

Reframing the Game: Constructing Political Discourse within U.S. Media's Sports Coverage - A Case Study of *The New York Times*

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Abstract: This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) integrated with Arnold Kling's political discourse framework, conducting discourse analysis on *The New York Times*' coverage of the summer Olympic Games involving China since 2008. Utilizing machine learning, the study extracted core discourses, deconstructed discourse frameworks, and investigates their construction mechanisms. Findings reveal that *The New York Times* constructs core discourses such as the "Medal Machine," aligned with the Liberal framework, "Ultra-Nationalism," embedded in the Conservative framework, and "Human Rights," rooted in the Progressive framework. These discourses indicate that *The New York Times* has shifted from a traditionally left-leaning stance to a broader ideological spectrum, reflecting increasingly complex reporting strategies that amplify ideological polarization between China and the United States. This research contributes to understanding sports politicization and media's role in international political dynamics.

Keywords: critical discourse studies; core discourse; discourse framework; ideological system; summer Olympic Games; politicization of sports

Introduction

Sporting mega-events, particularly the Olympics, significantly shape national identity and are effective in enhancing or modifying the host country's international image (Preuss, 2018). China is playing an increasing role in international sports decision-making, leading to a reshaping of the power structure and distribution of international sports organizations (Wei, 2022). However, due to the predominant influence of Western media, the effectiveness of China's sports diplomacy has not yet met expectations (Latham, 2009); moreover, the politicization of sport in Western media coverage is becoming more prevalent, with its powerful ability to lead public opinion toward a politicized attack of the image of sport in China (Edwards, 2013). For instance, *The New York Times* (NYT), recognized for its credibility in Western journalism (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005), has framed its Olympic coverage of China

using negative discourses such as the "Medal Machine"(Beech, 2021a), amplifying ideological tensions between China and the United States. Since sports have long been fused with politics in the most diverse spheres(Grix, 2012), a comprehensive understanding of how Western media present Olympic issues involving China is crucial for academic discourse. Previous research on media narratives of the Beijing Olympic Games (Price & Dayan, 2008) and Chinese football (Liu et al., 2021) offers foundational insights, yet gaps still remain in understanding media narratives and their construction mechanisms. This study aims to address this gap by employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in conjunction with Arnold Kling's political discourse frames to examine sports events coverage under the background of sports politicization. By analyzing *The New York Times*' coverage of China in the Summer Olympics from 2008 to 2024, this research investigates the core discourses, their ideological framing, and the mechanisms underlying their construction. This approach enables an in-depth examination of *The New York Times*' portrayal of China in the Olympics, focusing on the interplay between discourse and ideological dimensions of language, while contributing to a deeper understanding of the intersection between sports and politics in global media narratives.

Literature Review

Discourse Framing: The representational path of shaping the image of sports

The concept of framing originated in cognitive psychology and anthropology and was later adopted in sociology by Goffman, who posited that frames are culturally institutionalized (Bateson, 1955; Goffman, 1981; van Gorp, 2007). The definition of framing has evolved a narrowing-down process, with "narrow framing" is the explicit effect of the media text being emphasized and represented (Wang, 2017). Frame theory is applied differently across media with varying ideologies, adapting to political needs and reflecting specific viewpoints (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Chong and Druckman, 2007). Frame analysis examines the construction of news reports and is influenced by changing political, economic, and cultural contexts (Gamson, 1989).

From the sports perspective, media framing has been employed to examine issues surrounding mega-sporting events (Sobral et al., 2022), especially the Olympic Games (Zaharopoulos, 2007; Gutierrez and Bettine, 2021; Angelini et al., 2012). Researchers have also applied frame analysis when comparing media coverage from different media and countries (Huang and Fahmy, 2013; Hayashi et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2016; Scott and Kunkel, 2016; Pan and Lawal, 2017). As for country-specific perspectives, the Beijing

Olympics and Winter Olympics directed media attention to Chinese sports (Liang, 2013). Research on Olympic Games coverage based on frame analysis has often been conducted in the following scenarios and contexts: (1) media framing about the Beijing summer and winter Olympic Games (Ono and Jiao, 2008; Boykoff, 2022; Min and Zhen, 2010); (2) comparison of the frames of different media reports on the Beijing Olympic Games (Hong, 2010; Preuss and Alfs, 2011); (3) the long-term trends of Olympic coverage frames (Li, 2017; Yang et al., 2023); (4) the analysis of the framing of specific athletes' coverage (Li et al., 2019; Bie and Billings, 2015) and of gender (Peng et al., 2024; Lee, 2012; Xu et al., 2018).

In summary, sports image construction is an emerging field of research. While previous studies have primarily focused on practical aspects, such as the interpretation of specific reports, there has been a conspicuous absence of in-depth exploration into the underlying logical structures and value mechanisms that govern this field. This gap is particularly evident in the lack of empirical examination of media construction and the theoretical frameworks employed or the superficial treatment of socio-cultural factors. Such limitations not only hinder a comprehensive understanding of sports image construction but also constrain the development of effective strategies for improvement. Discourse analysis seeks to identify the relationship between speech activity and ideology from a structuralist approach. As Bourdieu points out, it is only when one relates the work to the social conditions of its production—namely, to the place occupied by its author in the field of production and to the market for which it is produced—and to the continuous market in which it is received that the work's formal character becomes meaningful (Bourdieu, Chu S, and Liu, 2005). On this basis, the texts of the Olympic coverage of China in Western media can be considered tendentious in the discursive act. Critical discourse analysis, combined with framing theory, helps to explore the construction mechanism behind the discourse of politicization of sports.

