

Climate Change in Chinese Newspapers 2000–2020: Discursive Strategies of Consolidating Hegemony

Mengrong Zhang

 ORCID: 0000-0002-9402-4980

University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract: Since China’s environmental policy is defined as top-down “authoritarian environmentalism”, political propaganda and media censorship heavily affect the communication of climate change. Hence, conducting an investigation of climate change communication in the context of China is a valuable exercise. This article uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how the Chinese Press reported on, and discursively constructed climate change through the employment of a series of discursive strategies, over a 20-year period, 2000-2020. The findings indicate that news reporting on climate change was in consistent alignment with the ruling Communist Party’s environmental policies during these two decades, facilitating the consolidation of the government’s hegemony.

Keywords: climate change; discursive strategies; China; Chinese newspapers; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is a complex phenomenon connected to a series of environmental hazards, which constitute a major threat to the planet (IPCC, 2021). Inevitably, threats to the ecological environment bring multi-layered changes both to society and individuals, such as in global or domestic climate change policies, economic development strategies, social structures, culture, energy development, or resource allocation (cf. Dryzek et al., 2011). As the hazards of climate change are mainly invisible to humans, most people access relevant information through the media. Therefore, in this era of unprecedented environmental change, the issue of how change is constructed in media and

communicational practices has become significant. A parallel challenge is how to mediate the world under the impact of climate change.

Ever since anthropogenic climate change first appeared in public agendas in the mid-1980s, questions about climate change communication and how to effectively communicate this issue to the public have increased considerably (Moser, 2010). Since the mid-1990s, research about climate change communication has appeared in academic journals. Communication scholars have begun to study how climate change can be given meaning through language, discourse, and media technology, as it mediates people's thoughts and behaviors. Initially, the research mainly focused on the public's understanding of climate change and risks, and then gradually expanded to a wider range of research fields, such as rhetorical analysis, explanatory qualitative research, and quantitative investigation and experimentation (Chadwick, 2017). Among these studies, a large number focus on content analysis of media news reports to determine themes and frames (e.g., Schäfer & O'Neill, 2017; Spence & Pidgeon, 2010; Vu et al., 2019); observe newsrooms and study news norms reflected in media reports (e.g., Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Schäfer & Painter, 2021); or explore information design and persuasiveness (e.g., Bolsen & Shapiro, 2017; O'Neill, 2020).

China has become the world's largest emitter of CO₂ annually since 2006, and climate change has seriously affected its ecological environment (Third National Assessment Report, 2015). Gilley (2012, p. 287) defines China's environmental policy as top-down "authoritarian environmentalism", in which, as Lynch (1999) argues, political propaganda influences communication about climate change in China's controlled media environment. Thus, investigating climate change news reporting in the Chinese context is a valuable exercise. Wang (2021) investigated 81 Chinese studies on climate change communication and found that they mainly focused on media content and discourse frameworks, and public awareness strategies analysis adopting primarily content analysis methods and approaches (e.g., Han et al., 2017; Xie, 2015).

To add to the existing literature from a critical perspective, this article adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), combining textual and contextual analysis to investigate how the Chinese Press reported on, and discursively constructed, climate change, through the employment of a series of discursive strategies from 2000 to 2020. The findings indicate that news reporting on climate change was in consistent alignment with the ruling Communist Party's environmental policies during these twenty years, facilitating the consolidation of the government's hegemony.

CLIMATE CHANGE POLITICS AND MEDIA IN CHINA

The media plays a central role in terms of informing public knowledge. Reporting on the environment and on climate change is challenging for journalists and news media, as it involves communicating “risk in the context of uncertainty” (Painter, 2013, p. 31). The challenges relate to the complex nature of the climate change phenomenon, the high degree of uncertainty, the difficulty of communicating scientific information, and sometimes the journalists’ lack of adequate knowledge (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Moser, 2010; Painter, 2013; Schäfer & O’Neill, 2017; Schäfer & Painter, 2021). These challenges impact journalists’ ability to evaluate information properly, which makes them dependent on their sources for the evaluation of information, increasing the risk that journalists adopt specific aspects and interpretations that promote certain economic interests and political agendas on environmental issues.

In China, where the state controls the media, climate change news reporting seems to have been supporting the Chinese government’s political project of maintaining its hegemony. The literature shows that the media in China have followed the prioritizations in the environmental policy set by the state. China ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1993, and since then the Chinese government has commemorated the “China Environment Centennial Journey” to support media reports on environmental issues, sponsoring also reporters to conduct investigations on selected environmental topics (Yang & Calhoun, 2007). During the same period, the Chinese media gradually began to pay some attention to environmental issues, and the number of pertinent news reports showed a mild increase.

Although China signed the Kyoto Protocol in 1998, its policies did not show any positive intent to protect the environment until 2007 due to the country’s economic development priorities (Kwon & Hanlon, 2015). At the Kyoto conference, the Chairman of the Committee on International Relations of the U.S. House of Representatives, Benjamin Gilman, described China’s position on climate change as a “Three Nos” policy, in which China would have a) no obligations, b) no voluntary commitments, and c) no binding negotiations in the future (Zhang, 2013). While international media were fairly critical of China’s policy (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2018), the Chinese media in this period were very cautious when reporting climate change issues (Ji & Dan, 2017).

