energy consumption. Given that NVIDIA's core business revolves around the sale of chips used to train large AI models, investors may have feared that the emergence of DeepSeek's more efficient systems could negatively affect demand for NVIDIA's products.

Prominent tech commentators went so far as to describe the event as a “Sputnik moment” for the United States, evoking Silicon Valley's abrupt realisation that Chinese tech firms had attained – if not surpassed – U.S. levels of innovation capacity.¹ In China, too, the release of DeepSeek's models was widely perceived as a turning point, signaling the country's growing competitiveness in the global technology and innovation landscape.

In light of its significance in the current global context as well as in the country's image construction, this contribution takes this topical event as a case study to explore the ways in which China is narrated both within its borders and internationally. In particular, it examines the discursive strategies employed by Chinese official media to shape or steer these narratives. The analysis draws on postcolonial theory² and its application to Chinese studies,³ with a view to comparing internal (Self-to-Self) and external (Self-to-Other) representations in the wider context of China's soft power theorisations. The Chinese academic debate has re-contextualised and re-interpreted Nye's widely adopted concept of soft power⁴ into two distinct forms: “internal” soft power (*nei bu ruan shili* 内部软实力) and “external” soft power (*wai bu ruan shili* 外部软实力). Both are integral to a political project that is simultaneously cultural – rooted in Confucian values – and communicative, with the principal aim of fostering alignment and consensus towards China and its ruling party within the country as well as abroad.⁵

1 Hetzner 2025.

2 Said 1978; Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2000; Spivak 2008; Albrecht 2021.

3 Duara 2010; Franceschini/Loubere 2022; Wang 2022.

4 Nye 1990; Nye 2004.

5 Zhou/Yan 2005; Liu/Wang 2007; Zhao/Xiao 2010; Guo 2012; Cao 2014; Riva 2023.

The growing scope and reach of Chinese news media beyond China's borders in recent years falls into China's external soft power strategy and responds to the Communist Party of China's (CPC) declared ambition to "counter Western narratives" and to attain a level of "discursive power" (*huayu quan* 话语权) in the world that matches China's economic power.⁶ In pursuit of this goal, the CPC has actively supported the development of foreign-language editions of Party-affiliated media, thereby seeking to speak directly to international audiences and influence global perceptions of China.⁷

Based on the idea that soft power relies also on the type of discursive practices that a nation deploys in the discursive constructions of Self and Other,⁸ this study investigates whether, and to what extent, Chinese official media employ differentiated discursive strategies when addressing domestic as opposed to international audiences. Specifically, it examines the discursive construction of the DeepSeek case in two editions of the *Renmin Ribao* (人民日报, henceforth the RMRB): the online Chinese-language edition *Renmin Wang* (人民网, henceforth the RMW), and the online Italian-language edition *Quotidiano del Popolo* (henceforth the QDP), which is, to date, the only Chinese written news outlet published in Italian. In the context of China's increased effort to expand both its discursive and economic influence within the Euro-Mediterranean space,⁹ an analysis of a non-English outlet such as the recently (2021) established QDP can provide information about the Chinese ability to localise official discursive strategies. At a more general level, uncovering the discursive strategies employed by CPC-affiliated media on the global stage can raise awareness of the potential influence of these messages as they are introduced into local public discourse.

The analysis is guided by three research questions. RQ1 is concerned with how the DeepSeek case has been presented in the RMW and the QDP coverage. RQ2 interrogates the function of the DeepSeek narrative in framing China's global positioning vis-à-vis the Global North–Global South dynamics, particularly in light of China's ambivalent presentation of itself as a "powerhouse" (*qiang guo* 强国, lit. "strong country") in this dichotomous representation. RQ3 examines the extent to which the domestically-oriented narrative (as found in RMW) overlaps with or diverges from the internationally-oriented narrative (as expressed in the QDP).

Considering discourse as social practice, this study is situated in the interdisciplinary field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly drawing on

6 Creemers 2012.

7 Thussu/de Burgh/Shi 2018.

8 Pan et al. 2020; Lams 2017.

9 Tran/Zoubir 2023.

Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach,¹⁰ and is conceptually informed by Raymond Williams' theorisation of "keywords".¹¹

The methodological approach is primarily qualitative, supported by corpus-assisted techniques. Key analytical tools employed include intertextuality, "charm offensive" strategies,¹² processes of othering,¹³ and understatement. Together, these lenses allow for an interpretation of how discursive tactics are adapted across platforms and audiences to serve China's narrative strategy.