Three Languages of Politics: The Ideology that Shapes the Image of Sports

Ideological polarization in contemporary American society has intensified, creating a pronounced contrast between the left-wing liberalism and the right-wing conservatism, a polarization that extends into global engagement, presenting a comprehensive scenario of ideological division (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Tong, 2020). The intertwining of sports with politics has deepened over the years, with major sporting events such as the Olympics often utilized by nations to further specific political agendas and influence social, political, and international relations (Lutan & Hong, 2005). In addition, it can be regarded as a tool to convey political signals, meaning that sports itself is used as a political means to pursue specific

political interests and achieve specific political purposes (Liu, 2015). Boykoff (2014) notes that The Olympics, while officially apolitical, have become arenas for expressing ideological biases and competing interests. Therefore, in this context, U.S. media coverage of the Olympics involving China also conveys its ideological bias.

Arnold Kling (2017a) argues that political thinking is driven by simplified moral frames and that each political event can be justified along different conceptual axes, thus allowing the respective political groups to assert moral superiority and reinforce their own positions (Tang and Shi, 2022). Kling (2017b) identifies three discourse frames: (1) The liberal discourse frame follows liberty-coercion axis, framing issues through a liberal dichotomy that denounces coercion and advocates for individual rights; (2) The conservative discourse frame, following civilization–barbarism axis, uses conservative dichotomy to frame issues by denouncing barbarism and advocating Western values and civilization; (3) The progressive frame, on the oppressor-oppressed axis, uses progressive dichotomy to frame issues, denounces oppression and advocates disadvantaged and minority groups.

Although Kling's three-axes model has been utilized in analyzing political media coverage (Chu, 2021; Kristof, 2023), its adoption in sports media analysis remains under-explored. This gap presents an opportunity for research, as the framework's robustness in uncovering ideological biases in political coverage suggests it could offer significant insights when applied to sports media analysis. This study considers Kling's three politics discourse frames also applicable to the analysis of sports coverage in the context of politicization of sports, namely the liberal discourse frame (L), the conservative discourse frame (C), and the progressive discourse frame (P).

Overall, in the context of the increasing politicization of sports, existing research seldom analyzes sports coverage as a form of political discourse, with few studies categorizing different frames into ideologies or exploring the construction mechanisms behind these frames. Moreover, few studies have examined how discourse frames evolve over time. CDA seeks to uncover the power relations, social structures, and ideological underpinnings behind language use, offering a robust framework for identifying and interpreting the implicit meanings and societal effects within media discourse (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 469; Wodak & Meyer, 2015; Fairclough, 2023, p. 15). Therefore, this study aims to bridge these gaps by applying a discourse analysis, grounded in CDA, to sports reporting, specifically examining the ideological framing within. Consequently, this study raises the following questions:

RQ1: What specific agendas and core discourse are included in NYT's coverage of the summer Olympic Games involving China?

RQ2: How are different core discourses allocated to their respective discourse frameworks?

RQ3: How have the political discourse frameworks in Olympic coverage evolved over time?

RQ4: What are the construction mechanisms and ideological goals behind the discourse frames?

Research Design

Sampling

This study examines *The New York Times*, the most visited news website and a prominent liberal media, noted for its high reliability (42.67) and left-leaning bias (-7.75)(Media Bias Fact Check, 2017; Ad Fontes Media, 2023). Using "Olympic* AND China" as keywords, the study leveraged NYT API to collect articles from August 1, 2008, to August 18, 2024. The data was then narrowed down to select periods within the Beijing (August 1–31, 2008), London (July 20–August 20, 2012), Rio (July 30–August 28, 2016), Tokyo (July 16–August 15, 2021) Olympics, and Pairs (July 19–August 18, 2024) Olympics. Finally 2,829 unique articles after removing duplicates, distributed as follows: 1,523 from Beijing, 430 from London, 224 from Rio, 389 from Tokyo, and 263 from Pairs. Time frames from the week before to the week after the Olympic Games were selected to analyze specific agendas, discourse frames, and construction paths in NYT's coverage of China during the Summer Olympics. This approach ensured the focus on relevant issues while preventing data duplication and invalidity.

Coding scheme

This study employed the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic model for a content analysis of NYT articles, leveraging unsupervised learning to extract underlying topics and semantic patterns from the text. The model used lexical probability distributions to identify implicit meanings and relationships within the articles (Blei et al., 2003). To reveal the underlying topics within the text, the study employed a two-step approach. Firstly, the collected articles underwent cleaning and sorting, followed by pre-processing through the deactivation of stop words and other techniques. Secondly, word frequency statistics and LDA text clustering were conducted on the pre-processed text data to identify high-frequency words in the news reports, thereby enabling topic mining and opinion identification.