After the United Nations Climate Change meeting held in Bali in 2007, China promised energy-saving and emission reduction measures. At the Copenhagen Summit in December 2009, the Chinese government faced severe criticism for its delaying tactics and refusal to support mandatory targets. From 2010, China’s position gradually changed to take voluntary and effective actions to adapt to climate change and to work with western countries on this issue.

In addition, China began to support the least developed countries, in Africa and Asia, in climate change adaptation and migration (Zhang, 2013). The “Twelfth Five-Year Plan” (2011–2015) signaled China’s policy shift to a new low-carbon development model (Li & Wang, 2012).¹ This shift was reflected in the Chinese media coverage, as climate change was no longer treated as a politically sensitive topic (Ji & Dan, 2017), receiving increased media coverage and attention.

Before elaborating on the theoretical and methodological foundations of this study, it is important to briefly address the specificities of the Chinese media system. China’s media environment is characterized by an elaborate system of control, supervision, and censorship (Tang & Iyengar, 2011). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses the media as a propaganda apparatus, limiting dissent (Zhu, 1990), by formulating political discourse agendas, publicizing official policies, monitoring public opinion, and obtaining political support from the press (Tang & Iyengar, 2011).

The state supervises the media through a management pyramid structure, in which the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee is at the highest level and supervises media propaganda strategies. The Publicity Department of the Central Committee supervises the operation of various media (Tang & Iyengar, 2011), while party-sponsored newspapers such as the *People’s Daily* and *Guangming Daily* set the agenda for other media. After the Chinese economic reforms of the 1970s, China’s media industry began to be commercialized and decentralized. The cultural system reform in 2003 enabled some media to gain economic autonomy (Sukosd & Wang, 2013). Market-oriented news outlets, such as the *Caixin Weekly*, emerged and developed. However, the CCP’s close supervision and control of the media has not been abolished and is still operative.

EXPLORING HEGEMONY THROUGH CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Climate change communication takes place in an environment of pressures and influences by domestic environmental policies, international relations, and corporate interests. As already mentioned, environmental communication takes on specific characteristics in China, being influenced by the country’s political, social, and cultural specificities, and the state’s control of the media’s environment. All of these enable China’s leadership to use climate change communication in the political project of maintaining its hegemony.

1 The Twelfth Five-Year Plan was formulated by the People’s Republic of China to develop the national economy from 2011 to 2015. Introduced in May 2011, it listed anti-corruption, deepening reforms, and environmental protection issues as the key objectives of the initial transformation of the economic structure.

Hegemony, a broadly used concept with Gramscian foundations in its applications in political studies, and in communication and media studies, relates to the consolidation of systems of power and domination in broad socio-political environments (Bates, 1975; Scott, 2001). Scholars exploring the concept emphasize the role of consent in securing hegemony, but also the role of culture, and its institutions, through which consent is largely orchestrated and operationalized (Dow, 1990; Reese, 1990; Scott, 2001). As struggles over hegemony take place in the social realm, they are never finalized and resolved (Fairclough, 1992), even in political systems of tight control. Renewing consent and approval for policies and governance is important, which is the case also in the Chinese context of the single communist party rule.

Part of these struggles of securing or renewing consent take place in the field of media and are of a discursive nature. Discourse as a concept has been used in diverse ways, ranging from narrow linguistic micro-textual to broad macro-textual and contextual approaches (see Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007). This study aligns with critical approaches to discourse that move beyond the micro-textual and micro-contextual frames of reference and look into how meaning and ideological messages are constructed and communicated in texts and social practices. Consistent with this standpoint, is critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1989; 1992; van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), which forms the foundation of this study. Discourse in CDA is a language form of social interaction that is embedded in the social context. In CDA, discourse is defined as social practice (Fairclough, 1989; 1992). Therefore, when conducting CDA, researchers focus not only on the text itself but also on the relationship between the text and social conditions.

In CDA, ideology, critique and power are key interrelated components, to explore and address. Ideology consists of “mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes and evaluations” about the social world and its optimal organization, shared by members of a specific social group (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88). Textual messages often bear traces of different ideological positions and can be considered as a discursive battlefield (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) where these positions are negotiated, legitimated, contested, or reconfigured. As CDA aims to reveal both the obvious persuasive and hidden manipulative intentions in the practice of discourse, it critically analyzes the language use of those in power and is concerned with issues of explicit and hidden domination, discrimination and control, embedded and mediated in discourse (Ietcu, 2006, p. 75; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Thus, CDA is an appropriate research tool to explore “the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96), as well as the potential of resistance, the overthrowing of hegemonies, and the consolidation of new ones.

METHODOLOGY

The present study undertakes a textual and contextual analysis inspired by the principles and tools of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; 1992; van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001) examining how the Chinese newspapers reported on, and discursively constructed climate change, through a series of discursive strategies, between 2000 and 2020.