In addition to the objectives outlined above, this study advocates for a critical discussion of China's international standing amid the ongoing shifts in global power. A significant number of scholarly works have addressed China's ambiguous positioning towards Global South countries, aiming to assess the relationship either as a South–South partnership or as one of dependency in neo-colonial terms.¹⁴ In particular, China's "dual character" as "part of the Global South, yet more highly developed and formally within the 'semi-periphery'"¹⁵ has been criticised with reference to partnerships in which the larger power (China) sets the terms, contributing to the peripheralisation of the partners' economies.¹⁶ In relation to Latin American experiences, this phenomenon has been labelled as "para-coloniality", leading to discussing China as part of the Global North.¹⁷

Alongside this ongoing debate, which focuses on the *economic* relationships between China and Global South countries, this study raises the question of whether, especially in light of its significant achievements in the field of AI technology, China's *discursive* (self-)representation as a spokesperson for the Global South warrants re-evaluation. Arguably, while China's economic relationships with the Global South cannot be reduced to a single model due to China pursuing varying relations on a country-by-country basis, its broader discursive positioning is not country-specific, lending itself to wider analytical interpretations.

The article is organised into six sections. Section two outlines the contextual background of the study, providing some preliminary definitions. Section three details the criteria adopted for corpus construction. The fourth and fifth sections present the analyses of the RMW and QDP corpora, respectively. The final section elaborates on the findings and reflects on the wider significance of the research, suggesting directions for future enquiry.

¹⁰ Fairclough 1992; Fairclough 1995; Fairclough 2003.

¹¹ Williams 1976.

¹² Pan et al. 2020.

¹³ Lams 2017.

¹⁴ Morvaridi/Hughes 2018; Giraudo 2020; Rodriguez/Bazan Seminario 2023.

¹⁵ Da Gama/Bui 2024.

¹⁶ Katz 2021.

¹⁷ Rodriguez/Bazan Seminario 2023: 5.

2 Background

2.1 Preliminary Definitions

In order to avoid confusion, some preliminary definitions are needed to disambiguate terms that, in this contribution, are employed in different contexts and with different meanings.

The one-word term “keyword” is used in this study as per Raymond Williams’ definition¹⁸ to point at terms that have emerged as particularly significant in political discourse due to them being “currently used”, “polysemous”, “categorical”, “actively contested”, and “part of a cluster”.¹⁹ Therefore, when employed as such, in this contribution “keyword” refers to words or terms that are ideologically charged and characterised by a multi-layered meaning.

Often such keywords appear as fixed components of *tifa* (提法). A *tifa* can be defined as a “multi-word unit”²⁰ or “lexical bundle”²¹ that is a fundamental ingredient of the official language spoken by the Chinese political authority and is characterised by fixed order, political keyness, and goal orientation.²²

Some examples might help clarify the relationship between *tifa* and keywords. Arguably the most emblematic *tifa* of the Xi Jinping era, “realising the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*shixian Zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing de Zhongguo meng* 实现中华民族伟大复兴的复兴的中国梦) is built around the term “Chinese dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦), which has emerged as a proper keyword in political discourse in recent years. The expression reflects a desire to restore China’s perceived rightful place in the global arena after the so-called “century of humiliation” (*bai nian guo chi* 百年国耻) that unfolded since the Opium Wars. This narrative considers the European powers responsible for China’s decline in the 19th-century.²³

Another fixed expression that has become a trademark of Xi Jinping’s era is “building a [insert word] powerhouse” (*jianshe [shenme shenme] qianguo* 建设[什么什么]强国). The core of the phrase is the keyword “strong country/powerhouse”.²⁴ Unlike other *tifa*, this fixed expression contains one term (the modifier in

18 Williams 1976.

19 Durant 2008: 135–137; for an application to the Chinese context, see Mottura 2021: 9–10.

20 Mitkov et al. 2018.

21 Li/Halverson 2022.

22 Schoenals 1992; Ji 2004; Qian 2012; Link 2013; Wang 2025.

23 Schell/Delury 2013.

24 It is noteworthy that this translation is contested by some Chinese scholars, who interpret the character “qiang” as a verb and, irrespective of the recurring verb “jianshe” that typically precede it, translate the remaining expression as “[insert word] strengthens the country” (private remote conversation with a Chinese colleague, October 2023).

square brackets) that is interchangeable and that indicates the domain to which the statement is related to. The official discourse has produced many variations of this expression. “To build a culture powerhouse” (*jianshe wenhua qiangguo* 建设文化强国); “to build an education powerhouse” (*jianshe jiaoyu qiangguo* 建设教育强国); “to build a sports powerhouse” (*jianshe tiyu qiangguo* 建设体育强国); “to build a scientific and technological powerhouse” (*jianshe keji qiangguo* 建设科技强国); and “to build a space powerhouse” (*jianshe hangtian qiangguo* 建设航天强国) are some widespread cases.²⁵

Conversely, the two-word term “key word” or, preferably, “key term”, is used in this work in the sense laid out by Scott in the context of corpus linguistic discourse studies: “A key word may be defined as a word which occurs with unusual frequency in a given text. This does not mean high frequency but unusual frequency, by comparison with a reference corpus of some kind”.²⁶ In this context, “keyness” is the means to statistically identify lexical items (like words, phrases, and word clusters) that are typical of a particular group text or a specific domain of language use. Keyness is the result of comparison between a “focus corpus” (in this case, the RMW and the QDP corpora) to a “reference corpus” (in this case, SketchEngine’s Chinese Web 2017 - zhTenTen17- Simplified). The goal of keyness analysis is to highlight key words or key terms that are significantly more or less frequent in the focus corpus than in the reference corpus.²⁷ In this study, it is used to guide and support the phase of manual and qualitative analysis.