This study utilized grid search to obtain the optimal model, testing several values for parameter K to refine topic modeling; it established the topic counts for previous Olympics as

13, 8, 7, 10, and 10. Based on probability, top 15-20 lexical items per topic were chosen as key indicators, forming a core vocabulary for further topic identification, and outlined topic distribution across the dataset. After obtaining lexical items, we employed a qualitative coding strategy, consisting of open, axial, and selective coding to identify concrete content (agenda) of each topic. Given the substantial volume of information in the sample, establishing a pre-defined structured conceptual framework proved challenging. Consequently, we elected to initiate open coding prior to structuring, and a hierarchical coding process was undertaken, aligned with our research objectives. This process identified core discourses, which were then matched with different discourse frames, enabling a deeper investigation into the construction mechanisms of each frame within.

During the primary coding phase, researchers strived to minimize the influence of the researcher's preconceived notions and coded thematic items, derived from text clustering, based on their inherent content. The first stage involved labeling, a process by which the lexical items within each topic were conceptualized, and the specific agenda embodied by each lexical item were determined through manual perusal. To maintain readability and due to manuscript length constraints, this study prioritizes showcasing each topic's specific agenda in the main text, with detailed lexical items relegated to the appendix (see in Tables 1-5 and appendix), ensuring a focused and accessible presentation of core issues in the main narrative while offering comprehensive lexical items in the appendix for in-depth exploration.

For instance, the first topic in Table 1 provided a comprehensive summary of the Beijing Olympic Games, whilst the second topic in Table 1 reported on the equestrian event hosted in Hong Kong. Thus, the initial agenda was designated with the label "Beijing Olympic Games event summary," and the second agenda was labeled as "Hong Kong hosted equestrian events." The primary objective of the secondary coding stage involves the identification of classes or categories. This stage aims to aggregate concept clusters around similar issues to formulate a more abstract conception. For instance, the issues relating to Hong Kong (such as Table 4, Topic 9) and Taiwan (such as Table 4, Topic 10) are similar conceptual entities. These topics encapsulate the complex relationship between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. We consolidated these related issues into one category, namely "Ultra-nationalism discourse". After a thorough examination and categorization process, this study identifies eight major categories, namely: "Medal Machine and National System discourse", "Economic Collapse discourse", "Human Rights discourse", "International rules discourse", "Ultra-nationalism discourse", "Environmental Protection discourse", "Earthquake Victim discourse", and

"Oppressed Athletes discourse". Following a meticulous three-tiered coding procedure, our principal aim was to categorically arrange the core discourse from the secondary coding within each of the established political discourse frameworks. Finally, we delineated the identified eight core discourses into three frames, namely, the Progressive Discourse Frame, the Conservative Discourse Frame, and the Liberal Discourse Frame.

Topic	Specific Agenda
1	Beijing Olympic Games event summary
2	Hong Kong hosted equestrian events
3	Tennis tournament
4	Police detain Tibetan independence protesters
5	Olympic torch relay blocked in London
6	Yao Ming participates in the Beijing Olympics
7	Liu Xiang withdrew from the competition
8	Women's Gymnastics
9	Beijing Olympics Games Sponsors
10	Environmental Protection Issues
11	Opening Ceremony Issue
12	Post-Olympic Inflation in China
13	Wenchuan Earthquake

Table 1 : Agendas in NYT's Coverage of China During the Beijing Olympics

Topic	Specific Agenda
1	Ye Shiwen's win and doping controversy
2	Gymnastics Issues
3	Sun Yang wins championship
4	Hong Kong Issues
5	Tennis Issues
6	Table Tennis Issue
7	London Olympic Games event summary
8	China-India Border Issue

Table 2: Agendas in NYT's Coverage of China During the London Olympics

Topic	Specific Agenda
1	NBA and WNBA Issues
2	Swimming events
3	Comic and Ping Pong Champ
4	Women's Swimming
5	Sun Yang's victory and antidoping issues
6	Efimova, Ye Shiwen Doping Controversy
7	Beach Volleyball Tournament

Table 3: Agendas in NYT's Coverage of China During the Rio Olympics

Topic	Specific Agenda
1	Guan Chenchen wins the championship
2	Gong Lijiao interviewed by CCTV
3	Syrian table tennis players come to China for training
4	Hong Kong athletes win in Tokyo Olympics
5	Yufei Zhang wins the championship
6	NBA Issues
7	Epidemic of COVID19 affects Olympic Games
8	Xinjiang Issue
9	Hong Kong Issues
10	Taiwan Issue

Table 4: Agendas in NYT's Coverage of China During the Tokyo Olympics

Topic	Specific Agenda
1	Doping Allegations Surrounding the Chinese Swimming Team
2	Global Economic and Supply Chain Crisis
3	Paris Olympics Opening Ceremony and Cultural Presentation
4	
5	Paris Olympics Event Summary
6	Politicization of Sports
7	Table Tennis Competitions
8	Anti-Doping and International Regulations

9	Zheng Qinwen's Championship Victory
10	"Fan-Culture" Behavior Among Chinese Sports Fans

Findings

After categorizing specific agendas into core discourses through secondary coding, we placed these core discourses within Kling's political discourse frames for interpretation and employed CDA to delve deeper into the linguistic construction of these discourses. We summarized the arguments within each framework and explored their construction mechanisms, shedding light on the dynamics of ideological framing in political discourse.