The analysis of this research is inspired by Carvalho's (2008) framework of textual and contextual analysis, which is adjusted to serve the purposes of this study. Textual analysis in this study focuses on analyzing discursive strategies, lexical choices, thematic focus, and certain formal features, such as genre and text length. The contextual analysis was carried out along two axes: Comparative-synchronic analysis (simultaneous description of the problem in various newspapers) and historical-diachronic analysis (time series and evolution).

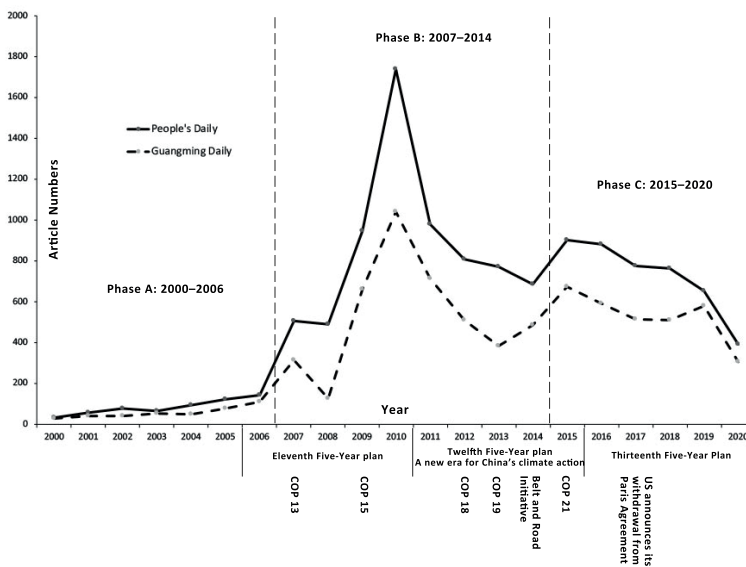
The research has a special focus on discursive strategies, and how they are implemented in the news in order to propose specific ideas, suggest specific interpretations, legitimize or delegitimize certain ideological positions (Doudaki & Boubouka, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2007). These strategies can be both text-specific and broader, pertaining to the selection of specific themes, aspects, actors, sources, within texts but also across texts, time, or media.

Among the discursive strategies that have been identified by scholars engaging in critical analyses of discourse, of high relevance for this study, are the following: expertise (use of experts in the news to provide special knowledge or frameworks of interpretation); quantification (use of data and numbers as tools of persuasion); dramatization (use of emotional language aimed to communicate urgency or intensity); moralization (use of language evoking values, morality or immorality); mystification (use of generalizations and abstraction, creating a vague, opaque environment, helping to conceal practices and information); euphemization/valorization (emphasizing values and merits, and creating a positive image) of self; condemnation (blaming, accusing, creating a negative image) of the other; and, denial (denying the existence of a phenomenon, an attitude or an attribute) (Doudaki, 2018; Doudaki & Boubouka, 2020; Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1992; Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Wodak, 2015).

This study analyzed climate change news articles in *People's Daily* and *Guangming Daily* from 2000 to 2020 (news reports on this topic were rare before 2000). Both newspapers are considered Chinese organ newspapers; they represent the propaganda intention and direction of the Chinese Communist Party and set the agenda for other media (Chan, 2007). The analysis also included a small sample of non-party-sponsored newspaper articles, published in the same period, to facilitate the contextual analysis component of the study.

News samples were gathered from the WiseSearch database² by entering the following keywords: *climate change*, *global warming*, *climate risk*, and *low carbon*, which resulted in a corpus of news articles (N=19,676) from the *People's Daily* (n=11,874) and the *Guangming Daily* (n=7,802) addressing climate change in 2000–2020 (see Figure 1 for a graph of their distribution over time). As indicated in Figure 1, three main phases were identified: 2000–2006, 2007–2014, and 2015–2020. In 2007, the level of news on climate change began to rise significantly, reaching a peak in 2009–2010. The three identified periods are in line with the time nodes of important climate change events, both domestic and international, such as the annual United Nations Climate Conferences (1997–onwards) and the promulgation of the Chinese government's climate policy (2010–onwards). Figure 1 highlights the dates of these climate change events.

Figure 1: Distribution of articles from People's Daily and Guangming Daily on climate change, 2000–2020



Among the corpus of news articles (N= 19,676), a sample of articles of the *People's Daily* (n=35) and the *Guangming Daily* (n=35) were subjected to CDA. The sample was spread across the three periods (2000–2006: n=10; 2007–2014: n=30; 2015–2020: n=30) and was selected by topic relevance, popularity, newspaper layout, news article length and source of information.

2 WiseSearch is a continually expanding media database, known for its comprehensive coverage and data integrity. The database comprises 1,500 printed media and over 10,000 web media news and is updated promptly. Accessed from: <https://lib.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/1184/3788.htm> Tsinghua University

As it concerns the analysis of the non-party-sponsored newspapers, it focused on three outlets, the “outspoken media outlets” (Zhao, 2008, p. 93) *Beijing News* (n=10) and *Southern Weekend* (n=10), and the market-oriented *Caixin Weekly* (n=10). The criteria used to select and analyze the articles from these outlets were the same as for the articles from the *People’s Daily* and the *Guangming Daily*. It shall be noted that the focus of this study is on party-sponsored media, given their prominence in the Chinese context, and the complementary analysis of the non-party-sponsored outlets facilitates the contextual analysis of the media environment and adds to the broader reflective analysis of the study. Its aim is not to serve as a comparative study of party and non-party sponsored media. Thereby, non-party-sponsored newspapers are only selected for reference in a small number of instances based on the number of articles in each of the three periods and the time when each outlet was established (2000–2006: n=4; 2007–2014: n=16; 2015–2020: n=10).

