



**Adaptation to Authoritarianism:
A Case Study of China Dialogue, a Non-profit Newsroom
Dedicated to Environmental Journalism in China**

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Abstract

This thesis examines to what extent *China Dialogue* as a non-profit newsroom can exert public service journalism under China's intensifying authoritarianism. Prior scholarship indicates the potential of non-profit journalism to push the boundary of mainstream news reporting due to their pledge to public service. Yet, whether this argument is valid remains a question under China's authoritarianism with limited press freedom. Through examining *China Dialogue's* adaptation to China between 2006 and 2021, this case study finds that, on the one hand, the non-profit newsroom has weakened its criticism on China's environmental issues. This is largely resulted from the increasing political control and necessary to ensure *China Dialogue's* survival in China. On the other hand, adaptation creates opportunities for divergent discursive construction. Comparative news analysis between *China Dialogue* and Chinese mainstream journalism reveals the presence of distinctive environmental discourses from *China Dialogue*. Particularly on climate change issues, while mainstream media are required to follow the official line, *China Dialogue* carves out a space for questioning China's climate performance. The analysis further highlights that *China Dialogue's* discursive practises are manifested with strong characteristics of constructive criticism, which could make the opposing discourses more acceptable for the arbitrary political power and thus increase the likelihood of circumventing the omnipresent censorship. In conclusion, this thesis contends that non-profit journalism occupies a vital role within Chinese environmental journalism. Its public service role cannot be fulfilled by the mainstream media, but it is also fragile with China's shrinking civil society that allows diminishing room for critical voices.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2011 autumn, Beijing residents could unmistakably sense the discomfort caused by air pollution. Thick smog sometimes lingered throughout the day, significantly reducing visibility. Hundreds of flights were cancelled, and public transportation facilities had to be temporarily closed. Stores sold out of face masks due to the panic buying (Wong 2011). However, according to data from the Beijing Bureau of Environmental Protection, Beijing's air quality was classified as "qualified" or "mild pollution" in most of the time (Fedorenko and Sun 2016), a stark contrast to the perception of most citizens. Starting in October, relevant discussions began to emerge on Chinese social media. Netizens posted pictures of the thick smog in Beijing, questioned the reliability of the data published by Beijing government and expressed strong concerns about the health effects of air pollution. The word "PM 2.5" (fine-particulate matters with a diameter of 2.5 microns or less) for the first time became famous among Chinese people (Ibid), which was widely believed as the main cause of smog in Beijing.

On 5 December 2011, a report authored by environmental expert Steven Q. Andrews was published on *China Dialogue*, a non-profit news website with British background dedicated to environmental news. The publication became one of milestones of the campaign and further fuelled public discontents with the authority. The report compared the air data from Beijing government with data released by the US Embassy, pointing out the deficiencies in the quality of Beijing's air pollution monitoring indicators, for example, PM2.5 were excluded in the monitoring scope (Andrews 2011). The report even raised question about possible data manipulation of Beijing government. Since published, the report garnered significant attention both domestically and internationally, which brought follow-up news reporting from other news media. *China Dialogue's* staff received numerous requests for Andrews's contact details, and the website obtained a massive amount of traffic (Boyd and Meng 2011). Under the intense public pressure, on 26 December 2011, China's environmental minister announced the official implementation of new air quality standards, which will start in 2012 with inclusion of PM2.5 in air monitoring data. On 29 February 2012, China's State Council granted approval to the country's inaugural national environmental standard for PM2.5, setting the annual average limit at 35 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ (Saikawa 2019). These policy changes indicate the success of the campaign for more transparent environmental data.

This online campaign presents *China Dialogue's* potential to facilitate environmental communication in domestic China. The media was launched by Isabel Hilton, a Scottish journalist and broadcaster, in 2006 and registered in the UK as a charity. The media now maintains four multilingual news websites including Chinadialogue.net (English and Chinese), Chinadialogueocean.net (English and Chinese), Thethirdpole.net (English, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Nepali and Russian), Dialogochino.net (English, Spanish and Portuguese). Among them, Chinadialogue.net is the first website initiated in 2006. All the platforms publish news articles dedicated to environmental issues with a particular interest in China's role. According to the introduction on the About-US page of Chinadialogue.net, "China Dialogue identifies, promotes and supports the unique voices that increase understanding, share precious experiences and inspire a higher awareness of the planet's challenges, whether they come from inside China or elsewhere. We are devoted to making such voices heard by a global audience, in a lively, convincing and multi-lingual fashion. It is our hope that in doing so, we can move closer to viable, equitable and real solutions to environmental problems" (China Dialogue 2023). The statement manifests the endeavour to facilitate global understandings on China's environmental issues, which is a rare media role in domestic China.

China Dialogue used to be registered as a business or foreign NGO project in China and maintain an office in Beijing for years. The media was deeply engaged in the network of China's environmentalism involving journalists, politicians, NGOs, and activists. Some influential figures of

China's environmentalism such as Pan Yue¹ have ever published articles on their website in early years. Although *China Dialogue*'s Beijing office was closed at the end of 2022, all the news websites of *China Dialogue* are still accessible for Chinese people today. This makes *China Dialogue* in difference from other foreign news media such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *BBC* that have been blocked in mainland China years ago. This also makes *China Dialogue* a research case that can be examined in China's domestic context, as we can explore what makes the news non-profit successfully adapt to China's authoritarianism and what media role it can play as the result of such adaptation.

1.1. Why study China Dialogue doing non-profit environmental journalism in China

Despite *China Dialogue*'s years of operation in domestic China and its potential to facilitate Chinese environmental discussions, current scholarship lack knowledge about its unique role as a non-profit media in Chinese media landscape. Prior studies on Chinese environmental journalism mainly focus on the mainstream news industry, or more specifically, the party and commercial journalism. Party journalism refers to the news media directly initiated, controlled and subsidised by different levels of Chinese government. They are mainly required to deliver the official voices and play the propaganda role for the government. In contrast, commercial news media are given more spaces for critical and watchdog journalism practises. They are also regulated by the propaganda departments and asked to be loyal to the party, but in practise, commercial media also function as businesses and the government may tolerate their critical voices due to the profitability (Wang and Sparks 2019a).

Prior knowledge about party and commercial environmental journalism may not be applied to *China Dialogue* due to the following two characteristics of the news non-profit. Firstly, as Konieczna (2022) suggests, non-profit journalism refers to not only an alternative journalistic business model but also a different set of logics for news practises. The non-profit status enables news media to enjoy tax-exempt and seek donations from the society, and at the same time requires that the revenues should be used to fully support the organisations' sustainable operation and news production (Shaver 2010). In many democratic countries – including the UK, where *China Dialogue* was registered – that allow news organisations to be registered as non-profit, news non-profits are asked to ensure their news practises to serve public interests instead of specific individuals or social groups (Picard et al. 2016). In practise, such public service role is normally manifested as doing journalism that matters for citizenship and democracy but unfortunately is not fully supported in mainstream news industry, which Konieczna (2018) describes with the concept of “field repair”. For example, many news non-profits focus on producing investigative news reports, because investigative journalism, although it is significant for democracy, is not fully practised in global market-oriented news industry (Kaplan 2013). In the US, a group of news non-profits are initiated to report local news stories and inform local voters while the American local journalism is facing a serious decline (Birnbauer 2018). In terms of environmental journalism, some non-profit newsrooms are dedicated to reporting environmental news as they believe mainstream news industry has not addressed adequate attention on the issue (Painter et al. 2022).

Thus, based on the commitment on public service, news outputs from *China Dialogue* are likely to be in difference from Chinese party and commercial news. This does not imply that mainstream news entirely neglects public interests. The argument put forth here is that the public service pledge may encourage or even require *China Dialogue* to cover news stories that have been long overlooked in

¹ Pan Yue is a high-profile politician in China who is famous for his advocacy for environmental protection and tough tone against pollution. He was the deputy director of China's State Environmental Protection Administration during 2003 and 2008 and served as the deputy of the Ministry of Environmental Protection until 2016. Some news stories published by Pan Yue on Chinadialogue.net can be found from: <https://chinadialogue.net/en/author/panyue/>

mainstream news industry yet hold significant importance for the advancement of China's environmentalism, and how this potential can be realised within Chinese unique political, economic and social context is not surveyed well in the current literature.

Secondly, another reason that makes *China Dialogue* in difference from Chinese mainstream journalism is its alternative position in Chinese media landscape, which makes it more possible to deliver distinct environmental discourses. This deserves more attention from academia given today's Chinese mainstream journalism is severely tamed by the alliance of political and market power (Tong 2019). The mainstream media once played a significant role in countering the official discourses on environmental issues, prompting environmentalism in China and appealing to eco-friendly policies and actions (de Burgh and Zeng 2012; Tong 2015a). Yet, with the severe deterioration of media environment in the past decade (Repnikova 2018a; Tong 2019), mainstream journalism is currently expected to adhere strictly to the ruling party's ideology and conform to the official stance on a wide range of social issues, including environmental matters. In addition to the political pressure, the business model collapse happened in commercial news industry further impedes the journalistic power to do critical and investigative journalism (Wang and Sparks 2019a), and the rising power of patriotic nationalism and populism among Chinese people also make it risky to counter the authority today (Chen 2018).

Under such circumstance, it is valuable to do more investigations on Chinese alternative journalism in distance from political and market power, as the alternative discourses have the potential to foster environmental awareness, promote active citizenship, impact environmental policy, and pose challenge to mainstream narrative (Hansen 2018). An exploration of alternative journalism such as *China Dialogue* and its discursive practises under China's intensifying authoritarianism could not only enhance our comprehension of the evolving landscape of environmental news in contemporary China, but also inspire more journalism practises that are potential to advance environmental communication.

To concern about Chinese alternative environmental journalism and its possible implication for environmental governance carries profound implications not only for China but also for the whole international community. Taking example of climate change, China has surpassed the US to become the world's largest CO₂ emitter since 2006 (Vidal and Adam 2007). Whether China can reach carbon neutral in the coming decades will greatly determine the global achievement of climate change mitigation. Particularly after China's participation to the World Trade Organisation and integration into the global market, its overseas investments in fossil fuels may exacerbate climate change and cause pollutions in other countries (Tan 2013). Despite these issues being widely discussed in the international community and the foreign media's scrutiny on China, prior studies have found that Chinese mainstream media are generally constrained to do critical and watchdog journalism on climate issues (see 2.3.3). The reasons could range from the political censorship (Guo et al. 2023) to journalists' concerns about national interests (Geall 2011), and even the perception of climate news as non-market valuable (Tong 2015). In this case, it will be valuable to explore whether *China Dialogue* can deliver critical voices on climate issues and if so, in what forms the critical voices can survive in the harsh political phenomenon in today's China. This research interest also echoes Schäfer and Painter (2021) calling on more studies on Chinese climate journalism. As they put, "more analysis is needed on the specific situation of climate journalists among Chinese environmental journalists, especially in light of research showing an increase in Chinese media coverage of climate change and the spread of the issue to a plurality of news desks" (p.7).

1.2. Research aims and research questions: non-profit journalism and China's authoritarianism

This thesis aims to examine to what extent *China Dialogue* as a non-profit news media can maintain the public service role in its environmental news contents with the adaptation to China's intensifying authoritarianism.

On the one hand, as noted above, given the public service promise of non-profit journalism, it is reasonable to expect that *China Dialogue* could push the boundary of mainstream journalism in China. It may act less propagandistic than the party journalism and less commercialised than the market-oriented journalism. As the result, *China Dialogue* may cover some news events that Chinese mainstream journalism is not allowed or less interested to cover, provide more plural views on the same news events, or even challenge the media discourses presented in mainstream news reports. This is important or even necessary for *China Dialogue* as a non-profit news media registered in the UK and justify their non-profit status when facing regulators and donors.

On the other hand, it should be also noticed that the public service promise is incompatible with China's oppressive political atmosphere. Although it is generally believed in prior scholarship that environmental journalists enjoy more freedom to do critical and watchdog journalism in China (Tong 2015; Li 2019), political censorship on environmental news has never stopped and now is heightened under Xi Jinping's governance (Chase 2020; Guo et al. 2023). In addition, the rising patriotic nationalistic sentiment among Chinese people in recent years boosted by Xi's propaganda apparatus has made it more challenging for news media to criticise China on many international issues (Chen 2018). In this situation, some environmental discussions could be forced to withdraw from news pages, as a former journalist recently puts in an interview: "Heightened government censorship has repressed environmental coverage. Journalists who report on the environment and climate-related matters are frequently labeled traitors ... [Government officials think of] different ways to build more obstacles so [reporters] can't get enough information to write detailed stories anymore" (Genovese 2023). Similar pressure and challenges happened to *China Dialogue* in 2010 when they commissioned an investigation into a polluting project in Dongguan China (Geall and Hilton 2014).

Therefore, a subtle conflict emerges here when it comes to examining the public service role of *China Dialogue* in Chinese context. Both potential and challenges exist for the non-profit media to provide distinct or even opposing environmental discourses. The concept adaptation is key for this thesis to guide the analysis on the two dimensions of such conflict. From the challenge side, journalistic adaptation to authoritarianism usually involves self-censorship inside the newsroom (Lee 1998; Zhao 2000; Pan and Chan 2003; Yesil 2014; Walulya and Nassanga 2020), which could make certain news topics or narratives less covered or disappeared in news stories due to the political sensitivity. With the increasing censorship in past years, adaptation to China could mean that *China Dialogue* must be more conservative with their news publishing, such as omitting some sensitive news topics, or being more positive in the tone or narrative when discussing China's environmental governance. This certainly could be regarded as a sacrifice on its public service pledge, although it may help the media to avoid possible political punishments that may lead to the media shutdown or news blocked in China.

Yet, for the potential or positive speaking, media adaptation to authoritarianism could be not only a concession to censorship but also a strategy to create space for opposition (Tong 2009; Repnikova 2017). After avoiding some sensitive topics and dangerous discursive constructions, *China Dialogue* may be able to create environmental discourses that mainstream news media are not allowed to present. The differences on discursive practises between non-profit and mainstream journalism can be significant for Chinese environmental communication in a variety of forms. For example, non-

profit media may provide discourses that question the relationship between the poor environmental governance and the authoritarian political order and even appeal to political reforms. Although such discussions about political ecology are normal for academia (for example see Kostka and Zhang 2018; Teets 2018; Hu and Li 2020), it is nearly absent in Chinese public spaces because of the political sensitivity (Geall and Ely 2018; Goron 2018). It will be valuable to explore whether *China Dialogue* can construct a discourse in an explicit or implicit way to raise this problem when facing political pressure. Or, in a less sensitive and dangerous case, *China Dialogue* may deliver a risk discourse that depicts the environmental disasters, urges the government to take more actions but avoids questioning the fundamental political system. This discourse has been previously found in numerous investigative news reports from Chinese mainstream journalism (Tong 2015), but now it is increasingly difficult to be presented with the stringent media environment.

With the two-sided understanding of *China Dialogue's* adaptation to China's authoritarianism, two research questions are respectively proposed in this thesis:

RQ1: How did *China Dialogue's* environmental news stories change with the deterioration of environment for critical journalism and non-profit advocacy in domestic China?

RQ2: To what extent *China Dialogue's* environmental news reporting can construct different environmental discourses from mainstream journalism in today's China?

RQ1 aims to explore the possible impacts of the authoritarian power on *China Dialogue's* news contents, which may suggest the media reactive adaptation to China's strengthening authoritarianism since it was initiated in 2006. If the analysis results claim that some topics or narratives once covered frequently by *China Dialogue* have now been declining, despite they are still important for furthering China's environmental governance today, it could indicate *China Dialogue's* concession of its public service pledge to the intensifying authoritarianism.

RQ2 pursues to examine whether *China Dialogue's* adaptation could push the boundary of environmental discursive construction in today's Chinese journalism. Such inquiry on environmental discourses "rests on the contention that language matters, that the way we construct, interpret, discuss, and analyse environmental problems has all kinds of consequences" (Dryzek 2022, p.11). The shaping of environmental discourses is indispensable to effective environmental governance. As Hansen points out, "the environment generally does not 'speak for itself' but that environmental problems only become problems or issues for public concern and political decision-making through claims-making and communication" (Hansen 2018, p.7). The delivery of specific environmental discourses could be possible to not only raise widespread social awareness on environmental problems but also prompt the government to issue relevant policies, evaluates environmental governance and pushes measures to alleviate the problems. Conversely, particular discourses may deny the existence of anthropogenic environmental problems and thus impede endeavour for environmental actions. If *China Dialogue* is found to deliver some discourses that are ignored or censored in mainstream journalism, it provides a compelling illustration of how the non-profit media effectively embodies the public service function it should perform. Even in today's hostile political climate, it continues to earnestly promote improved environmental governance through news publishing. Moreover, the research question also explores in what forms *China Dialogue's* unique discourses differ from the mainstream. Do these discourses share common features that enable them to bypass political scrutiny or gain acceptance from the censors? If so, what are these distinguishing characteristics?

1.3. Main findings

Through answering the two questions, this study finds that both aspects of adaptation apply to *China Dialogue*. On the one hand, we can observe the signal that *China Dialogue* has weakened its criticism on China's environmental issues in recent years. Some issues that are important for *China Dialogue*'s news coverages in early years have been less touched upon despite they are still not outdated for Chinese environmentalism today. This finding aligns with the oppressive political climate that is hostile to critical and watchdog journalism under Xi's media policies. After all, one specific manifestation of press freedom decreasing is the strengthening censorship on diversifying news topics, not matter such censorship comes from within or outside the media. Indeed, interview with *China Dialogue*'s CEO confirms that the changes of political phenomenon in recent years have made the media more difficult to report news in China and more careful with critical news publishing.

Nevertheless, such negative changes in news coverages over the years do not mean *China Dialogue* is completely subservient to the mainstream media discourses. With the limited space for press freedom, the news non-profit still provides more plural news topics and perspectives about China's environmental issues than mainstream journalism. This includes giving voices to marginalizing social groups, paying more attention to neglecting environmental issues, and emphasizing the controversy around China's environmental performance. Specifically, it is found that while covering international issues such as climate change, *China Dialogue* maintains the space to question China's overseas energy investments and ask the authority to take more urgent actions on carbon cutting. Such media discourse challenges China's responsible image built up in mainstream news, which is uncommon in today's China given the stringent media environment and the rampant patriotic nationalism sentiment among Chinese people. In this regard, *China Dialogue* has fulfilled its public service promise on some levels, and it is potential to push the boundary of environmental debates inside China.

Furthermore, this thesis argues that *China Dialogue*'s divergent discourses present strong features of "constructive criticism", a news reporting paradigm that has been once identified in Chinese critical journalism (Repnikova 2017). In contrast to conventional critical journalism that emphasises the damage of irresponsibility and thus is very likely to irritate the authority and lead to suppression, constructive criticism tends to discuss problems in a more deliberative and less provocative way, underline the progresses achieved so far while pointing out the problems, and propose possible solutions that may help alleviate the problems. All these characteristics found in *China Dialogue*'s news stories could make the critical discourses less aggressive and perhaps more acceptable for China's authority, which could be one reason why the discursive construction does not bring direct crackdown until the time of writing.

This case study presents both limitations and benefits for examining how non-profit journalism can adapt to China and exert public service news on environmental issues. There are other non-profit media operated in China besides *China Dialogue*, for example, *NGOCN*, *Zhishifenzi (The Intellectual)*, *Guyu Shiyanshi (Guyu Lab)*, *China Development Brief*. These non-profit journalistic projects differ from *China Dialogue* on a variety of aspects and their experiences within the context of China's authoritarianism may also diverge significantly. Findings from this case study cannot be simply generalised to other non-profit news cases in China.

However, as Thomas (2013) notes, an appropriate case has the "ability to act as a lens or template through which you are examining the object" (p.152). In this research, the object refers to the adaptation of non-profit journalism to China and how such journalistic form may diversify environmental discourses in China. *China Dialogue* can be a great example to examine the adaptation process given its long-term operation in China and its ability to endure and thrive amidst the intensifying authoritarian climate. Besides, its consistent and dedicated environmental news

reporting over the years constitute a large sample to observe the changes of Chinese environmental journalism with the media environment degradation. Through this case study, we can have a glimpse of how non-profit media strategically walk around China's authoritarian system and push the boundary of environmental journalism. This is of practical use in inspiring more alternative journalism practises in the future and fostering more studies on the significance of non-profit journalism in different contexts. It is also theoretically important to facilitate academic understandings on environmental journalism in contemporary China and its subtle interactions with political, market and social forces. More broadly, it expands prior non-profit journalism scholarship largely limited to democratic contexts to authoritarianism. It underscores that even in the face of a politically scrutinised environment filled with censorship and pressure, non-profit journalism differs significantly in news production culture from other journalistic forms and maintains a unique position in media landscape.

1.4. Thesis structure

In the following texts, Chapter 2 aims to examine the environmentalism prompted by Chinese mainstream journalism and environmental NGOs (ENGOS) through a perspective of discourse. It firstly reviews the flourishing of China's environmentalism since the national reform and open-up in 1980s, which largely explains how and why environmental journalism and ENGOS (including *China Dialogue*) can emerge under China's authoritarianism from the very beginning. It then explores the environmental discourses proposed in Chinese mainstream journalism and ENGOS, which are the important counterparts of *China Dialogue* in China. Environmental discourses are not equal to environmentalism but relate to how people think and talk about environmental problems, and in many cases, not just environmental problems (Dryzek 2022). As elaborated below, although the Chinese authority attitude about environmental issues has gone through a transition process from ignorance to notice and emphasis, discussions around environmental protections in China have long been intertwined with discourses of economic modernisation, patriotism, nationalism, populism, etc., which collectively shape the environmental media discourses in China. Through reviewing the divergent environmental discourses and the range of power relations behind, this chapter sets a foundation for our later analysis on the discourses identified in *China Dialogue's* news coverages.

Following these discussions about mainstream environmental discourses in China, Chapter 3 explains why non-profit journalism is believed to have the potential to diversify environmental news reporting, and the possible challenges for non-profit newsrooms operated in China to accomplish the task. This chapter, on the one hand, facilitates our understandings on non-profit journalism as a unique journalistic culture and institution in democratic contexts. Its public service mission makes it in distinction with commercial journalism and thus encourages it to diversify environmental news reporting, which constitutes a necessary perception on *China Dialogue* as a non-profit media from democratic world. On the other hand, this chapter examines the deterioration of non-profit and media environment in domestic China since 2006, the year when *China Dialogue* was initiated, which indicates the possible challenges for *China Dialogue* to exert its public service role in China. Its public service role could conflict with China's authoritarianism that requires increasing media royalty to the party, and thus to what extent the public service could be eventually maintained remains a question. These fruitful discussions constitute a significant context for our analysis on how *China Dialogue's* news contents in later stages.

Chapter 4 builds up a theoretical framework to understand journalistic adaptation to authoritarianism. It mainly proposes two approaches, critical and pragmatic, to the concept "adaptation" in this study, which respectively emphasises the repression of authoritarianism on independent journalism and the bottom-up perspective that sees adaptation as an opportunity and strategy for criticism. Chapter 4 argues that we need to combine the two approaches to examine

China Dialogue's adaptation to China, which is helpful for raising research questions at the end of the chapter.

With the research questions ready, Chapter 5 explains the methodology designed for answering the questions. As noted, this research mainly focuses on analysis on news texts. It adopts three methods to do news analysis, combining computational and manual, quantitative and qualitative methods together. But going beyond that, an interview with *China Dialogue's* CEO is conducted as a complementary perspective from inside newsroom to help interpret the news analysis results.

Chapter 6, 7 and 8 present the detailed findings and analysis. News data collected from *China Dialogue* and the mainstream journalism will be put into the political, economic and social contexts to identify their discursive construction on China's environmental issues, and the environmental discourses found from the data will be linked back to the contexts to discuss their potential weaknesses and power for promoting environmental governance in China. As we will see, after years of adapting to China's authoritarianism, some news narratives are now hardly found in *China Dialogue's* news coverages. This is largely as the result of the deterioration of non-profit and media environment. There is also a reduction in the richness of news topics, which is not conducive to fostering comprehensive discussions on China's environmental problems. Yet, at the same time, in the face of a hostile political climate, *China Dialogue* has successfully pushed the boundary of Chinese environmental news reporting in a constructive rather than confrontational manner. Particularly in challenging the media discourses found in mainstream journalism on some international issues such as climate change, *China Dialogue* may be able to promote more diversifying environmental debates in China. This is the fact that makes *China Dialogue's* adaptation to China not reduced to a phenomenon of assimilation but maintain its own autonomy and public service role.

With all these findings and analysis, Chapter 9 concludes that non-profit journalism has the potential to adapt to China's authoritarianism and maintain its public service role on some levels, which is manifested in its distinct environmental discourses that mainstream journalism is forbidden or not willing to construct due to the political and economic pressure. It will also contend that this public service role from *China Dialogue* is not easily identifiable in Chinese mainstream journalism because of not merely the disparities in their positions within the media landscape but also the differing logics of news production. Although it remains a question to what degree such marginal discursive construction has an impact on the environmental governance in China, the marginal indeed brings some risky, sensitive but important discussions to the depressing public space. Such resistance to the mainstream discourses led by the authoritarian power should not be regarded as meaningless or powerless as it maintains the hope for reforms and progress in the future.

Chapter 2 The Development and Discursive Construction of Environmental Journalism and ENGOS in China

2.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the development of environmental journalism and ENGOS in contemporary China and reviews the discourses identified in their activities.

Historical perspective is helpful to explain why the advent of environmental journalism and ENGOS is possible under China's authoritarianism. It also provides significant contextual information to understand environmental discourses in China. The political opportunity for Chinese environmental journalism and ENGOS should be largely attributed to the reforms and open-up pushed by Deng Xiaoping in late 20th century. Since then, the interaction between these institutions and the political force in China should not be simply caught by a command-and-control model. As discussed in detail below, scholarship has found that Chinese media and ENGOS maintain autonomy and agency on some levels, and in some cases, they play the watchdog role and push more accountable environmental governance. This is also the background for *China Dialogue* when they enter Chinese media and non-profit landscape in 2000s.

Given the space for autonomy, this chapter adopts a discourse approach to understand the environmentalism shaped by Chinese mainstream environmental journalists and ENGOS. It explains that the environmental discourses from bottom relate to not only environmental issues but also political, economic, cultural, and scientific debates. Discursive construction on a variety of environmental issues shall not be analysed in a monolithic way, as journalists and ENGOS may have different concerns when it comes to different issues, and the authority attitude about the divergent issues could differ as well. These discussions help us gauge the extent to which Chinese mainstream journalism and ENGOS can challenge official environmental discourses, which sets the stage for our later exploration of whether *China Dialogue* can expand the boundaries of environmental communication in China.

In the following texts, section 2.2 gives historical information about the advent and flourishing of Chinese environmental journalists and ENGOS since the reforms and open-up. Then section 2.3 reviews the discursive construction of these institutions on diversifying environmental issues. Lastly, a section will be given to sum up the discussions in this chapter and further explain how they can contribute to our study on *China Dialogue* in China.

2.2. Environmentalism, environmental journalism and ENGOS in late 20th century and early 2000s

Environmental problems in China have become increasingly drastic since the country was established in 1949. During Mao's era, his conception of the adversarial relation between human beings and nature – the nature should serve the human needs and human should conquer the nature – was fully practised under his totalitarianism and resulted in severe environmental degradation in China (Shapiro 1999). For instance, his mass campaign the Great Leap Forward decreed the local officials to exploit all the resources to reach impossible goals of agricultural and industrial outputs, which led to not only the world's largest famine during 1959 and 1961 but also environmental problems such as the rocky desertification, deforestation, soil erosion, water shortage and contamination (Jiang et al. 2014; Zhang and Barr 2013). The economic priority of heavy industrial production also results in severe air pollution (Sanders 1999). Out of the need for irrigation and flood control, tens of thousands of hydropower dams were built during Mao's era "mainly by

peasant-led teams with limited equipment, materials and training” despite the oppositional opinions and deep environmental concerns (Kang 2015, p.6).

The Chinese government had not noticed the environmental degradation in early years, and due to Mao’s crackdown on critical voices, officials inside the party and dissidents in society were not able to raise these issues for years. The beginning of the state attitude change can be dated back to the 1972 UN Conference on Human Environment (De Burgh and Zeng 2010; Ma 2021a). It was the first time for the Chinese government to learn that human activities could have huge impacts on the environment. This perception inspired some Chinese officials such as Qu Geping, who was later honoured as the “father of environmental protection in China”, to evaluate domestic environmental problems. In the same year, a large area of toxic algal bloom was found in the coastal area near Dalian, and sold fish in Beijing was found with high level of toxic chemicals. The two events alerted China’s State Council about the environmental problems, which promoted the establishment of a committee addressing environmental investigation and resolution headed by the Premier Zhou Enlai (Geall 2018). A year later, in 1973, an academic magazine *Environmental Protection* was launched, which symbolises a small step for Chinese environmental governance in contemporary history (Bao 2010).

After Mao’s death in 1976, the reforms and open-up policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping revitalised Chinese society, injecting it with a newfound vitality. In contrast to Mao’s obsessiveness on ideological control, Deng is a political pragmatist. His famous “cat theory”, “it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white so long as it catches mice” (Liao 2009), suggests his resistance to the ideological conflicts during the Cold War and his openness to the free market and social liberalisation.