Frame of Liberal Discourse: "Human Rights First" as a Context for "Medal Machine," "Economic Collapse," and "Human Rights" Narratives

In terms of the mechanisms of constructing liberal discourse frames, the main approaches are two. The first is the reinforce approach, which argues that audiences tend to be willing to receive reasoning that conforms to their own predispositions (Graber & Dunaway, 2018). By emphasizing individual rights and freedoms, NYT generates the core discourse of "whole national system" and "medal machine," arguing that Chinese athletes' training mechanism is a fetter on humanity and freedom and that they have been described as medal machines. The specific words contained in its report include "For the Chinese sports machine, all those punishing years of effort can still be foiled in the heat of Olympic competition" (Beech, 2021a), "Many Chinese are asking if the nation's once insatiable appetite for medals has hit a limit" (Buckley, 2016), and others. In fact, the so-called "whole national system" (Hong et al., 2013) and "gold medal supremacy" is only the product of a specific historical period. With the improvement of China's comprehensive national power, the change of national mentality, the optimization of sports mechanism, and the enhancement of foreign propaganda concept, "gold medalism" is no longer the only criterion for judging sports events.

The second path is the cumulative approach, which focuses on the media's influence on the public over a longer period of time (Lang GE and Lang K, 1980). First, through consistently criticizing Xinjiang and Tibet's human rights issues and collaborating with the U.S. government to spotlight these concerns during the Olympics, NYT generated the core discourse of human rights. This discourse, claiming "humanitarian morality" and "human rights protection," meddles in China's internal matters, stigmatizing China as a "dictatorship" and a "power political state," thus reinforcing its liberal audience's ideology. Second, NYT has long attacked China's economic development, advocating neo-liberal economics, promoting market

economy, and opposing state capitalism. After the 2008 Beijing Olympics, NYT exaggerated China's inflation, slowing economic growth, and high prices; it shaped the core discourse of "economic collapse discourse" to portray China as a threat to the world's economy and intensify its liberal audience ideology. Another way archiving human rights discourse is that NYT indirectly contrasted the image of its country's players' freedom of choice and their high commercial value with Chinese athletes' difficulties in sustaining their lives after retirement by interspersing their own NBA reports during the Olympics. This further appeals to the audience's preferences and awakens the ideology of left-leaning and liberal audiences in the U.S., thus reinforcing China's image of "nation above freedom" and deepening the group's ideological dichotomy toward China.

Frame of Conservative Discourse: "American Supremacy" as a Context for "Ultra-Nationalism" Narratives

In terms of the construction mechanism of the conservative discourse framework, the main construction path is cumulative approach. Firstly, NYT mainly adopts the cumulative approach to construct the issue of China's Hong Kong and Taiwan. The core discourse of "ultra-nationalism" is formed by commenting on and emphasizing the sovereignty of Hong Kong and Taiwan instantly and by denouncing China's political system during the Olympic Games through the winning of awards by athletes from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Through text clustering, it can be concluded that in the China-related reports of previous Olympic Games, words such as "Hong Kong-Mainland" and "resident-government" appear in the clustering of Hong Kong-related topic words. By selecting biased coverage, the issue of Hong Kong is further "extended and generalized" to the level of political issues.

During the COVID-19 period, this phenomenon was exacerbated by increased competition between major powers and ideological "backlash." For example, in the coverage of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, articles about the Hong Kong and Taiwan delegations' participation and award-winning status, as well as the athletes' personal issues, have appeared as specially reported articles. The two articles titled "Taiwan's gold medal win over China in badminton raises tension" (Chang, 2021) and "Olympic Success Gives Hong Kong an Emotional Lift in Hard Times" (Beech, 2021b) cite the achievements of the Chinese Taipei team in badminton and the Hong Kong team in fencing and deliberately separate the relationship between the Hong Kong and Taiwan Olympic teams and the Chinese Olympic delegation by quoting the athletes' and sports executive's words, such as "But we don't have any relationship with them. We are separate" (Beech, 2021b). The comparison with mainland

players reinforces their “hard-won” medals, argues that the medals won by Hong Kong and Taiwan are an “emotional lift” for the local “hard times,” and stands on its own values to accuse China’s “one country, two systems” of having influenced the international order, implying strong conservative political overtones. This core discourse of “ultra-nationalism” renders the capitalist political system and American culture “universal” and “authoritative,” better catering to right-leaning and conservative audiences in the United States and further consolidating its conservative ideology.

Within the framework of the "International Rules Narrative," *The New York Times* strategically focuses on controversies involving Chinese athletes, particularly doping allegations in swimming, to redirect attention away from similar issues among American athletes. While doping scandals involving U.S. athletes have surfaced historically, they are often framed as isolated incidents, sparing the broader U.S. sports system and national image from significant scrutiny. In contrast, reports about Chinese athletes are constructed to suggest systemic shortcomings. Employing what can be described as a "cumulative amplification" approach, the coverage repeatedly highlights doping controversies, selectively citing experts and anti-doping organizations to portray these individual cases as indicative of flaws in China’s sports governance. This tactic implies a misalignment between China's sports practices and international norms, effectively shifting the narrative focus.