MEDIATING CLIMATE CHANGE UNDER A CHANGING CONTEXT

2000–2006: UNCERTAINTY AND RISK ARE BEING DOWNPLAYED

China has experienced remarkable economic growth since the 1990s. Coal consumption doubled between 2002 and 2008 (Stensdal, 2012), which caused carbon dioxide emissions in 2008 to be more than double compared to 1990 (Wang, 2012). In 2004, former president Hu Jintao promulgated a change of economic development policy. Aiming to better balance economic development and environmental protection, Hu proposed the “Scientific Outlook on Development” (Communist Party Member website, 2017). Still, before 2009, China’s leadership viewed economic benefits as an important driving force for climate change formulation and consequently climate change policies were practically absent (Weiner, 2008).

Although China signed the Kyoto Protocol in 1998, it did not promise emission reduction as part of the Protocol, and its policies had almost no investment plan to reduce carbon emissions (Ji & Dan, 2017). The Kyoto Protocol, with all its limitations, officially came into effect in 2005. Yang and Calhoun (2007, p. 211) describe the concomitant transformation of environmental discourses in China in the early 2000s as a “green sphere”. In direct contrast to Mao’s “war against nature”, this new type of rhetoric emphasized China’s responsibility to protect a fragile environment. In 2005 and 2006, terms such as *risk* and *disaster* began to appear in the media frequently. The *People’s Daily* (14.12.2006) was the first to employ the term *environmental refugees* in a report named “What is an environmental refugee?”.

The Chinese newspapers analyzed during this first period under study aligned with the official approach to climate change and tended to downplay uncertainty when describing climate risk, using several discursive strategies. This finding echoes Geall's (2018, p. 6) observations that, "top-down approaches to climate change in China tend to underplay uncertainty or incomplete knowledge".

The first identified discursive strategy is quantification: the instrumental use of data as a means of persuasion. Hence, the discussion on climate change was only based on past data to explain the seriousness of the problem, instead of future forecast data. For example, in the article "Our country's meteorological experts analyze the root causes of severe high temperature and drought in Chongqing and Sichuan, global warming causes frequent disasters" (*People's Daily*, 30.08.2006) data measured in the past 100 years was used to explain the negative impact of climate change.

The second strategy involved downplaying risk through expertise, which consists of the strategic presence of experts in the news, whose specialized scientific knowledge can ease concerns about future developments. During this first period, the newspapers often included suggestions and evaluations by domestic experts in news articles containing uncertain information about the environment. As the following article emphasizes, "Experts pointed out that although there are still major disputes on the ecological and environmental impact of super large reservoirs in the world, in the general view, there is no obvious evidence showing that reservoirs impact the climate" (*People's Daily*, 30.8.2006). The reference to experts combined with the abstract phrase "in the general view" are used in the article to ease environmental concerns and downplay uncertainty.

The third discursive strategy, which was already introduced in the previous example, was mystification. General and abstract references are often used to alleviate readers' worries about climate risks, as becomes evident in the following article excerpts: "This impact can be minimized through technological improvements and increased adaptability", and "In the next few decades, climate change will not have a major impact on my country's food security" (*People's Daily*, 31.12.2003).

The fourth strategy aimed at downplaying risk involved counterbalancing or overshadowing risk and uncertainty by valorizing and praising China's key ecological protection projects. For example, the article "Xinjiang: Seeing Again the Clear Streams in Shahe" (*People's Daily*, 14.12.2003) described how the Chinese government was spending 10.74 billion RMB to solve the ecological deterioration of the Tarim River Basin. This news article is relatively long (2,986 words), but only about 200 words were used to explain the negative impact of climate change. Instead, the article mainly focused on euphemizing the Chinese policy of ecological protection.

Since there were no market-oriented media during this period, the study examined for reference newspapers such as the *Beijing News* and *Southern Weekend*, both of which have relatively left-leaning political views. Although these media do not use overly politicized words, their content is very close to the party-sponsored media. For example, in the following *Southern Weekend* (22.9.2005) news article, the discursive strategy of euphemization was adopted, praising a national project to downplay risks:

the government's 'lighting project' brings solar products and technology to thousands of households in remote pastoral areas in Xinjiang [...] after a long period of worshipping nature, human beings discovered that it is better to create a sustainable solar energy source than to follow the example of *Kuafu chasing the Sun*.

In citing the mythical story of Kuafu, who symbolizes the desire of the ancient Chinese to conquer nature, the report conveys the government's confidence in climate change governance. The two newspapers also contain some popular science content, which is not included in the party-sponsored newspapers of the same period, as in the article "How do we mitigate climate change?" (*Southern Weekend*, 22.9.2005).