One part of Deng’s reform project is the marketisation of the news industry, which is the most important structural change for contemporary Chinese journalism. After the economic reform, some news media in China were not totally financially supported and owned by the state. They were encouraged to make profits from advertising and outside investment, although it was still regulated that the non-state investment to news outlets should not exceed 49% (Hu 2003). Apart from the marketisation, Chinese government also relaxed the licensing policy to allow more commercial newspapers, television channels, radio programmes to be founded (Zhao 2008). It was due to this political opportunity that, in late 1990s and early 2000s, a group of local metropolitan newspapers were established across the nation such as the *Xinjingbao* (*Beijing News*) in Beijing, *Nanfang Dushibao* (*Southern Metropolis Daily*) in Guangzhou, *Dahe Ribao* (*Dahe Daily*) in Henan, *Yunnan Xinxibao* (*Yunnan Information Newspaper*) in Yunnan, and *Huashang Ribao* (*Huashang Daily*) in Shanxi. Although they are all local newspapers, their news reporting is not limited to local news and often touches on national issues. Despite the fact that these newspapers are still owned by the government and regulated by the local propaganda department, they do not function totally as the party mouthpiece. They “are considered to play the dual role of ‘commodities in the market’ and ‘ideological apparatuses’” (Su and Xiao 2021, p.280-281). In other words, the commercial news media in China serve the public interests on the one hand and play a propaganda role on the other. In addition to promoting the official line, they also conduct critical journalism, play a watchdog role on politics and business, and challenge official lines in some cases (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). Many of them even establish bureau for investigative journalism that aims to expose complicated but significant social problems (Tong 2011).

While news media are given more autonomy, environmental journalism that serves the public goods rather than the ruling party becomes possible. Party organs took a lead to cover environmental news in the 1990s. Many of them such as *Renmin Ribao* (*People’s Daily*) and *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (*China Youth Daily*) opened columns specifically for environmental news (Li 2020). In 1993, the “Chinese Century of Environmental Protection” (*Zhonghua Huanbao Shijixing*) campaign was jointly launched by several state departments to promote news media nationwide to cover environmental

news stories (Yang and Calhoun 2007). Numerous companies and local governments that should be responsible for pollution could be exposed by the news reporting and urged to fix the problems. This state support for environmental journalism was reinforced in 1996 when the State Council promulgated a document calling for news media to uncover behaviours damaging the environment. Stated in the document:

“Mass media such as newspaper, broadcasting and television shall in due course report and praise advanced or model units or individuals of environmental protection and openly disclose and criticise illegal activities of polluting and damaging ecological environment. The press shall play the role of supervision and monitoring and shall expose to the public any unit or individual who has seriously polluted or damaged ecological environment”. (Asian Legal Information Institute 2008)

In addition to the journalism practises led by the government, some radical and more critical news reporting also appeared. For instance, Dai Qing, who worked for *Guangming Ribao* (*Guangming Daily*) as a reporter and columnist, publicly stood out to oppose the official decision on the construction of Three Gorges Dam in early 1989. She convinced the publisher *Guizhou Renmin Chubanshe* (*Guizhou People's Press*) to publish the book *Yangtze! Yangtze!*, a series of critical articles written by journalists (including herself), trying to present potential risks resulted from the huge construction project such as the flood, drought and relocation of residents (Hilton 2017). Although her advocacy failed to stop the state approval on the project, and she was later arrested due to her support for the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration, news reports following environmental problems have not stopped since then.

Moreover, the number of environmental ENGOs in China also boomed in the 1990s and 2000s. Only nine ENGOs were registered in 1994 but the number increased to 69 in 1999 (Yang 2005) and 3539 in 2008 (Zhan and Tang 2013). These figures do not even include unregistered ENGOs and those registered as business but operated in a non-profit way (Xie 2011). Although most non-profit organisations in China are directly founded and under the leadership by the government, which are generally named as government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) (Zhao et al. 2016; Zhou and Le Han 2019), there are also many grassroots ENGOs established from bottom by Chinese citizens and social groups.

Apparently, such proliferation of ENGOs should be largely attributed to the political opportunity after China's reforms (Xu 2011). The reforms gave the local governments more autonomy but at the same time required them “to deliver social services to the Chinese population without a transfer of the necessary taxing autonomy to meet these new mandates” (Benjamins 2015, p.109). Meanwhile, local officials were incentivised by promotion reasons to seek for innovative ways to ensure and enhance public service with limited budget. The double pressure of finance and political performances forced the local governments to engage more NGOs that can fill the gap of social service (Teets 2014). As Liu et al. (2017) note, although the Chinese state has long been worried about the social organisations that may oppose its political agenda from the bottom, it also admits it is necessary to allow some social actors to be involved into the policymaking process. Thus, the burgeoning of ENGOs was welcomed, or at least tolerated, on some levels by the Chinese government.

Besides, Ru and Ortolano (2009) claim that international NGOs from outside also made a great contribution to the development of Chinese ENGOs in various ways. Firstly, some intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations provide an arena for Chinese people to get in touch with these international NGOs, which inspires the resourceful people to establish their own organisations. The Chinese government also invited some international ENGOs coming to China to share their experiences (Fei 2016). Secondly, some international NGOs started to establish offices in China, and

their communication events such as workshops, saloons and conferences enabled them to share experiences and strategies with Chinese domestic ENGOs to promote environmental changes. Thirdly, some foreign NGOs such as *Ford Foundation*, *Oxfam* and *World Life Fund* provided substantial financial supports for Chinese domestic ENGOs. Even some GONGOs have received their donations.

These ENGOs, whether from outside or established domestically, founded by government from top or citizens from bottom, have played an important role in environmental protection in contemporary China. Hildebrandt and Turner (2009) conclude four roles that ENGOs in China can play to contribute to the environmental governance: “(1) empowering citizens and checking local governments, (2) pressuring and ‘greening’ local businesses, (3) sparking policy or legal changes, and (4) partnering with the news media in national campaigns” (p.94). All these activities not only raise public environmental awareness but also constitute a social power allied with Chinese news media, pushing the powerful institutions to be accountable on environmental problems (Yang and Calhoun 2007).

In fact, scholarship has identified the close linkage and alliance between ENGOs and Chinese environmental journalism (Yang 2005; Tong 2015a; Li 2020). This alliance benefits both sides. For ENGOs, they need media exposure to foster publicity for pragmatic purposes such as fundraising, visibility and also for normative reasons such as mobilizing public support in a campaign, pressuring government for policy changes, and bringing environmental problems into public discussions (Yang 2005; Dai et al. 2017). Some ENGOs were also established by elites who possess social resources linking to government officials, journalists and editors in news media. For example, *Lujiayuan* (*Green Homeland*) was established in 1996 by Wang Yongchen who was the reporter of *Zhongyang Renmin Guangbo Diantai* (*Central People's Broadcasting Station*) at the time, and *Ziran Zhiyou* (*Friends of Nature*) was founded in 1994 by Liang Congjie who worked at the *Academy for Chinese Culture*. Both of them were regarded as the representative figures of Chinese environmentalism in 1990s, and they inspired younger generations to join in the environmental-protection career in the new century. Their interpersonal resources enabled their ENGOs to launch influential environmental protection campaigns and arouse attention from the government and news media.

For Chinese news media, reporting the ENGOs' activities is consistent with their environmental concerns. As Yang (2005) notes, revealing environmental problems is, firstly, news-worthy and helps boost the subscription of newspapers. Secondly, such critical environmental news reporting echoes media pursuit of public service and at the same time is encouraged by the central government on some levels, which makes it a politically safe topic. Both considerations naturally make Chinese news media delighted to follow ENGOs' actions to push environmental policy changes. Relevant journalism awards such as the “Dupont Award” and “Earth Award” were also initiated to encourage more environmental news reporting (Li 2020).

All in all, the reforms and open-up in late 20th century has become a significant political opportunity for the development of both journalism and NGOs in China. The alliance between environmental journalists and ENGOs constitute an environmentalism in China to inform the public about environmental problems, expose environmental wrongdoings across the society, engage public discussions, and facilitate public participation in the government decisions on environmental issues. In next section, we will examine these environmental practises in detail from a discursive perspective, exploring to what degree Chinese environmentalism from the journalistic and non-profit field can challenge the official hegemonic discourses on a variety of environmental issues.

2.3. Environmental discourses from Chinese mainstream journalism and ENGOS

2.3.1. Under authoritarianism: apolitical discourse of environmentalism

Chan (1993) adopts “media commercialization without independence” to describe the media reform in 1980s China, which is an accurate description concluding the fundamental predicament for Chinese journalism. Even though news media are given more autonomy after the reform, censorship and reporting instructions from propaganda department never stop and political revenge on critical journalists happens from time to time (Shim and Yi 2006) due to the state worry that critical journalism may threaten the ruling of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Tong 2011).

Similarly, regulations on the non-profit sector stay tough. It is not easy for non-profit organisations to pursue legal status in China. The dual management system was generally conducted by the government to restrict the registration of NPOs in early years (Lan and Galaskiewicz 2012). This system requires a non-profit organisation to seek a government agency sponsor before it can finally obtain legal identity. The government agency sponsor should undertake monitoring the organisation’s daily operation and activities, and once the organisation gets involved in any political and legal issues, its sponsor will share the responsibilities. Due to this political risk, it is difficult to find a sponsor to finalise the registration for a non-profit organisation in China (Zhao et al. 2016). In addition, GONGOS or citizen NGOs with close relationship with government officials are found easier to raise funding and obtain media publicity (Zhang and Guo 2012; Guo and Saxton 2018). Through these mechanisms, Chinese authority maintain its control on the national fragile third sector.

In spite of the constraints, environmentalism in China is generally believed to be a less sensitive issue compared to other social issues such as China’s poor record on human rights. As mentioned above, Chinese central government also admits the environmental risks after decades of economic development and has the willing to solve the problem. Although the central government is always vigilant with the critical voice from media and non-profit advocacy, it also recognises that such civil power is helpful to monitor the environmental governance on local level. To ensure local accountable governance is important for regime stability. Therefore, news media and ENGOS are, to some extent, encouraged to reveal the wrongdoings of local governments and companies (Tong 2014; Li 2019).

Moreover, the central government recognises that, if such critical voices can be manipulated well and the criticizing subjects can be limited to the local governments, it can “provide crucial legitimacy for the government’s efforts on environmental protection” (Chen 2018, p.97). Brady suggests that one of the reasons why Chinese critical journalism is tolerated by the state government is because the “the Central Propaganda Department had come to recognise the value of negative propaganda as a pressure valve during crisis situation” (Brady 2017, p.134). Under the circumstance, some degree of self-censorship is necessary when doing environmental news reporting in China. It has been found that Chinese critical news reports target individuals, businesses and local governments in most cases and hardly challenge the narrative of central government (Tong 2015a). As Tong (2015a) suggests, some topics such as the interest relationship between the construction of Three Gorges Dam and the family of Li Peng, the former Premier of China from 1987 to 1998, was not allowed to be touched by mainstream news media in China, because it has pointed at the state government. Li’s study on how *Nanfang Zhoumo* (*Southern Weekly*) - one of the most influential and pioneering newspapers on investigative journalism in China - covers smog pollution also reveals that environmental journalists rarely explicitly criticise government and officials on the state level (Li 2019). To avoid political crackdown from the authority, most of news reports, when covering air pollution, tend to simply report the situation “without delving into politically sensitive interpretation

of what caused the pollution, who was responsible, the extent of the risk to people's health, and what needed to be done in the future to bring about fundamental change" (Sun 2017, p.101-102).

Similar tactic of avoiding attacks on the central government is also found when it comes to the non-profit advocacy. It has been found that it is dangerous for NGOs to oppose the authority in public space, and they should be cautious to avoid questioning China's one-party system (Dai and Spires 2018). Su and Zhang find that Chinese advocacy NGOs prefer "political advocacy" to "social advocacy": "the former focuses on lobbying governmental decision-makers directly, while the latter aims at mobilizing social actors to influence policy making indirectly" (Su and Zhang 2021, p.172). This is to say that, for NGOs operated in China, they tend to push policy changes inside the state-led political framework instead of mobilizing public participation from outside, as the latter may be regarded as an antagonism toward the authority (Fei 2016). Through study on environmental campaigns in China, Zeng et al. (2019a) also point out the key strategy for a successful environmental campaign in China is to resonate with the interest of central government and utilise the support from the central to force concession from the local level.

These strategies to survive under China's authoritarianism are consistent with the ostensibly apolitical frame that, as Mertha (2008) contends, is important for environmentalism to survive and bring changes in China. To utilise this frame does not mean to seek environmental changes without pursuing policy changes or targeting politicians. It broadly refers to environmental activism strategies that avoid challenging the current political order. In practise, environmental activists and journalists usually pursue changes through seeking supports from upper government, constructing narratives consistent with the interests of the ruling party as a whole, and calling for enforcement of existing laws and regulations (Mertha 2008). In other words, the one-party authoritarian hierarchy is not allowed to be questioned or challenged regardless of the general views that this political system has impeded China's effective environmental governance (Gilley 2012; Eaton and Kostka 2014; Seligsohn et al. 2018; Hu and Li 2020; Lo 2020a).

Such compliance to the apolitical discourse leads to a doubt on the role of environmental journalism and ENGOs played in China. For example, Chen (2017, p.146) sends a warning that such news reporting may "bolster the image of 'central good, local bad'" and inevitably consolidate Chinese authoritarianism. Other scholars such as Zhao (2000), Pan and Chan (2003) also share the similar opinions. It is said that these critical journalism practises, although they present the watchdog characteristic that we can see from their counterparts in western democratic contexts, ultimately serve instead of countering the state benefits. Particularly, when it comes to the poor environmental governance of the Chinese central government, it is difficult for these social actors to play the watchdog role. In terms of scholarship on NGOs in China, Su and Zhang (2021) hold similar views that these civil society organisations may strengthen the authoritarian state capacity.

Yet, this does not mean these critical voices from journalistic and non-profit fields with obvious apolitical discourse makes not benefits for Chinese society. As will be elaborated below, comprehensive analysis on the Chinese environmental news reports and non-profit advocacy suggest that they compose an important discourse of risk, revealing the environmental problems behind China's rapid economic growth. Such risk discourse, so far, has not brought fundamental political changes to China's authoritarianism, but indeed exposes the dangers and injustice of China's seemingly beautiful modernisation project.

2.3.2. Counter hegemony of economic modernisation: discourse of environmentalism and risk

What constitutes a hegemonic power in Chinese society after Deng's reform is the discourse of economic modernisation which promises the national prosperity with economic growth (Ho 2006; Tong 2015a). After Mao's cruel ideological struggle, a series of reform measures tended to shift the

national focus on economic modernisation. For example, to embrace free market, in 1984, the government passed the Company Law, allowing for the creation of private enterprises for the first time since the country established in 1949. This led to a wave of entrepreneurial activity and the rapid growth of the private sector in China. In rural area, farmers were permitted to lease land and sell their surplus crops on the open market. Meanwhile, amounts of overseas capitals were attracted by China's cheap labour and extensive natural resources. They were also welcomed by Chinese government as one of the key reforms was the establishment of Special Economic Zones such as Shenzhen, Hainan and Zhuhai in which foreign investors were allowed to operate with greater freedoms and less bureaucracy than in other parts of the country. The integration into world capitalistic system was accelerated after China's participation in WTO in 2001. Such reforms aimed at economic modernisation have indeed made a great achievement. From 1980 to 2010, China's GDP grew at an average annual rate of 10.6 percent (The World Bank 2023), making it one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

Yet, rapid economic growth comes at the cost of drastic environmental degradation. The rapid industrialisation in the absence of strong regulation and scrutiny has resulted in large amounts of industrial waste released to natural environment, causing air, soil and water pollutions. This industrialisation also takes place in agricultural field. Uncontrolled application of pesticide, for instance, not only causes pollution to farmland but also brings challenges to biodiversity in rural areas and food safety concerns. Although the prevalence of urban life in recent decades improves the life quality for Chinese people, it also leads to severe sound and air pollution due to the increasing city traffic (Chen 2018). In addition, stimulated by the need of economic development, growth of GDP has become an important indicator for the promotion of local government officials. During a long period, in order to get promoted, local officials compete to exploit natural resources to enhance economic growth regardless of the environmental problems that may be caused. Although the central government revised the environmental law in 2014 and placed a stronger emphasis on the environmental performance reviews for local government officials (Schreurs 2017), some studies have argued that the effectiveness of such top-down incentivisation remains dubious without the oversight from third party and independent legal enforcement (for example see Li 2019; Lo 2020b; Shen and Jiang 2021).

Tong (2014; 2015a) claims that these awful environmental costs shall be largely attributed to the hegemonic discourse of economic modernisation promoted by Chinese authority, which mirrors the Promethean discourse defined by John S. Dryzek. According to Dryzek (2022), Promethean environmental discourse indicates an inherent hierarchy in which "human (and, in particular, human minds) dominate everything else" (Ibid, p.61). It applauds for the successful economic achievement since industrial revolution, and believes that the environmental problems can be controlled and managed by human beings through technological progress and economic growth. In other words, despite the acknowledgement on environmental degradation, Promethean discourse puts economic growth as the priority. This is in fact what happened after China's reforms and open-up. Environmental concerns were indeed addressed with some reforms on laws, policies, and institutions (Mol 2006), nevertheless, the need for environmental protection often gave a way to economic development (Fei 2016). The endless environmental protests in the country (Deng and Yang 2012) and its economic yearly growth show that this Promethean environmental discourse is strongly enforced in Chinese society.

Furthermore, the authority obsession on the discourse of economic modernisation echoes its aspiration on "stability maintenance" (*weiwén*) (Sun 2017). Due to the lack of electoral legitimacy in China's authoritarianism, ensuring economic growth has become the implicit social contract between the government and the ruled masses (Cook and Dimitrov 2017), which is to say that the mass sacrifices the right of political participation in exchange for a better material life. Under such circumstance, in order to consolidate the party rule, Chinese government has to stimulate economic

growth even if it is sometimes at the cost of environmental protection. As concluded by Sun (2017), the government's environmental governance is "tied by its own agenda of developing the economy, maintaining stability and securing support and legitimacy from its population" (p.102).

Given the hegemonic discourse of economic modernisation and liberalizing reform on the society, fruitful scholarships have investigated whether and how Chinese environmental journalism and ENGOs can create distinct environmental discourses to counterbalance the official modernisation discourse. Through systematic framing and discourse analysis on Chinese investigative environmental news reports for over twenty years, Tong (2015a) finds that these news coverages have exposed severe environmental problems as a result of China's economic modernisation. Nine agendas of environmental hazards are identified including "pollution, cancer villages, dam/hydroelectric project building, ground collapse, resource exhaustion and depletion, deforestation, desertification, water crisis and artificial land/island construction" (Ibid, p.60). As she notes, media exposure on the various environmental problems constructs not only a discourse of environmentalism but also a discourse of risk.

While Chinese propaganda apparatus is boasting the benefits of economic achievements, such risk discourse, on the one hand, implies that the environmental degradation cannot be easily fixed by economic growth or technological progress (the Promethean characteristic of China's modernisation discourse). For example, media critique on the construction of hydropower stations and artificial land calls for a new imagination on the relationship between human beings and the nature. They refute the government and business practises in the unscrupulous exploitation of natural resources. They challenge the official Maoist ecological discourse which indicates an adversarial relationship between human and nature, as Mao once wrote, "To struggle against the heavens is endless joy, to struggle against the earth is endless joy, to struggle against people is endless joy" (*Yu tian dou, qi le wu qiong, yu di dou, qi le wu qiong, yu ren dou, qi le wu qiong*) (Shapiro 2009, p.9). Such cognition has a deep impact on his successors after the reform and may partly explain Chinese government's enthusiasm on these huge construction projects (Fu et al. 2007). In the narrative of such critical news reports, these projects may bring disasters rather than joyfulness, as some media even question the linkage between dam construction and the massive losses of Wenchuan 2008 earthquake (Tong 2015a).

On the other hand, such discourse of risk also reveals the social rupture during China's modernisation process (Tong 2015a). Media exposure on "cancer village" indicates the social inequality under the current China's economic model. "Cancer village" refers to those villages where people living will easily have cancer due to pollutions. These people are normally the disadvantaged groups in Chinese society. In contrast to city dwellers who benefit from China's rapid economic development, people in cancer village not only live in poor conditions but also suffer from the consequence of pollutions brought about by China's industrialisation. This cleavage between different social groups has questioned the beautiful picture of economic modernisation depicted by China's propaganda system.

Furthermore, scholarship have shown such journalistic discursive practise is potential to effectively mobilise public participation and contribute to the success of environmental movements. This can be told from a series of events such as the Tibetan-antelope-protection campaign in late 1990s (Tong 2015a), Dujiangyan protection and anti-Nu-River dam movements in 2003 (Bao 2010; Yang and Calhoun 2007), campaign against Tiger-Leaping-Gorge dam in 2004 (Geall 2014), and Xiamen PX protest in 2007 (Chin-Fu 2013; Zeng 2015). In these events, media published critical news reports, emphasised the environmental costs of the profit-seeking projects, and successfully aroused public heated discussions and even demonstrations. Such pressure built up from bottom forced the government to reassess and shelved the projects, which indicates the discourse of risk is possible to bring environmentalism to the official agenda of modernisation.

This media role during the campaign is consistent with some scholars' argument about the advocacy characteristic of environmental journalism in China. For example, Geall (2014), based on his long-term field work with Chinese environmental journalists, argues that Hassid's description of "advocate professionals" in China fits many of his informants. For Hassid (2011), "advocate professional" refers to those journalists who contain high commitment to both advocacy and journalistic independence. He believes that one of the biggest drivers of political change in contemporary China is this type of journalists rather than the "American-style professionals" that stick to the objectivity principle and stay away from advocacy commitment (Ibid). Tong (2017) also finds that, in order to reveal the environmental problems and constructing a narrative in their news reports, environmental investigative journalists need to make judgements based on the information obtained from personal observations, interviews with different news sources, paper analysis and so on. During this process, "subjectivity is inevitable" (Ibid, p.781), and "behind this journalistic methodology is a philosophy of journalism that sees the role of journalism as advocating values and social change" (Ibid, p.784). As we can see from environmental journalists in China, many of them aim at mitigating the environmental problems rather than just reporting them. They try to promote improvements such as more pollution information disclosure, more efficient environmental governance, punishments on pollution behaviours and more opportunities for public participation.

Apart from journalism, the role of ENGOs is also important for constructing such discourse of environmentalism in China. As noted above, ENGOs and Chinese environmental journalism are closely related to each other. In practise, it is not unusual to see the collaboration between the two fields in many environmental campaigns. For example, Yang and Calhoun's (2007) analysis on the 2003 campaign against Nu-River dam construction shows that newspapers played an important arena for ENGOs to mobilise public supports and pose pressure on the authority. The campaigns initiated by ENGOs become news-worthy events for Chinese environmental journalists, and these news coverages, in return, bring public attention to the campaigns and push the government to consider about environmental impacts, which is consistent with the ENGOs' pursuit. The cooperation between the two is not just happened during the campaigns but in daily works. It is very common for Chinese ENGOs to keep regular communication with environmental journalists. Except for publishing articles on media, ENGOs also involve journalists through activities such as salons, conferences, workshops and even environmental journalism awards (Reese 2015; Dai and Spires 2018). This network jointly established by journalists and ENGOs undoubtedly facilitates the discursive practise of environmentalism in contemporary China.

However, it should be noted that most of the studies on such risk discourse of environmentalism are based on the materials collected before 2013, the year Xi Jinping officially took the power. As will be elaborated in next chapter, spaces for environmental criticism and advocacy from bottom drastically shrink during Xi's era. There are some signals that the risk discourse has been largely suppressed. Moreover, such risk discourse construction is mainly limited to discussions about China's domestic environmental issues. When it comes to international issues such as climate change, the space for the criticism of Chinese journalism and NGOs is very limited as will be discussed below.

2.3.3. Climate change: absence of critical discourse

With the rapid economic growth, China's greenhouse gas emission also increases drastically in the past decades and the country has become the largest CO₂ emitter in 2007 (Geall 2014). Under this circumstance, global news media and civil society organisations have urged Chinese government to make great efforts to reduce carbon emission and accelerate its green transition. However, it is found that Chinese domestic mainstream journalism and ENGOs hardly question China's official line on climate change issues.

The reasons can be manifold. Firstly, climate change is not an urgent problem for ordinary Chinese people. The consequences of other environmental problems such as pollution and resource exhaustion can be easily observed and sensed in daily life, but climate change seems too far away from normal life. Thus, climate change is judged as not attractive for news readers by the Chinese market-oriented news industry (Tong 2015a). Secondly, news media in China generally lack necessary capacity and resources to do news reporting on global level, especially for investigative journalism projects. After all, there are many problems to be solved when travelling to other countries to do news reporting such as the money and language problem. Thirdly, when reporting on climate change, such an issue that involves multiple national interests in the global community, many Chinese journalists are struggling with “divided loyalties: at once upholding objectivity, while defending the national interest” (Geall 2011, p.23), which makes it difficult to challenge the official discourse on this issue.

China’s official discourse on climate change can be identified from the news reports of its mouthpiece newspaper *Renmin Ribao* (*People’s Daily*). Based on long-term analysis on *Renmin Ribao*’s climate change news stories between 1995 and 2018, Pan et al. (2021) have found that, although the newspaper gradually admit that China should take some responsibilities of the climate crisis in recent years, what remains unchanged for the whole period is the emphasis on China’s role as a developing nation and insistence on developed countries’ major responsibility on climate change. This finding is also confirmed by other news analysis studies (Xie 2015; Zhao 2021). Such narrative firmly standing for China’s national interests can go too far and help construct a climate scepticism discourse in domestic China. Such unique scepticism discourse is different from the climate sceptics in western developed countries that claim anthropogenic climate change is not real, rather, as Chen (2018) notes, it focuses more on the intention of western developed nations during the climate international negotiations. It criticises that developed countries are trying to hinder China’s economic development with the excuse of climate change mitigation and eventually aims to disrupt China’s growing global influences. With the prevalence of this scepticism discourse, any voices in China urging the government to take stronger measures on climate mitigation could face doubts, pressure, and even cyberviolence from Chinese nationalists and patriots.

Furthermore, the Promethean discourse discussed above is also found in *Renmin Ribao*’s reporting on climate change. Climate change is seen as a solvable problem. On the one hand, “economic growth remained as a central theme” throughout the whole period (Pan et al. 2021, p.198), and on the other hand, the solution that the authority proposes to face climate crisis is to achieve a more sustainable economic growth relying on low-carbon technologies. Both perceptions seek the solutions within the given political economy and reflect China’s emphasis on economic growth and social stability.

To evaluate whether market-oriented newspapers are able to pose challenge to the official discourse on climate change issue, some comparative news analyses are conducted to answer the question. There are some positive signals showing that commercial newspapers are more likely to give voices to news sources such as ENGOs and citizens than party newspapers (Han et al. 2017; Duan and Miller 2021). However, such improvements from commercial newspapers are extremely limited. Ultimately, they rely heavily on the authority as their news sources and tend to deliver the government voices in most news reports (Wang 2020). Overall, the dominance of Chinese official voices and lack of abundant viewpoints are apparent when reporting on climate change across mainstream journalism in China, not matter party or market-oriented ones. More recently, a study, through analysis on Chinese mainstream climate news reporting during 2013 and 2021, has also found that while voices from state officials have become more and more predominant in the news coverages, scientific and critical opinions were gradually muted over time, which indicate the increasing media control and the severe politicisation of climate issue in China (Guo et al. 2023).

For ENGOs, the political space for their participation on China's governance on climate change is also very limited. There are still some spaces for Chinese ENGOs and other social elites to debate about climate change, but the real problem is their inability to mobilise the masses and to sustain a movement, and it is hardly allowed for these social actors to question the national climate targets and policies (Eberhardt 2015). According to Liu et al. (2017), "Chinese ENGOs, especially grassroots NGOs, tend to seek technical fixes for practical problems such as passive house technologies, renewable energies and sustainable lifestyle education, rather than targeting institutional weakness" (p.6). This is to say that ENGOs in China are asked to play a collaborating and following role in China's climate governance, and therefore, it is hard for them to challenge the official discourse that applauds China's responsible national image on this issue. Bottom-up activism is also limited to promoting public participation under the government permission and downstream policy implementation (Gilley 2012), which is seen by some scholars as helping instead of pressuring the government to take climate actions (Liu et al. 2017).

2.4. Summary

This chapter reviews the development of environmental journalism and ENGOs in contemporary China and their discursive practises on a variety of environmental issues. The reform and open-up promoted by Deng Xiaoping not only boosted China's economy but also relaxed the state control on the society, enabling commercial news media and non-profit organisations to be initiated and operated in China. After the reform, although economic growth was the priority of Chinese state, the central government also recognised that environmental degradation would lead to social instability if it cannot be well alleviated. At the same time, since local governments were given more autonomy, the central government hoped some mechanisms from bottom could play a role of monitoring and scrutiny on the environmental governance on local level. Thus, media were encouraged to do critical environmental news reporting and ENGOs were initiated to provide the service that local governments may overlook, as long as their criticism and advocacy will stay in the "safe zone" and will not threaten the CCP ruling. As shown, this official concerns about bottom-up criticism can be found from the apolitical discourse of environmentalism generally identified among Chinese environmental news and non-profit activities. Such discourse, when discussing environmental problems in China, tends to avoid questioning the political system and focus on solving the problem itself. It is usually featured with criticizing the local governments, businesses and at the same time appealing for the central government to step in. Thus, when it comes to debates about climate change, such an international negotiating issue involving national interests, news media and ENGOs in China are usually incapable of challenging the state.