During the Rio and Paris Olympics, frequent references to terms like "doping tests" and "rules violations" were observed in relation to China, creating a strong linguistic and thematic association. This pattern reflects not an isolated editorial choice but a broader continuation of conservative ideological framing that aligns with the "America First" agenda. By casting China’s actions as a challenge to the integrity of international sports regulations, *The New York Times* reinforces the U.S.’s role as the supposed guardian of global standards. This portrayal appeals to conservative audiences, amplifying a sense of national superiority while casting doubt on China's legitimacy in the international sports arena. This framing does more than critique China’s sports policies; it elevates competition in global sports into an ideological confrontation. By questioning China’s adherence to international norms, the narrative subtly promotes U.S. dominance, cloaked under the guise of defending fairness and global rules. This dual-purpose strategy strengthens conservative ideological cohesion among readers while embedding sports rivalry within a larger geopolitical and cultural battleground.

Frame of Progressive Discourse: “Progress and Equality” as a Context for “Environmental Protection,” “Earthquake Victims,” and “Oppressed Athletes” Narratives

Within the framework of the progressive discourse, NYT has developed core discourses such as “environmentalism discourse,” “earthquake victimism discourse,” and “oppressed athletes discourse.” Their construction mechanism is mainly based on the path of the “dramatic approach,” which refers to the media’s efforts to impress audiences with unexpected or powerful dramatic coverage. The “medal machine discourse” treats Chinese athletes as a whole through the liberty–coercion axis and emphasizes that they are coerced by power politics and lose their individual rights. In contrast, the “oppressed athlete discourse” focuses on the athletes’ individual experiences by addressing their personal experiences; for example, Liu Xiang was blamed by Chinese netizens for withdrawing from competition (Yardley, 2008); Gong Lijiao was asked about her “masculine” appearance by CCTV reporters (May and Chen, 2021), and Ye Shiwen was caught up in a doping controversy (Longman, 2012). Through the oppressor–oppressed axis in the progressive discourse framework, which also advocates social empathy and pluralistic justice, individual athletes are portrayed as the “oppressed” vulnerable group, and Chinese netizens and media are regarded as the “oppressor.” This creates an image of Chinese society as “culturally backward” and “lacking in empathy and love” in contrast to the progressive United States, appealing and stimulating the emotional resonance of a progressive audience and deepening its ideological opposition to China.

The “environmental pollution discourse” and “earthquake victim discourse” also rely on the construction mechanism of the dramatic approach. NYT used the themes of environmental protection and natural disasters, such as air pollution and the Wenchuan earthquake on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, to tie in with the Olympics themselves. In addition, it used the terms “disaster damage” and “traffic restrictions” to define China as a developing country with a “poor environment” and “frequent natural disasters,” defining its people as victims of air pollution and natural disasters to highlight its own positive image of environmentalism and socioeconomic progress and get close to the ideology of its progressive audience.

The coverage of China's participation in the Summer Olympics by *The New York Times* reveals a notable evolution in its discourse frameworks, reflecting shifts in reporting strategies and positions against the backdrop of political polarization. Among these frameworks, the liberal discourse has consistently held a central role. Its application across different Olympic Games demonstrates a stable and coherent narrative. For instance, the "human rights" narrative, a

hallmark of the liberal framework, has persisted since the Beijing Olympics and remained a focal point during the Rio and Tokyo Games, underscoring *The New York Times*' sustained critique of China's human rights record. Additionally, the "medal machine and national system narratives first emerged during the Beijing Olympics, criticizing China's reliance on state power to drive athletic achievement, portraying it as dehumanizing and antithetical to individual freedom. These narratives resurfaced during the Tokyo and Paris Games with renewed intensity, highlighting amplified criticism of China's sports policies during specific historical moments. This pattern not only reflects *The New York Times*' continued attention to China's sports development but also reveals an ideological inclination to magnify negative issues to align with its broader liberal narrative. Despite variations in the specific topics addressed, the core elements of the liberal framework illustrate a consistent stance in the paper's reporting on China's Olympic involvement.

The conservative discourse framework emerged as early as the Beijing Olympics, primarily through the "extreme nationalism" narrative, which spotlighted China's nationalist sentiments and state-centric behaviors. Over time, this framework gained greater prominence, particularly during the Rio, Tokyo, and Paris Olympics, evolving into the "international rules" narrative. By framing China as a violator of global norms, often through the stigmatization of doping scandals involving Chinese athletes, *The New York Times* positioned the U.S. as a defender of international standards. This narrative aligned with the "America First" ideology, appealing to conservative audiences by reinforcing a sense of national superiority and portraying the U.S. as the rightful steward of global sports governance. This strategic shift highlights how the conservative framework adapted to consolidate ideological alignment while expanding its resonance within a politically polarized context.

The progressive discourse framework has also played a significant role in *The New York Times*' Olympic coverage. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, this framework was evident in narratives such as "environmental pollution," "earthquake victims," and "oppressed athletes." These stories centered on issues like Beijing's air quality, the victims of the Wenchuan earthquake, and the challenging living conditions of Chinese athletes. Over time, from the Rio to the Paris Olympics, the progressive framework expanded its focus to include new angles, such as the training mechanisms for athletes and the emerging phenomenon of sports fandom's "idolization culture." This evolution reflects a dynamic adaptation of the progressive discourse, aligning it with broader themes of social justice and individual rights, which resonate with its audience's values.