2.2 “Qiang Guo” in Chinese Official Discourse on AI

This article focuses in particular on the discursive construction of a “technological powerhouse” and on the patriotic undertones underpinning China’s narrative about technological achievements in the country.

The term “qiang guo” has obtained growing relevance in China’s internal political discourse, following decades of understatement and denial regarding the country’s actual strength in the international context.²⁸ As mentioned above, the discourse on technological innovation and AI in particular can be considered a topical subject in the Chinese representation of the Self in the present era. Analyses of official documents regarding the development of AI in the PRC have shown how China’s institutions frame technological innovation and AI not only as drivers of

²⁵ Lupano 2025a: 72–73.

²⁶ Scott 1997: 236.

²⁷ Gabrielatos 2018.

²⁸ Pan 2013; Cao 2014.

economic growth, but also as strategic tools for asserting China's role on the global stage.²⁹

At the same time, the official discourse stresses the concept of cooperation in relation to AI. This notion is invoked on two levels. Domestically, it refers to the collaboration among key actors in China's technological development – namely enterprises and research institutions. Internationally, it highlights China's self-representation as a committed advocate of global cooperation for the development of sustainable AI, as well as for ensuring widespread and equitable distribution of the benefits generated by its use. Within this narrative, the United States is implicitly portrayed as reluctant to engage in genuine collaboration and, by extension, as partly responsible for the unequal distribution of the dividends that AI development may bring.³⁰ In contrast, China depicts itself as the representative and the vanguard of the Global South, while at the same time building the image of a top competitor in the otherwise Western- (and Global North-) dominated AI race. As the following analysis will show, manifestations of this contradictory narrative can be found also in the official media discourse on DeepSeek.

3 Corpora Construction

This study draws on two corpora containing articles published by the RMW and the QDP on the release of DeepSeek's V3 and R1 models.

The collections were manually built by searching articles of all genres via the search bar of each outlet's website. In both cases, the search keyword was "DeepSeek", since preliminary extensive reading of print and online newspaper articles showed that the name of both the company and the AI model is regularly mentioned by at least its English name. Most of the times, the Chinese name follows in bracket, although in several instances only the English name appears.

Originally, the *Factiva* database was used to collect the Chinese-language corpus. However, once the comparison between the Chinese and Italian editions became a primary objective of this study, both corpora were compiled with reference to their online environments only, as the QDP is not available in print.

The earlier RMW opinion piece that contained the name of DeepSeek dates 6 February 2025. A total of 27 commentary articles were found through the search on the RMW portal in the two months under scrutiny, amounting to roughly 65,000 Chinese characters. The QDP was faster to publish its first relevant article on 31

²⁹ Lupano 2025b.

³⁰ Lupano 2025b.

January 2025. The search within the period under scrutiny delivered 15 articles, for a total of roughly 5,200 Italian words, or 36,000 characters.³¹

It is worth noting that, while some authors in the past have documented the relation between internal and external narratives based on Chinese official outlets and their English-language (and French-language) editions,³² no previous study has, to date, compared the Chinese and the Italian editions of RMRB with the same aim. Therefore, this article can be seen as a contribution to opening an original line of inquiry that pioneers investigation on both a “minor” language, such as Italian, and on a region, the Euro-Mediterranean area, that arguably deserves more attention regarding China’s influence abroad.

4 Self-to-Self Narrative: DeepSeek in the RMW

Computer-assisted analysis of RMW commentaries based on keyness scores led to the identification of three dominant clusters of meaning represented by relevant key terms. The following sub-sections analyse each cluster.

4.1 Representation of High-Tech Companies

Keyness analysis in the RMW corpus foregrounds the term “Chinese-style modernisation” (*Zhongguo shi xiandaihua* 中国式现代化), closely followed by “non-state economy” (*minying jingji* 民营经济) and related terms or synonyms, such as “non-public economy” (*fei gongyou zhi jingji* 非公有制经济) and “non-state entrepreneurs” (*minying qiyejia* 民营企业企业家). The link between the two groups lies in private companies being given the mission to support the country’s modernisation, following the “style” laid out by the Party.

The discursive prime position of non-public economy and actors in the corpus is particularly noticeable due to timing. After more than four years of heightened governmental scrutiny on private tech companies, with tighter enforcement of data security and competition rules, observers from China and abroad have paid great attention to a rare meeting held on 17 February 2025 at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing between the country’s leader and the representatives of some of China’s most prominent tech giants.³³

31 In contemporary Standard Chinese more than 70 % of words are disyllabic (Abbiati 2017). Therefore, it can be argued that the total word count would amount to at least 30,000 words, making the RMW corpus significantly larger than the QDP corpus.