Although the apolitical discourse of environmentalism is found general and important for Chinese environmental journalism practitioners and ENGOs to survive under the authoritarianism, it does not mean that environmental criticism from bottom pose no challenge to the social order led by the state power. As discussed above, Chinese news media and ENGO have once consistently interrogated the dam constructions that are normally approved by the central government. In these cases, although these critical voices usually will not directly attack the one-party system, they indeed question the government's decision-making process as arbitrary and thoughtless through exposing the potential environmental problems of dam construction. In addition, news reporting and the ENGOs' attention on a variety of pollution and resource shortage also reveal the risky and failing side behind the seemingly beautiful economic modernisation in contemporary China. And more importantly, this risk discourse in some cases is powerful to arouse widespread attention and promote civil protests, which is exactly what the Chinese government is most wary and afraid of.

Discussions in this chapter enable further examination on whether and how *China Dialogue* can provide distinct discourses on various environmental issues. This, as will be discussed in next chapter, is significant to understand how *China Dialogue* can exert its public service role as a non-profit news

outlet for Chinese environmental communication. Indeed, the purpose of doing public service journalism is an important feature that could make non-profit journalism differs from the commercial and party journalism in China. Yet, this public service pursuit is very likely to meet serious challenges under China's authoritarianism that is hostile with journalism and non-profit organisations. Next chapter will fully unpack both points and facilitate understanding on the nature of non-profit journalism and the possible incompatibility when using this concept in Chinese context.

Chapter 3 The Potential and Challenges of China Dialogue as a Non-profit Newsroom to Exert Public Service in China

3.1. Introduction

This chapter explains why *China Dialogue* as a non-profit newsroom is expected to provide environmental discourses in difference from Chinese mainstream journalism, and why China's authoritarian environment could pose a constraint on such potential.

On the one hand, non-profit journalism usually refers to public service journalism practises. It is not only an alternative business model but also a different set of logic to do journalism (Konieczna 2022). In contrast to profit-driven journalism that has commercial concerns and party journalism that aims to serve the ruling party interests, non-profit journalism (is required to) pursues public goods. This perception on non-profit journalism, although it mainly originates from liberal democratic contexts, is vital for examination on *China Dialogue* as a case in China, because, as a news non-profit initiated and registered in the UK, *China Dialogue's* operation is regulated by the British charity laws, and its news practises could be influenced by the western journalistic culture.

On the other hand, *China Dialogue* may encounter great challenges when practicing public service journalism amidst China's authoritarianism. There is not a comfortable media environment for non-profit journalism in China. The 2023 World Press Freedom Index from *Reporters Without Borders* ranks China 179 out of 180 countries as China is "the world's largest prison for journalists, and its regime conducts a campaign of repression against journalism and the right to information worldwide" (Reporters Without Borders 2023). More importantly, since *China Dialogue* was initiated in 2006, it has witnessed a deteriorating environment in China that has become increasingly oppressive for independent journalism and non-profit practises. These Chinese authoritarian contexts are necessary to analyse *China Dialogue's* public service role in China.

In the following texts, section 3.2 firstly elaborates the public service nature of non-profit journalism, why it becomes a burgeoning media phenomenon in recent decade, and how non-profit journalism can serve democracy and facilitate environmental accountability. The discussions are mainly based on liberal democratic contexts as the current English-language scholarship on non-profit journalism is largely limited to Anglo-American countries, and we lack knowledge about non-profit journalism practises in other areas (although there are fragmentary studies on non-profit journalism in Asia, South America and Africa, as will be touched below). However, as explained above, such discussions are key for understanding *China Dialogue* as a news non-profit with western background. Secondly, section 3.3 reviewed the deterioration of media and non-profit environment in China since *China Dialogue* was initiated in 2006. The change of political climate could severely damage the ability of *China Dialogue* to play its public service role. Lastly, section 3.4 provides a summary for this chapter. It argues that the discussions about non-profit journalism in liberal democratic contexts and China's authoritarianism are linked together to foster our understanding on the two sides of *China Dialogue* operated in China: due to the public service nature of non-profit journalism, *China Dialogue* is expected to create distinct environmental discourses from Chinese mainstream media and even push the boundary of news reporting; yet, such expectation can be comprised by the hostile environment under China's authoritarianism.

3.2. Burgeoning non-profit journalism as a public service during the decline of mainstream news industry

3.2.1. Decline of mainstream journalism: business model collapse and the fading of public service news

Non-profit journalism is not a new phenomenon. Some researchers suggest it can be traced back to the establishment of *Associated Press* in 1846 (Mcgrath 2014; Ferrucci and Nelson 2019; Konieczna 2020). In the whole 20th century, there were some non-profit newsrooms being established such as *The Christian Science Monitor* in the US and *The Guardian* in the UK, but the proliferation of non-profit journalism in liberal democratic contexts happened in late 20th century and early 21st century. As Kaplan notes, “The non-profit model, which started in the United States, has spread rapidly both in the U.S. and abroad. The trend began in the 1970s and ’80s, with a handful of U.S.-based non-profits devoted to advancing investigative journalism” (Kaplan 2013, p.25). A 2013 Pew research also finds that the non-profit media boom in the US is just a recent phenomenon (Mitchell et al. 2013). Among the 172 US digital news non-profits sampled in the research, only 29% of them were established before 2008 and the rest of them were launched between 2008 and 2012. Outside the US, the stable increase in number of investigative news non-profits after 1989 suggests that non-profit model gradually becomes an option to support investigative journalism in Europe, South America, Africa and Asia (Kaplan 2013).

Such proliferation of news non-profits in Anglo-American contexts largely comes from the decline of mainstream market-oriented journalism (Birnbauer 2018; Konieczna 2018; 2020). One of striking phenomena that happens to substantial profit-driven newsrooms today is the business model collapse. Traditionally, commercial news media obtain readership and audiences through news publishing and attracting advertisers, which becomes a major model to make profits in mainstream news industry. Yet, such business model has been severely challenged with the prevalence of the Internet, particularly the social media. The rising of new media platforms has successfully changed the public news consumption habits. As a 2018 survey notes, “about two-thirds of American adults (68%) say they at least occasionally get news on social media” (Matsa and Shearer 2018), which has certainly won lots of website traffics for those social media companies. As the result, digital technology giants such as Google, Facebook and Twitter are taking advertising revenues away from legacy news industry, which leads to amounts of newspapers trapped in serious profit-losing, layoffs and even closures (Pew Research Center 2019).

This business model collapse is harmful for the public service commitment of legacy news media and subsequently raises concerns about journalism and democracy. As Cairncross (2019) notes, the journalism that is mostly affected by the market change of news industry is “investigative and campaigning journalism” and “the humdrum task of reporting on the daily activities of public institutions, particularly those at local level” (p.17). Cairncross (2019) steps forward to suggest that the high-cost and high-risk investigative journalism projects generally bring the newsrooms great reputation but not the matching monetary rewards, which makes it more easily affected while substantial newsrooms are now losing profits and cut down expenses. The decline of news reporting on local affairs has also lowered the public willing to vote (Ibid). These negative changes in mainstream news industry as the result of digital disruption could undermine the integrity of a healthy democratic system that requires information transparency and oversight of power.

3.2.2. *Burgeoning of non-profit journalism: an alternative business model to do public service journalism*

It is in this background with the business collapse in profit-driven news industry and the subsequent decline of public service commitment that more non-profit news media are initiated in response to the crisis of journalism. There are a few benefits for a news organisation to pursue the non-profit status. Firstly, it provides an alternative business model to do journalism. Rather than relying on advertisers, most non-profit newsrooms are registered as a charity and receive funding from foundations, philanthropists, government, individual donors, readers, and corporate sponsorships (Konieczna 2018). According to the 2024 index report of *Institute for Non-profit News* (2024), the largest society for US non-profit newsrooms with more than 400 members, financial supports from foundations and individuals account for 80% of the total revenues for their member organisations. Although some news non-profits also run businesses such as selling products and advertising, the revenues are not allowed to be distributed to shareholders but should be used to fully support the organisations' sustainable operation and news production (Shaver 2010). The non-profit status also allows news organisations to enjoy tax exemptions, which is not applied to commercial news media that are registered as businesses.

Secondly, non-profit model encourages journalism practitioners to focus on public service news production rather than doing journalism with market concerns. In many liberal democratic countries such as US, UK, Canada and Australia, the charity laws require non-profit news organisations to ensure their works to serve public goods (Picard et al. 2016). Taking journalism as a public service implies a precondition that journalism could serve the public and benefit democratic life. As Ferrucci notes, "Public service journalism ... meant that the specific digitally native news non-profit involved citizens far more seamlessly and consistently in agenda setting and overall news construction processes, and focused content more strongly on issues affecting citizenship and democracy" (Ferrucci 2017, p.359). For Konieczna (2018), she refers "public service journalism" as a kind of journalism that is required by democracy. It focuses on hard news production, rejects trivialisation of readers, and promotes free debates and conversations on significant social issues. According to Cushion (2012), most of the values of public service journalism come from Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, which argues that news media should provide a platform for deliberative communication among citizens without state and commercial interference, and subsequently, democracy will thrive. Through literatures reviewing, Lamuedra et al. make a strong conclusion on three functions that public service journalism should achieve: "(1) to provide plural and quality information of public interest, (2) so as to allow citizen participation and public debate, (3) thus fostering the community's cultural cohesion" (Lamuedra et al. 2019, p.1531).

This requirement on news non-profits to do public service journalism makes it in difference from the traditional commercial journalism. Although many commercial media practitioners also value the public service role of news, they bear from the pressure of selling news stories. Out of the market concern, news is seen as products and news receivers are perceived as customers. In most cases, the daily expenses of news organisations are covered by advertising revenue, and journalists can be encouraged to please readers as more as possible since this could make the press more attractive in competition for advertisers (Croteau and Hoynes 2013). Such commercial pursuit in many cases could be contradicted with the public service role of journalism. For example, it is not unusual for journalists to give up critical news reporting on their advertisers due to the concern of advertisement losing (McChesney 2004). Tabloid press driven by profit orientation have long been criticised by some journalism scholars for spreading fake and biased news, trivializing and sensationalizing news stories (Skovsgaard 2014; Simpson and Startin 2023). In addition, over-emphasis on news selling also leads to some unethical journalism practises such as the phone hacking in 2011 Britain (Harcup 2015). All these journalism practises out of commercial concerns are

certainly contradicted with the expectation on journalism to act as a public service. In this situation, how to “develop a new model that finds profit in truth, vigilance and social responsibility” (Meyer’s words cited in Lewis 2007a) becomes an important topic for journalistic reformers. Due to the nature of non-profit journalism that aims to promote public goods, such model has received more and more attentions from journalism practitioners and scholars (Nee 2013; Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando 2014; Ferrucci 2015; Shin 2015; Konieczna 2018).

Despite the promise, it remains a question whether non-profit journalism can fulfil the public service mission. There are certainly some concerns. For instance, non-profit journalism so far is still an emerging and alternative media phenomenon in many countries, and the sustainability of such business model needs further observations. Donations could be cut off at any time, and the resources distribution is uneven as the 2017 data shows that while 92% of journalism grant funding across the world flowing to America and 7% to Europe, news organisations in other regions receive little of sponsorship (Karstens 2017). Legalisation is another important factor restricting the development of non-profit journalism. In many liberal democratic countries, obtaining non-profit status is still challengeable for news organisations (Kaplan 2013; Picard et al. 2016), not to mention those in authoritarian countries including China where it is not allowed for a news media to be registered as an independent non-profit organisation. In addition, to do journalism in a non-profit model does not mean that journalists can be completely independent. Some cases studies have pointed out non-profit newsrooms can be influenced by their benefactors in some cases due to the interest relationship (for example see Janssen 2015; Pickard and Stearns 2011; Benson 2018; Ferrucci and Nelson 2019; Wright et al. 2019). When it comes to authoritarian contexts, it is very possible that non-profit newsrooms can be forced to do self-censorship or even cracked down by coercive political power, as Ntibinyane (2018) has observed in a Nigerian non-profit newsroom.

However, there are also arousing findings that non-profit journalism can make significant differences from mainstream news reporting. For *Institute for Non-profit News* (2024), most of their members are not limited to daily news reporting but focus more on investigative and explanatory journalism. “These organisations invest in more cost-intensive endeavours like investigating injustices or communicating complicated topics to audiences (including local politics, government, environment and climate), often resulting in fewer, deeper stories than their news of the day peers” (Ibid). Such news practises echo with the public service mission of non-profit journalism as they are important for hold the power accountable, promote information transparency and inform citizens on public affairs. In addition, the “in-depth, time-intensive” news stories are exactly those news products affected mostly by the decline of mainstream profit-driven journalism due to the high costs of news production. The phenomenon that news non-profits put more resources to produce these news stories indicates that non-profit journalism is conducted to produce the news stories that mainstream journalism may lack of resources to make.

Analysis on news non-profits outside the US also indicate the quality of non-profit newsrooms stand out. Based on their research on eight investigative news non-profits in Latin America, Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando (2014) conclude that those newsrooms “have provided a public service that has been in most cases much better and more critical than their traditional mainstream counterparts” (p.528). Through comparative news analysis between non-profit and for-profit news media from Ibero-American area, a recent study also suggests that non-profit media “are characterised by content of social and critical nature” (Sánchez-Torné et al. 2023, p.13). The research shows that non-profit news outlets tend to report news stories that are marginalised in for-profit journalism such as the environment, corruption, gender and LGBT issues. While for-profit journalism report more international and national news, news non-profits touch more on national and local news stories. Sánchez-Torné et al. (2023) also find that news stories from non-profit media tend to be more critical about public affairs, which may suggest that non-profit journalism has more spaces and motivation to push social progress.

These findings on news contents from non-profit media are consistent with the reasons why supporters choose to donate non-profit journalism. Through investigation on readership, Powers and Yaros (2012; 2013) suggest that what promotes donors to support non-profit newsrooms is their demands for high-quality local news stories that they rarely find in other news channels. Not only audiences but also journalists themselves believe non-profit news organisations provide high commitment to doing public service journalism (Lanosga and Houston 2017). A comparative study has also demonstrated that in those democratic countries with a more mature non-profit news provision system, people can be better informed and the information gap between different social classes is smaller (Curran et al. 2009). As Carpenter et al. (2016) find, because non-profit newsrooms tend to prioritise public goods instead of commercial benefits, journalists and editors working for non-profit outlets are able to devote more time to a single news story and improve the news quality. Thus, non-profit news stories are usually more interpretive and explanatory, which is important for readers to fully understand a social phenomenon.

Specifically, when it comes to environmental journalism, there are some signals that, with the public service purpose, non-profit media hold the potential to facilitate better communication of environmental news to the public domestically and even internationally.

3.2.3. The potential of non-profit journalism to produce better environmental news

Although human health problem caused by industrial pollutions has been reported by some journalists in 19th century, Sachsman and Valenti (2020) note that the beginning of modern environmental journalism is dated back to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, "which led to a shift in the environmental paradigm from conservation to pollution and human health risk" (p.2). Since then, environmental news has become a regular reporting topic for mass news media. While some environmental news topics are domestic such as the soil/water/air pollution in a specific country, some other issues are international ones that require collaboration across the world such as the biodiversity loss and climate change. Today, how news media covers environmental issues has become an important sub-field for journalism studies, which also applies to Chinese context as elaborated in Chapter 2. Amounts of academic works have focused on the change of organisational settings of environmental media, journalists' perception on environmental news reporting, their struggling between different journalistic norms, and the social impacts of their news stories (for example see Boykoff and Boykoff 2007; Giannoulis 2010; Tandoc Jr and Takahashi 2014; Tong 2017a; Sachsman and Valenti 2020). These works are significant since, despite the prevalence of new media channels, news media still remain important arenas for people to receive and absorb environmental news information (Newman et al. 2020). Environmental news reporting can not only influence public cognition on environmental problems but also impact policy makers.

The downturn in the media business has also affected environmental news reporting. The degree of such influence could vary across contexts due to the different business models, but at least in those countries such as the US and Canada with a strong commercial media ecosystem, scholarship has noted the negative impacts of business collapse on environmental journalism (for example see Neuzil 2020; Sachsman and Valenti 2020). What happened is similar to other reporting areas as discussed above. Due to the profit losing, expense cut, layoffs and even media closure, there are rising concerns that environmental news cannot be fully covered as before and there are not enough vacancies for environmental journalists. A recent review on global climate journalism has documented the worrying phenomenon in the US: "fewer beats, fewer specialist journalists, generalist rather than specialist reporters covering science and the environment, outsourcing to freelancers, the migration of specialist reporters to general assignments or other desks, less time for investigative reporting, and a need to produce more output for a greater variety of platforms" (Schäfer and Painter 2021, p.5-6).

Yet, along with the concerns about decline of mainstream journalism, the emergence of new media platforms creates opportunities for environmental journalists. When Sachsman and Valenti (2020) did the similar research on American environmental journalists respectively in early 2000s and 2010s, they found that many of their interviewees had moved from legacy news media to the Internet or web-only news start-ups. Despite lack of systematic studies, non-profit newsrooms have also played an important role to support environmental journalism. Some news non-profits have opened environmental-news-focus sections on their websites such as *ProPublica*, *MinnPost* and *Mother Jones* in the US, *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism* in the UK, and *Corrective* in Germany. There are also some non-profit news media that are initiated to dedicate on environmental news reporting, and this has shown a tendency in the US such as *Environmental Health News*, *The New Lede* and *ecoRI News*. And of course, the subject of this research, *China Dialogue*, is one of the non-profit newsrooms doing environmental news reporting in China. Some news stories from these non-profit news outlets have obtained widespread praise from their news counterparts. For example, *InsideClimate News*, a US-based non-profit news organisation founded in 2007, has won Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2013 for their investigations on an enormous oil spill in the US (Neuzil 2020). As Giles (2010) suggests, such single-issue news media can provide more in-depth news coverage that mainstream news organisations largely ignore and promote public understandings on more diversifying environmental topics.

It is also reasonable to believe that non-profit journalism can facilitate news reporting on some international environmental issues such as climate change. As Konieczna (2018; 2020) notes, non-profit news practitioners are more willing to cooperate with other news media compared to the commercial news media due to their public service commitment instead of business competition concerns. Some transnational cooperation journalism projects are led by non-profit news media. For example, *The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists* (ICIJ) has created an international network “persuading the biggest and the smallest media organisations in the world to work together to do the watchdog journalism they used to do alone” (The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2022a). Their series of investigations have shed light on the transnational capitals’ responsibility on environmental problems such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, and how these multinational enterprises escape legal supervision through capital transferring (The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2022b). Such investigative news project involves investigations on different countries and requires journalists to be familiar with the situations across contexts. The collaborating network would enable journalists from different national and cultural backgrounds to work together, which may help media avoid the trap of “parachute journalism” (Musa and Yusha’u 2013).

3.3. China authoritarianism: increasing control on media and non-profit organisations

Overall, all the discussions above on non-profit journalism as public service, how this public-service-led role could perform in distinction from mainstream media, how it produces news stories beneficial for public goods and facilitates better environmental communication, indicate that *China Dialogue* as a non-profit news media have the potential to make positive differences for Chinese environmental journalism. The discussions are so far largely limited to liberal democracies, but some points are also applied to Chinese context. For example, the watchdog role identified in Chinese mainstream journalism (see Chapter 2) indeed can be regarded one type of public service journalism practises. Although such watchdog news practise is constrained to a certain level given China’s authoritarian structure, its pursuit to serve the public goods is consistent with the public service ethos. Yet, Chinese mainstream journalism also faced serious financial problem in the past decade, and it becomes one of the significant factors to impede its watchdog news practises (see 3.3.2). This is the common challenge between Chinese journalists and their counterparts in liberal democratic world.

But going beyond this, more specific factors should be concerned when examining *China Dialogue's* potential to do public service journalism under China's authoritarianism. The environment for *China Dialogue* is much more restrictive and oppressive. In difference from most of the countries noted above where their legal frameworks allow the official registration of non-profit news organisations, China's charity law has never addressed this. During the long years of operation in China, *China Dialogue* was registered as a business or foreign NGO project instead of a news organisation (interview with Sam Geall² on 11 August 2023), which at some points could impede their news reporting (see Chapter 6). Besides, although Chapter 2 acknowledges the dynamic interplay between Chinese authority and the civil institutions, where news organisations and ENGOs retain some autonomy for criticism and advocacy, vigilance and hostility from the coercive political force persist. Even worse, since *China Dialogue's* entry into the Chinese media landscape in 2006, subsequent years witness a deteriorating environment where the Chinese government becomes gradually alert to both news media and non-profit organisations. Its public service role faces possible contradictions with the political imperatives of regime consolidation and social stability, exemplified by the tight suppression on journalism and non-profit sector in the past two decades.

3.3.1. Hu's governance: the beginning of tighter controls on critical voices

Hu Jintao was appointed as general secretary of the CCP in November 2002 and the president of China three months later. Hu's government at first sent out friendly signals to the news media. For example, in January 2003, Li Changchun, head of the Central Leading Group on Propaganda and Thought Work, called on the Chinese media to report problems in the society, which is seen by some observers as a supporting statement for Chinese watchdog journalism (Brady 2017). However, when it comes to May 2006, he shifted his tone and asked for more party control on the areas including "(1) popular newspapers; (2) underground publications; (3) literature art; (4) private radio stations; (5) websites; (6) advertisements; (7) online gaming; and (8) entertainment and amusement venues" (Ibid, p.134). In the same year, the CCP issued a document calling for enhancing the party's ideology and strengthening the "governing ability" (Fewsmith 2005). These statements from the state level of officials are consistent with Hu's concept of "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) proposed in February 2005 that "hoped to mitigate domestic social conflicts, cope with a crisis of governance, and regain Party legitimacy" (Tong 2011, p.53). As Tong (2011) argues, such an attitude shift about the role of Chinese journalism may come from the state concern that critical news reporting on social conflicts will not help solve the problems but instead threaten the ruling party.

What happened at roughly the same time is a series of events that worry Chinese journalists and media practitioners. For instance, in 2005, the central government issued a document explicitly banning cross-regional media supervision (Tong 2011). The cross-regional media supervision refers to the journalism practises in which journalists from a media based on one place report critical news about another place. In Chinese press system, local propaganda departments are only responsible for managing the media that are based on the corresponding administrative regions. Thus, for Chinese local media, it is normally more difficult to be critical about its domestic regions because they are often subjected to control by the local propaganda departments. However, when reporting negative news about government entities at the same administrative level in other regions, the media is normally given more leeway. This strategy of cross-regional reporting was once important for Chinese critical journalists (Tong 2011; Wang 2016). Although the state document to ban such journalism practises was not strictly enforced in practise, it shows the state vigilance against critical journalism and the willingness to strengthen media control.

² Dr Sam Geall is the current CEO of China Dialogue. He is the interviewee for this research (for more information about the interview see section 5.2.3).

The punishment imposed on one of the most influential newspapers also raised concerns among journalists. In January 2006, *Bingdian (Freezing Point)*, an investigative and critical weekly supplement of the *Zhongguo Qiangnianbao (China Youth Daily)*, published an essay written by a Chinese historian Yuan Weishi that questions some fact errors in Chinese historical textbooks. The essay riled the propaganda department as it was seen as a challenge to the official ideology, which led to the temporary shutdown of the news journal and the dismissal of top editors (Repnikova 2017).

In the late Hu era, interviews with Chinese journalists indicate that “interference by the propaganda authorities had not declined or even had increased” (Steinhardt 2016. p.301). The personnel shuffle of *Nanfang Daily Media Group* during the last few years of Hu’s era also points this out. The *Nanfang Daily* is one of the largest media groups in China once famous for its most critical child newspapers *Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekly)* and *Nanfang Dushibao (Southern Metropolis Daily)*. In 2011, Chang Ping, a well-known outspoken news commenter, was removed from *Nanfang Dushibao* with a few other fellows, which became an omen of further crackdown. In the following year, Tuo Zhen, “an extremely conservative news official” as described by news media (Bandurski 2012), was put as the new head of the Propaganda Department of the Guangdong Committee which directly takes charge of the *Nanfang Daily Media Group*. At the same time, Yang Jian, another conservative governor, was appointed as the party secretary of the media group. A new division, the so-called “Examination Office” (*shendushi*), was also established inside the newsroom to monitor journalists and news editors. These forced personnel changes and management measures in the most outspoken media group, once again, show the government's determination to limit space of critical journalism and enhance the propaganda properties of news media.

At the same time, Hu’s government has gradually strengthened its control over the Internet. The ten years under Hu’s governance was also the decade of rapid increase in Internet penetration in China. According to data from the *World Bank* (2023), while only 5% of the Chinese population had access to the Internet in 2002, the number increased to 42% in 2012. Many social media platforms and online forums familiar with Chinese people today were initiated during the period, for example, *Sina Weibo*, *WeChat*, *Toutiao*, *Zhihu*. In the early years of Hu’s governance, some foreign social media platforms were accessible to Chinese people such as *Twitter*, *YouTube* and *Facebook*. Yet, these foreign websites were permanently blocked in 2009 due to the state demand for stronger information controls. In 2010, *Google* chose to pull its search engine from the Chinese market under the pressure of censorship (Kharpal 2022).

3.3.2. Xi’s depressing era: strengthening propaganda and the systematic collapse of critical journalism and non-profit advocacy

Under the governance of current president Xi Jinping, the situation became even tougher for Chinese journalism. As Tong (2019) notes, “Xi’s tenure has two noticeable features: blatant ideological struggles and unsympathetic hard-line media policies” (p.81). Immediately after he came to power in March 2013, Xi proposed “three confidences” calling for confidence in “1) the theory of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, 2) China’s current path, and 3) its current political system” (Zhao 2016, p.85). This speech indicates Xi’s strong concerns about the views that are critical to Chinese social problems and the governance of CCP. To rebuild these confidences, Xi demands to strengthen the party's leading role in the communication field, which means, on the one hand, stronger propaganda, and, on the other hand, taming critical voices and political dissidents.

Since news media is seen as the major propaganda tool for the party, journalism firstly becomes one of the targets of Xi’s media campaign. In his official speeches, Xi emphasises the function of news media more on propaganda and loyalty to the party rather than scrutiny on the government. For example, in August 2013, he stressed the importance of “propaganda struggle” (*yulundouzheng*),

which contrasts with his predecessors' word "opinion scrutiny" (*yulunjiandu*). And during his high-profile visits to state media outlets in 2016, Xi emphasised that media belong to the party and should "take the surname as party" (*meitixingdang*) (Tong 2019). Xi has indeed successfully put his stringent media policy into practise. In 2014, Shen Hao, a Chinese journalist famous for his liberal and democratic opinions, was arrested and sentenced to be corruption, and he was also forced to deliver his confession on a CCTV program (Denyer 2015). Despite whether this is an evidence-based trial, arresting such an influential liberal journalist and forcing him to commit crimes publicly will cause a chilling effect on Chinese journalism practitioners given the nation's unjust judiciary. In addition, according to interviews with Chinese journalists and editors, Repnikova (2018a) suggests that news media under Xi's governance receive "more detailed and frequent censorship instructions than they had in the past" (p.57).

What makes the situation worse is the business model collapse of Chinese legacy news media. As mentioned above, the advent and prevalence of the Internet, particularly social media, has fiercely challenged the traditional news industry with strong market characteristics. The mainstream news industry in China also faces the same challenges as their western counterparts that the Internet has diverted advertising revenues from legacy news media to digital platforms. Wang and Sparks (2019a) conclude three ways Chinese newspapers trying to rescue themselves from the economic collapse, including the integration of business and editorial department, seeking new revenue sources and transforming the editorial roles to business roles. When the traditional business model can no longer support the full engagement of journalists in producing news, they must concern about the business issue and think about how news content can serve commercial purpose. At this point, since the editorial independence cannot be promised, the collapse of business model has resulted in deep concerns about the recession of journalistic professional norms in China (Wang and Sparks 2019a).

Politically, the digital technology also breaks the delicate balance between market and state power for Chinese journalism, which leads to the concession of critical journalism and also strengthens authority control on news media under Xi Jinping's regime (Tong 2019; Wang and Sparks 2019b). The spaces for critical journalism in China were once based on the context that news media still had abilities to bargain with political power, given the government needed news media to function as an intermediate role connecting to the public and commercial news media had economic values. However, when the press itself is in financial trouble and even in need of government subsidies (Wang and Sparks 2019a), and the new communication technology enables government to interact with public directly (Chen et al. 2016; Truex 2017; Cai and Zhou 2019), Chinese news media has lost the leeway to negotiate with the state. In the worst case, some newspapers must rely on the advertising funding from government to survive in the market and writing advertising news stories for the government has even become the daily job for journalists, which further constrains the media ability to do critical journalism (Wang and Guo 2021). As Tong (2019) suggests, "alongside strong political control, commercial and technological forces have transformed the whole environment into one that is unsuitable for the development and sustainability of critical journalism" (p.91).