Between 2000 and 2006, climate change appears gradually in the news, however, it is not clearly labeled as an issue of public concern. The discursive construction of climate change into a public risk is contrary to the government's economic development strategy at this time, and scientific uncertainty is used in the news to maintain the government's value stance.

2007–2014: POLITICAL EVENTS DRIVE REPORTING TO SHAPE THE NATIONAL IMAGE

Figure 1 demonstrates that news reports on climate change have experienced significant growth since 2007, a watershed year in China's climate change policy. Since the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006–2010) for the development of the national economy introduced renewable energy and air pollution goals, China's climate policy started to develop rapidly (Stensdal, 2012, p. 4). The Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011–2015) contained, as Kwon and Hanlon (2015) emphasize, ambitious environmental goals and is widely regarded as the most environmentally friendly of the previous five-year plans, setting goals to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels and improve energy efficiency.

It was during this period that the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, held in October 2007, proposed the construction of an ecological civilization. At the same time, the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference was held in Bali, in December. These major climate events prompted

the publication of news reports on climate change, by Chinese media.³ The terms *emission reduction* (first appeared in 2007) and *low carbon* (first appeared in 2009) began to gradually appear in the media during this period.

Driven by major climate events, news articles during this period were related to political events, both international and domestic. China appeared in the news as showing a positive attitude towards the mitigation of climate change at a global level, especially in 2007. For example, the article “Wen Jiabao [the then Prime Minister of China] talks with Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda” (*People’s Daily*, 29.12.2007) appeared on the news page with a broad picture of the two leaders’ meeting. Similarly, the article “Xi Jinping Meets British Guests” (*People’s Daily*, 20.12.2007) reported on the meeting between the Chinese President Xi Jinping and Britain’s Prime Minister David Cameron, emphasizing cooperation on climate change issues. The party-sponsored newspapers’ coverage of climate risks during this period appeared to echo the political leadership’s strategy of building China’s national image and international reputation through the communication of its climate change policy, frequently using the discursive strategy of euphemization.

A noteworthy aspect is that after the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 15), China received considerable negative coverage around the world (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2018). This was addressed by the Chinese party-sponsored newspapers with the implementation of the two interconnected main strategies of euphemizing the self and condemning the other. The first strategy consisted of the continuous representation of China’s positive image, through the reporting of the cooperative attitude described above. The second strategy’s focus was the fight back against international negative coverage by attempting to delegitimize the accusations, sometimes also by reversing blame and re-attributing the critiques back onto Western countries, such as the USA. The news articles by the party-sponsored newspapers did not omit the international negative coverage against China, but instrumentally included parts of it, in order to challenge and delegitimize it. For example, *Guangming Daily’s* article “China’s performance on climate change is commendable” (25.12.2009) stated that “the British and American media recently hyped China’s ‘hijacking’ of the COP 15. This conference was a failure, and the failure was attributed to China.” This news article quotes Professor Lin Zhicong (Ateneo University, Philippines) confirming that China is to be commended on the issue of climate change. The undermining

3 In 2007, a series of major events took place in the field of environmental protection both within China and internationally. China established the National Leading Group for Addressing Climate Change, issued the “China National Plan for Addressing Climate Change”, and put forward the requirements for controlling greenhouse gas emissions in the “Eleventh Five-Year Plan” for National Environmental Protection. The Chinese Academy of Sciences also released the National Climate Change Assessment Report.

and de-legitimization of the western accusations are put to effect through the use of verbs such as “hyped” and “hijacking” (the latter put in quotation marks, which adds to the de-legitimization of the western media’s claims).

The use of experts is again instrumental. For example, in the article “The international community positively evaluated the Copenhagen Accord” (*People’s Daily*, 24.12.2009), Knut Alfsan, director of the Norwegian Climate Research Centre, was cited as saying he believed that the accusations against China were “unfair” and that “China has done much better than the United States.” This is an example of combined expertise, denial, and moralization, where an expert denies the accusations against China, labeling them as “unfair”.

During this period, the non-party-sponsored newspapers gradually began to pay more attention to the issue of climate change, following the general trend. In the following example, quantification, euphemization and condemnation are used as discursive strategies, to demonstrate China’s positive attitude towards climate change governance:

China can easily surpass the 2020 wind and solar energy targets and may even triple these targets [...] a large share of the government’s ‘4 trillion [RMB] economic stimulus program’ is allocated for low-carbon projects. 210 billion [RMB] will be used for environmental protection and greenhouse gas emission reduction (*Southern Weekend*, 25.6.2009).

The article then adopts an accusatory tone: “In fact, to achieve these goals, China needs more technical and financial support, but Europe has not yet reached an agreement on the amount of aid. The EU’s assistance to China’s environmental funds is not unconditional” (ibid.)

Compared with party-sponsored newspapers, non-party-sponsored newspapers are more likely to adopt a human-interest framework (Luther & Zhou, 2005; Yang, 2009). The *Beijing News* and *Southern Weekend*’s climate change news articles were no longer limited to popular science or political issues; instead, they tried to report climate risk from an economic perspective, as indicated by the following article, which encouraged low-carbon and environmentally friendly lifestyles: “Low-carbon households share their books and discuss energy-saving coups to support 21 households to carry out energy-saving renovations such as with water and electricity” (*Beijing News*, 20.11.2011). Still, these news articles, even if they expanded the range of genres and thematic angles, did not diverge from the official policy’s prioritizations and representations.