32 Among others, see Mottura 2017.

33 Reuters 2025.

Among the invitees, the presence of Jack Ma (Ma Yun 马云), founder of Alibaba, alongside Liang Wenfeng, was considered most significant. Ma, a symbol of China's tech industry boom, had disappeared from the public scene after the IPO of Ant Group, Alibaba's financial arm, was halted by the national authority on 11 November 2020. Suspiciously, the measure came immediately after a public statement in which Ma had criticised the country's banking system.³⁴

Ma's return to the scene in an official gathering and his handshake with Xi Jinping on the occasion, reported worldwide, were considered the sign of the businessman's (and the whole tech giant sector's) rehabilitation. With President Xi encouraging Chinese tech companies to "fully display their talent", a new deal seemed to have been struck: cooptation of the private sector in exchange for more public support.

The RMW corpus includes commentaries that elaborate on the February 2025 meeting, echoing Xi Jinping's words and conceptualisations.

推进中国式现代化, 民营经济是生力军; 实现高质量发展, 民营经济是重要基础。

The non-state economy is a vital force for the promotion of Chinese-style modernisation; it also provides an essential foundation to achieve high-quality development. (RWM 13/03)

实践充分证明, 非公有制经济在稳定增长、促进创新、增加就业、改善民生上发挥了重要作用。在中国式现代化壮阔征程上, 民营经济大有可为, 也必将大有作为!

Practice has fully proved that the non-public economy has played an important role in stabilising growth, promoting innovation, increasing employment, and improving people's livelihood. In the grand journey of China's modernisation, the private economy has great potential and will surely make great achievements! (RMW 15/03)

发展新质生产力的关键在科技创新, 民营经济是推动科技创新、培育新质生产力的生力军。

The key to developing new quality productivity lies in scientific and technological innovation, and the private economy is the main force to promote scientific and technological innovation and cultivate new quality productivity. (RMW 14/03)

In line with the official discourse, the commentary articles urge private companies to actively contribute to the superior goal of national prosperity, supporting their cooptation into the CPC's national project. These companies are portrayed as central drivers of innovation and are asked to focus their efforts on areas such as basic research and the advancement of a self-reliant, autonomous industrial system. At the same time, they are also called upon to act ethically and, crucially, to share their wealth with society at large.

The moralistic appeal to cultivating “spiritual wealth” (*jingshen caifu* 精神财富) over material gain warns the country’s entrepreneurs that the State’s support is only subject to their respect for the Party’s requirements.

达则兼济天下。[...] 从“让一部分人先富起来”到“共同富裕”的历史跨越中，企业家将自身的奋斗目标融入国家发展蓝图，“先富”成为共同富裕的起点。[...] 企业是创造财富的。物质财富可能有起有落，精神财富却能长盛不衰。爱拼会赢，就是永不贬值的精神财富。

If you are rich, you should help the world. [...] In the historical leap from “letting some people get rich first” to “common prosperity”, entrepreneurs have integrated their own goals into the national development blueprint, and “getting rich first” has become the starting point for common prosperity. [...] Enterprises create wealth. Material wealth may rise and fall, but spiritual wealth can flourish forever. Hard work and winning is the spiritual wealth that never depreciates. (RMW 26/02)

Regardless of their key role, in the RMW discourse private companies are predominantly treated as no more than cogs in the wheel of national development. In this view, it does not surprise that neither DeepSeek nor its founder are given special attention, in line with the humbling style requested of Chinese entrepreneurs. Only one commentary article, earlier in the corpus (6 February), briefly dwells on technical innovation on which DeepSeek’s breakthrough is based, on the company’s talented employees, and on the world’s emotional response to the event (by means of WEATHER metaphor: “storm of surprise” *jingtian fengbao* 惊叹风暴). It is also the only article in the RMW corpus that uses quotations from national and international elites to support triumphal tones.

Another recurrent term that can be traced back to this area of meaning is also “little dragons” (*xiaolong* 小龙) or “six little dragons of Hangzhou” (*Hangzhou liu xiaolong* 杭州六小龙), which emerged in online discourse as a reference to six high tech companies that, in early 2025, made the national or international headlines due to innovation breakthroughs: Yushu Technology (*Yushu keji* 宇树科技), Game Science (*Jiashang youxi kexue* 加上游戏科学), Qiangnao Technology (*Qiangnao keji* 强脑科技), Qunhe Technology (*Qunhe keji* 群核科技), Yunshenchu Technology (*Yunshenchu keji* 云深处科技), and DeepSeek itself.

“杭州六小龙”代表的，正是中国新一批由年轻人主导、充满创新活力的民营企业。他们中的许多人是在地铁上调试模型，在早餐摊前画架构图，用代码当砖瓦，拿算法做钢筋，垒出通向未来的桥梁。

The “Hangzhou six little dragons” represent a new batch of private enterprises in China that are led by young people who are full of innovative vitality. Many of them debug models on the subway, draw diagrams in front of breakfast stalls, use codes as bricks and tiles, and use algorithms as steel bars to build a bridge to the future. (RMW 19/02)

In the avoidance of celebration of the company as an individual entity, the vast majority of the articles refrain from discussing DeepSeek's success as the result of the initiative and attitude of one entrepreneur, presenting them instead as part of a collective trend. Even when hinting at the peculiar working style and passion that is behind DeepSeek's success, its model is presented, at the very least, among the "six little dragons", or expanded as the result of "national" skills and positive attitude.