It is because of the coercive political phenomenon and low economic returns that lots of journalists, particularly investigative journalists, leave their jobs (Phillips 2016). Specifically, for environmental journalists, it has been also found that they are struggling with the harsher censorship under Xi's governance (Hilton 2017). As Liu Hongqiao, once an environmental journalist working for a famous news magazine Caixin, said in an interview:

"In 2012, there was still a relatively healthy ecosystem for journalists to do their jobs. Experts supported their work, civil society and other media would pick up their stories, and the government would, to an extent, address the issues they raised. In 2014, when I left my job, that relatively healthy environment had worsened rapidly." (Schoenmakers and Liu 2022)

The coercions are not limited to traditional news media but extended to social media platforms. In the name of campaigning against fake rumours, Xi, shortly after he took the power, launched a crackdown on social media platforms. A group of liberal opinion leaders once active on the Internet were detained and some of them were sentenced to prison (Brady 2017). Social media users who are judged as spreading “rumours” can face police interrogation, detention and even jail (Huang 2017). In 2014, Xi created the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission chaired by himself which aims to strengthen cyber control. In the following years, new regulations such as the 2015 Counterterrorism Law, 2016 Cybersecurity Law and 2017 Internet News and Information Regulation had been issued to further regulate voices on the Internet (Repnikova 2018a). More recently, Fang’s analysis on the fact-checking platforms in China during the pandemic also shows that, “rumour-debunking”, such an independent and professional journalism practise in liberal democracy is, however, intertwined with political propaganda in China and adopted by the government as a weapon to suppress critical voices (Fang 2022).

Furthermore, Xi’s propaganda department has learned well how to utilise the social media to build national image through boosting the patriotic nationalism emotion among the public. Some strategies are inherited from his predecessors. For example, Chinese government had hired a group of “online commenters”, often known as “fifty-cent party” (*wumaodang*), pretending to be ordinary netizens and anonymously post pro-government contents with nationalistic fervour (Han 2015; King et al. 2017). In addition, governments on different levels have created accounts on various social media platforms to promote soft propaganda information. This type of propaganda information is different from the traditional hard propaganda that is “pretentious and dogmatic” (Huang 2015, p.435), rather, it tends to be more appealing, entertaining and interactive to match the characteristics of social media.

Under Xi’s media policy, China’s propaganda apparatus not only defends the governance of Chinese state but also promotes the anti-foreign sentiment online. It is boosted through reminding Chinese people of the history in 19th and 20th century when China was invaded by western countries, and, at the same time, driving a narrative that contemporary western criticism on China such as the Hongkong and Xinjiang controversies should be regarded as an extension of the past foreign interference to China (Mattingly and Yao 2022). As a result of the spreading of this anti-foreign sentiment, as Yang and Fang (2021) observe, an alt-right community and discourse is rising and becomes rampant on Chinese social media in recent years. This group of Internet users, on the one hand, share and promote similar views with western alt-right community such as anti-immigration, anti-feminism, racism, and conspiracy theories about western democracy. On the other hand, they “used nationalistic arguments to support their appeals. The alt-right influencers treat those supporting liberal ideologies and domestic minority groups (e.g., the Muslim community, feminists, ethnic minorities) as non-Chinese and threatening China’s national identity. They also explicitly call on the state to intervene in relevant fields and undermine the power of these civic groups” (Ibid, p.13). Such discourse, manifested by western alt-right values and mixed with China’s domestic patriotic nationalism, has become increasingly popular and influential on today’s Chinese Internet, and it is also potential to cause stigmatisation of any critical voice to the Chinese government when it comes to climate change debates.

Xi’s intolerance on dissidents also leads him to tighten control on non-profit sector, specifically the advocacy NGOs. Although harassment, intimidation and crackdown on NGOs and activists happened from time to time during Hu’s era, Xi’s hostility is stronger, and his administration is less hesitant to adopt legal mechanisms to prosecute NGO members and activists. According to Zhu and Jun (2022), “in the Hu’s era, there were only five criminal cases involving nine NGO members”, but “in the past eight years, at least 54 members of 30 NGOs have been criminally charged in 29 cases” (p.527), and most of the charges are ambiguous with the “pocket crimes” such as “illegal business operation” and “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” (p.529). As they note, Xi’s systematic crackdown on civil

society organisations is out of the regime concerns over state security rather than “maintaining social stability” in Hu’s era. In other words, for Xi’s regime, the civic NGOs created from the bottom are potential to subvert the party ruling, and this echoes his triggers to strengthen control on news media.

Xi’s opposition to civic NGOs can be also seen from the 2017 Foreign NGO Law. When the draft of Overseas NGOs Management Law was released in 2015, according to news reporting from *The New York Times*, those foreign organisations based on China for a lot of years – “including international trade associations and philanthropic foundations” – are considering “scaling back their activities in China or pulling out of the country entirely” (Jacobs 2015). The law draft imposed numerous restrictions on the registration and operation of foreign NGOs working in China. For example, the law requires foreign NGOs to register with the Ministry of State Security rather than the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which implies the risk of foreign NGOs threatening state security. Any projects operated in China are asked to find a domestic partner and supervising unit. In addition, receiving unsanctioned foreign funding is strictly forbidden, which makes foreign NGOs pursuing funding and working in China more difficult to bypass official supervision (Sidel 2019). Although the law draft caused concerns and criticism from domestic and foreign non-profit practitioners, and the government had to publicly assert their openness attitude, the final law enacted in 2016 was revised little. Also, as the government favours social service organisations over advocacy and social justice projects, those foreign organisations working on the latter are mostly rejected to enter the country. Under this circumstance, Teets and Almen (2018) find that the political opportunity structure for non-profit organisations in China to conduct advocacy becomes more closed in Xi’s era than under the Hu’s administration.

These comprehensive setbacks in China’s civil society over the past decade lay the groundwork for our subsequent discussion regarding *China Dialogue’s* coverage of environmental news about China. As a news media and at the same time a non-profit organisation, *China Dialogue* could encounter heightened pressure, risks and constraints in conducting public service journalism under the intensifying authoritarianism.

3.4. Summary

This chapter provides indispensable background information to understand the public-service-oriented characteristic of non-profit journalism, which is vital for understanding *China Dialogue’s* discursive construction, and the challenges to do public service journalism under China’s authoritarianism.

Prior studies have revealed that, compared to profit-driven journalism, non-profit news media generally provide higher-quality news stories. They are more likely to offer news coverages that are important for public goods but not fully covered in mainstream commercial news industry. For example, local news stories that are vital for local democracy but have small readership, some marginal news topics that are regarded as lack of commercial value, and investigative news reports that require large investments of money, manpower and time. This finding is consistent with self-declaration of most non-profit media that they aim to educate the public, promote public interests instead of pursuing business benefits (Konieczna 2018). Such role definition is widely caught in scholarship with the concept of public service journalism (Lewis 2007b; Ferrucci 2015; Scott 2017; Konieczna 2018; Birnbauer 2018), and it nowadays becomes increasingly important in those countries with deep commercial news culture, particularly the US, when large number of commercial newsrooms have encountered severe financial problems. Moreover, when it comes to environmental journalism, there are also evidences that non-profit media could facilitate more diversifying and accountable news reporting, which further suggests that *China Dialogue* may be able to make important differences for Chinese environmental news.

Back to the media ecosystem in China, there could be challenges for *China Dialogue* to produce its public service news. Although, as discussed in Chapter 2, the reform and open-up creates political opportunity for *China Dialogue* to do environmental news reporting in China, the Chinese state worries about the burgeoning of civil society that may threaten the party legitimacy has never disappeared and becomes deeper under Hu and Xi's governance. What comes after is the gradual control on news media and non-profit sector. Particularly since Xi Jinping came to power, amounts of scholarship have suggested that previous spaces for watchdog journalism and independent non-profit advocacy have now become extremely limited (Repnikova 2018a; Teets and Almen 2018; Tong 2019; Sidel 2019). Critical voices to the government could be easily seen as disrupting social stability or even state security in the current situation. Furthermore, in today's Chinese public arena, an ideology mixed with pro-government patriotism, nationalism, and xenophobia is fiercely promoted by Xi's propaganda apparatus. The prevalence of the ideology in Chinese society today could become another pressure that restricts the public service exhibition of *China Dialogue*.

In one word, based on the discussions in this chapter, it is assumed that *China Dialogue* would push the boundary of Chinese mainstream environmental journalism but at the same time it has to make concession on its public service news reporting when facing the authoritarian system. Such conflicts will be unified with the concept of "adaptation" in next chapter. Through reviewing prior scholarship in sociology on how to understand adaptation and, more specifically, journalism scholarship on how to understand journalistic adaptation to authoritarianism, next chapter will show that such conflicts when examining *China Dialogue's* public service role under China's authoritarianism is not new for scholarship. Prior perceptions on the adaptation problem can help raise specific research questions in this study.

Chapter 4 Journalistic Adaptation to Authoritarianism

4.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to present different theoretical approaches to journalistic adaptation to authoritarianism and propose research questions based on the theories.

In sociology, there are three approaches to interpret the adaptation process: a positivist approach from structural functionalism sees adaptation as a process to reach social equilibrium and stabilisation; a critical approach tends to critically examine adaptation as a repressive process in which the dominated social groups are allured or forced to accept the rules, disciplines and norms created by the dominant; and a pragmatic approach that recognises the agency of social actors and claims that adaptation also refers to the strategies of the subaltern to resist external repressions.

When it comes to journalism studies, although the concept of adaptation is not systematically examined, it has been used in recent years to explore how journalistic institutions face the media environmental changes such as the traditional business model collapse, disruption of new digital technologies, dynamic boundary of journalism as a profession, and rising populism and authoritarianism across the world (Anderson et al. 2015; Song and Chang 2017; Gladkova 2017; Holcomb 2018; Broersma 2020; Mäder and Rinsdorf 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022; Erzikova and Lowrey 2023). The critical and pragmatic approaches to adaptation in sociology could be also identified when examining news contents under authoritarianism. For example, classic liberalists have argued that self-censorship, a news behaviour that media generally adopt to survive under authoritarianism, usually results in the concession in news contents, which manifests a forced adaptation to coercive power and weakens journalism to play its public service role (see 4.3.1). Yet, more recently, a branch of scholarship proposes that the forced news concession under authoritarianism also present the agency of social actors, and in some cases, create opportunity to push the boundary of criticism and advocacy (see 4.3.2). This echoes with the pragmatic perspective to understand the adaptation process under a hierarchical power structure. These discussions from prior literature provide insightful perspectives examine *China Dialogue's* news contents under China's authoritarianism.

The following sections firstly unpack different approaches to the concept of adaptation in sociology. It then adopts the critical and pragmatic perspectives to examine the adaptation of news contents to authoritarianism. Finally, a summary section argues that both critical and pragmatic perspectives are valuable to investigate *China Dialogue's* news contents as the result of adaptation to China, which also leads to two research questions proposed at the end of this chapter.

4.2. Theoretical approaches to adaptation

4.2.1. A positivist perspective on adaptation

“In the broadest sense, adaptation has described the capacities for human, cultural, and biological adjustments as a way of surviving, advancing, or simply changing” (Corrigan 2017, p.25). Originated mainly in studies of the living, the concept “adaptation” is generally used in biology to refer to the process by which living organisms adjust to changes in the natural environment to increase their chances of survival and reproduction. Specifically, in evolutionary biology, the success of adaptation is vital for the emergence of new species (Simonet 2010). By adapting to changing environmental conditions, organisms are able to exploit new resources and create new ways of living. Such brief and perhaps simplistic perception on adaptation in biology indicates that to study adaptation is to

study the dynamic, persistent and complicated interactions between living beings and the environment.

The notion of adaptation in biology once had a deep impact on sociological understanding on adaptation. According to structural functionalism, which was influential in the first half of 20th century, society is studied by means of a biological anthology (Turner and Maryanski 1979). It is argued that just as biological organisms have specific structures and functions that contribute to their overall health and survival, society has structures and institutions that contribute to its overall stability and well-being. For most structural functionalists, the major concern is how the society reaches to equilibrium and stabilisation. In this regard, social organisations and institutions are understood according to their functions corresponding to the social needs, and the notion of adaptation is seen as an important capacity or process for social entities to adjust their behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs to meet the changing social and environmental conditions. For example, in Talcott Parsons's famous analysis model, adaptation is defined as one of the functional prerequisites for any successful social system (Chernilo 2017). The basic idea is that any social system such as a family, a school and even a whole society must maintain resources to survive and keep operation, which is the process and capacity captured with the notion "adaptation". For a family, it needs jobs to earn living. For a society, a stable economic system is required to meet this adaptation condition. Although Parsons's conception on adaptation has its emphasis on material and biological adaptation, the concept cannot be reduced to it (Ibid). Humans are not only organic (biological) but also social, which is also true for social organisations composed on individuals. Thus, "questions of adaptation can no longer be treated exclusively at an organic level; they need also to include sociocultural developments" (Ibid, p.92). For individuals in a society, adaptation also refers to the interiorisation of existing social norms and "any deviation from the adoption of these norms by the individual is social pathology" (Terziev 2019, p.494).

4.2.2. A critical perspective on adaptation

Yet, the interiorisation of social norms could be also presented as a social control, a domestication process of the individuals or a specific social group. In other words, adaptation is not always a positive or beneficial process, but can reinforce existing inequalities and injustices. It can be not only a process of compromise between man and the environment, but also a process of power and domination in which dominant groups impose their values and norms on subordinate groups to maintain dominance. This critical approach to adaptation echoes the general criticism on functionalism in the 1950s that doubts functionalism "as conservative and as implicitly legitimizing the status quo" (Turner and Maryanski 1979, p.114). Since many functionalists majorly concern about how a social system can maintain equilibrium and homeostasis, critics argue that functionalists' research perspective lacks a critical view of reality.

For instance, the concept of "hegemony" provides a typical critical approach to examine sociological adaptation. As Martin (2022) notes, "hegemony describes a form of societal leadership whereby those under its influence give assent to domination by a particular group, class, or state" (p.1). In this definition, what links hegemony to adaptation is the description of "give assent to domination". In such social status, maintenance on sovereignty is not solely based on coercion and suppression, rather, it requires the consent of the dominated. From the functionalists' view, this shall be seen as a procedure of the subaltern's adaptation and the existence of hegemony plays a positive and significant role to maintain social stability. Yet, for critics, hegemony is usually used as a negative word to describe an unjust social order. As Marxist Antonio Gramsci points out, one of the important reasons why capitalism thrives in western democracies with mature civil society is the capitalistic beliefs such as protection of private property and free market have achieved hegemonic status over the society (Ibid). This ideological hegemony achieved by bourgeoisie needs to be critically viewed because the social order based on this hegemony is unfair to the working class, and the working

class's belief in this set of bourgeois ideology is a "false consciousness" that goes against their economic interests (Eyerman 1981). Even though the working class successfully adapts to the capitalistic system, for Marxists, one should not take this adaptation for granted or legitimate since there is manipulation of "infrastructure" and "superstructure" by the ruling class over the subordinate class in this adaptation process (Martin 2022). In other words, ethical considerations are necessary when examining social adaptation.

4.2.3. A pragmatic perspective on adaptation

In addition to the positivist and critical understanding on adaptation, both of which overemphasise the structuralism and do not leave "apparent place for the active powers of agency" (Chernilo 2017, p.87), another approach to adaptation tends to see it as a proactive process. As Simonet (2010) contends, social adaptation cannot be reduced to socialization. "Socialization requires an individual to have interiorised and integrated the models, values and symbols of the milieu to the structure of his personality in order to communicate and evolve with ease. Social adaptation, however, does not signify 'conformity' as the adaptation to a milieu can introduce the notion of innovation or modification" (p.5). This is to say that the process of adaptation could create spaces for agency to challenge the status quo and potentially lead to social progress.

This conception on adaptation is consistent with James Scott's critique on the concept of hegemony (Scott 2008). "The problem with the hegemonic thesis, at least in its strong forms as proposed by some of Gramsci's successors, is that it is difficult to explain how social change could ever originate from below" (Ibid, p.78). As Scott puts, the consent from subordinated group to be dominated can be a temporary compromise they make for the promised benefits from the upper class, which does not mean that they consider the current hierarchical structure to be legitimate. After all, any hegemonic ideology must make a claim to serve the interests of subordinate groups to prove its legitimacy, and this at the same time "provides antagonists with political resources in the form of political claims that are legitimised by that ideology" (Ibid, p.95). Thus, it is hard to know whether the consent from bottom, or the adaptation to the power structure, is sincere or is rather a tactic to pursue personal gains. If it is the later, once the commitment to serve the subordinated cannot be fulfilled, it may be a moment for rebellion to occur.

Chua's (2012) study on gay collective action in Singapore also recognises the agency of the dominated groups. He proposes that the pragmatic resistance of gay activists in Singapore can be understood as a "strategic adaptation", which is the concept proposed by McCammon et al. (2008). It requires the activism group, on the one hand, to keep high degree of sensitivity to the political phenomenon, ensuring their survival while facing the limited civil-political liberties, and on the other hand, to make good use of any possibilities to advance with skirmishes, pushing for changes on policies and practises. In this situation, adaptation is not only a reactive process in which social actors are forced to accept or interiorise the social norms, regulations or disciplines, but also a proactive activity that actors choose to play. Indeed, in the model constructed by McCammon et al. (2008), one of the crucial steps for strategic adaptation is to make decision to adjust tactics for social movement after evaluating the contextual changes. It is this exercise of agency that makes social progress possible. Terziev (2009) terms this understanding on adaptation as "pragmatic approach", in which it is claimed that "it is not the social norms that create the adaptation of the individual, but it is the individual in the process of his adaptation who evaluates, modifies, develops the social norms" (p.495).

It should be noted that such pragmatic approach to adaptation does not necessarily lead to the overall denial of the critical approach. What Scott's critique on hegemony and the concept of "strategic adaptation" remind us here is that adaptation to a hierarchical structure should not be simplified as unconsciousness and inability of the whole underclasses. They do not argue that the

opposition and resistance is embedded in the action of underclasses but just point out the potential. They do not overturn the critical argument that hierarchy is usually based on the adaptation of underclasses but add a complementary perspective that gives attention to the possible agency of the dominated.

In terms of this study examining journalistic adaptation to authoritarianism from the perspective of news output, it is feasible and essential to combine the two approaches. In fact, as elaborated in the following section, both critical and pragmatic perspectives can be identified in terms of the investigations on news outputs under authoritarianism.

4.3. Adaptation of news contents to authoritarianism

4.3.1. Concession in news contents as a forced degradation: a critical perspective

Despite the wide variety of authoritarian regimes, authoritarianism share some common characteristics that make it differ from competitive democracies and totalitarian systems. Juan Linz defines authoritarian regime as

“political system with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate or guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader and occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones”. (Linz 2000, p.159)

According to this definition, authoritarianism allows some spaces for oppositions and dissidents, but the dissenting voices should be restricted and under-controlled to ensure regime consolidation. Such spaces can be elastic given different historical periods and different regimes, and it is because of this elasticity that creates “the fairly wide range in which those (authoritarian) regimes operate” (Ibid, p.161). The scale of speech control may vary from country to country, but speech censorship on some levels is necessary to embody the political crackdown in authoritarian regimes.

Due to the speech control, it has been found that self-censorship is a normal phenomenon during journalistic adaptation to authoritarianism, which usually results in concession in news contents such as marginalisation of some significant news topics and biased news reporting (for example see Tong 2009; Yesil 2014; George 2019; Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020). As Lee (1998) puts, self-censorship could be defined as “a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organisations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishment from the power structure” (p.57). It happens inside the newsroom before censoring order from the upper classes come into effect, as the news practitioners make a judgement call in advance that the news publishing would lead to punishments. Although in such cases the news stories are not directly censored by the coercive power, the censorship is “a direct result of explicit political pressure, interference or fear” (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020, p.30).

Self-censorship is normally compulsory for news practitioners to adapt to the authoritarian setting that requires speech control. Although it is not easy to identify self-censorship since media practitioners hardly want to discuss it due to the sensitivity of this topic, and it is not easy to justify the self-censorship behaviour (Lee and Chan 2009), empirical studies find that self-censorship indeed exists. On the organisational level, news organisations under authoritarianism need to learn the boundary to do critical news reporting to avoid crackdown, and for individual journalists, particularly for new entrants to the industry, one of the adaptation processes is usually to learn self-censorship with the (unspoken) expectations and guidelines from their superiors (Skjerdal 2010; Tapsell 2012).

What comes with the self-censorship is the news concession that fails journalistic mission to report truths and promote public goods. For example, during the 2016 Uganda election, Walulya and Nassanga (2020) find that it is general for journalists to self-censor critical news stories that could hurt the candidates' image because of their embedded relationship with the candidates' campaign team. This apparently prevents voters from casting a fair vote. And certainly, in China, self-censorship among news media is universal given press freedom is not institutionally protected and outspoken media can be easily punished by the political power, which has led to the distortion of news information in public discussions and vanishment of important public affairs, as we have fully discussed in Chapter 2 and 3. More seriously, some scholars have argued that excessive self-censorship and compromise on criticism may help polish the authoritarian regime and consolidate the unjust political order (Zhao 2000; Pan and Chan 2003). Although higher level of self-censorship is found under authoritarianism (Shen and Truex 2021), it is also identified in liberal democracies. For instance, it has been found that, when reporting climate change, such a topic sensitive to some advertisers such as fossil fuel companies, commercial news media in the US could underreport it or even provide biased information due to the worry of losing advertisers (Antilla 2010; Germano and Meier 2013).

From the perspective of classic liberalism, the concession of news contents under pressure and coercion, although it helps the media adapt to the hostile environment, is a phenomenon as the result of constraining speech freedom and is detrimental to the healthy development of human mind. The defence of speech freedom as a political and human right is not new. Back to the 17th century, John Milton (1965) delivered his now-famous speech, *Areopagitica*, in the English Parliament. In the speech, he vehemently criticised the stringent system of publication censorship in England at that time, pointing out that censorship not only constitutes an ignoble act persecuting dissenting individuals but also hinders independent thinking among the public. Two hundred years later, John Stuart Mill also advocated for speech freedom. "The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of the opinion is, that it is robbing the human race" (Mill 1865, p.11). His book *On Liberty* argues that although the people of Britain had largely freed themselves from the oppression of government and church, they still need to be cautious about the tyranny of the majority. When individual expressions are confronted with mainstream public opinions, even if the ideas are erroneous, they should be protected as long as the speeches do not cause harm to others, because this is necessary to test the correctness of mainstream ideas. When the alternative opinion is muted, as Mill puts, "If the (alternative) opinion is right, they (mainstream opinions) are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error" (Ibid, p.11-12). Such belief on speech freedom reflects Mill's optimism that truths will prevail over errors if free debates are allowed.

With these liberating ideas of speech freedom, advocacy for press freedom and denouncement on press censorship is not unnormal since 19th century, as journalism has been gradually seen as one of the most important institutions that have a huge impact on public exchange of information and ideas. For example, Karl Marx wrote his first political commentary, *Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction*, in 1842 to condemn the limitation on news publications imposed by the Prussian government. He claims that such a system represents a form of control over knowledge and thought, preventing the public from accessing truthful and diverse information (Marx 1842). However, the belief on press freedom without any intervene has met challenges in 20th century. In 1920, Walter Lippmann in his book *Liberty and the News* argued that liberty is not a purpose but a set of methods which aims to serve "the furnishing of a healthy environment in which human judgement and inquiry can most successfully organize human life" (Lippmann 2020, p.12). He proposes that some degree of regulations on the news industry is necessary to avoid news practitioners spreading irresponsible and incorrect information. Yet, the advice he proposed do not include the censorship from government or other powerful institutions but tend to push changes

inside the news industry and ask for self-discipline of journalists, which indicates Lippmann's concerns that the censorship or regulations from outside may distort news information and impede news media to report truth. After all, his opinion on the function of journalism is not different from previous advocates for press freedom: "there can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil" (Ibid, p.4). These ideas of ensuring journalistic autonomy from powerful institutions and constructing a responsible news industry through self-regulation were advocated more comprehensively in the Hutchins commission report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, published in 1947. As the report puts, while "any power capable of protecting freedom is also capable of endangering it" (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947, p.7), the press itself should promote self-regulation to ensure the "responsibility for performance in the public interest" (Ibid, p.69). These justifications on press freedom and denial of outside interferences provide a critical perspective to examine the news concession under authoritarianism. It shall be regarded as unacceptable as it fails the public right to know and harms the first duty of ethical journalism: get the truth (Harcup 2006). Even worse, aligning with the critical approach to adaptation, the distorted news reporting can be manipulated to serve the benefits of upper classes and thus impede the pursuit for social justice.

4.3.2. Concession in news contents as a strategy for criticism: a pragmatic perspective

Nevertheless, recent studies on news practises under authoritarian regimes propose a more positive opinion about the news concession. On the one hand, it is argued that the concession resulted from self-censorship does not equal unconditional submission to the authority power. Skjerdal's study on journalists working for Ethiopia state media finds that, despite self-censorship is very normal among the journalists, they still conserve some degrees of journalistic professionalism (Skjerdal 2010). They may not be allowed to touch on some stories, but they make large efforts to refute lying in the news reports. Such subtle and constant struggling between professionalism and self-censorship is also found among Venezuelan journalists (Pain and Korin 2021). In daily journalism practises, many journalists still try their best to collect significant information, corroborate sources and share news sources with more independent newsrooms once their own organisations are not allowed to report the news. All these strategies are adopted to work beyond self-censorship. As one Venezuelan journalist says, "if not to win them (professionalism), at least to survive them" (Ibid, p.80).

On the other hand, more importantly, a certain degree of concession may create a space enabling news media to avoid political crackdown and do critical journalism on some levels. For instance, back to Chinese context, Tong (2009) argues that "the self-censorship in Chinese newsrooms nowadays is not a strict 'No' policy. Instead, it helps maximise the possibility of getting reports published at the same time as minimizing political risks" (p.609). She finds that when it comes to coverages about social conflicts, after journalists finish the initial version of news stories and hand them to the editors, some self-censorship practises are conducted to avoid the news stories being too critical to the government and subsequently leading to political crackdown on the newsrooms. To soften the critical tone in the original news reports, editors may replace eye-catching headline with a dull one, concealing partial sensitive information, cite more official statements, and propose constructive suggestions on policy change. These self-censorship measures definitely weaken the intensity of criticism. Yet, it is because of these measures that the conflictual events can be reported and enter publicity. From this perspective, in Chinese specific context, the necessary concession in news contents "has potentially become a force that increases media freedom instead of a threat to media freedom" (Ibid, p.593).

In addition, "constructive" (*jianshexing*) criticism is generally identified in Chinese critical news reports in Repnikova's investigation on media politics in China (Repnikova 2017), which also presents the agency of journalists to reinterpret their space within the coercive system. The idea was initially proposed by the Chinese propaganda department as a guideline for news media to exert criticism in an acceptable and constraining way. They are expected to explicate solutions and transmit a hopeful

sentiment while doing watchdog journalism. The solution proposition shows the media collaborating stance with the authority, and transmitting hopeful sentiment – for example, through reporting the achievements and progresses obtained so far to correct errors – helps ease the social discontents. As Repnikova (2017) suggests, such stress on constructive criticism aligns with the official perception on “media’s role of directing or spinning public opinion in line with the party-state’s priorities” (p.60), as constructive criticism is considered beneficial for improving governance and less harmful for regime consolidation. In other words, constructive criticism manifests the authority control on journalism. In recent years, the Chinese government is also devoted to promoting such constructive mode of news reporting to the global community as an alternative to the conventional watchdog journalism, trying to mitigate outside criticism on China’s issues (Benner et al. 2018).

With the official guideline, Repnikova (2017) does find that the characteristics of constructive criticism are widely identified in Chinese investigative and critical news reports, despite the idea of constructive criticism remains controversial among Chinese journalists (Lin 2010). As Repnikova (2017) concludes, the constructive criticism “was achieved with three discursive devices: by appealing to expert testimonies, by drawing parallels to successful cases and by proposing solutions” (Ibid, p.124). The “expert testimonies” create some distance between journalists’ own opinions and the critical voices conveyed by the interviewees, which on some levels protects the journalists and at the same time succeed to exert criticism. Through “drawing parallels to successful cases” and “proposing solutions”, journalists present their constructive and collaborative role, making the critical news reports more acceptable by the censorship system. In many cases, it is by utilizing these discursive devices that Chinese journalists seek the space to touch upon some sensitive news topics, which is in fact sometimes beyond the original expectation of the authority (Ibid). For instance, Repnikova (2017) finds that, when reporting the collapsed school building in 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, a news media discussed the construction quality issues, in which the problem had gone beyond the faults of a specific person or group and targeted the systemic supervision failures. The news topic was extremely sensitive since it was related to caused deaths of Children – an intolerable error – and irresponsibility of upper government. It is very likely to raise doubts on the ability of Chinese authority as a whole. The critical news report is carefully written with apparent characteristics of constructive criticism, and this may help explain why it can be published under the censorship system (Ibid).

Therefore, despite the idea of constructive criticism is proposed in the official discourse, its practises among Chinese journalists should not be reduced to complete obedience to the political control. As Repnikova (2018b) argues, it “can present more challenges or vulnerabilities to authoritarian systems” in the long-term (p.56). Although, to ensure survival, news organisations and journalists are not able to directly criticise the authoritarian system, they do open the spaces for revealing many important social problems through the constructive criticism practises. With such pressure from bottom, the Chinese government is “forced into a cycle of responsiveness to public demands by co-opting critical voices into the party’s nexus” (Ibid, p.56), which is potential to create cleavage inside the authoritarian system for future political change. From this point of view, such criticism with concession to the oppressive power can be productive. It can be viewed as a smart way for media practitioners to play guerrilla warfare with the censors and resist authoritarian suppression.