Over time, the focus of these discourse frameworks has shifted, reflecting evolving priorities in different periods. Nonetheless, the liberal discourse framework has consistently maintained its dominant position in *The New York Times*' coverage. Notably, the prominence of the conservative discourse framework has increased during specific periods, though it has not supplanted the liberal framework entirely. Similarly, the progressive discourse framework has shown a steady growth trajectory, particularly in narratives like the "oppressed athletes" storyline. These shifts highlight not only *The New York Times*' strategic adjustments in its reporting approach over different historical contexts but also its nuanced and multifaceted interpretation of China's Olympic participation. This evolution underscores the transition from a predominantly liberal framework to a more diversified set of discourse frameworks, illustrating the newspaper's increasing complexity and adaptability in addressing the needs of diverse readerships and responding to the demands of a politically polarized environment.

Overall, Figure 1 below explains the process of discourse analysis in *The New York Times*' Sports Coverage, and Table 5 shows to what discourse frame core discourse and specific topics correspond one by one. Specific agendas and core discourses together form the representation pathway of discourse on China's Olympic involvement. These core discourses are subsequently integrated into the news narratives through various ideological discourse frames—liberal, conservative, and progressive. Each frame not only shapes the representation of the core discourse but also embeds it within a particular ideological context, thereby influencing the narrative's reception by the public. Furthermore, these discourse frames employ distinct construction mechanisms to embed the discourse within the narrative. Broadly, these mechanisms can be categorized into three types: reinforcement, which underscores the consistency and strengthening of the core discourse; cumulation, which denotes a gradual aggregation and layering of narrative elements; and dramatization, which amplifies the narrative's emotional and rhetorical impact. By analyzing these construction mechanisms and their interaction with ideological discourse frames, the study uncovered the multifaceted ways in which *The New York Times* shapes and communicates ideological content in relation to China's portrayal in the Olympic discourse. This approach not only contributes to our understanding of media framing but also provides insights into the ideological undercurrents that permeate sports journalism.

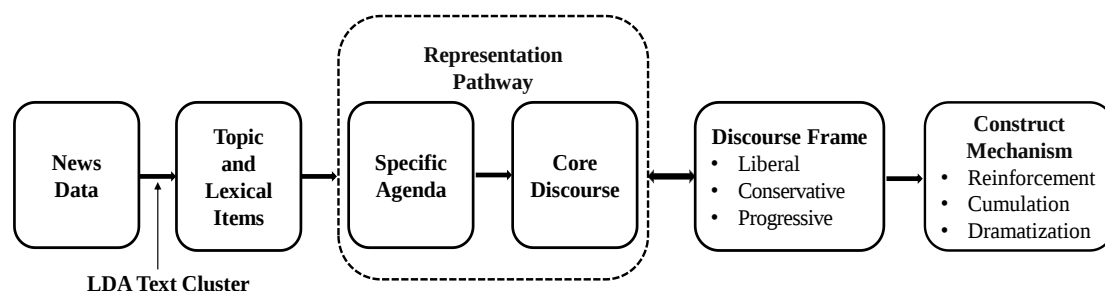


Figure 1: Process of Discourse Analysis in *The New York Times'* Sports Coverage

Discourse Frame	Core Discourse	Specific Agenda	Construction Mechanism
Liberal Discourse of Human rights First	Medal machine and Whole national system Discourse	Beijing (2008): Topic 1 Tokyo(2020): Topic 7 Pairs(2024): Topic 7	Reinforcement approach
	Economic collapse Discourse	Beijing (2008) : Topic 12 Pairs(2024): Topic 2	Reinforcement approach
	Human rights Discourse	Beijing (2008) : Topic4, 5 Rio (2016) : Topic 1 Tokyo (2020): Topics 6	Cumulation approach
Conservative Discourse of American Supremacy	Ultra-nationalism Discourse	Beijing (2008): Topic 2 London(2012): Topics 4, 8 Tokyo(2020): Topics 8, 9, 10 Pairs(2024): Topic 6	Cumulation approach
	International rules Discourse	Rio (2016) : Topic 2 Pairs(2024): Topic 6	Cumulation approach
Progressive Discourse of Progress and Equality	Environmental Protection Discourse	Beijing(2008): Topic 10	Dramatization approach
	Earthquake	Beijing(2008): Topic 13	Dramatization

	Victims Discourse		approach
	Oppressed Athletes Discourse	Beijing(2008): Topic 7 London(2012): Topic 1 Rio(2016): Topics 3, 5, 6 Tokyo(2020): Topic 2 Pairs(2024): Topics 1, 10	Dramatization approach

Table 5: Discourse Frames, Core Discourses, and Construction Mechanisms in *The New York Times*' Coverage of China-Related Olympic Topics

Conclusion and Discussion

The politicization of sports has become a significant topic in Western media in recent years, leading to the construction of core discourse and discourse frameworks by media outlets to convey their views on the topic. *The New York Times* is one such media outlet that has been at the forefront of this discourse construction. Overall, its discourse construction on the politicization of sports reflects a belief that sports can be a powerful tool for social change and shift in the global order, and journalists and editors have asserted political discourse in sporting mega-events, even though the intersection of sports and politics can be complex and controversial.