In summary, the national and international agendas of climate change politics moved forward in 2007 and gave considerable impetus to the news coverage of the issue. The Chinese media seemed to align with the country’s strategy

in using the climate change policy as a means of building its national image as environmentally conscious and responsible.

2015–2020: A NEW LEADER OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE WORLD

The Paris Agreement was adopted at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21). Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the opening ceremony of the Paris Conference entitled “Work Together to Build a Win-Win, Equitable and Balanced Governance Mechanism on Climate Change”. This was the first time a Chinese paramount leader attended the UN Climate Conference. In this period, China’s Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) was also initiated.⁴ In the State Council’s notice on the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan regarding the Control of Greenhouse Gas Emissions (gov.cn, 2016), it was clearly stated that 2015 was a crucial year for the negotiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and that it was necessary to insist on “common but different responsibility”.

Figure 1 shows that the number of news articles on climate change began to level off from 2009 to 2015. The third period from 2015 to 2020 is similar to the second in terms of volume but also in that political events, such as climate conferences and government reports, drove the news stories. However, a key difference is that the main focus of the newspapers’ coverage during this period was to demonstrate China’s leadership in the world.

China issued the “China–Africa Policy” in 2006, which aims to strengthen cooperation with African countries, and according to which China is committed to establishing a new type of strategic partnership with Africa (Ajakaiye, 2006), which includes environmental aspects. Correspondingly, China–Africa relations feature in the news during the same period. As one article mentions, reflecting the idea of China’s international leadership, “China provides tangible support to African countries (...) for addressing climate change” (*People’s Daily*, 7.12.2015).

During the tenure of U.S. President Donald Trump, relations between the United States and China deteriorated sharply. After the U.S. announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017, the image of joint Chinese-American efforts portrayed by the Chinese media was deeply disrupted. At the same time, Chinese media began to refute the “China threat theory”, consistently employing the discursive strategies of positive self-image representation and negative other-image representation by reversing and re-attributing responsibility and blame to the USA. As the image of China as a world leader in climate change policy began to develop, the portrayal of the relationship between China and the U.S. changed from collaborative to antagonistic. While in 2013, news articles

⁴ The Thirteenth Five-Year Plan aims for the development of the national economy from 2016 to 2020.

would stress that “China-U.S. relations maintain a positive and stable development trend” (*People’s Daily*, 16.11.2013), in 2018 they would emphasize that “The U.S. leaders stigmatized China in their speeches and deliberately labeled China’s diplomacy as ‘expansionism’... all absurd statements full of arrogance and hypocrisy” (*Guangming Daily*, 18.10.2018).

The news sampled from this period shows that moralization was applied frequently as a discursive strategy, following President Xi’s advocacy for the “Community of Common Destiny”, when reporting on the issue of climate change. Statements such as “We call on people from all over the world to work together to build a community with a shared future for mankind” and “We must adhere to environmental friendliness, cooperate in tackling climate change, and protect the earth” repeatedly appeared in the news (*People’s Daily*, 28.10.2017).

Self-euphemization combined with expertise was also used as a discursive strategy, to defend the Communist Party’s political hegemony. For example, on 8.4.2018, *Guangming Daily* reported on the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ work on carbon sequestration in China’s terrestrial ecosystems. The article concluded that the research “supports China’s international negotiations on climate change and provides enlightenment for other countries. It conveys Chinese wisdom in coping with global climate change”.

After 2015, Caixin News Corporation gradually began to gain influence and became a representative of market-oriented news media. This research analyzed news (after 2015) from *Caixin.com* and *Caixin Weekly*. Similar to the party-sponsored news media, *Caixin’s* news coverage hardly talks about the actual climate change crisis and its related disasters. However, in a unique way, *Caixin* did discuss low-carbon development and green energy in an economic frame. For example, in a *Caixin.com* (26.8.2019) news article, the following sentences arouse people’s attention to climate change:

The overemphasis on the market makes people ignore and underestimate the impact of climate change. Economists regard climate change as an external problem or market failure, which means people cannot fully realize that it is a matter of life and death.

In this example, which uses the strategy of dramatization to enhance the sense of urgency, while there is no direct critique addressed towards the state, criticism is orientated towards business and economic activity.

In conclusion, during the 2015–2020 period, international political events such as the signing of the Paris Agreement and the United States’ exit from the Agreement, largely drove the media’s news agenda on climate change. In China, climate change was used as a political slogan for shaping China’s image through the news media, as a world leader in environmental protection.

CONCLUSIONS

In today's mediated and mediatised world, news media performs a key role in the mediated journey of climate change. Over time, climate change has gradually transformed from an early public debate within the scientific community to a political issue and a global crisis discussed widely by the media (Lester & Cottle, 2009).