The two understandings on the concession in news contents under authoritarianism reviewed above respectively echoes the critical and pragmatic approaches to adaptation as we have discussed in section 4.2. For liberalism, news concession can be understood as the reactive adaptation of media organisations to authoritarianism with stringent speech regulations. It emphasises the docile side of media practitioners in the restrictive media environment and indicates that such adaptation is a type of alienation. In contrast, for optimists, news concession could be also an active strategy for media practitioners to circumvent political risks and play criticism and advocacy.

These two opinions about news concession as an adaptation phenomenon under authoritarianism should not be perceived as contradictory. In fact, they are united in terms of their value pursuit. Both perspectives value liberty and emancipation, both believe that press freedom should be protected from external censorship, and both advocate for journalism to serve public goods instead of any specific interest groups. They are neither contradicted on methodology. When examining adaptation to authoritarianism, researchers can, on the one hand, evaluate to what extent the news organisation self-censor (sacrifice) news contents to keep safety when facing intimidation from coercive power, which may involve avoiding some news topics, concealing specific narratives, and the delicate phrasing adjustments. And on the other hand, researchers can explore on what levels journalists under authoritarianism can produce news contents to challenge the status quo after surviving the repressive environment.

Combining the two perspectives news concession under authoritarianism also helps examine Chinese environmentalism practises. Back to the discussions about environmental discourses in China (see 2.3), prior scholarship has found that the apolitical discourse is general for Chinese environmental journalism and NGOs in the constraining environment for press freedom and non-profit advocacy. From the liberal and critical view, certainly this indicates that Chinese environmentalism practise must sacrifice the intensity of criticism on the status quo to survive under the authoritarianism. Nevertheless, from the pragmatic perspective, it is the apolitical discourse that makes the risk discourse of environmentalism possible to be identified and disseminated in China. In news reporting of a single environmental incident, or a specific environmental campaign, it is certainly difficult for the Chinese media and NGOs to challenge the central authority, but when a series of critical reports on environmental problems and environmental campaigns can uniformly point to the criticism on China's modernisation discourse, it would be hard to say whether this kind of environmentalism is really "apolitical" because, fundamentally speaking, the constructed risk discourse poses a challenge to the ideology dominated by state power. Thus, answering questions about the adaptation of *China Dialogue* to China requires the combination of both analytical perspectives. We must examine not only the possible distortion of its environmental discourse under the authoritarianism but also how likely it is to deliver discourses that may shake the mainstream discourses maintained by the authority.

4.4. Summary and research questions formulation

To sum up, this chapter firstly examines the concept of adaptation from three perspectives: positivist, critical and pragmatic. The positivist understanding on adaptation can be identified from the structural functionalism paradigm which aims to explore how the adaptation of individuals and social groups can benefit social stability. Since this analysing perspective is criticised by many as being too conservative and talking little about justice, a critical approach to adaptation is introduced through the notion of hegemony as an example. From critical perspective, ethic should be an important concern. In a power structure, one should analyse how the superiors manipulate the behaviour and ideology of the subordinates, and in this situation the adaptation process for the subordinates is the process of learning and internalising the rules and norms that make them controllable to be governed, dominated and disciplined. This perspective, although stands for the disadvantaged groups, gives not enough attention to their agency and subjectivity. In contrast, a so-called pragmatic approach tends to believe the subordinate adaptation still maintains space for resistance and even overthrowing the power structure. Adaptation can be also an active strategy to survive and seek opportunities to make positive changes on the status quo.

With plural approaches to examining adaptation, when it comes to examine the tension between journalism and authoritarianism, there are also different but complementary understandings on the concession in news contents while journalistic adapting to the political system with inadequate press

freedom. For liberalists, the concession as the result of self-censorship is a forced response of news media under pressure from the powerful individuals and institutions that causes damage to journalism to play its critical and watchdog role. However, this critique may overlook the resistance of the news media to the authoritarian structure. As we have reviewed, some scholarship on Chinese journalism has argued that certain degree of concession in news contents helps the survival of news media in an authoritarian system, thereby allowing the media to push the speech boundary. If the media does not exercise the self-censorship when reporting sensitive events, the result is that the event would be completely unreported. A constructive criticism is also identified in many Chinese critical news reports, which, although limits the media criticism to a more acceptable and less harmful way for the authority, enables journalists to deliver discourses countering the official in many cases. In this sense, it is the news concession that makes critical reporting possible under China's authoritarianism.

These two perspectives on the concession in news contents respectively corresponds to the critical and pragmatic approach to adaptation, and it is necessary to combine the two when examining *China Dialogue's* adaptation to China's authoritarian system. On the one hand, as we have reviewed in Chapter 3, it is hard not to admit that *China Dialogue* must suffer from the political pressure and refrain from some critical expressions to survive in China. In particular, since initiated in 2006, the media has witnessed the growing authoritarianism with decreasing space for press freedom, particularly after Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. The increasing political censorship will inevitably lead to stronger self-censorship inside news media, and the patriotic nationalism sentiment on social media boosted by propaganda apparatus will also constrain rational debates about environmental issues. To examine the possible concession in *China Dialogue's* news contents with the deterioration of such media environment, this study raises the first research question:

RQ1: How did *China Dialogue's* environmental news stories change with the deterioration of environment for critical journalism and non-profit advocacy in domestic China?

On the other hand, with some levels of concession to the political censorship and other coercive power, *China Dialogue* may still maintain some ways to exert its public service role. As discussed in Chapter 3, this is important for a non-profit news media to justify and legitimate the non-profit status. The public service role can be demonstrated in the news outputs. Non-profit journalism normally tends to cover news stories that mainstream news outlets cannot fully produce due to a variety of reasons, and it has been found that news contents from non-profit journalism is more likely to be more critical than mainstream journalism (see Chapter 3). Similarly, back to *China Dialogue* as a non-profit case in China, it is also important to evaluate whether the media can deliver news contents in difference from Chinese mainstream journalism. It may be able to construct a particular discourse of environmentalism that counters or pushes the official line while mainstream news media are generally tamed by the political power in today's China. Thus, a second research question is proposed here:

RQ2: To what extent *China Dialogue's* environmental news reporting can construct different environmental discourses from mainstream journalism in today's China?

The combination of the two research questions will enable analysis on the two dimensions of *China Dialogue's* adaptation to China's authoritarianism: adaptation to fit the repression in a hierarchical power structure, and adaptation as a strategy to push positive change of the depressing system.

Chapter 5 Methodology

5.1. Introduction

This chapter explains the corresponding research methods adopted to answer the two research questions proposed at the end of last chapter. For RQ1, this research adopts a computational topic modelling to observe how *China Dialogue*'s news stories change during 2006 and 2021. If the degradation of news topics abundance can be identified over the time, which may indicate the news concession to China's intensifying authoritarianism. After this is done, this research focuses more on the recent situation, conducting quantitative and qualitative comparison between news contents from *China Dialogue* and Chinese mainstream journalism in 2021. The comparison aims to answer RQ2 and explores, after the possible news concession, whether *China Dialogue*'s news can differ from mainstream environmental news in China, which could manifest its public service role as a news non-profit. All the research methods are explained in details one by one in the following sections.

5.2. China Dialogue's adaptation of news contents: LDA topic modelling

Impacts of the environmental change on news media could be reflected on the news stories. As discussed in Chapter 2, the stringent political censorship has distorted Chinese news reporting on environmental issues. Some topics are hardly touched due to the political sensitivity, and some issues should be carefully framed to circumvent the censorship system. To understand how *China Dialogue* adjusts its news contents with the increasing media control in China, this research adopts a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling to analyse how the media cover Chinese environmental news during 2006 (the year of its establishment) and 2021 (the year of researching).

LDA is an unsupervised machine learning algorithm. In contrast to supervised learning, LDA does not need labelled input and output data for training, which makes it convenient for scholars who lack resources to construct a large training dataset. The algorithm is good at grouping words into a topic. Since it was invented by Blei et al. (2003), LDA model has been gradually applied by journalism and media scholars to conclude the topics presented in a substantial news sample. As Maier et al. (2018) note, "it proves useful and efficient to explore global and general topic clusters in document collections, which is a frequent task in communication research" (p.96). In addition, it has proved to be a powerful approach to analyse Chinese text corpora by prior studies (for example see Fu et al. 2013; Liu et al. 2020; Xie et al. 2021).

There are some challenges when using LDA to analyse the data. For example, LDA does not consider word order, which means the complex information in the texts based on a specific context can be lost when applying this method (Maier et al. 2018). In other words, the model is good at presenting what has been discussed but cannot indicate how it is discussed. In addition, the reliability of LDA model outputs depends much on the parameters that need to be defined manually. Different parameters input could largely influence the modelling results (Ibid). How these challenges can be conquered will be addressed below.

However, as one of the most influential topic models in scholarship, some advantages of LDA are undoubtful. For example, the model "can reveal a latent semantic connection between words, even if they never actually occurred in a document together" (Maier et al. 2018, p.96). This means that the model can reveal common topics from different news stories in this research, which is consistent with the feature of our news sample since news stories overlap with each other in terms of the news topics. In addition, LDA assumes that a document can consist of several topics. This avoids rough conclusions on the news topics of an article and enables more diversifying topics to emerge. These

two assumptions, (1) a topic representation can be scattered across the whole sample and (2) a news article can consist of various topics, are helpful for this research when dealing with substantial documents and many of them may indicate several common topics.

5.2.1. News sampling for LDA topic modelling

To build the news sample, this research utilises web scraping with Python. Through the early observation and comparison, the Chinese version of *China Dialogue's* website (<https://chinadialogue.net/zh/>) is decided to be the scraping subject due to three reasons. Firstly, although the news organisation publishes their news stories through different channels such as website, WeChat and their blog page on Caixin website³, their website is updated most frequently and all the articles are reserved well on the website since initiated. The website is the main channel for *China Dialogue* to publish their news stories and others are regarded as a complement.

Secondly, although *China Dialogue* maintains four websites and all of them are not blocked by Chinese authority, only two of them, *Chinadialogue.net* and *Chinadialogueocean.net*, provide Chinese news reports, which means that these two websites are designed more as facing Chinese readers and more likely to be read by Chinese people. And between the two websites, while *Chinadialogueocean.net* is initiated in 2018 and only focused on ocean issues, *Chinadialogue.net* is founded in 2006 and talks about general environmental issues, which makes the latter more appropriate for our long-term news analysis.

Thirdly, after reviewing the two lingual versions of the same story on the website *Chinadialogue.net*, the author found, even if the main meanings stay the same, some expressions are slightly different between the two. For example, an article, which has the English title “UN says the world has eight years to halve emissions”, its Chinese title, if translated word by word, is “UN: Global carbon emission cut half, we have only eight years” (*lianheguo: quanqiu tanpai jianban, women zhiyou banian shijian*). Apparently, the word “only” in the Chinese version emphasises the “eight years” and heightens the tension. Due to such subtle differences between the two versions, to choose which one to build news sample matters. The English version is discarded because this research assumes that news stories written in Chinese version have more influence in Chinese context and more possibilities to be read by its Chinese readers, which means the Chinese version should be more likely to attract attention from the Chinese government and public. Since this research asks the question about how the media dances with the stringent censorship in China, the Chinese version should be chosen for the analysis because of its potentially larger impact on Chinese society.

Furthermore, due to the same reason, this analysis only samples those reports covering affairs about China. In China's specific media environment, reporting foreign affairs, particularly negative news, enjoys much more space than writing news stories about China-related affairs. This is largely due to Chinese government concerns about social stability and the regime's legitimacy. For example, a news story about the Chinese government arresting environmental activists may be censored due to its negative impacts on the government's image, conversely, a story about American police arresting demonstrators could be encouraged by the Chinese government since this echoes China's nationalistic and xenophobic sentiment in recent years as discussed above in Chapter 3. Thus, news stories about foreign affairs provide limited values for our analysis to explore how *China Dialogue* adapts to the Chinese stringent media environment through news content change.

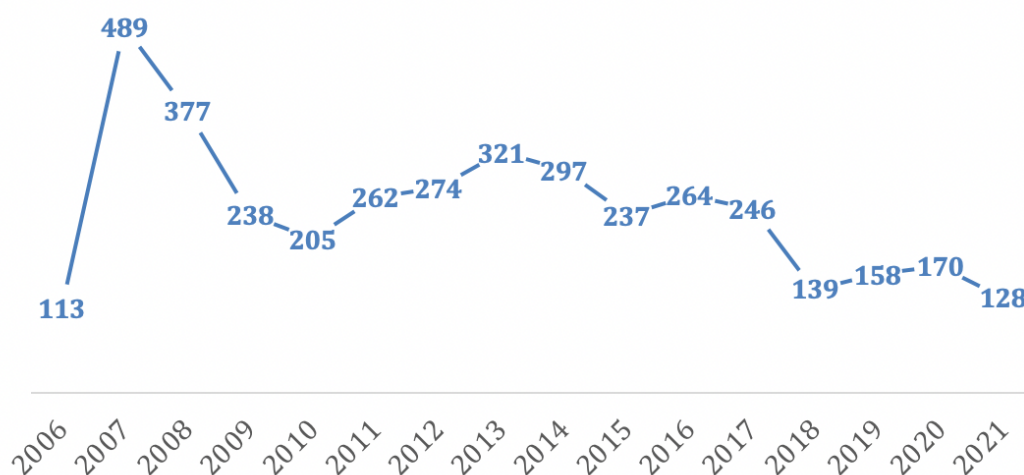
³ *Caixin* is a Chinese news magazine, and their website also operates as a platform for other media to publish news stories. *China Dialogue* also maintains a web page on the website, which can be visited through: <https://zhongwaiduihua.blog.caixin.com/>

To limit the sampling on news stories reporting China-related affairs, firstly, the key word “China” (*zhongguo*) is used to search the news stories published on the website (Chinese version) during 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2021. This is finished based on the website's built-in search function, and articles containing the keyword at least once appear on the search page. Then with the Requests library for Python, the author collects the URL address and the HTML source code of each article. The source code contains required information of an article including news title, authors' names, publication date, and the main body texts. This enables the author to extract them and save an article as a .txt document. Secondly, a Python program is conducted to exclude the documents in which the word “China” is mentioned less than three times. The word frequency is set to further limit the news sample to those stories that mainly discuss affairs about China rather than just mentioning it. However, some articles covering China's issues may be excluded by solely sampling with the key word “China”. For example, those articles reporting China's local affairs may use the city names such as Beijing and Shanghai instead of the word “China” to describe where the event happened. To correct this mistake, lastly, the author manually reviews the articles excluded by the Python program one by one and re-includes these articles into the sample.

Eventually, 3918 articles are collected for this LDA topic model. The article number of each year's corpus is shown in Figure 5.1. While the corpus in early years has more articles than the recent, the early corpus contains lots of brief articles, and many even only provide a lead to other news websites (for example see *China Dialogue* 2007; 2008; 2009). In contrast, *China Dialogue* in recent years only publishes full and long articles.

Overall, the 3918 China-related articles broadly discuss two aspects: (1) China's domestic environmental affairs such as pollution in China and how the Chinese society faces it; (2) international affairs within which China was involved such as the yearly UN climate change conferences and China's environmental performance in other countries (overseas investment, resource exploitation, etc.).

Figure 5.1. Article number of each year's corpus.



5.2.2. Corpus preparation for LDA topic modelling

All the sampled articles are arranged into separate documents sorted by year, which is convenient for later training LDA model for articles published in the same year. Before that, text segmentation is necessary for the model to recognise the words. Chinese texts, unlike English, have no space between each word, which makes it more complex to separate the words in a sentence. The Jieba

package can help accomplish this task. It is an open source project and has been proved effective and accurate by prior studies (for example see Liu et al. 2020; Xie et al. 2021).

After the text segmentation, noise needs to be removed from the texts since the stop words and punctuation marks are useless for the LDA model to construct a topic. There are three popular stop words lists in Chinese, one from *Baidu*, one from *Harbin Institute of Technology*, and one from *Sichuan University MachineLab*. The Chinese stop words list used in this research combines the three. In addition, some words frequently identified in the sample but useless for the topic modelling such as the publishing year (2006, 2007, 2008 ... 2021) and “China Dialogue (*zhongwaiduihua*)” are also added to the stop words list. All the words and symbols included in the list are removed from the segmented texts through a Python program.

5.2.3. Analysis on results of LDA topic modelling

After this corpus preparation, documents grouped in the same year are imported into the LDA model for training to obtain the news topics presented in each year (from 2006 to 2021), which enables later analysis on changes of news topics through timeline. The model trainings are finished based on Gensim, an open-source Python library for topic modelling (Python Package Index 2024).

Some prior parameters used when training the model are listed in Table 5.1. Given there is no unified standard to guide setting the value for these parameters, the values are decided with concerns for both reliability and efficiency after a few tests until the modelling results are similar (with similar topic outputs).

Table 5.1. Parameters used during the LDA topic modelling analysis.

* Explanation for each parameter comes from the Gensim official (Gensim 2022).

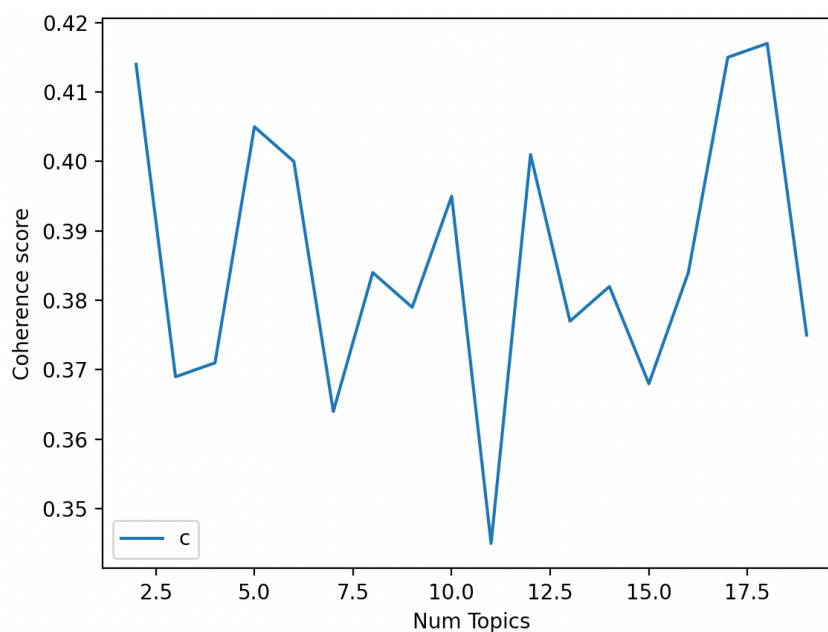
Parameter	Value	Explanation of parameter
random_state	100	This serves as a seed to initialise various processes.
update_every	2	Number of documents to be iterated through for each update
chunksize	20	Number of documents to be used in each training chunk.
passes	50	Number of passes through the corpus during training.
iterations	200	Maximum number of iterations through the corpus when inferring the topic distribution of a corpus.
alpha	auto	It refers to A-priori belief on document-topic distribution. When set as auto, it learns an asymmetric prior from the corpus.
eta	auto	It refers to A-priori belief on topic-word distribution. When set as auto, it learns an asymmetric prior from the corpus.

In addition to these parameters, another one – and perhaps the most important one – is the number of topics (K value). Once a K value is set, the model will output the same number of news topics from the data. Thus, how to determine this parameter will largely influence the quality of results obtained from the LDA modelling. If the value is set up too low, some specific topics could be lost in the output. If it is too high, it could be hard to tell the differences between topics as a same topic could be divided into different ones.

Coherence measure is applied in this research to decide the number of topics that will be constructed for the analysis on a specific year. Coherence value “measures the degree of semantic similarity between high scoring words in the topic” (Kapadia 2019), and generally speaking, it is assumed that the higher the value of coherence, the higher will be the accuracy for the model (Hasan et al. 2021). Before deciding the number of topics, the coherence value for each topic number between 2 and 20 is tested for comparison. This range is chosen to ensure the topic number is feasible for manual analysis. After all, the model just presents key words under a topic and the detailed interpretation relies on manual coding. The number with the highest coherence value is set as the topic number for each year’s analysis. Figure 5.2 shows an example when analysing news sample from the year 2006. The figure shows that when setting the topic number as 19, the coherence value is highest, and thus the topic number for 2006 modelling is 19.

Figure 5.2. Coherence values when setting different topic number for 2006 sample.

* There are different metrics to measure the coherence value such as C_V, UMass, and NPMI. This research adopts C_V.



The results of the modelling analysis are visualised based on PyLDAvis, a developed python package made by Sievert and Shirley (2014). An example is given here to explain how the news topics are extracted from the sample. Figure 5.3 shows one of the topics (Topic 2) from the modelling result on the news sample of year 2006. Each circle in the left panel indicates a topic. The size refers to its prevalence in the sample, and the distance between topics means topical relevance. By choosing one topic in the left panel, the top 30 keywords under the topic are presented in the right panel. “The blue bar shows the overall term frequency in the dataset, and the red bar represents the estimated term frequency in the selected topic” (Xie et al. 2021, p.92). The words are ranked according to their relevance to the topic by two dimensions: “the frequency of the term under that topic as well as the term’s exclusivity to the topic” (Sievert and Shirley 2014, p.64).

These words under a specific topic, combined together, enable us to label the topic with a name. For this topic, shown in figure 5.3, given the words such as “energy”, “China”, “carbon dioxide”, “technology”, “renewable energy” and “clean”, this topic can be labelled as “China’s Clean Energy Development”.

Figure 5.3. Visualisation of LDA modelling results of analysis on 2006 sample - Topic 2.

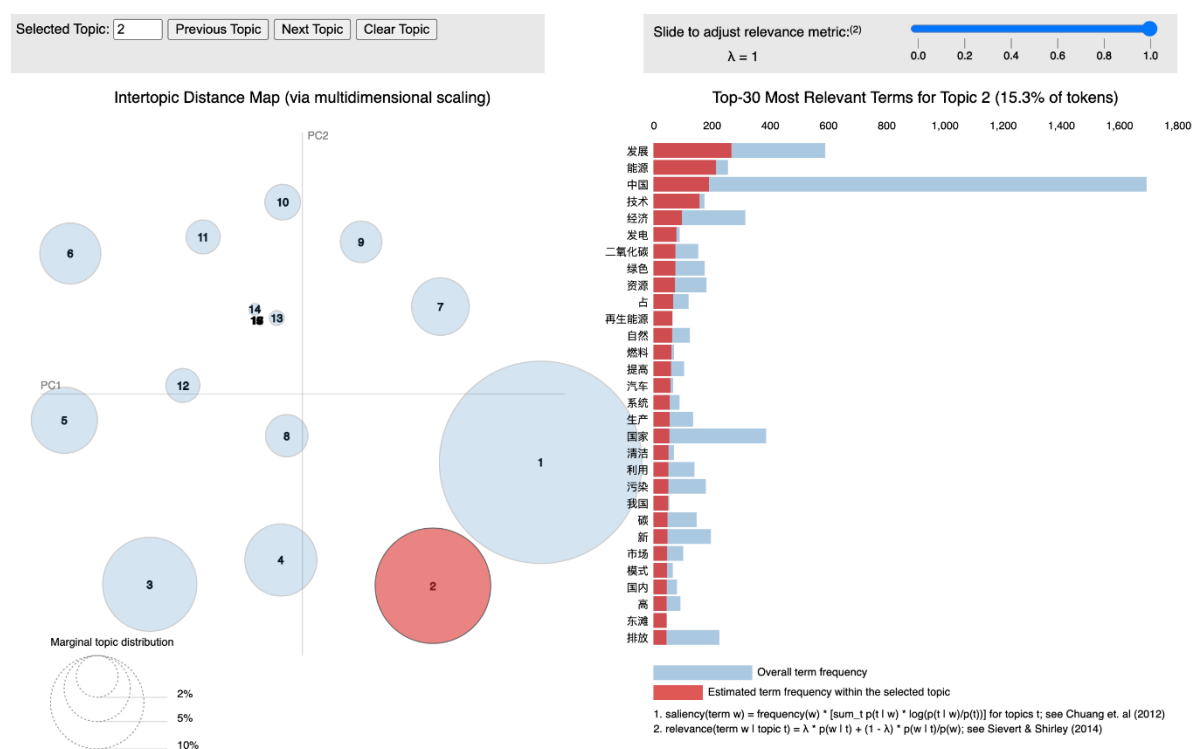


Table 5.2. Topics and sub-topics concluded from analysis on articles published in 2006.

Topics	Sub-topics
Climate Change	(1) How the world face climate change (2) Dangers of climate change (3) China's clean energy development (4) Nuclear power development
Ecological Conservation	(1) Desertification (2) Water resources exploitation (3) Soil and water loss
China's Overseas Investments and Import/Export Market	(1) China's overseas investments on resources
Animal Protection	(1) Wildlife protection
Urbanisation and Environmental Impacts	(1) Urbanisation and environmental impacts
Food Safety	(1) Food safety and healthy diet
Pollution	(1) Water pollution (2) Pollution and human health (3) Economic loss caused by pollution
China's Green Public Sphere	(1) Media scrutiny and civil actions

Then, as presented in Table 5.2, similar topics obtained directly from LDA modelling results are sorted into a more inclusive topic. For instance, “How the world faces climate change” and “Dangers of climate change” both discuss climate change and are categorised into the topic “Climate Change”. This helps us reduce the number of topics for analysis and makes it more convenient for comparing news topics that appear in different years. To avoid confusion, in the following writing, “sub-topics”

refers to those topics that are obtained directly from the LDA analysis, and “topics” refers to the inclusive topics that contain several sub-topics. Accordingly, through adding the token size of each sub-topic under a topic, this research can obtain the topic proportion for each topic in each year, which enables to easily tell the temporal change of the news topics. This responds to the RQ1 that asks how *China Dialogue*’s news stories change over the time.

A Python program is also designed to list the top 5 representative articles for each sub-topic, and a rough review is taken to simply understand the main themes of these articles. Since LDA assumes that each article contains several topics, it can also indicate how likely a topic is presented in a specific article. This program identifies the five articles that are most likely to represent a specific topic. Since the sub-topics alone tell limited information with the listed key words, having these representative articles will help us to interpret the topic in more details. As shown in Chapter 6, these news articles are cited to elaborate how *China Dialogue* discusses a news topic.

In addition, one semi-structured interview with *China Dialogue*’s CEO is conducted to better understand the possible temporal change of news topics. This research only conducts one interview because of practical difficulties of conducting interviews with *China Dialogue*’s staffs, given the political sensitivity of this research and the depressing political phenomenon within today’s China. Yet, the sole interview can still provide a perspective from inside the newsroom to help explore how and why *China Dialogue* adapts to China’s media environment with its news coverage changes. As noted, the LDA analysis can tell the change has happened but cannot fully explain why it happened, and why *China Dialogue* chooses to continue operation in China with the news concession. The interview can give some answers on these aspects.

The interview is conducted face-to-face, lasted around one hour and audio recorded. After the interview is done, the audio record is transcribed to texts and then analysed with NVivo. Thematic analysis is conducted on the interview transcription with the following concerns:

- (1) How does *China Dialogue* survive the increasingly stringent authoritarian environment?
- (2) How does *China Dialogue* perceive its value as a non-profit newsroom in China?
- (3) How does *China Dialogue* advance Chinese environmental communication through their works in today’s China?

As shown in the following finding analysis chapters, the interview contents add more contextual information and supplement the news analysis results to facilitate understanding of *China Dialogue*’s adaptation to China.

5.2.4. Validation on the results of LDA topic modelling

After the results are obtained from the topic modelling, the results are validated. “Validations shows that the measure captures the phenomenon we are interested in studying” (Grimmer et al. 2022, p.211). In terms of this topic modelling, validation shall help confirm that the identified topics align with the actual news contents and that interpretations on the classifying results are consistent among different observers. As Grimmer et al. (2022) suggest, the validation process implicitly invokes the concept of homogeneity, “which states that two observations assigned the same value of the measurement are equivalent with respect to the conceptual dimension the measure is seeking to recover” (p.211). In other words, the validation shall somewhat prove that the modelling results and the interpretation are not severely manipulated by the researchers.

This research adopts the methods of “Word Intrusion” and “Topic Intrusion” proposed by Chang et al. (2009) for the validation purpose, which involve nonexpert human judgements to check the

performance of the models. The two tasks correspondently validate two dimensions of the modelling results.

5.2.4.1. Word intrusion design

Firstly, the Word Intrusion ensures that the classification of topics work well for the model. As shown above, the researcher could tell what sub-topics have been identified in the news sample through the word lists given by the models. A satisfying result from this part requires that different sub-topics can be easily distinguished by human, and thus the words listed belonging to one specific sub-topic shall be semantically coherent. The Word Intrusion task refers to intruding the word list belong to one sub-topic with a word coming from another sub-topic (the word is called intruding word here), and then presenting the combined word lists to evaluators to see how likely they can find the intruding word. The intruding word shall not only belong to another sub-topic but also one of the most representative words – in this research, top 10 – that the model gives.

Table 5.3 shows examples of the word lists shown to evaluators. Six randomly ordered words are presented for each sub-topic, which include five words that the models believe belong to the sub-topic and one intruding word.