American sociologist Freidson (2001) defines professionalism as a “third logic” beyond the logic of capital and state power, as a spirit of higher authority beyond capital and state, and as a conscious attitude of service to the public (Pan and Lu, 2017). *The New York Times* is considered a credible and relatively objective professional media with a political attitude more in line with the liberal Democrats of the neutral left. However, according to the Pew Research Center, the credibility of the U.S. mainstream media has been declining gradually in recent years (Mitchell et al., 2019), which also indicates that *The New York Times* has fallen off its original track and shaken the foundations of journalistic professionalism at different levels and to different degrees.

This study analyzed the discursive construction strategy of *The New York Times*' China-related coverage during the previous Olympic Games through the process of core discourse and discourse frame analysis. It found that the discourse framework constructed by NYT in relation to the politicization of sports is multifaceted; its discourse frames present a pluralistic character, and the reporters use a combination of three discourse frames of American political discourse,

rather than in the framework of liberal discourse. The construction mechanism of the discourse frames reflects its fragmented ideologies, in which the so-called journalistic professionalism is also entangled. In the milieu of escalating great-power rivalry, pervasive politicization of sports, and China's incrementally expanding clout in the global sports domain, *The New York Times* employs a multifaceted discursive approach. Within the liberal discourse framework, the newspaper constructs core discourses such as “Medal Machine Discourse,” “Whole Nation System Discourse,” “Economic Collapse Discourse,” and “Human Rights Discourse.” Within the conservative discourse, it advances the “Extreme Nationalism Discourse,” and within the progressive discourse, it posits narratives of “Environmental Protection,” “Earthquake Victim,” and “Oppressed Athletes.” As a media outlet often categorized under liberal ideology, NYT adopts a nuanced approach in its coverage of Chinese sports. Rather than exclusively employing a discourse framework that aligns with a liberal audience, the publication also incorporates conservative and progressive narratives to cater to a diverse political readership. It creates a comprehensive and multifaceted image of China as a “power political state” that is “disrupting the international order,” “backward in cultural concepts” and with “serious environmental pollution”; This situates China and the United States within a polarized dichotomy, reducing the two nations to two entirely opposing camps and overlooking the diversity and complexity that exist between them. Through the lens of CDA, this study illustrates how NYT ideologically driven reporting deepens the US-China divide. By emphasizing “our good things” and highlighting “their bad things,” NYT not only perpetuates an “us versus them” dichotomy but further categorizes China as an out-group member (Wodak, 2011, p. 44; Van Dijk, 2011, pp. 380–396). This has conformed to the ideological needs of audiences with differing viewpoints, and amplified the differences between the two countries to facilitate the formation of stigmatized perceptions of China among the audience, thereby exacerbating the ideological confrontation between Chinese and American values.

Research findings indicate that Olympic coverage related to China using political discourse frameworks consistently exhibit a derogatory portrayal of China's national image. Within the three political discourse frameworks, journalist emphasizing negative political issues or weaknesses in China's national image, thereby creating an unfavorable media atmosphere surrounding China. From the perspective of western centralism, Western countries' positions and values often dominate international politics and media, leading to the marginalization or denigration of other countries and cultures. Within the thinking pattern of Western-centralism, journalists from *The New York Times*, for instance, may view China as an

out-group member and employ political frameworks to assess China's actions, possibly based on considerations of sport policies, human rights, democracy, and other values. This does not necessarily imply a deliberate depreciation of China's national image but rather reflects their differing perspectives on China. In conclusion, the utilization of political frameworks in addressing China-related issues and the alleged biases of left-leaning media in America can be interpreted and examined through the lens of Western-centralism and the concept of in-group favouritism. As Pierre Bourdieu states in "Program for a sociology of sport" (1988), "the space of sports is not a self-contained universe." Not only does the discourse frame in *The New York Times*' reporting reflect the current social situation of ideological polarization in the United States, but more importantly, in the future sports international publicity, it is worthwhile to continue to explore how to construct a discourse frame and core sports discourse based on China's own characteristics.

Limitations

This study has limitations. Initially, a subset of sports news in NYT, like "Comic and Ping-Pong Champ," (Table 3, Topic 3) and broader topics (Table 2, Topic 2) avoid political bias, challenging integration into Kling's framework and indicating editorial balancing strategies in news generating. Additionally, since Kling's model is U.S.-centric, this NYT case study prompts further research on its applicability in global media contexts, suggesting future expansion to diverse media outlets and capitalist countries.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix

Topic	Specific issues	Lexical items
1	Beijing Olympic Games event summary	Olympic gold team medal machines games Chinese women united sports athletes win record American
2	Hong Kong hosted equestrian events	Hong Kong Chinese horses square center events residents government equestrian construction tang foreigners designed mainland
3	Tennis tournament	tennis Williams Federer won Wimbledon Russia Dementieva Nadal court Zheng singles French Li ranked beat Serena
4	Police detain Tibetan independence protesters	Tibetan Dalai lama government police protests Lhasa violence security march western authorities monks foreign media
5	Olympic torch relay blocked in London	Olympic torch relay committee Chinese white ceremony London pollution officials IOC police flame security international protesters route rogge