This article studied how Chinese newspapers covered the issue of climate change between 2000 and 2020. Following the principles of critical discourse analysis and combining textual and contextual analysis, the study explored how the Chinese news coverage of climate change evolved in the 20-year research period, following broader socio-political trends, but more importantly, aligning with the Chinese government's shifting attention toward the issue. In the early 2000s, the issue of the environment and climate change began to appear in Chinese media. However, until 2006, newspapers downplayed the risks and uncertainties of climate change by reporting highly praised environmental protection projects and criticizing climate change mitigation efforts in Western countries. Since 2007, the news media's agenda has been strongly influenced by political events, such as climate conferences, international cooperation, and national policies. There are very few news reports on the actual climate change risks and threats. After 2015, the newspapers studied used climate change to demonstrate China's leadership in the world.

As the analysis showed, climate change communication is operative in the realm of political struggles for the consolidation of disparate ideological positions. The news coverage of climate change in China by the party-sponsored newspapers has been in consistent alignment with the official state environmental policy over the issue, facilitated by the use of specific discursive strategies, such as expertise, self-euphemization, and other-condemnation. The non-party-sponsored newspapers' coverage points to a slightly diversified media environment, which might be raising some critical issues in relation to environmental risks, but is still not directly critical towards the state, following the official agenda trends. The news coverage of climate change, which would be expected to include diverse and comprehensive reporting on this complex phenomenon, appears to be in the service of the official communication of China's environmental policy both domestically and internationally. The state uses the media coverage to build China's image as a major actor in global climate governance and to consolidate the Chinese government's hegemony.

This research provides empirical insight into changes in climate change news reporting by Chinese newspapers. However, it must be acknowledged that one of the limitations of this study is that the analysis focuses on newspapers. It shall be mentioned that from 2008 to 2011 the internet – and especially social

media – played an active role in Chinese politics and public life. Mainstream newspapers such as the *People's Daily* and the *Guangming Daily* started to use the internet to disseminate their news, including setting up accounts on social media platforms. An exploration in the context of multiple and hybrid media could therefore provide a productive direction for further research. At the same time, focusing on party-sponsored media given their prominence in the Chinese context is considered valuable, despite the limitations.

In conclusion, this study explored the discursive construction of a complex phenomenon that deals with change. The media under study mediate change through the reporting of climate change-related news. While mediating change, they construct change as a phenomenon with dimensions, risks, actors, failures, and successes. At the same time, the mediation of change is put in the service of maintaining stability. There is consistency across time as it concerns the deployment of discursive strategies through which climate change news coverage is set in alignment with the state environmental policies and the preferred way of their communication. This consistent alignment serves to maintain the status quo, by consolidating the Chinese government's hegemony, in this case through the construction of the country's image as a global leader in climate change policy and management.

REFERENCES

- Ajakaiye, O. (2006). *China and Africa: Opportunities and challenges*. AERC Scoping Studies on China-Africa Economic Relations, African Economic Research Consortium (AERC). Retrieved April 11, 2022 from <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/93163>
- Bates, T. R. (1975). Gramsci and the theory of hegemony. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36(2), 351–366.
- Bolsen, T., & Shapiro, M. A. (2017). Strategic framing and persuasive messaging to influence climate change perceptions and decisions. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.385
- Boykoff, M. T., & Boykoff, J. M. (2007). Climate change and journalistic norms: A case-study of US mass-media coverage. *Geoforum*, 38(6), 1190–1204.
- Carpentier, N., & De Cleen, B. (2007). Bringing discourse theory into media studies: The applicability of discourse theoretical analysis (DTA) for the study of media practises and discourses. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 6(2), 265–293.
- Carvalho, A. (2008). Media(ted) discourse and society. *Journalism Studies*, 9(2), 161-177.
- Chadwick, A. (2017). Climate change communication. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.22
- Chan, A. (2007). Guiding public opinion through social agenda-setting: China's media policy since the 1990s. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 16(53), 547-559.