这个现象首先说明, 中国企业、中国人民有能力在最尖端的科技领域“为天下先”。[...] 面对各种“专利壁垒”“技术卡脖子”困境, “六小龙”的出现再次证明, 中国有足够的能力和自信冲破高墙、打碎藩篱, 独立自主取得一项又一项突破。这个现象也让世人看到, 中国广袤的土地和市场, 蕴含着无穷的活力与潜力。

This phenomenon first shows that Chinese companies and the Chinese people have the ability to "lead the world" in the most cutting-edge scientific and technological fields. [...] Faced with various "patent barriers" and "technical bottlenecks", the emergence of the "six little dragons" once again proves that China has enough ability and confidence to break through high walls and barriers, and independently achieve breakthroughs one after another. This phenomenon also shows the world that China's vast land and market contain infinite vitality and potential. (RMW 18/02)

Contrary to the way foreign media portrayed the story of DeepSeek – with journalists foregrounding personal information about its founder³⁵ – the RMW's narrative refrains from focusing on the personality or on the single success story, subsuming the individual into the collective by treating them as just one example of a general phenomenon. This narrative allows for minimising the contribution of the single person, serving the goal to depict the Chinese people as the actual protagonist in a success story that, ultimately, is made possible by the system that empowers them. As such, one tech company's achievement is discursively collectivised to become, in essence, the achievement of a whole country and the demonstration of its sound moral values and efficient functioning. From this perspective, the individual does not matter; what matters is collective success (based on collective effort), which is the foundation of a strong country. And who guides such collective effort?

新时代的中国共产党, 掌握了创新中国的“密钥”。

The Communist Party of China in the New Era has mastered the "key" to innovative China. (RMW 18/03)

35 Baptista 2025.

4.2 Representation of China as a “Strong Country”

Another cluster of meaning that can be identified through keyness score is related to the aim of “building a strong country/building a powerhouse” (*qiang guo jianshe* 强国建设), a goal that can be reached once “Chinese-style modernisation” is achieved.

当前和今后一个时期是以中国式现代化全面推进强国建设、民族复兴伟业的关键时期，民营企业发展站在了新的历史起点上。

The present and forthcoming period are crucial in advancing national rejuvenation and building a strong country through Chinese-style modernisation, with the development of private enterprises now standing at a new historical starting point. (RMW 28/03)

Concordance analysis shows that “strong country” is often correlated to “national rejuvenation” (*minzu fuxing* 民族复兴), a component of the *tifa* “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. In the corpus, this *tifa* refers to a condition that the country has yet to reach, placing the ambition in the future, confirmed by the use of the verb “to promote” (*tuijin* 推进) that typically introduces this *tifa*, or of the term “process” (*guocheng* 过程), which follows the expression becoming the modified noun.

In the corpus, similar to what can be seen in other manifestations of official discourse, “strong country/powerhouse” appears in combination with a series of modifiers that describe the areas in which China aims to become a global leader:

- science and technology powerhouse (*keji qiang guo* 建设科技强国)
- socialist modernisation powerhouse (*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua qiang guo* 建设社会主义现代化强国)
- culture powerhouse (*wenhua qiang guo* 建设文化强国)
- education powerhouse (*jiaoyu qiang guo* 建设教育强国)
- communication powerhouse (*jiaotong qiang guo* 建设交通强国)

When discussing the present state of China, the RMW commentaries use the term “major country” (*da guo* 大国). This expressive choice can be seen as supporting the country’s attempt to downplay its growing global standing and ambitions, and to present China’s bright future as a goal yet to achieve, therefore justifying the CPC’s continuing rule.

中国是科技大国，已成为全球科技创新的重要一极，正在推进高水平科技自立自强，向科技强国迈进。

China is a major science and technology power and has become an important pole of global scientific and technological innovation. It is promoting high-level scientific and technological self-reliance and self-improvement, and is moving towards becoming a strong country in scientific and technological power. (RMW 26/02)

The term “major country”, however, also reveals China’s feeling of superiority when it is modified by the adjective “empowering” (*funengxing* 赋能型) to define the country’s supportive role towards the Global South, which is presented as lagging far behind in technological innovation. This phenomenon is discussed in the following sub-section.

4.3 Representation of China as a Cooperative Actor

The discourse on DeepSeek that emerges from the RMW corpus is instrumental to positively presenting China as a cooperative, generous and inclusive player in the field of technological innovation, one that supports the development of every country in a non-competitive fashion, having mutual benefit and joint development as a main goal. This meaning is built through repetitive use of terms like “open cooperation” (*kaifang hezuo* 开放合作), “win-win open strategy” (*gongying de kaifang zhanlüe* 共赢的开放战略), and “technological equality” (*jishu pingquan* 技术平权); as well as by insisting on the dialogical relationship between “China” and “humanity” (*renlei* 人类), where the latter is presented as beneficial to the former by means of verbs that incorporate positive actions such as “promote” (*cujin* 促进), “enhance” (*zengjin* 增进), and “advance” (*tuidong* 推动).