Table 5.3. Three examples of the word lists presented to evaluators in the Word Intrusion task.

* The word English translation is not presented to evaluators but just added here for reading convenience.

Word list presented to evaluators						
Topic 1	水污染 (water pollution)	动物 (animal)	饲养 (rearing)	濒危 (endangered)	人工 (artificial)	野生 (wildlife)
Topic 2	核电站 (nuclear power plant)	反应堆 (reactor)	核武器 (nuclear weapon)	非洲 (Africa)	核能 (nuclear power)	发电 (generate electricity)
Topic 3	变暖 (warming)	论坛 (conference)	减排 (carbon reduction)	二氧化碳 (carbon dioxide)	垦荒 (reclamation)	气候变化 (climate change)

The six words are manually, instead of randomly, picked up by the researcher from the top 10 words of the sub-topics out of two reasons. Firstly, such manual works can exclude those words that are too general to describe environmental issues. For example, for words such as “environment”, “China”, “protection”, “ecology”, they can match any other words to indicate a sub-topic, which makes them inappropriate for such Word Intrusion task. Secondly, as the whole news sample is focused on environmental issues which are often intertwined and share many representative words, the manual process to intrude word can help ensure that the intruding word is not from a closely related sub-topic and thus make it possible for the evaluators to identify. For instance, if the intruding word is from the sub-topic Climate Change (say “emission”), and the other five words are from the sub-topic Air Pollution (say “pollution”, “air”, “health”, “air quality”, “PM2.5”), it would be nearly impossible for the evaluators to find the intruding word, even though the topic modelling results do classify the two sub-topics. Such manual construction of the word lists may raise interrogation on manipulation of the validation results. Yet, given the words are all from the top 10

representative words for the sub-topics, which are the results directly obtained from the topic modelling, the validation results are still meaningful to examine the classifying performance on some levels.

Total 218 sub-topics obtained from the models are processed with the Word Intrusion task by 4 separate evaluators. The evaluators can all read Chinese but are not experts on Chinese journalism or environmental news. The number of evaluators recruited to do this validation work varies across the current literature due to the different research conditions (for example, 8 evaluators for Chang et al. 2009; 10 for Bhatia et al. 2018; 20 for Arnold et al. 2016), but the commonality is that there should be more than one evaluator to obtain averageness of the validation results. This research hires 4 evaluators and believes that the number is acceptable enough for this validation purpose, which is also applied to the Topic Intrusion task below.

5.2.4.2. Topic intrusion design

Secondly, the Topic Intrusion evaluates how accurately the modelling results reflect the news contents. As discussed above, the LDA topic modelling can tell the possibility of a document including each sub-topic presented in the results. The Topic Intrusion refers to intruding one less-related sub-topic to the three-highest-probability sub-topics assigned to the current news piece, and then let the evaluators find the intruding sub-topic. If the models are satisfying enough, the evaluators will easily identify the intruding sub-topic after skimming through the article.

Table 5.4. Three examples of the topic lists presented to evaluators in the Topic Intrusion task.

* The word English translation is not presented to evaluators but just added here for reading convenience.

Topic list presented to evaluators				
Article 1	中国碳排放/减排 (China's carbon emission and cutting)	气候变化谈判 (climate change negotiation)	绿色经济发展 (Green economic development)	重金属污染和人体健康 (heavy metal pollution and human health)
Article 2	污染及其带来的健康问题 (pollution and human health)	食物安全 (food safety)	中国可再生能源发展和及其国际投资 (China's clean energy development and its international investments)	气候变化谈判 (climate change negotiation)
Article 3	中国可再生能源发展和及其国际投资 (China's clean energy development and its international investments)	水坝建设及其环境问题 (dam construction and the environmental impacts)	草原保育 (grassland conservation)	气候变化谈判 (climate change negotiation)

Table 5.4 shows three examples of the topic lists presented the evaluators. In difference from the Word Intrusion task, the intruding sub-topics here are randomly chosen by a Python program, because, in this case, the evaluators are asked to skim through the articles so that they know the news contents. If the models work well, the intruding sub-topic will be less related to the article than the other three.

Ideally speaking, such Topic Intrusion should be processed on every document in the corpus, which means 3918 articles at total. However, this is not possible in terms of this research due to the limitation of labour and funding. In previous studies, it is also normal for researchers to build a smaller sample for this validation purpose (for example see Arnold et al. 2016; Bhatia et al. 2018; Nguyen and Hovy 2019). Thus, this research randomly chooses 10 articles from each year sample for the Topic Intrusion task. The same 4 evaluators hired to do the Word Intrusion validation are also required to do this Topic Intrusion work.

5.2.4.3. Validation results

For the Word Intrusion task, precision is used to measure the validation results (Chang et al. 2009), which indicates the fraction of evaluators who correctly identify the intruding word. The mean of the precision from the four evaluators is 0.85 (Std. Deviation=0.028), which indicates a well-accepted performance of the modelling according to prior research results (Arnold et al. 2016; Nguyen and Hovy 2019).

For the Topic intrusion, topic log odds (TLO) is adopted “as a quantitative measure of the agreement between the model and human judgements on this task” (Chang et al. 2009, p.7). As the modelling results can tell the probability of a specific sub-topic belonging to an article, this enables calculation of the deviation between the true intruding sub-topic and the one that evaluators pick. When all the intruding sub-topics have been correctly identified, the value of TLO will be 0, which is also the upper bound (Ibid). The mean of TLO in this research from the four evaluators is -0.79 (Std. Deviation=0.21), which is also a satisfying result compared to the results from other studies (for example, TLO=-0.87 from Arnold et al. 2016; TLO=-1.66 from Nguyen and Hovy 2019).

Given the validation results from Word Intrusion and Topic Intrusion are both acceptable, this indicates the analysis results from the LDA topic modelling are somewhat reliable in this research and enable further analysis.

After asking the first question about the impact of media environment on *China Dialogue’s* news contents, this thesis also seeks to examine its environmental media discourses constructed after the adaptation and how it differs from the mainstream journalism in China. This examination is completed through the comparative news analysis among *China Dialogue* (non-profit journalism), *Xinjingbao* (commercial journalism) and *Renmin Ribao* (party journalism). Quantitative framing analysis and critical discourse analysis on the news contents from the three media are conducted. This combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can facilitate our understanding of the discursive differences among the three media. The two methods are introduced in sequence below.

5.3. Quantitative comparison between China Dialogue and Chinese mainstream journalism: framing analysis

Framing analysis in journalism studies is concerned with the ways in which journalists make choices about what to include or exclude from a story, as well as how they choose to present the news information. As Entman notes, “To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item

described” (Entman 1993, p.52). This selected salience on specific aspects is significant since, as Entman goes on, it is “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (Ibid, p.53), which could potentially facilitate or shake the audiences’ understanding on various social issues. Of course, such influences on audiences’ thinking cannot be ensured as receivers’ interpretation may deviate from the communicators’ original purpose of framing the information. Yet, some empirical findings suggest that different frames can impact on audiences’ perceptions on specific issues in some cases (Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Shen 2004; Shen et al. 2014; Ayalon and Toch 2018).

Despite to what extent framing has an impact on its receivers, in this study, framing analysis plays a significant tool to compare how the three media construct environmental discourses in their news coverages. According to Pan and Kosicki (1993), “framing analysis as an approach to analysing news discourse mainly deals with how public discourse about public policy issues is constructed and negotiated” (p.70). It follows agenda-setting research that focuses on what information has been presented but goes beyond that by examining how the information is presented and discussed. What information are presented and how to present are significant issues for discourse construction. For instance, if one is promoting the Promethean discourse as we have discussed in Chapter 2, he or she may tend to explain how the environmental problems can be solved by technological progress and economic model iteration in the communication texts. And for another environmental discourse trying to counter Promethean discourse, it may present the information to prove that technological and economic development are not enough to alleviate the problems. Thus, framing analysis can help reveal the environmental discourses formed by the research cases in this study.

And for this quantitative framing analysis, the quantitative method enables processing a large news sample and have an overall picture of how the three media cover environmental news in a specific period. As Punch (2005) addresses, “quantitative data enable standardized, objective comparisons to be made, and the measurements of quantitative research permit overall descriptions of situations or phenomena in a systematic and comparable way” (p.238). This quantitative analysis tells the basic characteristics of *China Dialogue*’s environmental news coverages, for example, what topics they tend to cover, what frames they tend to use, and what are the similarities and differences between its news stories and the mainstream. These basic understandings also provide the clues for us to select smaller sample for detailed qualitative analysis later.

5.3.1. News sampling for quantitative framing analysis

News stories are collected from three news media in China: *China Dialogue*, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* are chosen for comparison as they hold a significant position respectively in Chinese commercial and party journalism. And they are both influential in Chinese public space and directly governed by the authority, which makes them possess a certain representativeness within Chinese mainstream journalism.

Xinjingbao (also referred as *Beijing News*) began publishing in 2003 as a commercial or market-oriented newspaper. It was jointly established by *Nanfang Daily Media Group* in Guangzhou and *Guangming Daily Group* in Beijing. Thus, although it was based in Beijing, it was once jointly supervised by the party propaganda departments in the two places. Despite the newspaper being owned by the CCP, due to its market-oriented characteristic and its complicated supervision background, it is given more space to do critical journalism than party journalism, and its investigative journalism practise is once famous among Chinese journalists (Tong 2011). However, the newspaper also suffered from political pressure from time to time. For instance, in 2011, the supervision unit over the newspaper was forcibly moved to Beijing municipal committee of the CCP, which is seen as a signal for strengthening political control on the paper (Huang and Cheng 2021). In 2017, Zhu Xuedong, the paper’s chief editor famous for his journalistic professionalism practise, was

forced to leave as well as nearly the whole senior editorial team (Zeng and George 2022). Given these experiences and the oppressive political phenomenon in recent years, it is possible that *Xinjingbao's* critical news practise has now been severely weakened.

In terms of *Renmin Ribao* (also known as *People's Daily*), the newspaper was established in 1946 and consistently under control of the top leadership of the CCP since then. It is regarded as playing the propaganda (*xuanchuan*) role for CCP, thus, its news contents are strictly censored by the central propaganda department and its editorials are normally seen as delivering the authoritative statements of the party. The paper's circulation reached 3.46 million in 2021 (Renmin Ribao 2022), which makes it the most popular and influential party newspaper in mainland China. The newspaper is issued in different languages but this research only focuses on its Chinese version which targets Chinese people as readers.

After determining the research cases, the period between 1 June and 31 December 2021 is set as the news sampling period because, firstly, this analysis aims to compare the news outcomes from the three media after *China Dialogue's* adaptation. Thus, the sampling period for this comparative analysis shall be as timely as possible. Secondly, in second half of 2021, several significant events brought about extensive concerns about environmental issues in China, which include international ones such as the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15), UN General Assembly, G20 summit, and domestic ones such as the Henan floods and power shortage in some areas. All these events provide abundant materials for news media to do news reporting and also a great opportunity for this research to compare how the three media cover these issues.

For *China Dialogue*, all the news stories on their website published during this period are collected as they all report environmental issues. In terms of *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*, because they cover more than environmental news, some key words are necessary for sampling on their websites (<https://www.bjnews.com.cn/> for *Xinjingbao* and data.people.com.cn/rmrb/ for *Renmin Ribao*). Referencing prior researches on China's environmental news (for example see Tong 2014) and through some tests, any news articles whose titles contain the following keywords are firstly included when sampling on the two media:

environmental protection (*huanbao*), ecology (*shengtai*), sustainability (*kechixu*), nature(*ziran*), COP26, greenness (*luse*), climate (*qihou*), biodiversity (*shengwu duoyangxing*), Henan rainstorm (*henan baoyu*), haze (*mai*), carbon (*tan*), coal (*mei*), pollution (*wuran*), energy (*nengyuan*), water (*shui*), soil (*turan*), trash (*laji*), animal (*dongwu*), desert (*shamo*), river (*he*), forest (*senlin*), cancer (*ai*), heavy mental (*zhongjinshu*).

Some key words here are proposed according to the important environmental events (as noted above) happened during the sampling period, including "COP26" and "Henan rainstorm". The other words are chosen as they are generally related to a variety of environmental issues. Sampling with these key words may still overlook some environmental news stories published during the period, but it does generate a sufficiently large sample for quantitative analysis.

Secondly, the researcher manually excludes news articles that are not relevant to environmental issues. It should be noted that some articles that are not adopting an environmental perspective are also excluded. For example, as China aims to reach carbon peak and neutrality in the next decades, development of electric vehicles has become an important issue in environmental news reporting. In the initial news sample, the researcher finds there is a group of news articles from *Xinjingbao* regularly reporting the sailing market of electric vehicles. These articles are excluded from the sample since they simply report the sales of electric vehicles but do not relate this phenomenon to any environmental issues, for example, how the sales of electric vehicles can mitigate climate change or air pollution. These articles use business instead of environmental perspective and thus

should be excluded from the sample solely about environmental news. The same method is also applied to those news articles that report natural disasters but do not mention any anthropogenic elements behind. In other words, the environmental perspective requires the news stories to explore how the environment is affected by human beings, how terrible this affect can be, how we can and are going to fix this problem and whether the current solution is feasible or efficient.

Combing the automatic and manual sampling methods, 1415 news articles at total have been collected for analysis, and the sample size for each publication is given in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5. Sample size for quantitative analysis on the three news outlets.

News Outlets	China Dialogue	Xinjingbao	Renmin Ribao
Sample Size	110	665	640

5.3.2. Quantitative news analysis procedures

The quantitative analysis is mainly finished on the software SPSS. While conducting the framing analysis on the news sample, it is also companied with analysis on other aspects including the regional distribution, news topics and news sources.

Regional distribution is designed to measure the attention given to environmental issues about China and other countries. Since *China Dialogue*, as introduced by themselves, aims to “increase understanding, share precious experiences and inspire a higher awareness of the planet’s challenges, whether they come from inside China or elsewhere” (China Dialogue 2023), it can be expected that their news stories will not be limited to China’s issues but also cover much about environmental issues in other countries. Three regional issues are identified in this research, including “China’s domestic issue”, “international issues” and “foreign issues”, which are classified based on which region the news reports have covered and the perspective adopted in the report. For example, if a story reports China’s domestic pollution and its influence on the health of Chinese people, the article is labelled as covering “China’s domestic issue”. If another story also talks about China’s domestic pollution but extends its discussion to how this conflicts China’s climate mitigation plan and how the other countries respond to this problem, it is labelled as reporting “international issue” since this perspective covers international conflicts in which China is involved. If an article merely talks about environmental issues in other countries, and it does not mention any actions or statements from China either how China can be impacted, the story is labelled as reporting “foreign issue”.

The news topic in each news story are also identified. Every news piece is attributed with a news topic. All the news topics identified in the whole sample and the meaning of each topic are presented in Appendix B. This research analyses how various news topics are covered with divergent proportion by the three media, examining whether *China Dialogue* can bring the topics largely ignored by Chinese mainstream journalism to publicity.

Moreover, the abundance of news sources in the news sample is measured to see to what extent *China Dialogue* can provide divergent voices when it comes to environmental discussions in China. Due to the prevalence of objectivity norm in Chinese news industry (Tong 2015c), journalists are usually forbidden to directly express personal opinions, and, practically, the establishment of different frames on a specific event is often accomplished by quoting different news sources. For example, Geall (2018) mentions a case of how an independent environmental journalist in China covered the shrinking of Inner Mongolia’s Dalai Lake. While China’s state media *Xinhua* attributed the drought on climate change in their news reports, the journalist, through interviewing local

residents, found another explanation that the lake shrinking may be related to the mine constructed nearby run by a subsidiary backed by state-owned company, which was intentionally or unwittingly overlooked by official opinions. The journalist chose to honestly present these two controversial frames in his news report and “refuse to close down toward a single narrative” (Ibid, p.548), which successfully presents doubts on opinions from official news media. From this case, we can see the significance of news sources when it comes to framing. As a non-profit news outlet, it is expected that *China Dialogue* would present more abundant voices in the news reports.

In this study, the abundance of news sources for a news piece is measured through two indicators, source number and source types. The former refers to the number of people, organisations or documents are cited, and the latter indicates the categories of news sources cited in a news story such as government officials, NGO or business (more categories are given in Chapter 7). If the interviewee cited in the story maintaining several professions, she/he is only labelled as one type of source according to how the article emphasises her/his background and which organisation she/he represents in the news report. These two indicators will indicate whether *China Dialogue* can present more diversifying opinions more than *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*.

Besides, quantitative framing analysis is adopted to code the news sample to further explore the heterogeneity among the three media. This research combines deductive and inductive approaches to conduct the framing analysis. The former aims to examine whether the “generic frames” that have been identified in many other framing analyses on news stories have emerged, and the latter seeks to find any possible frame that signify in this news sample. As Chapter 7 shows, each frame contains questions as their variables, which ask if some information is mentioned in a news story or not. Each variable is measured by three levels including “Absent” (value of 1), “Present” (value of 2) and “Emphasised” (value of 3). “Absent” means the information asked in the question is not presented in the story at all; “Present” suggests the information is just mentioned in one sentence or one short paragraph given a long-text article; “Emphasised” indicates that the article devotes lots of space to the information. This 1-3 continuum enables assessing the frame frequency in each media’s coverages in a more sophisticated way than a 0-1 dichotomy proposed in some previous studies (for example see Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). The mean value of all the articles on a specific variable is the score of the media on this variable, and the mean value of all the variables under a frame becomes the score of the media on this frame.

Finally, after inserting all these data (variables) about the news topics, regional distribution, news sources and frames into SPSS, calculations such as Spearman’s rho and Chi-square tests are performed to test the correlation between different variables, which may tell more information about the characteristics of the three media news reporting.

However, such quantitative news analysis can merely give a rough understanding on the news sample and, as we will elaborate below, its analysis results can be misleading in some cases. This is because most of our analytical steps lack sufficient consideration of the news context. Without the context, we won’t be able to know whether *China Dialogue*’s coverage of a specific environmental event presents a different discourse from the other two media. We may know that *China Dialogue* is more active on a certain news topic and perhaps provides a divergent pattern of news sourcing and media framing, but we have no way of knowing to what extent its discursive construction on this topic differs from the mainstream environmental discourses. Thus, in response to the limitation of this quantitative analysis, the qualitative analysis, more specifically, critical discourse analysis, is conducted to examine whether *China Dialogue* can provide media discourses that are marginalised, suppressed or even forbidden in Chinese mainstream news reporting.

5.4. Qualitative comparison between China Dialogue and Chinese mainstream journalism: critical discourse analysis

This study adopts Chalaby's approach to understand discourses in the news texts. As he puts, "Texts belong to the same discourse as long as particular relations of production condition the set of discursive practices which produces a class of texts" (Chalaby 1996, p.690). In his analogy, a group of people with similar economic background can constitute a class, and a group of texts that deliver a common theme in a given sociocultural background can constitute a discourse.

When defining discourse in a group of texts, Chalaby (1996) suggests that one should look for the "sociological intertextuality", which cannot be reduced to any single text that belong to it. Here the term "sociological" matters since it suggests that "intertextuality" should not be examined without "sociological" (contextual) considerations. A group of texts may be able to construct a discourse by just delivering a same theme, but a discourse should not be equated with a theme since discourse is not internal to the linguistic forms but should be understood with the social conditions. The same theme in the texts could be produced and distributed out of different intentions and interpreted in different ways given divergent social conditions. In other words, when putting a theme in different contexts, it could produce different discourses. This explanation of discourse is consistent with Fairclough's emphasis on intertextuality when conducting discourse analysis: "on how in the production and interpretation ... of a text people draw upon other texts and text types which are culturally available to them" (Fairclough 1998, p.145). It also echoes Bourdieu's argument that "texts must be analysed both in relation to other texts and in relation to the structure of the field and to the specific agents involved" (Johnson and Bourdieu 1993, p.17).

Thus, with such perception on discourse that emphasises the sociological intertextuality, discourse analysis in this research aims to explore the power relations behind the texts and, more importantly, critically examine the potential of discourse to consolidate or restructure the current power relations. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is adopted here for critically examining the discursive practise of dominant social groups, analysing how specific discourses are constructed to maintain and legitimise the inequality and how discourses of dissents and opposition are marginalised, excluded and suppressed. As Wodak (2001) notes, "CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised and so on by language use (or in discourse)" (p.2). Therefore, CDA starts from the recognition of social problems of inequality and unfairness. From the normative perspective, it naturally stands for the suppressed social groups, affirms their struggling, and explores to what degrees their discursive construction could challenge the current order of discourses. In van Dijk's words, "CDA is biased - and proud of it" (van Dijk 2001, p.96). Therefore, for the comparison between the three media in this research, the focus is to explore whether *China Dialogue* can produce environmental discourses that may counter the official discourses promoted in the mainstream journalism.

5.4.1. News sampling for critical discourse analysis

Since CDA needs delicate examination on news articles, a smaller sample for comparative analysis is demanded. News articles for CDA is sampled based on the findings from quantitative analysis. As noted above, the quantitative analysis gives a broad picture of the news coverages and tells some major differences among the three media. These differences between *China Dialogue* and the other two media indicate the most distinct characteristics of *China Dialogue*'s environmental news reporting. Given this research seeks to explore how different environmental discourse can be constructed in *China Dialogue*'s news coverages, it is more efficient to concentrate on those news articles that can fully present its distinctions with the other two media.

The CDA sample is built up with two standards. Standard one: news stories should be labelled as “Present” or “Emphasised” on the conflict frame when conducting framing analysis, which means that all the stories sampled for CDA use the conflict frame. According to the findings from framing analysis (see Chapter 7), *China Dialogue* adopts conflict frame much more frequently than the other two media, which is one of the most distinct differences between *China Dialogue* and mainstream news. The conflict frame refers to the presentation of different opinions and concerns in one news story. *China Dialogue*’s emphasis on this frame, while the frame is hardly adopted by mainstream news, suggests that the non-profit media may provide more balanced viewpoints while specific opinions are dominated in mainstream news. It may also propose some concerns that mainstream news overlook. Such differences indicate a very potential for different discursive construction, which is exactly what the CDA here pursues to explore. Thus, news stories in which the conflict frame emerge are sampled for the CDA.

Standard two: all the news stories sampled for CDA should talk about climate news. More specifically, the news stories’ topics should be labelled as “Climate Change”, “Energy Transition” or “Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality” in the quantitative analysis procedure, as the three topics are closely related to climate issues. Climate news stories are chosen for CDA out of two reasons.

Firstly, the quantitative analysis finds that climate change is the most prominent news topic for the three media (see Chapter 7), which means they all underline climate issues during the sampling period. This provides an opportunity to observe how they construct climate discourses.

Secondly, discussions around climate issues are normally full of conflicts, tensions and opposing opinions, which makes climate change an appropriate topic to observe how *China Dialogue* adopts the conflict frame for discursive construction (here echoes with standard one). The conflicts around climate issues can include that, for example, some sceptics have doubted the existence of climate change as an anthropogenic phenomenon (Weisenthal 2009; Klein 2015), which fundamentally impedes the endeavours for climate mitigation. For people who recognise the climate change, there remains different approaches to alleviate the problem. Domestically, climate change sparks debate about how to solve the tension between the industrialised economy and the calling on imperative climate mitigation. It has long been argued that the industrialised society featured with unlimited production, consumption, and population growth, although it brings about material prosperity and poverty alleviation across the world, has broken the balance between human living and unhuman nature (Merchant 1992; Foster 1999). For climate change, huge greenhouse gas (GHG) emission from the production, distribution and consumption of commercial goods has made the world inappropriate for human living. In this situation, some radical advocates have argued to limit the increase of human production and consumption for climate mitigation, while some nonradical tend to push the changes through pursuing the compatibility of economic prosperity and environmental protection (Dryzek 2022). And when it comes to international negotiation, climate talks are usually influenced by domestic concerns, diplomatic strategies and international relations. Correspondently, news reporting on international climate talks could be also influenced or constrained by these issues, which is particularly a severe situation for Chinese mainstream journalism (see 2.3.3). This international perspective especially deserves to be explored in this sample as the quantitative findings suggest that *China Dialogue* is more likely to report international news than the other two media, which, again, indicates potential for distinct discourses.

Table 5.6. Sample Size for qualitative analysis on the three news outlets.

News Outlets	China Dialogue	Xinjingbao	Renmin Ribao
Sample Size	60	93	13

Eventually, after sampling with the two standards above, 166 news articles are obtained here for critical discourse analysis (sample size for each publication is given in Table 5.6). The common characteristics of these sampling articles can be concluded that they all discuss climate change and use conflict frame in the news texts.

5.4.2. Critical discourse analysis procedures

All the news pieces are imported into the software NVivo for analysis, which enables highlighting and extracting texts from the documents and categorizing them into different codes in a more flexible way. As noted above, although most of the CDA approaches share common research paradigm, CDA does not necessarily refer to a determined and step-by-step followed approach. Rather, how to do CDA depends on the research problem and objectives. As van Dijk (2001, p.101) notes, “the choice of discourse categories in CDA is guided by theory, as well as by the main aims of CDA, namely the critical study of the discursive reproduction of domination in society”. In other words, the specific approach should be problem-oriented, and data should be examined given relevant contextual information (Meyer 2001).

In this comparative CDA analysis, news sample is built on the climate-change-related news stories in which some kind of conflicts are presented or even emphasised. In these articles, discussions about climate change conflicts are the essential narratives, which is where the key discourses may emerge. Thus, three specific questions are asked here while conducting CDA: (1) what conflicts about climate change are (not) presented in the news texts; (2) who/what is seen (not) as responsible for the conflicts; (3) how conflicts can be and have been addressed. The answers to these questions will be linked to the contexts to examine what discourses are constructed.

Bearing these three questions in mind, this research comes up with the analysis procedures below based on van Dijk’s CDA approach (van Dijk 2001):

- 1) **Topical analysis.** van Dijk recommends starting with this analysis since “topics represent what a discourse ‘is about’ globally speaking, embody most important information of a discourse, and explain overall coherence of text and talk” (Ibid, p.102). Three specific questions are raised in this step to summarise the topics from the corpus: (1) what conflicts are presented in the news texts; (2) who/what is seen (not) as responsible for the conflicts; (3) how conflicts can be and have been addressed.

In the NVivo project, firstly, codes are constructed to refer to the first questions, “what conflicts are presented in the news texts”, which include codes such as “arguments on the UN climate change conference”, “debates on how to advance climate mitigation in China”, “how China’s overseas investments mitigate/exacerbate climate change”, etc. These codes are identified in the news texts and the relevant news texts are sorted into the codes accordingly. Then, under the codes, more children codes are built corresponding to the other two questions, who are responsible for the conflicts and how the conflicts are addressed. Again, relevant texts are categorised into the children codes. All these categorisations enable convenient analysis in the following procedures below.

- 2) **Subtle linguistic analysis.** This step mainly probes into how the topics are presented. It involves the use of words (e.g., “climate change” and “climate crisis” refers to different descriptions on the situation), news title choice (it tells what is emphasised in a news story), and topics arrangement (e.g., topics that are put in heading and ending are generally seen as important to catch up readers’ attention and set the tone for the whole news article). Such linguistic analysis

can help reveal not just what the media report in the news articles but also how they report, in which we can identify the attitudes among the news texts. Such attitudes, combined with the contextual analysis below, are necessary for our social cognition analysis later.

- 3) **Contextual analysis.** In this step, van Dijk (2001) distinguishes between the local and global contexts. Local context is “defined in terms of properties of the immediate, interactional situation in which a communicative event takes place”, and global context refers to “the social, political, cultural and historical structures in which a communicative event takes place” (Ibid, p.108). In this research, local contexts involve which organisation publishes the news texts (*China Dialogue*, *Xinjingbao* or *Renmin Ribao*), what is the background of the news organisation (party/commercial/non-profit journalism), when the news stories were published. The interview with *China Dialogue*’s CEO also plays a role here, offering great information about how the non-profit media operates in China.

For analysis on global contexts, Chapter 2 and 3 provide an abundant political, economic, social, cultural and historical picture for consideration in this regard, which involves a variety of issues such as China’s increasing speech censorship in recent years, the state consistent emphasis on economic growth, the prevailing chauvinistic ideology in Chinese society, the complicated co-dependency between the authoritarian system, journalism and NGOs, etc. All this contextual information, on the one hand, enables us to understand how these news texts could be produced, distributed and consumed, which can tell what the topical analysis above cannot tell. For instance, the topical analysis can only point out what conflicts have been presented, but with this contextual analysis, we can also know what is overlooked in the texts. On the other hand, such contextual analysis allows us to proceed to the next stage of analysis on social cognition, which is impossible without concerning the texts within contexts.

- 4) **Social cognition analysis.** For van Dijk, “social representations are ‘particularized’ in mental models, and it is often through mental models that they are expressed in text and talk” (Ibid, p.114). After examining the texts within contexts, CDA also pursues to reveal the cognition of different social groups represented in the texts. Social cognition here involves any norm, value, attitude, and most importantly, ideology in the society. Ideology here, in contrast with Marxists’ use in a negative way referring to a cognitive control other than coerciveness and physical violence, is defined as a neutral word. It plays an ultimate role featuring “the basic principles that organize the attitudes shared by the members of a group” (Ibid). Through the attitudes delivered from a group of texts, particularly if these texts all come from the same organisation, one would be able to identify the ideology such as socialism, capitalism, liberalism, neoliberalism, feminism, ecologism, and so on.