6	Yao Ming	season Yao star Houston Ming rockets player leading participates in the Beijing Olympics	basketball national career Chinese seasons participation NBA treated ambassador
7	Liu Xiang	Olympic athletes suffered hurdles star won record Li withdrew from the competition	u Xiang race track training crashes meter 110
8	Women's Gymnastics	Chinese team gold women won medal Olympic gymnastics parents Johnson yang competition Chen Wang champion coach Lin Liukin bronze score family vault silver	
9	Beijing Olympics Games Sponsors	company Chinese sponsors marketing Olympic ads brand cola television coca global athletes sales Mcdonald logo sponsorship international consumers Lenovo	
10	Environmental Protection Issues	Olympic city air pollution quality water center building officials traffic green construction road travel environmental restrictions host visitors	
11	Opening Ceremony Issue	Chinese country film music national history cultural family western ceremony story century modern stadium living square huge	
12	Post-Olympic Inflation in China	market economy prices growth oil Chinese billion global stock business companies money demand investment markets countries bank fund increase rise inflation	
13	Wenchuan Earthquake	earthquake people province government disaster school rescue death Wenchuan Xinhua aid hit collapsed buildings struck damage survivors magnitude Beichuan	

Table 1: LDA-based NYT text clustering on China for Beijing Olympics

Topic	Specific issues	Lexical items
1	Ye Shiwen's win and doping controversy	won gold American 400 doping team Chinese ye final London ahead medal championships finished Iran swimming women record

2	Gymnastics Issues	Olympic London won gold potro grand team singles zou games ring championships medal play match china Deng record
3	Sun Yang wins championship	champion team American international Chinese competition swimming Australian swimmers sun coach record won water competitors 400 gold
4	Hong Kong Issues	Hong Kong mainland public residents 1997 birth opinion prices pregnant visitors born hospitals colony property
5	Tennis Issues	match Federer Williams Murray serve tennis court Sharapova doubles break singles Wimbledon li game career Roddick roger win
6	Table Tennis Issue	table Zhang gold medal team ping tennis stone brown pong person perform win sports
7	London Olympic Games event summary	gold team medal won Olympic women match final Chinese American games London meter bronze medals play event players silver record
8	China-India Border Issue	Chinese India government Asia police international security officials ministry freedom Delhi corruption foreign Xinhua detained surveillance protests

Table 2: LDA-based NYT text clustering on China for London Olympics

Topic	Specific issues	Lexical items
1	NBA and WNBA Issues	basketball league sport women club money Olympic final won stacking Chinese fans players NBA WNBA association gold
2	Swimming events	Fu Yuanhui Chinese American team athletes medals win national bronze Rio performance Wang backstroke dominated
3	Comic and Ping Pong Champ	table tennis Wu Friedlander shuttles match playing tournament play fans feathers Rio matches club singles professional

4	Women's Swimming	swimming Chinese league national training Australia play global swimmers team center Olympic association 15 American major win
5	Sun Yang's victory and antidoping issues	Chinese club American Beijing won team sun doping Horton anti association Olympic Australian
6	Efimova and Ye Shiwen Doping Controversy	games IOC team Efimova athletes gold won Russian Olympics medal Ye doping women sport Chinese anti-doping
7	Beach Volleyball Tournament	sand beach Copacabana volleyball games deep Olympics rio athletes season Ipanema won summer women popular

Table 3: LDA-based NYT text clustering on China for Rio Olympics

Topic	Specific issues	Lexical items
Topic 1	Guan Chencheng wins the championship	won beam balance medal Biles Chencheng bronze Tokyo Guan finished difficult return winning silver gymnast pike athlete
Topic 2	Gong Lijiao interviewed by CCTV	gong women masculine reporter partner post Weibo life medalist plans appearance discourse marriage CCTV Lijiao physical
Topic 3	Syrian table tennis players come to China for training	Zaza table 11 Liu tennis Tokyo Olympics games war Syria match fight train tough tournament
Topic 4	Hong Kong athletes win in Tokyo Olympics	Hong Kong people Chinese Olympics flag anthem national fencing Cheung won Beijing political police British medals Haughey 100 competitor celebrating
Topic 5	Yufei Zhang wins the championship	meter Yufei smith butterfly 200 won Olympic record Zhang medal swimming seconds strongest flickinger stroke narrowly Americans securing Hali
Topic 6	NBA Issues	players NBA basketball Bryant Nike shoes ad

			Kobe	popular	professional	golden	Lebron		
			signature	featuring	retirement	performance			
Topic 7	Epidemic	of	athletes	games	vaccine	Tokyo	government	Japan	
	COVID19	affects	pandemic	Chinese	American	medal	public	health	
	Olympic Games		Japanese	vaccinated					
Topic 8	Xinjiang Issue		games	Olympic	athletes	boycott	Beijing	Chinese	
			officials	human	rights	IOC	Xinjiang	genocide	
			coronavirus	political					
Topic 9	Hong Kong Issues		team	government	vaccine	Chinese	national	party	
			coronavirus	public	Kong	athletes	president		
			mainland	Beijing	Hong	Australia			
Topic 10	Taiwan Issue		Chinese	Olympic	women	games	sport	players	box
			Taiwan	north	gold	team	position-relative		
			companies	Beijing					

Table 4: LDA-based NYT text clustering on China for Tokyo Olympics