As mentioned above, the RMW commentaries do not dwell on the technical characteristics that made DeepSeek stand out globally. Arguably, the main aspect stressed by the articles is that the new DeepSeek models are open-source. This business choice, in a discursive context where a company’s attitude is presented as the manifestation of a nation’s attitude, supports the narrative of an open, responsible, and generous country that focuses on the development of humanity and on the interest of the whole mankind.

坚持科技开放合作造福人类, 奉行互利共赢的开放战略, 为应对全球性挑战、促进人类发展进步贡献中国智慧和力量, 是中国在新时代科技事业发展实践中积累的重要经验, 也是中国作为“赋能型大国”的应有担当。[...] 中国开展科技创新、建设科技强国, 不是为了争夺所谓“全球科技主导地位”, 不会追求成果独享, 而是要让科技创新为中国式现代化提供支撑, 并增进人类福祉、推动全球发展。

Adhering to open cooperation in science and technology for the benefit of mankind, pursuing a mutually beneficial and win-win open strategy, and contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to responding to global challenges and promoting human development and progress are important experiences accumulated by China in the practice of developing science and technology in the new era, and are also the due responsibility of China as an “empowering power”. [...] China’s scientific and technological innovation and construction of a scientific and technological power are not to compete for the so-called “global scientific and technological dominance” or to seek exclusive enjoyment of results, but to allow scientific and technological innovation to provide support for Chinese-style modernisation, enhance human well-being, and promote global development. (RMW 26/02)

The disclaimer about the “construction of a scientific and technological power” not being aimed at competing for “global scientific and technological dominance” supports, if naively, China’s image-building of a good-willed, trustworthy power. The same argument is made with reference to the “Hangzhou six little dragons”, showing how their technologies are “public goods” (*gonggong pin* 公共品) that can be used anywhere, benefitting any country:

“杭州六小龙”现象同样告诉世界，中国一直在[...]坚定不移地走发展自己、利好世界的路。深度求索的开源大模型降低了AI应用门槛，宇树科技的机器人突破了一些国家的高价壁垒，强脑科技的脑机接口技术的进展有望造福无数病患人群……这是中国科技实实在在进行的“技术平权”。围绕这些新技术产生的论文、产品，本质上都属于公共品，原则上可以造福所有国家。面对全球经济复苏乏力、地缘博弈加剧的挑战，是把心思花在“脱钩断链”、打压对手上，还是聚精会神搞创新、带动全球技术进步？中国又一次用行动做出了回答。

The “Hangzhou six little dragons” phenomenon also tells the world that China [...] is unswervingly taking the path of developing itself and benefiting the world. DeepSeek’s open source big model has lowered the threshold for AI applications, Yushu Technology’s robots have broken through the high price barriers of some countries, and Qiangnao Technology’s progress in brain-computer interface technology is expected to benefit countless patients... This is the “technological equality” that China’s science and technology is actually carrying out. The papers and products created around these new technologies are essentially public goods, and in principle can benefit all countries. Faced with the challenges of a weak global economic recovery and intensified geopolitical games, should we focus on “decoupling and breaking the chain” and suppressing opponents, or concentrate on innovation and driving global technological progress? China once again answered with action. (RMW 18/02)

The rhetorical question at the end of the above excerpt provides an example of how presupposition and othering are used in the corpus as discursive strategies to criticise the US and, in particular, the so-called “small yard, high walls [or high fence] approach”,³⁶ promoted by the US government since Barack Obama’s presidency, following a call by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates for “adequately control[ing] and protect[ing] those key items and technologies that must be protected for our national security”.³⁷

The literal translation in Chinese of the “small yard, high walls” policy (*xiao yuan gao qiang* 小院高墙), is a key term in the corpus. In the RMW discourse, it is used derogatively to refer to the choice of US big tech companies, such as OpenAI, to keep their AI models closed. The commentaries both covertly and openly frame this approach as selfish protectionism, contrastively reinforcing the positive image of China as a country concerned with carrying out “technological equality” (*jishu pingquan* 技术平权).

36 U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation 2019.

37 Obama White House 2010.

In fact, according to the RMW articles,

中国 [...] 积极推动人工智能普惠发展, 帮助发展中国家加强能力建设, 主张开源人工智能技术, 促进人工智能服务的可及性, 实现各国共享智能红利。[中国] 坚定走以开放合作促科技进步、以创新成果共享促共同发展之路, 为全球可持续发展和世界现代化赋能。

[China] actively promotes the inclusive development of AI, helps developing countries to strengthen capacity building, advocates open source artificial intelligence technology, promotes the accessibility of AI services, and enables countries to share the benefits of intelligence. [...] China is determined to promote scientific and technological progress through open cooperation, and advance common development through sharing of innovative achievements, empowering global sustainable development and world modernisation. (RMW 26/02)

In this narrative, the concept of “empowering power” emerges in some contrast with the country’s intent to depict the country as a representative of the Global South. Its intertextual presence materialises in the iterative use of verbs that consistently position China in a higher spot compared to the rest of the (developing) world: China promotes (*tuijin* 推进), China helps (*bangzhu* 帮助), China advocates (*zhuzhang* 主张), China enables (*cujin* 促进), China advances (*tuidong* 推动), China empowers (*funeng* 赋能), etc. These terminological choices defeat the attempt to describe the country as a *primus inter pares* in the Global South.