- Communist Party Member website (2017). Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party. Retrieved January 7, 2022 from www.12371.cn/special/zggcdzc/zggcdzcqw/
- Doudaki, V., & Boubouba, A. (2020). *Discourses of legitimation in the news. The case of the economic crisis in Greece*. London: Routledge.
- Doudaki, V. (2018). Discourses of legitimation in the news: The case of the Cypriot bailout. In V. Doudaki & N. Carpentier (eds.), *Cyprus and its conflicts. Representations, materialities and cultures* (pp. 142-162). New York: Berghahn Books.
- Dow, B. J. (1990). Hegemony, feminist criticism and the Mary Tyler Moore show. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 7(3), 261–274.
- Dryzek, J. S., Norgaard, R. B., & Schlosberg, D. (2011). *The Oxford handbook of climate change and society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London and New York: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Geall, S. (2018). Climate-change journalism and “Edgeball” politics in contemporary China. *Society and Natural Resources*, 31(5), 541–555.
- Gilley, B. (2012). Authoritarian environmentalism and China’s response to climate change. *Environmental Politics*, 21(2), 287–307.
- Gov.cn (2016). *Guo wu yuan guan yu yin fa “shi san wu” kong zhi wen shi qi ti pai fang gong zuo fang an de tong zhi – Zheng fu xin xi gong kai zhuan lan* [Notice of the State Council on issuing the work plan for controlling greenhouse gas emissions during the 13th five-year plan_Government information disclosure column]. Retrieved April 11, 2022 from http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-11/04/content_5128619.htm
- Han, J, Sun, S., & Lu, Y. (2017). Framing climate change: A content analysis of Chinese mainstream newspapers from 2005 to 2015. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 2889–2911.
- Iețcu, I. (2006). Argumentation, dialogue and conflicting moral economies in post-1989 Romania: An argument against the trade union movement. *Discourse & Society*, 17(5), 627–650.
- IPCC (2021). *Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying*. United Nations. <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>
- Ji, L., & Dan, L. (2017). Climate change communication in China. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*. doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.467
- Kwon, K., & Hanlon, R. (2015). A comparative review for understanding elite interest and climate change policy in China. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 18(4), 1177–1193.
- Lester, L., & Cottle, S. (2009). Visualizing climate change: Television news and ecological citizenship. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 920–936.
- Li, J., & Wang, X. (2012). Energy and climate policy in China’s twelfth five-year plan: A paradigm shift. *Energy Policy*, 41, 519–528.
- Luther, C., & Zhou, X. (2005). Within the boundaries of politics: News framing of SARS in China and the United States. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 857–872.
- Lynch, D. C. (1999). *After the propaganda state: Media, politics, and ‘Thought Work’ in reformed China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Moser, S. (2010). Communicating climate change: History, challenges, process and future directions. *WIREs Climate Change*, 1(1), 31–53.
- O’Neill, S. (2020). More than meets the eye: A longitudinal analysis of climate change imagery in the print media. *Climatic Change*, 163, 9–26.
- Painter, J. (2013). *Climate change in the media: Reporting risk and uncertainty*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Rauchfleisch, A., & Schäfer, M. S. (2018). Climate change politics and the role of china: A window of opportunity to gain soft power? *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 5(1–2): 39–59.
- Reese, S. D. (1990). The news paradigm and the ideology of objectivity: A socialist at the Wall Street journal. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 7(4), 390–409.
- Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2009). The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 87–121). London: Sage.
- Schäfer, M. S., & Painter, J. (2021). Climate journalism in a changing media ecosystem: Assessing the production of climate change related news around the world. *WIREs Climate Change*, 12(1). doi:10.1002/wcc.675
- Schäfer, M. S., & O’Neill, S. (2017). Frame analysis in climate change communication. *Oxford Encyclopedia of Climate Change Communication*. doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.487
- Scott, J. (2001). *Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Spence, A., & Pidgeon, N. F. (2010). Framing and communicating climate change: The effects of distance and outcome frame manipulations. *Global Environmental Change*, 20, 656–667.
- Stensdal, I. (2012). *China’s climate-change policy 1988–2011: From zero to hero?* Fridtjof Nansen Institute, FNI-rapport 9/2012. www.fni.no/publications/china-s-climate-change-policy-1988-2011-from-zero-to-hero
- Sukosd, M., & Wang, L. (2013). From centralization to selective diversification: A historical analysis of media structure and agency in China, 1949–2013. *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 10(4), 83–104.
- Tang, W., & Iyengar, S. (2011). The emerging media system in China: Implications for regime change. *Political Communication*, 28, 263–267.
- Third national assessment report on climate change editorial committee (2015). *Third national assessment report on climate change*. Peking: Science Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1992). Discourse and the denial of racism. *Discourse & society*, 3(1), 87–118.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. Hamilton (eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352–371). Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 91–112.
- Van Leeuwen, T., & Wodak, R. (1999). Legitimizing immigration control: A discourse-historical analysis. *Discourse Studies*, 1(1), 83–118.
- Vu, H. T., Liu, Y., & Tran, D. V. (2019). Nationalizing a global phenomenon: A study of how the press in 45 countries and territories portrays climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 58. doi: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.101942
- Wang, B. (2021). *China’s transition on climate change communication and governance – from zero to hero*. Singapore: Springer.

- Wang, W. (2012). Overview of climate change policies and prospects for carbon markets in China. *Les Cahiers de la Chaire Economie du Climat* [The Notebooks of the Climate Economics Chair], 18. www.chaireeconomieduclimat.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/12-07-10-Cahier-ID-n18-Wang.pdf
- Weiner, J. B. (2008). Climate change policy and policy change in China. *UCLA Law Review*, 55, 1805–1826.
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. London: Sage.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage.
- Xie, L. (2015). The story of two big chimneys: A frame analysis of climate change in US and Chinese newspapers. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 44(2), 151–177.
- Yang, A. (2009, May). *Chinese media in change: A comparison of Chinese media framing of the 2003 SARS crisis and the 2008 Sichuan earthquake* [Conference presentation]. Annual meeting of the ICA, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Yang, G., & Calhoun, C. (2007). Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China. *China Information*, XXI(2), 211–236.
- Zhang, H. B. (2013). *China and international climate change negotiations*. WeltTrends Online-Dossier. http://welttrends.de/res/uploads/Zhang_China-and-International-climate-change-negotiations.pdf
- Zhao, Y. (2008). *Communication in China: Political economy, power, and conflict*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Zhu, J. H. (1990). *Information availability, source credibility, and audience sophistication: Factors conditioning the effects of Communist propaganda in China* (Publication No. 9109722) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.