In terms of this comparative analysis, the differences of attitudes among the three news media could be found from the answers to the three questions above. They may tend to cover different types of conflicts. They may blame or avoid blaming a specific social group on the conflicts. They may propose different solutions to the same conflicts. These attitudes and propositions, combined with the contextual analysis, will reveal the ideologies behind the media texts. These ideologies from the environmental news reports may not be limited to environmentalism but also involve, as we have touched above, state chauvinism and capitalism which characterise Chinese contemporary society.

5) **Analysis on order of discourses.** All the analysis above can tell the discourses delivered from the texts. Yet, an adequate analysis of discourse “does need to locate them within fields of social practise and in relation to the social and cultural forces and processes which shape and transform those fields” (Fairclough 1998, p.143). As he goes on, the “fields of social practise” can be conceptualised with Foucault’s concept “order of discourse” which refers to “a structured configuration of genres and discourses ... associated with a given social domain” (Ibid, p.145). According to Foucault (1971), the notion of exclusion is important to construct the order of discourse. The dominant discourses usually maintain the domination through a variety of exclusions to reject the reasonability and legitimacy of other discourses. In the most coercive way, the dominant discourses may define some discourses as taboos that should be forbidden to be proposed and denounce the people promoting the discourses as insane. In this situation, some discourses would be suppressed, marginalised and eventually excluded from the social discussions.

Based on the concept “order of discourse”, the last step of this CDA aims to explore the positions of discourses identified in the news texts within the current order of discourse in Chinese society. Which discourses are supported and promoted by state power? Which are opposed, marginalised, and suppressed? Which marginal discourses may coexist with mainstream discourses backed by the state despite the contradictions? And if so, on what aspects the marginal discourses comply or challenge the mainstream? To answer questions as such facilitates our understanding on the environmental discursive struggles within the power structures in contemporary China, and enables us to push discussions about potential future changes. After all, the marginalised discourses are not absolutely powerless but could lead to social changes at some points. As Foucault puts, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault, cited in Mills 2003, p.54-55).

5.5. Summary

To sum up, this chapter has explained the research methodology employed in this thesis to answer the two research questions raised at the end of last chapter. For the first research question about the survival of *China Dialogue* under China’s authoritarianism, the perspective of news outputs is manifested by the LDA topic modelling, and an interview presents the viewpoints from the newsroom to show more details of how the media dances with the coercive political regulation. In response to the second research question examining the public service role of *China Dialogue*, comparative news analysis among *China Dialogue*, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* can tell how the non-profit media can exert its public service role on the news outputs, and the interview with *China Dialogue*’s manager offers a perspective from the news practitioners to interpret *China Dialogue*’s works. The combination of both perspectives provides a comprehensive framework to examine *China Dialogue*’s adaptation to China’s authoritarianism as a non-profit news media. Through the news analysis, we will be able to see the results of the adaptation process that can be directly observed from outside of the newsroom. Through the interview, we go further to explore the adaptation process from inside to understand why and how the adaptation happens.

Furthermore, when it comes to the news analysis, it combines quantitative and qualitative, computational and manual methods together. The abundance of news analysis methods, on the one hand, enables analysis on large sample with thousands of news articles and presents an overall view of the news stories, which helps avoid biased or occasional results due to the small sample selection. On the other hand, it offers opportunities for deep analysis on news coverages based on specific

contexts. After all, as discussed above, media discourses cannot be only understood without contextual analysis. The benefits of combining different news analysis methods will be exhibited in the following chapters when presenting the research results.

Chapter 6 The Changes and Constants in China Dialogue's News Contents with China's Intensifying Authoritarianism

6.1. Introduction

Within the 16 years of operation in China, as elaborated in Chapter 3, *China Dialogue* has faced an environment where the space for speech freedom and non-profit advocacy is gradually shrinking. Particularly after Xi Jinping came to power, laws, regulations and serious political campaigns were issued to further suppress NGOs and news media, which constitutes a hostile environment for *China Dialogue* to operate in China as a foreign news organisation. One can find *China Dialogue* stopped holding the Environmental Press Award (EPA) after 2016. The EPA, co-operated by *China Dialogue*, *The Guardian* and *Sina Environmental Protection Channel*, was once the first and “the only purely grassroots environmental journalism award in China” (Dong 2013, p.398). The latest released record of this award is in 2016 and stops update since then (The Guardian 2016). And in 2022, the media closed its Beijing office. All these changes could be related to the civil society shrinking in domestic China. However, what is astonishing is that *China Dialogue's* news website is still accessible for Chinese people instead of being blacklisted, despite the increasing censorship on journalistic field and harsher regulations on NGOs. And, most importantly, the newsroom is operated in a non-profit way, which means its commitment on public goods shall be contradicted on some levels with China's increasingly stringent censorship in recent years. Then to what extent *China Dialogue* has to undermine its public service to survive under China's authoritarianism?

This chapter explores the changes and constants in *China Dialogue's* news contents with the deterioration of China's media and non-profit environment. It initially finds that some news topics, such as “Climate Change” and “Ecological Conservation”, have been consistently covered by the non-profit media. These topics are important for both China and the other countries as to solve the environmental problems need collaboration and endeavour from both sides. *China Dialogue's* emphasis on these issues is related to its media mission to facilitate environmental communication across the world. However, two negative changes in its news stories have been identified. Firstly, it has been found that the abundance of news topics has decreased. Some news topics that are important for *China Dialogue* in early years have been rarely touched in the past few years. Secondly, what happens with the decrease of news topic abundance is the shift from being radical criticism to being conservative criticism in *China Dialogue's* contents, which may help the media survive the harsh environment and at the same time commit its public service pledge to the largest extent as a non-profit media. This chapter argues that these content changes are closely – but not only – related to the constraining space for media freedom and non-profit organisations under Xi's governance.

The following writing starts with an overview on the news topics from *China Dialogue* over the 16 years, which finds that, although some topics are consistently reported, some others have been covered less with time goes on. It then provides a detailed analysis on the two changes of *China Dialogue's* news contents, which is consistent with the civil society shrinking in the past few years in China. Subsequently, it tries to explain why it is important for *China Dialogue* to adapt to the intensifying authoritarianism. Finally, a conclusion section is given to summarise the findings and lead us to next chapter comparing the news stories from *China Dialogue* and mainstream journalism in today's China.

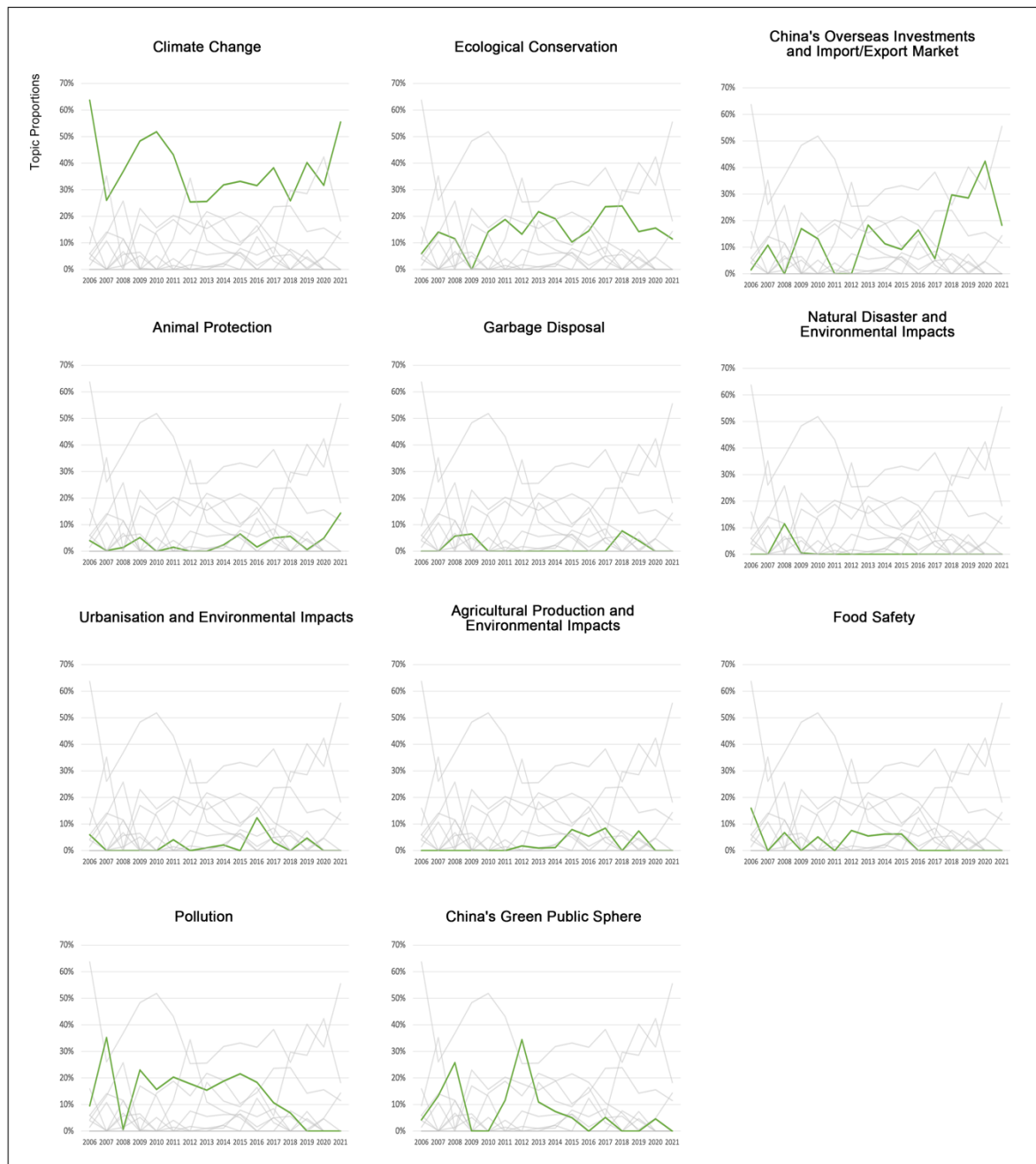
6.2. Overview on news topics from China Dialogue over the 16 years: persistent reporting international issues and the degradation of news topic abundance

The main findings from the LDA topic modelling are presented in Figure 6.1. It presents all the news topics from *China Dialogue* (specific meaning for each topic is attached in Appendix A). As explained

in last chapter, these topics are concluded from the sub-topics that are directly obtained from the LDA models. The figure also shows the topic proportions in each year, which tells the temporal trends of the news topics.

Figure 6.1. Temporal trends of the topic proportions of China Dialogue.

* Topic proportion refers to how important the topic is for each year. The higher the topic proportion is, more frequently the topic is covered in the corresponding year. When the topic proportion is zero, it means the topic is not caught by the model in the year.



As shown, the topics presented in *China Dialogue's* news coverages are broad, covering multiple levels of environmental issues. They not only discuss China's domestic environmental issues but also touch the "international issues" which, in this research, is defined as those news topics that discuss how China interacts with other countries to solve an environmental problem and how China can

mitigate or aggravate an environmental problem in other countries. More specifically, international issues identified in this LDA analysis mainly include the topics “Climate Change” and “China's Overseas Investment and Import/Export Market”. The former touches on China’s actions or inaction when it comes to climate mitigation, and the latter explores how China’s overseas financing behaviours and its huge market can impact environment in other countries. In contrast to those domestic issues that discuss the environmental problems occur inside China in which victims are mainly Chinese people, these international topics emphasise China’s international influence, and focus on how China’s behaviours can have positive or negative impacts on other countries where the environmental costs are mainly suffered by people other than Chinese.

Taking example of the topic “China's Overseas Investment and Import/Export Market”, this longitudinal analysis finds that *China Dialogue* has paid increasing attention to this issue over the years (see Figure 6.1), which discusses the environmental impacts as the result of China’s overseas mining, fisheries, and investments on energy projects. These overseas behaviours definitely benefit China’s economy and its diplomatic influence, but it may cause environmental concerns in other nations: financing on dirty energy projects can lead to pollution in local community, and overfishing can cause damage to the local ecological balance.

According to Figure 6.1, *China Dialogue* keeps consistent or increasing attention to these international topics throughout the whole sampling period (see the charts for topics “Climate Change” and “China's Overseas Investment and Import/Export Market”). This echoes *China Dialogue*’s self-identified role as a mediator or bridge between China and the outside world. When talking about why to initiate *China Dialogue* at the very beginning, Sam Geall, the current CEO of *China Dialogue*, explains:

“The initial idea was, in the west, China was widely used as an excuse for inaction. People would say, you know, why do anything about climate change if China is opening a coal-fired power station every week. In China, back at that time, there was a growing environmental awareness. There were environmental NGOs. There was media starting to spring up. But the international dimension of that was quite sensitive and quite difficult as well. So people would really see international conversations about climate change as just a way to point the finger at China to try to dictate the terms of China's development. So we thought it was a better way through this conversation to get past an impasse by translating Chinese voices for global audiences and global voices for Chinese audiences, and creating a joint exchange around all environmental issues like climate change, pollution and other sustainability issues... over the years, it [*China Dialogue*] has grown and changed, and the environment that we are in has changed. But the mission is pretty much the same.” (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

This mediating role, on the one hand, can be reflected in their bilingual website that provides Chinese and English version of most of news stories, which creates convenience for both language speakers to understand the common issues, making it easier and more likely to deliver news agendas from one side to the other. On the other hand, it corresponds to the finding here that *China Dialogue* pays consistent attention to those international topics that involve China and the outside world. Particularly for the topic “Climate Change”, it has been always one of the most important news topics for *China Dialogue* during the 16 years (see Figure 6.1), and this has not changed whereas China’s media regulations became harsher in recent years. Climate change is a typical environmental problem that requires not only common understandings on the urgency of climate mitigation across the world but also the co-operation in the international community for carbon-cutting. It thus involves negotiations and debates between divergent nations and interest groups.

This LDA analysis finds that, since 2006, *China Dialogue* has put lots of attention and resources every year to discuss (1) the dangers of climate change; (2) the negotiations, conflicts and collaborations in the international community when facing climate change; (3) measures and performances of each country – in this LDA sample mainly China – when it comes to combating climate change. *China Dialogue's* emphasis on this topic from beginning until now manifests its endeavour to involve China in the climate talks and facilitate mutual understandings on the issue between China and outside. How the non-profit media reports climate change – what discourses around the issues have been constructed and how it differs from Chinese mainstream journalism – will be discussed in details in Chapter 8. What is noted here is that *China Dialogue* has a special and consistent focus on international topics since its establishment.

As shown in Figure 6.1, “Ecological Conservation” is another topic that maintains a persistent significant position in *China Dialogue's* news contents throughout the whole period. The topic mainly addresses the tensions between the ecological conservation and the resource exploitation projects, which can touch on both China's domestic and international issues.

For China's domestic issues, one example is the controversy surrounding development activities around Poyang Lake. As the largest freshwater lake in the country and home to a diverse range of endemic and threatened plant and animal species, Poyang Lake holds a vital place in ecological significance. Yet, its abundant natural resources also appeal to local government for economic projects, which for years has aroused general concerns for environmentalists. As early as 2007, *China Dialogue* published an article discussing the impacts of the large-scale sand dredging on the survival of the finless porpoise in Poyang Lake (Zhang 2007). In recent years, the attention on Poyang Lake by *China Dialogue* has not diminished. An article published in 2017 stated, “Researchers say sand mining is the major reason why the lake's water level has dropped dramatically in recent years. The lower water levels have led to declining water quality and supply to surrounding wetlands – Asia's largest winter migration spot for endangered Siberian cranes and white storks” (The Third Pole 2017). More recently, in 2021, *China Dialogue* also published an article reviewing the numerous controversies over the past 19 years (2002-2021) surrounding the construction of dams around Poyang Lake and the potential environmental impacts (Liu 2021a).

For the international issues, the dams constructed by China's southwestern provinces in recent years is a significant focus in *China Dialogue's* news contents. Many rivers in this area are connected to the rivers in China's neighbouring countries. The Lancang River in Yunnan Province which is connected to the Mekong River passing through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The Nu River in China's Tibet is connected to the Salween River within Myanmar. The hydropower stations constructed by China in these river basins could impact the lives of residents in downstream countries. In addition, capitals from China are also involved in many dam constructions in these countries bordering the river basin, which in many cases causes harm to the interests of native people and even arouses protests in local community. *China Dialogue* has published a series of news articles talking about these issues in the past few years. For example, in 2018, the media discussed in an article about how unrestrained and low-quality dam constructions in Laos brings about safety concerns and ecological damage, in which China's capital also plays a role (Eyler 2018). In 2019, a news story reported that the hydropower stations built by China on the Lancang River have affected the natural rise and fall of the Mekong River's water levels (Rujivanarom 2019). As a result, the biodiversity of this river basin, particularly the migratory species of fish, is under threat, subsequently impacting the livelihoods of local fishermen.

In contrast to these news topics that obtain *China Dialogue's* persistent news reporting, the topics “Food Safety” and “Pollution” (frequently) touched in early years are not caught by the LDA model in recent years. This suggests the degradation of news diversity of *China Dialogue*. One possible reason

to explain this phenomenon is, as analysed later, these topics are not allowed to be covered any more due to the sensitivity of these topics and with increasing censorship under Xi Jinping's regime.

However, in terms of another topic "China's Green Public Sphere", which is also related to some sensitive sub-topics, it is surprising to find *China Dialogue* still touches on this topic in recent years, although the frequency severely decreases (see Figure 6.1). The concept "green public sphere" is utilised by Yang and Calhoun (2007) to describe how China's ENGOs and media – the media in their analysis include mass media, alternative media and the Internet – appeal to public attention and mobilise civil participations on environmental issues to hold government accountable. This research adopts this concept to refer to those sub-topics that focus on the roles and activities of activists, ENGOs, news media and China's environmental laws and policies when facing environmental problems. For years, environmental governance of China's authoritarianism has been criticised due to lacking information transparency and mechanisms for citizenry participation (Gilley 2012; Engels 2018; Kostka and Zhang 2018; Seligsohn et al. 2018). Chinese government is always concerned about the potential challenges to regime legitimacy coming with mass mobilisation, and thus, any news information about environmental activism and demonstrations are severely censored. Under this circumstance, how does *China Dialogue* report "China's Green Public Sphere" in today's media environment? Are there any sub-topics that were touched before lost in recent years?

The following two sections provide an analysis on two changes of *China Dialogue* that may help the media survive in an increasingly stringent media environment in today's China: one is to cover fewer sensitive topics or even completely avoid them, and another is to report a sensitive topic from a safer and non-radical perspective. This is not to say that for those topics that are covered throughout the whole 16 years are not sensitive at all. For instance, as noted in Chapter 2, it is risky for Chinese news media to challenge the official line on climate change because it is a topic related to national interests. And as will be elaborated in Chapter 8, *China Dialogue*'s news reporting on "China's Overseas Investments and Import/Export Market" has brought the media to a cyber violence in 2021. However, at least from the findings of this LDA model, we can conclude that these topics about pollution and food safety have been less covered or ignored with time goes on, which can be closely related to the harsher censorship and regulations on news media.

6.3. Avoidance of sensitive topics: food safety and pollution

These two topics "Pollution" and "Food Safety" usually involve discussions about the health of human beings and perhaps they are the ones that are most directly relevant to personal interests among all the environmental issues. Taking example of the 2008 milk scandal, the incident shocked the whole Chinese society. Infant formulas produced by Sanlu Group, a state-owned firm based on Shijiazhuang, were found contained with melamine which can cause kidney stones and other damages. Before the scandal, the company was one of the largest formula sellers in China and prided itself with strict quality control process. Their products were even praised in a 2007 program produced by China Central Television (CCTV). Sanlu brand of milk products was trustworthy for millions of Chinese families and a number of its products were exempt from government quality checks. However, destruction of this credibility was instantaneous. As reported by China's health ministry, the contaminated formula led to 300,000 children ill in 2008 and caused six death cases (Branigan 2008). One important reason to explain why the event could lead to such a large-scaled social impact is because every child in China could be the victim of this food safety problem. Childcare issues are always the ones that Chinese people concern mostly. In the traditional Chinese culture, children are seen as the future of a family and raised as a new generation that burden the responsibility of procreation, to carry the family line. In today's China, consumption on children's education is huge since children, in most of cases, are regarded as the only opportunity of social mobility for the underclass and maintaining family wealth for middle class (Lin 2019). Any social

problems that may impact the children are very likely to cause massive outrage in Chinese society given the huge investments on children.

After the scandal was reported by other news media, *China Dialogue* published a commentary article written by Jiang Gaoming, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Botany. The author, through this milk scandal, came up with a question: "Melamine is not a regular food additive, and its appearance in products made by Sanlu and other firms indicates criminal behaviour. But should government-approved food additives be trusted either? The large-scale use of food additives may increase production to some extent, but it has a significant impact on quality, and some of these foods may be a danger to public health" (Jiang 2008). This article tried to convey an opinion that this milk scandal is not an occasional case but a result of the massive abuse of food additives in China, which went beyond the sole event and touched the fundamental weakness of China's food regulatory system.

One year after the Sanlu incident, China's Food Safety Law was enacted on 1 June 2009, superseding the 1995 Food Hygiene Law. The legislation bolstered governmental supervisory power, standardised food safety criteria, and heightened accountability for violations, which shows the government response to the general distrust in food safety among Chinese people and "marked that the reform of China's food safety laws entered a new stage" (Song et al. 2014, p.1299). Yet, in the following years, food safety incidents kept cropping up in China. A variety of shocking scandals such as gutter oil, toxic substandard products and fake meat continued to dominate the news headlines. Along with many other Chinese news media at that time, *China Dialogue* has discussed a lot about how to improve China's food safety at least until 2015 (as shown in Figure 6.1). During the years, the media has published a series of articles – some are editorials, some are interviews with experts and scholars – to explore why food safety problem in China is difficult to be addressed and how to alleviate the problem. As Xu Nan, managing editor in *China Dialogue*'s Beijing office at that time, stated in 2012, food safety problem is related to China's "institutional, economic, social, and cultural dimensions" (Xu 2012). An expert interviewed by *China Dialogue* in 2013 shares the similar ideas that there is not a simple solution for the problem. According to the interview (Levitt 2013), China's food safety problems are not only tied to corruption but also encompass the inflexibility of local governance due to centralised political power, as well as the difficulties of food regulations stemming from the overly decentralised structure of the food industry.

In 2015, collaborating with the Chinese environmental journalist Liu Hongqiao, *China Dialogue* even co-published a whole report with another NGO *China Water Risk* investigating the drinking water safety in China. As reported by the media, due to the lack of infrastructure construction in rural area, "at the end of 2010 ... there were still over 400 million rural Chinese – 42% of the rural population – who had to collect water directly from water sources, using basic water supply delivery systems, or none. Among them, 85.72 million people had no water supply facilities at all, and so were getting their water directly from rivers, streams and ponds" (Liu 2015a). While Chinese state government plans to "completely solving" the problem by the end of 2015, *China Dialogue* cited the statement from an expert from Tsinghua University that this is an impossible mission, pointing out the big challenges ahead such as the geographical limitations, economic constraints, and severe deterioration of the quality of drinking water sources due to the environmental degradation.

Similar to food safety, pollution is another issue that is closely related to human health. While reporting this topic, *China Dialogue* touched much on how different categories of contaminations such as pollutions of water, air, chemical industry and soil can cause health concerns for Chinese people. Some pollutions are also related to the food safety issue since poisoned soil and contaminated water will produce poisoned food. Other kinds of pollutions such as air and chemical pollution can also lead to severe health problems. However, the causal relationship between pollution and health problem or even mortality is not as apparent as food and health. When

reporting a specific news event, journalists usually need to turn to scientists and researchers to determine whether the cause of individual health problems can be blamed on pollutions (Tong 2017a). Citing research reports to indicate pollution effects on human health is not scarce in news stories from *China Dialogue*. For example, in a 2015 article with the straightforward title “Nearly 260,000 premature deaths in China’s major cities are linked to smog in 2013” (translated directly from the Chinese title), the media cites a research conducted by Peking University and an international environmental NGO Greenpeace to point out the potentially deadly nature of air pollution in China (Xu 2015). In another article published in the same year, the outlet relays the findings of a study that suggests “reservoir that supplies Beijing could contain unsafe levels of lead” (China Dialogue 2015) and fully explains how this can affect human health within the texts:

“Lead is a cumulative poison with no known safe level of exposure, which affects multiple systems in the body and is particularly harmful to the health of children. It is estimated that children's exposure to lead causes about 600,000 new cases of mental disability each year.” (Ibid)

Going back another year, in 2014, collaborating with Yale Environment 360, an online magazine published at the Yale School of the Environment, *China Dialogue* released a series of news reporting about how people living in villages suffer from soil pollution. In the narrative of these articles, villagers are sick or even dead largely because they live in a contaminated environment resulted from the chemical factories built around. Food safety is concerned with the same reason. As one of the articles reported, “many local farmers have given up eating the crops they grow. They know that their vegetables are planted in soil polluted with cadmium, lead and mercury, heavy metals that are dangerous to human health” (He 2014a). The article also covered some issues that today’s Chinese mainstream news media will rarely be allowed to report. The writer frankly criticises that, while the soil pollution is so severe and innocent people are affected, data on soil pollution is guarded “that it has been officially categorised as a ‘state secret’”, and Chinese government used to obstruct media exposure on this problem (Ibid). Another article also reported a villager petitioning for punishment on local government irresponsibility for soil pollution with increasing cadmium-related death cases in the community (He 2014b).

These news stories about pollutions in rural area and the human health problem as the result, as Tong (2015a) argues, has touched on the inequality of China’s economic modernisation. While many high-polluting industries are moved to rural areas to avoid the (relatively) strict regulations in cities, China has in fact shifted the cost of environmental degradation resulting from the rapid economic growth onto marginalised communities. Compared to urban residents, rural inhabitants often have lower levels of education and environmental awareness. When facing the high-polluting industries, they also lack the awareness and capacity to defend their rights and interests. As one of the articles from *China Dialogue* discussing China’s cancer villages puts, when media and scholarship has paid large attention to the environmental consciousness rising in urban areas, most of the rural people living around pollutions “suffer in silence, are unsuccessful in their attempts to put an end to pollution, or are co-opted by polluting enterprises into seeing it as inevitable. This is especially the case when not only the local (and central) government depend on industry, but people themselves rely on them for employment” (Lora-Wainwright 2013).

The news topics of “food safety” and “pollution” reflect the cruel facts of China’s economic modernisation. Since reform and open-up, China’s national policies often prioritised GDP growth as the national development goal. These media discussions about food safety and pollutions serve as warnings to Chinese society: the one-dimensional governance approach may not necessarily elevate people's living standards, but could engender a sense of insecurity and significant social inequality. Since 1990s, it was not unusual for discontents with these matters transforming to societal unrest. Particularly on pollution-related issues, the siting of polluting power plants and waste incinerators

frequently triggered protests and demonstrations in urban areas. Many of these movements exhibited characteristics of the Not-In-My-Backyard Activism (NIMBYism), driven by the desire to safeguard local interests rather than seeking systematic changes (Johnson 2010). Once projects with potential pollution risks were cancelled or relocated, protesters often ceased to engage with the issue. But according to Steinhardt (2019), sometimes protests in China against polluting projects can be escalated to the “fundamental discontent with the prevailing GDP-crazed political economy and the opaque policy-making by an unaccountable officialdom ignoring the interests of the public” (p.245).

Due to the very potential of these news topics to mobilise Chinese public, media reporting on these issues are usually sensitive and risky in China as the government concerns mostly about the social stability. Even during relatively lenient periods of media control, certain relevant topics were prohibited from being reported for a period of time. For example, as Sam Geall recalls in his previous writing, censorship on “stories about heavy metal and cadmium contamination in rice and other crops in southern China” were once strict, but the restriction was suddenly lifted in 2010, which in the following short period enabled a group of investigative and critical news stories about the issues to emerge (Geall 2014, p.76). Sometimes even journalists are capable of doing news reporting, they could meet challenges of collecting information from the ground. As Geall (2014) continues, in 2010, when *China Dialogue* tried to conduct an investigation on pollution-related diseases in Dongguan, the city home to many processing and manufacturing enterprises, the journalists have met numerous rebuffs of interview from government officials, scientists, hospitals due to the sensitivity of the topic. The requests for academic and public proceeding were also rejected with the confidentiality reason.

As shown in Figure 6.1, news coverages from *China Dialogue* about food safety and pollutions have been hardly found in the news sample in recent years. The food safety issue lastly shows up in 2015, and for pollution it is in 2018. Particularly for topic “Pollution”, it has been once one of the most important topics for *China Dialogue* for years before 2018, but the result here suggests this is not the case anymore.

This is not to say that *China Dialogue* does not touch these topics at all in recent years. In fact, the media still reports the issues from time to time. For example, for food safety issues, when the spread of African swine fever in 2018 summer affected pigs across China, *China Dialogue* published an article stressing this outbreak highlights risks in the country’s intensive livestock industry, which can include the abuse of antibiotic and the public health hazards as the result (Zhou 2018). As the author proposes,

“More than half of the antibiotic consumption in China is driven by the livestock industry in an effort to prevent infection and promote growth but is also creating serious unintended consequences. Recently, public health researchers from Fudan University found antibiotic residues in 58.3% of school children’s urine samples collected in east China, including three antibiotics used in animal farming” (Ibid).