5 Self-to-Other Narrative: DeepSeek in the QDP

This section summarises the analysis developed in a forthcoming paper³⁸ which examines the narrative on DeepSeek as conveyed by the QDP, and offers a comparison between China’s Self-to-Self and Self-to-Other discursive constructions.

Originally, the QDP corpus was conceived as a parallel corpus to the RMW’s, which is composed exclusively of commentary articles. However, given the limited number of opinion pieces published by the Italian-language edition, the selection criteria were subsequently extended to include news reports. The small number of retrievable texts is indicative of the limited coverage that the QDP dedicates to any given topic, especially when compared to its English and Chinese counterparts. As a publication in a ‘minor’ language, the QDP clearly occupies a peripheral role in the CPC’s international communication strategy, targeting an audience confined almost entirely to Italian readers. The minimal resources allocated to the outlet are further evidenced by the fact that only two journalists regularly sign the published articles.

Despite the disparity in format, a degree of thematic consistency emerges when the QDP texts are analysed using the same three semantic clusters identified

³⁸ Lupano in preparation.

in the RMW corpus – namely, the presentation of DeepSeek, the portrayal of China as a “strong country”, and the emphasis on China as a cooperative international actor. Nonetheless, notable differences in tone and narrative approach also come to light.

Like the RMW, the QDP avoids focusing on individual entrepreneurs, including DeepSeek’s founder. However, in contrast to the more restrained language found in the Chinese-language corpus, the Italian articles adopt a more celebratory and dramatic tone, highlighting the company’s achievements and origins with expressions such as “sharp decline” (*calo drastico*), “record results” (*risultati record*), and “weakened” (*ha fatto vacillare*). Strikingly, the Italian texts also employ WAR metaphors – such as “invincibility” (*invincibilità*) – to frame DeepSeek’s emergence, in contrast to the RMW, which avoids any discursive framing suggestive of overt confrontation.

Il 27 gennaio, ora di Washington, subito dopo l'apertura del mercato azionario degli Stati Uniti, ha registrato un drastico calo, in particolare nelle sezioni hi-tech. Secondo gli analisti, il motivo consiste negli ultimi risultati record di DeepSeek, azienda cinese sull'intelligenza artificiale (sic), che ha fatto vacillare l'“invincibilità” dell'industria tecnologica statunitense.

On 27 January, Washington time, immediately after the opening of the US stock market, a sharp decline was recorded, particularly in the high-tech sector. According to analysts, the downturn was triggered by the latest record-breaking results of DeepSeek, a Chinese artificial intelligence company, which challenged the perceived “invincibility” of the US tech industry. (QDP 31/01)

An undertone of self-affirmation is discernible in this presentation of a Chinese company capable of disrupting the US market and challenging its technological supremacy by sounding “the alarm bells” (*campanello d'allarme*) for American industry. While the RMW commentaries tend to understate DeepSeek’s abilities and downplay DeepSeek’s achievements, the QDP highlights how major US firms, such as NVIDIA, are integrating DeepSeek into their platforms – an act portrayed as a strategic acknowledgement of the company’s “revolutionary” capabilities.

Con il riconoscimento globale di DeepSeek per le sue capacità rivoluzionarie, le principali aziende tecnologiche, tra cui il gigante statunitense dell'unità di elaborazione grafica Nvidia, stanno incorporando DeepSeek nelle loro piattaforme, una decisione ampiamente vista come un riconoscimento strategico della crescente abilità di DeepSeek.

With DeepSeek gaining global recognition for its ground-breaking capabilities, major technology companies – including the US-based GPU giant Nvidia – have begun integrating DeepSeek into their platforms. This move is widely regarded as a strategic acknowledgement of DeepSeek’s growing technological prowess. (QDP 05/02)

Another difference with the RMW corpus is the widespread use of positive quotations from foreign elites to legitimise the Chinese successful approach to innovation.

They also contribute to the discursive process of othering by criticising the US “high walls” policy – another *leitmotif* in the corpus, in line with the RMW.

I “piccoli cortili con alte mura” non possono fermare il pensiero innovativo, e il “disaccoppiamento” finirà solo per isolare chi lo propone; la scienza e la tecnologia non dovrebbero essere uno strumento per tessere una cortina di ferro, ma una ricchezza da condividere a beneficio di tutti. La Cina desidera condividere i frutti dell’innovazione con un numero sempre crescente di Paesi.

“Small yards, high walls” [policy] cannot block innovative thinking, and any attempt at “decoupling” will ultimately isolate those who advocate for it. Science and technology should not serve as tools to build a new iron curtain, but rather as shared assets to benefit all. China is committed to sharing the fruits of innovation with an ever-growing number of countries. (QDP 07/03)

6 Concluding Remarks

This study has sought to map the construction of the Self – both internally and externally – in relation to the DeepSeek case through the analysis of discursive patterns related to the political concept of *qiang guo*. The narrative surrounding technological development and innovation, as observed in the RMW and QDP corpora analysed, reveals several noteworthy features.

A prominent phenomenon is the marginalization of individual voices in constructing the DeepSeek story. Across both Chinese and Italian-language sources, scant attention is given to the personal trajectory of DeepSeek’s founder, Liang Wenfeng, who is mentioned only briefly and without elaboration. In the RMW corpus, there is no exploration of his business strategy, team composition, or the drivers of the company’s success. While the QDP offers more information on the technical strengths at the basis of DeepSeek’s global emergence, these aspects remain secondary to the overarching narrative. This is in stark contrast to international media coverage – especially in Europe and North America – which tends to focus on the personal and technological elements behind DeepSeek’s rise.

The RMW consistently presents DeepSeek’s success as emblematic of a collective national achievement. The company is frequently grouped with other firms in rapid succession, without further elaboration or attention to individual merit. Entrepreneurial or corporate accomplishments are framed as auxiliary to the story of national progress, which is portrayed as the result of a long-term strategy under CPC leadership. In contrast, the QDP – perhaps due to having an Italian and European readership in mind – offers slightly more details on the company’s individual success. Nonetheless, its argumentation still leads to equal DeepSeek’s accomplishments

with national achievements, directly or indirectly attributing them to the Party. In particular, the Party's role is made explicit in certain articles through extensive quotations from President Xi Jinping, where references to DeepSeek act mainly as rhetorical gateways to the political messaging.

This rhetorical pattern is not unique to the DeepSeek case. A comparable discursive transformation – from individual to national success – was observed in the coverage of Suning's acquisition of FC Internazionale in 2017.³⁹

This case study highlights that when addressing the domestic audience, Chinese official media adopt a more measured tone than when communicating with international readers. The Self-to-Other discourse, as found in the QDP, tends to be more assertive – perhaps to reinforce China's status on the global stage. Whether this strategy effectively meets the CPC's communication objectives is a question that this study is not aiming to investigate, and that should be explored through reception-oriented research.

A further theme emerging from both corpora is the ambivalent portrayal of China's global role. On the one hand, with the DeepSeek breakthrough symbolising the coming of age of national AI innovation, China is portrayed as having moved beyond the developing world – particularly in terms of technological advancement – and as now standing as a global power.

On the other hand, the RMW and QDP narrative frame China as a leader of the Global South that promotes coordinated development and advocates for equitable international cooperation. This oscillation may reflect China's transitional status: economically and technologically on an equal footing with the Global North, yet still facing domestic challenges in areas such as public health and social infrastructure. However, it may also represent a strategic balancing act aimed at asserting China's developmental achievements while preserving an image of a benevolent and non-threatening power – particularly in the eyes of Global South audiences – in order to strengthen its legitimacy as a leading actor on the international stage.

As one commentary noted:

中国开展科技创新、建设科技强国，不是为了争夺所谓“全球科技主导地位”，不会追求成果独享，而是要让科技创新为中国式现代化提供支撑，并增进人类福祉、推动全球发展。

China's scientific and technological innovation and construction of a scientific and technological power are not to compete for the so-called “global scientific and technological dominance” or to seek the exclusive enjoyment of its results, but to allow scientific and technological innovation to provide support for Chinese-style modernisation, enhance human well-being, and promote global development.

³⁹ Lupano 2020.

Both the Self-to-Self and Self-to-Other narratives tread a delicate line between moments of triumphalism and a conscious effort to steer clear of overtly hegemonic rhetoric. In doing so, they frame China as a powerful, technologically advanced, internationally responsible, and secure nation. However, within these portrayals, particularly in discussions of China's scientific and technological progress, other developing countries are often cast in subordinate roles. Whether referring to African, Eastern European, or Asian states, these actors are rarely represented as equals. Rather, they are positioned as recipients of China's benevolence, reliant on its expertise and support in order to advance.

Simultaneously, China continues to invoke its identity as part of the Global South, drawing on discursive *topoi* such as the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". This juxtaposition reveals a fundamental ambivalence in the construction of the Self: while celebrating China's rise and projecting its status among the world's leading powers, official discourse also echoes a postcolonial desire for redress and recognition, speaking from the position of a formerly marginalised actor.

The analysis offered in this study opens up a promising line of inquiry into China's discursive positioning between the Global North and the Global South as reflected in institutional media. Although the country's self-representation currently lacks full coherence, this ambiguity invites deeper exploration across a wider array of media – including commercial platforms, internationally oriented outlets, films, and literature. What remains of the Global South in China's self-narrative, domestically and abroad? And to what extent is China's assertive posture limited to areas such as technological innovation, where its global leadership is now indisputable? These are questions for further scholarly engagement.

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