For pollution issues, as elaborated later in Chapter 7&8, *China Dialogue*’s consistent intensive attention on China’s annual energy consumption and the country’s responsibility on climate change is closely related to China’s air pollution. While the media urges China to decrease its reliance on coal power and develop renewable energy, it actually calls on China to solve the air pollution since China’s deteriorating air quality is largely the result of unrestricted emissions from coal-fired factories. And just in August 2022, several months after China’s state council announced to carry out a national soil survey, the news outlet published an article discussing the significance of this decision and related how severe the soil pollution in China so far is (Chen et al. 2022).

The reasons why these articles that still mention China's pollution and food safety issues do not constitute the topics in the LDA results in recent years can be various, but one certain reason is that the frequency of the words related to the topics and the articles specifically addressing the topics is not as high as before. What is argued here is that, in comparison with its news stories of early years, *China Dialogue's* reporting on China's domestic pollution and food safety problems is less frequent and straightforward in recent years. Those news stories that descriptively report how Chinese people's health can be affected by China's contaminations and how people petition for this are now rare in their publications. Especially those articles that usually focus on specific events to show people's grievances about the pollution and food safety problems are hardly identified in their recent publications. In other words, these news topics are not emphasised anymore when discussing China's domestic environmental issues.

Such degradation of news topic abundance could be a symptom largely resulted from the civil society shrinking under Xi Jinping's governance. The influences on *China Dialogue* to do journalism can be dimensional. Firstly, with the shrinking space for critical voices, *China Dialogue* concerns more about the risk of being blocked or shut down by the coercive power, although this does not necessarily happen in every publishing decision. And due to many journalists working for *China Dialogue* are Chinese and based on China, they could be worried about what they can publish without political punishments (interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). This can lead to prudent attitude with doing critical news reporting and discussing sensitive issues such as food safety and pollutions.

Secondly, with the strengthening control on media and NGOs, it has now become more difficult and dangerous for *China Dialogue* to send out journalists and do field news reporting. Under the legal provisions in China, journalists and media outlets are required to obtain official recognition before conducting interviews and news reporting: journalists need to acquire press credentials through official assessments, and media outlets should be authorised by the authority. Although the legal provisions are often not strictly enforced, their presence suggests that the Chinese government holds the power to penalise media and journalists without proper qualifications at any given time. With Xi's tightening media policies, his government has intended to enforce the laws more strictly in the past decade. The 2017 Internet News and Information Regulation extends the regulations to the Internet and requires qualifications to do news gathering and editing works. In 2019, China's media regulator, the National Press and Publication Administration, started to ask Chinese journalists across the nation to pass a test "grading their understanding of Xi Jinping Thought" to obtain or renew their press cards (Kuo 2019).

Although there are still many journalists and media doing news reporting in China without the qualification, it has now become riskier to do field reporting in such a hostile political phenomenon. Particularly for *China Dialogue* registered as an NGO instead of a news media, they are now more conservative to send out journalists to do field investigations, since this could lead to penalties if the journalists are caught as working for an organisation lacking legal approval for news service. As Sam Geall puts:

"It just became much more difficult to report on the ground in China, so we ended up over the last few years doing a lot more analysis ... sort of policy, deep dives and analysis from China, because we just can't send reporters, even when we had an office. It's just not possible for reporters to [report on the ground], because we're not registered as a news organisation. For a long time, we used to be able to send someone to report on pollution and to do things like that. We can't anymore." (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

This could help explain the decrease of some news topics that demand detailed investigations. Indeed, as discussed above, lots of *China Dialogue's* news stories published in early years are written

by journalists who visited the polluted places, interviewed the victims, and did detailed on-the-ground investigations on how the pollutions happened and damage the local community. In the past few years, although the media still touches on China's pollution issues from time to time, similar investigative news stories are hardly identified. The media now approaches the issues more from the perspective of policy analysis, which is largely done based on data from political and scientific institutions and interviews with experts rather than victims.

Thirdly, as elaborated in Chapter 3, the deterioration of media environment has led to many journalists, especially investigative journalists, leaving Chinese news industry, which has also posed a significant challenge for *China Dialogue* as a small-scale media team in Beijing. With only a limited number of full-time news editors based in Beijing, many of *China Dialogue's* articles reporting China are contributed by freelance journalists (interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). As mentioned above, its report on China's drinking water safety published in 2015 was a collaborative effort with Liu Hongqiao, who just left Caixin Media and became a freelancer in 2014. But Liu left China in the following years, and she is not alone among Chinese journalists. For many journalists in China, heightened harassment and intimidation from the government hinder their endeavours and passion to continue uncovering social wrongdoings, which makes many of them forced to be silenced, leave Chinese news industry or even leave the country (Hernández 2019; Genovese 2023). Amid the substantial loss of journalists in China and the increasingly stringent media control, there could be a decreasing number of journalists who can provide on-the-ground investigative articles for *China Dialogue*. This situation could lead to certain specific issues such as the pollution and food safety not receiving sufficient attention in *China Dialogue's* news coverages.

Some may argue that these topics are covered less by *China Dialogue* not because of the shrinking speech spaces but because of China's satisfying performance on these issues in recent years, and these pollution and food safety problems are not the major concerns for Chinese people and news media today. Such argument does notice the difference of environmental governance between Xi's administration and his predecessors', but it understates the severity of environmental degradation caused by China's rapid economic development over the past few decades.

Fairly speaking, with all kinds of environmental problems becoming increasingly prominent and under years of criticism at home and abroad, Xi's governance, under the flag of "ecological civilisation" (Geall and Ely 2018), emphasises more on environmental protection than his predecessors. As Kostka and Zhang (2018, p.778) note, "from Xi Jinping down to local EPB (Environmental Protection Bureaus') officials, the need to prioritize environmental protection has become a consensus within the Chinese state". Numerous environmental regulations and laws were promulgated and campaigns combating pollutions were initiated in the past decade to show Xi's determination to reverse China's environmental degradations. For example, just several months after Xi officially started his presidency in 2013, a national action plan for air pollution control was launched by the State Council in September. And in the following year, the premier Li Keqiang declared a "war" on pollution in a parliament meeting, denouncing that "China will cut outdated steel production capacity by a total of 27 million tonnes this year, slash cement production by 42 million tonnes, and also shut down 50,000 small coal-fired furnaces across the country" (Reuters 2014). Following such ambitious statement, tens of thousands of polluting plants across the country were shut down by force, and some measures are dramatic including cutting electricity and gas to stop factory production (Schmitz 2017).

In addition, the new Environmental Protection Law (EPL) that officially came into force on 1 January 2015 makes the polluting companies face a stricter fine system. Government officials who protect and connive at polluting activities could be held criminally responsible. At the same time, the law regulates that environmental performance should be reviewed when it comes to government officials' promotion. "Upward mobility chances in a career can be strengthened, weakened or

destroyed depending on whether local government officials successfully enforce environmental regulations in their communities” (Schreurs 2017, p.168). This attempt is aimed at changing the previous blind pursuit of economic boost on local level. In 2018, the Environmental Protection Tax Law was enacted. This tax law is widely expected to rectify the situation and further prompt local governments to carry out necessary supervision over polluting enterprises. In the same year, the Ministry of Environment Protection dismantled and a more powerful ministry, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, was formed.

Despite general concerns about whether such emphasis on environmental protection can be consistent in a long run and the quality of implementation of these stringent laws and policies under China’s authoritarianism (for example see Engels 2018; Lewis 2020), recent researches evaluating China’s pollution indicate that Xi’s environmental governance has yielded some gratifying results. For instance, based on annual data released by Chinese authority and some other publicly accessible information, Zeng et al. (2019b) find “during the past decade, SO₂ and NO_x emissions had declined throughout China and concentrations of PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ had considerably decreased in most cities” (p.329). A study analysing agricultural soil pollution by heavy metals suggests that some heavy metals have been decreased and the accumulation had slowed down since 2012 (Huang et al. 2019).

Nevertheless, some levels of improvements do not mean the disappearance of environmental problems. China’s rapid growth over the past few decades at the cost of environmental destruction will not be completely reversed by a few years of campaigning governance. As Zeng et al. (2019b) note, although some air pollutants decreased in the past few years, concentrations of PM₁₀, PM_{2.5} and O₃ still remain much higher than the WHO guidelines. In the most-polluted-countries index published by the real-time air pollution monitoring website IQAir (2022), China ranks 22nd out of 117 countries in 2021 as its annual average PM_{2.5} concentration exceeds the WHO guideline by 5 to 7 times. A 2020 report from Greenpeace estimated that 49,000 deaths could be blamed on smog in Beijing and Shanghai in 2020 (Reuters 2020). Just before the Beijing Winter Olympic in February 2022, serious air pollution occurred again in Beijing and the spokesman for the Ministry of Ecology and Environment warned that “winter weather was ‘very unfavourable’ for efforts to keep the air clean” (Xu and Stanway 2022). At the same time, as a toxics campaigner at Greenpeace East Asia points out, “state spending on soil treatment has lagged behind that on other bigger campaigns like ending air and water pollution”, and this may lead to serious food safety problem (Bao 2020).

Thus, while China’s management on pollution and food safety problems still has a long way to go, to argue that *China Dialogue* lacks reporting materials to cover the issues is not convincing. The degradation of news topic abundance in *China Dialogue*’s news coverages should be understood better in the context of increasing political control on media and non-profit organisations. On the one hand, in a hostile political climate, *China Dialogue* is necessary to walk the tightrope more carefully in order to continue operation in today’s China, which means more self-censorship inside the newsroom. On the other hand, the deterioration of China’s media environment could also lead to incapability of *China Dialogue* to publish news stories that demand investigation on the ground. All these factors could explain the decreasing exposure on some typical environmental issues such as the pollutions and food safety problems.

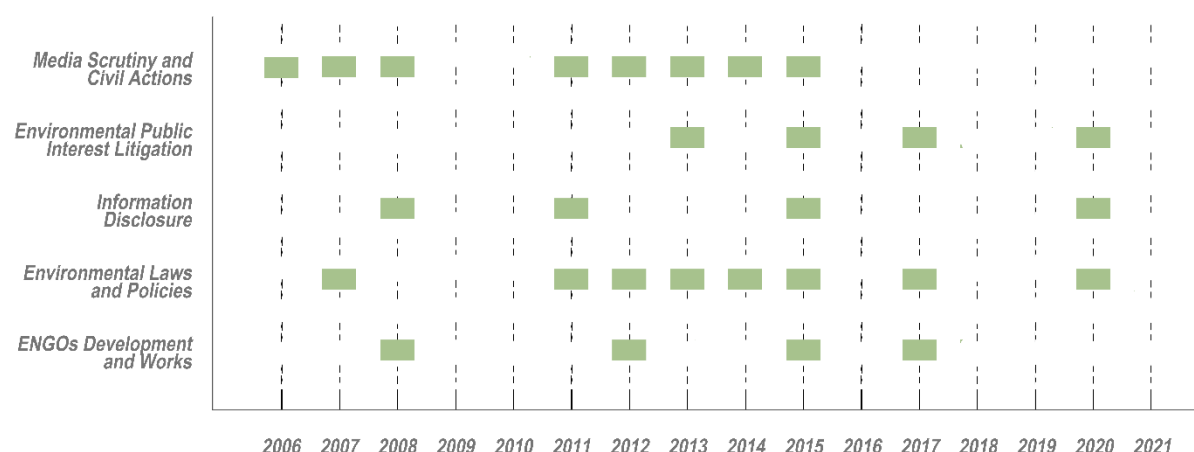
6.4. From radical criticism to conservative criticism: how China Dialogue promotes China’s green public sphere

The self-censorship behaviours can be also reflected in *China Dialogue*’s news coverage on topic “China’s Green Public Sphere”, which is another relatively sensitive topic for Chinese environmental communication. Although, according to Figure 6.1, the media still pays attention to the topic in recent years, the way *China Dialogue* exerts criticism in the coverages has changed over the time.

Figure 6.2 below presents the five sub-topics under “China’s Green Public Sphere” obtained directly from the LDA modelling. The figure only shows whether the sub-topic is presented in each year and does not provide the topic proportions, because these sub-topics are closely related and the LDA in some years does not distinguish them (but it can do so in some other years). This means that for those years that the sub-topics are grouped under the same topic, the LDA cannot tell the exact proportion for different sub-topics. Even so, whether a sub-topic appears in each year’s corpus suggests important information about how *China Dialogue* reports “China’s Green Public Sphere” over the years.

Figure 6.2. Five sub-topics under the topic “China’s Green Public Sphere”.

* The green block means that the sub-topic is presented in the topic modelling results in the current year. The magnitude of a block holds no significance.



These sub-topics tell different perspectives of “China’s Green Public Sphere”:

- “Media Scrutiny and Civil Actions” refers to the stories of environmental activists, media and demonstrators to oppose polluters and government.
- “Environmental Public Interest Litigation” refers to how individuals or organisations initiate a lawsuit in the name of environmental public interest. As noted above, after the new Environmental Protection Law came to effective in 2015, the law permits this public right.
- “Information Disclosure” refers to the transparency of China’s environmental information such as the air pollution levels in cities.
- “Environmental Laws and Policies” refers to discussions on the strength or deficiencies of China’s environmental laws and policies and how they can be revised to promote environmental protection.
- “ENGOs Development and Works” refers to discussions on how ENGOs carry out their works in China to raise public awareness, pushing or collaborating with government and enterprises to solve environmental problems.

Some sub-topics here are sensitive in Chinese context. Studies have suggested Xi’s environmental governance has a typical command-and-control mode, which largely relies on top-down scrutiny within the party (Kostka and Zhang 2018). Other social actors such as China’s ENGOs and news media are required to play a cooperative instead of a supervisory role. The 2015 new Environmental Protection Law is a step forward. The law, at the first time in China’s history, permits ENGOs to prosecute an appeal in the name of public interest, although some restrictions still exist as discussed below. However, since Xi came to power, suppression on ENGOs and environmental activists are drastic. For advocacy ENGOs in China, “opposing government policies or decisions presents a formidable challenge, especially when the opposition is based on pure environmental reasons” (Dai

and Spires 2018, p.77). Liu Shu, who was the head of an ENGO and famous for publicizing pollution data in China, was detained in 2016 due to “disclosure of state secrets” (Huang and Lin 2016). More recently, another influential ENGO that regularly monitors marine debris in China’s coastal areas were accused of leaking sensitive data to foreign organisations. Reported by *Huanqiu Shibao* (*Global Times*), a media backed by Chinese government, the marine data leaked by the organisation was used to “vilify” China’s environmental protection endeavour and was probable to threaten China’s military security (Huanqiu Shibao 2021). Under this circumstance, news media in China are cautious about reporting stories that advocate environmental activists and protesters. And while reporting the government suppressions on China’s environmental advocacy, it is dangerous to challenge the official line.

Given the intolerance of Chinese government towards environmental activists, ENGOs and news media, it is reasonable to argue that, among these five sub-topics, “Media Scrutiny and Civil Actions” is the most sensitive one. Some news stories sampled under this sub-topic is nearly impossible to be found in today’s Chinese journalism. In 2012, *China Dialogue* directly confronted Chinese government and criticise the arrest of Liu Futang. Liu, at the age of 65, was renowned for his advocacy on environmental issues on the Internet. His exposure of the deforestation incident in Hainan Province in 2011 earned him the “Best Citizen Journalist” award in the Environmental Press Award co-organised by *China Dialogue* in 2012 (Liu 2012). However, in July of the same year, Liu was arrested by Hainan authority on charges of “illegal business operations”, which triggered general condemnation from China’s environmentalists. In October 2012, *China Dialogue* reprinted an article from *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan* (*Southern People Weekly*) in support of Liu (Hai 2012). The author’s stance on the issue was very clear, suggesting that the charges against Liu were political retaliation by the authorities for his decade-long exposure of local environmental destruction events, bluntly stating that the accusation against him was “absurd” (Ibid). In December, after Liu was eventually convicted, *China Dialogue* stated in a news report that “Liu Futang’s case has brought shame to China’s environmental commitments” (directly translated from the Chinese news title) (Lin 2012). It is hard to image that such blunt and direct critique on China’s crackdown on environmental activists can emerge in any Chinese news media without being censored today.

The latest year in which the sub-topic “Media Scrutiny and Civil Actions” appears is 2015. The most representative article found for this sub-topic in this year is a news story that covers a protest against pungent air emanating from a chemical plant in a Sichuan city (Zhang 2015a). As reported, the demonstrators for long were concerned about pollution from the chemical plants, and doubted whether the local government had taken necessary measures to solve the problem. The protest went violent after the local policemen were sent out to “control the situation” (Ibid). Although self-organised protests are normally banned in China, such conflicts between the public and government caused by environmental issues are not rare at all (Steinhardt 2019). However, due to the authority concern about social stability and news media reporting these conflicts may damage the ruling party reputation, news media in China are rarely allowed to cover these issues. Therefore, one can say that *China Dialogue* being able to publish such story proves that, before 2015, there are still some spaces for the media to touch upon the sensitive topic.

Yet, according to Figure 6.2, the sub-topic “Media Scrutiny and Civil Actions” has been rarely touched by *China Dialogue* after 2015. One may suggest that, with increasing social control from the authority, there are few conflictual events that the media can cover. However, according to news coverages from foreign news media and some alternative news media in China, demonstrations and petitions caused by environmental degradation or controversial chemical projects continued in recent years despite the harsh political suppression in Xi’s era. Various forms of environmental activism have not stopped. For instance, in December 2016, a group of artists put on face masks to stage a sit-in protest against smog pollution in Chengdu city centre (Lin 2016 from the media *Sixth Tone*). In February 2017, hundreds of residents in a north-eastern city Daqing came out to oppose

the building of an aluminium factory (Shepherd and Blanchard 2017 from *Reuters*). In July 2019, thousands of citizens in Wuhan marched on street for a few days to protest an incinerator project planned by local government (Bradsher 2019 from *The New York Times*). In September 2020, inspired by Greta Thunberg #FridaysforFuture campaign, Howey Ou, China's "first climate striker" as media call her, held a silent demonstration with three other activists in Shanghai, urging Chinese government to take more actions to face climate change (Standaert 2020 from *The Guardian*). The examples listed here are just some events that have been captured by news media, and, in the actual situation, there are more conflictual events in recent years as recorded in Steinhardt's study (Steinhardt 2019). The explanation that *China Dialogue* lacks events to write a story about environmental activism is untenable whereas these actions, undoubtedly, were suppressed promptly by the authority.

While the sub-topic "Media Scrutiny and Civil Action" was avoided by the media in recent years, some other sub-topics "Environmental Laws and Policies", "Environmental Public Interest Litigation" and "Information Disclosure" are consistent to be covered throughout the whole period. In fact, looking at the representative articles under these sub-topics, they are all closely related to each other. Taken together, they aim at discussing the legal construction and enforcement of China's environmentalism, and how individuals and organisations such as ENGOs utilise the law to promote environmental protection.

Such long-term persistence to report the topics can reflect how *China Dialogue* plays the public service role to promote environmental reforms in China. One of the cases to show this is the news articles sampled under the sub-topic "Environmental Public Interest Litigation", which discuss the enactment and enforcement of China's new Environmental Protection Law (EPL). As Zhang et al. (2016) note, revision of the EPL is a typical case showing how public opinions in China influenced legislation in the past decade. *China Dialogue*, during the revision process of the law, provided a significant space for environmental interest groups to exert influences on the legislation through opinions expression.

The new EPL that officially came into effect in 2015 grants ENGOs the right to initiate public interest lawsuit. Although there were some environment protection courts established on local levels before then, this is the first time that China's national law clearly enables the right of environmental public interest litigation. However, introduction of EPL was not easy at all since its drafts aroused controversy about the litigation subject. In 2013, when the draft amendment to this law was released to the public, China's ENGOs were disgruntled with a provision that authorised only the All-China Environmental Federation (ACEF) and its provincial-level branches to file environmental public interest lawsuits. ACEF is the largest environmental organisation with official background in China. As *China Dialogue* reported in one story:

People "worry that ACEF will be unable to avoid government influence, meaning that cases which may damage local economies will be overlooked. It is also easy to imagine that ACEF, which is overseen by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, will not be able to fulfil its responsibilities when it comes to litigation against the government" (Zhang and Lin 2013).

In the following months, China's ENGOs tried their best to push the government to revise the article. *China Dialogue* had paid close attention to their endeavour. Another article that discusses the difficulties for China's ENGOs to sue a public interest case in the past was found during this period (Zhang 2013). Pointing out the first public interest litigation brought by China's ENGO still has no result after two years, the article analysed the various problems China's ENGOs met before when it comes to litigations, as a professor notes in the news report:

“such as that major local taxpayers and local courts have shared interests, civil society is weak, legislation on public interest lawsuits is lacking or too narrow and there are only a small number of bodies able to bring lawsuits. Another issue is that the appraisals needed in evidence are expensive and difficult” (Ibid).

The author also interviewed an American environmental lawyer probing into what China can learn from US legal system. The article was published during the period when the draft of Environmental Protection Law was reviewed by Chinese government. Such discussions apparently would be potential to influence the law amendment. When draft was revised and issued again in late October, ENGOs were still unsatisfied with the provision because of the strict standards the law imposes on the subject of environmental public interest litigations. Although the draft did not specify ACEF should be the only organisation that can initiate public interest lawsuits, ACEF would be actually the only one according to the high standards. *China Dialogue* published a news report again in December with the title “China’s green NGOs fight for the right to sue” (Yang 2013). Influential figures from ENGO, legal and academic sectors were interviewed in the news report and appealed to lowering the threshold for organisations to initiate a litigation and treating all the ENGOs equally.

Eventually, the final version of new EPL was passed in April 2014. Compared to the previous version ruling that NGOs initiating public interest litigation should meet stringent conditions, the final version eases some restrictions but still regulates two conditions: (1) to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs on the city level or above; (2) having engaged in environmental protection activities for at least five consecutive years without illegal records. Although some limitations exist, appeals of China’s ENGOs were answered by the legislative branch to some extent.

China Dialogue had not stopped here. In the following years, the media kept eyes on how the environmental public interest litigations were practised. It paid close attention to the litigation cases under the new EPL. Shortly after ACEF sued a case for 30-million-yuan air pollution penalty on 19 March 2015, *China Dialogue* followed up and published a news report covering the event (Liu 2015b). And after the court ruled in favour of the first public interest lawsuit since 2015 initiated by two ENGOs *Friends of Nature* and *Fujian Green Home Environmental Friendly Centre*, the media interviewed legal professionals and the ENGOs staffs to discuss the experiences (Zhang 2015b). In 2017, two years after the EPL came into force, *China Dialogue* reviewed six typical cases of environmental public interest litigation under the new law (Zhang 2017).

Furthermore, *China Dialogue* initiated lots of discussions about the deficiencies of current legal system after EPL was announced. For example, in June 2015, the media published an article trying to answer the question “why are China’s anti-pollution lawsuits stalling” (Xu and Zhang 2015). Lin Yanmei, a legal professor, gave a few explanations in the interview. As she mentioned, although the EPL permits some ENGOs to initiate litigations, the necessary mechanisms are not in place. For example, it is still unclear that how a polluter is legally defined and how to divide the responsibilities among different polluters, and “many local courts haven’t set up the necessary environmental and resource tribunals and aren’t familiar with the new system” (Ibid). In addition, while “the judicial system is often subject to interference by local governments”, local courts may not be able to render a fair judgement since local governments treat economic growth as a priority (Ibid). It is still challengeable for China’s ENGOs to initiate a public interest litigation under the new law. For instance, with the legal restrictions on litigation subjects noted above, few ENGOs meet the conditions and for those which can initiate a case, they may lack necessary knowledge or resources. And most importantly, for any organisation in China that sues a case against local government or those businesses seen as large taxpayers, the tremendous pressure are expected (Ibid). While the public interest litigation permitted in the new EPL was generally interpreted as being limited to suing directly against polluters, *China Dialogue* published another article in 2017 to discuss how possible China’s ENGOs can initiate lawsuits against government irresponsibility (Schulte and Li 2017). And

more recently, in February 2020, the media called on going beyond current legal system and permitting preventive public interest cases, which will allow “litigation procedures brought up before starting a project or an action that could negatively affect the environment” (De Boer 2020).

Through these news reports, one can see that *China Dialogue* was trying to promote further reforms in China to boost participations of the public and NGOs. In contrast to reporting on “Media Scrutiny and Civil Action”, discussions on China’s environmental legal system seem tolerated more by the authority from the results of this LDA modelling. As Fu suggests, Chinese government “permitted civil society groups to operate with a degree of maneuverability so long as these same groups did not directly mobilise collective contention” (Fu 2018, cited in Su and Zhang 2021, p.164). Su and Zhang (2021) divide strategies of NGO advocacy in China into social advocacy and political advocacy: the former aims at mobilizing society to exert influences on policy making, and the latter tends to lobby policy decision-makers directly. While social advocacy includes “media advocacy, research and public education, coalition building, grassroots advocacy, and direct actions”, political advocacy contains “legislative advocacy, administrative advocacy, judicial (legal) advocacy, and electoral advocacy” (Su and Zhang 2021, p.172). Their research finds that the majority of China’s NGOs adopt political advocacy much more frequently than social advocacy, and only a tiny proportion of them have tried social advocacy directly to the public such as organizing petition, protests and collective action. This is not difficult to be understood since social advocacy refers to a radical strategy that directly confronts and forces the government to make concessions in public, which is politically risky as it could be easily seen as threatening the ruling party. In contrast, political advocacy is relatively safe since it refers to a conservative criticism that tends to push changes inside the political system without challenging the regime legitimacy.

The LDA results here suggest that *China Dialogue* has now become more cautious about reporting social advocacy behaviours such as the protests and grassroot citizen actions. With strengthening media censorship along with Xi Jinping’s emphasis on “national security” (Cabestan 2021), news reporting on any environmental actions potential to mobilise the public could easily be regarded as supporting the activism and lead to political punishments. The radical criticism of the authority displayed by *China Dialogue* in Liu Futang’s case is now impossible to be replicated under the new circumstance.

Nevertheless, *China Dialogue* still have some spaces to discuss how China should push legislative and judicial reforms for environmental advance, which is similar to the political advocacy from many NGOs in China that shows a conservative criticism. It is conservative because it avoids endorsing the social advocacy actions that directly confronts the political power and asks for justice. It is still critical because it calls for self-reform inside the political system to be more open to the public and non-profit participation on environmental governance, which contradicts Xi’s top-down environmental campaign that is vigilant with interference from outside the political system. As discussed above, Xi’s antagonistic stance can be discerned through the punitive actions taken against not only environmental activists but also NGOs. Although *China Dialogue* does not directly criticise the arrest of environmentalists in recent years, its consistent call for a more open environmental governance system a pose a challenge to the government narrative that participations from below could threaten national security.

6.5. Adaptation to involve China in international environmental communication

These changes in *China Dialogue*’s news contents over the 16 years suggest that, on the one hand, self-censorship has become increasingly tougher inside the newsroom with the press freedom shrinking. On the other hand, the collapse of Chinese news industry as the result of a depressing media environment can further lead to the incapability of *China Dialogue* to create critical and

investigative news stories on some issues. In this situation, *China Dialogue's* public service role cannot be fully displayed as it cannot fully inform the Chinese readers.

Yet, there are some reasons that the non-profit news outlet believes to survive in China is important to maintain their public service. Firstly, for *China Dialogue* that wants to play the mediating role between China and the rest of the world, it is important for the media not to be blocked in China. It wants its publications to be accessible for normal Chinese people, which is seen by the media manager as significant to facilitate common understandings on the environmental issues between the two sides (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). Although some Chinese people use VPN to circumvent the censorship system and browse blacklisted websites, the circumvention tool usage maintains a low percentage and largely limited to specific group of people, as a 2018 study finds that only "more than 11% of Chinese Internet users had ever used circumvention tools and they were most likely to be young and well-educated" (Shen and Zhang 2018, p.106). As a non-profit media aimed at facilitating communication between different nations, *China Dialogue* wants to be accessible for the multiple sides as more as possible.

Secondly, if *China Dialogue* is blocked or must exit China, it would become more difficult for the media to find Chinese journalists to write news stories, since working for a blacklisted news organisation would be seen as riskier and more sensitive in today's China. To have Chinese writers is important for *China Dialogue* as the media wants to deliver local voices to the international community instead of solely relying on outside analysis (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). As discussed more later, outside analysis and reporting could lead to parachute journalism that is unlikely to conduct in-depth news coverage, or even worse, results in misinterpreting the information due to unfamiliarity with contexts. In this regard, to have writers from China and familiar with Chinese contexts helps correctly understand the environmental issues in China.

Thirdly, if *China Dialogue* is blocked in China and its Beijing office is shut down, the media would be more easily regarded as a foreign news media, which could make it more difficult to deliver opinions from China's side. With the rising patriotic nationalism and xenophobia in today's China (see 3.3.2), it is not rare in recent years that foreign journalists working in China were harassed, threatened and even attacked when doing news reporting on site. For instance, staffs from the *BBC* and *Los Angeles Times* claimed to receive death threats when reporting the China's floods in mid-2021 (Crossley and Tian 2021). And when the protest against the zero-Covid policy erupted in Shanghai in late 2022, a *BBC* journalist was assaulted and detained by the police on the spot, although he was released later (The Guardian 2022). With the hostility against foreign news media, to offer information to foreign media can be also sensitive for Chinese and even regarded as a treachery behaviour, as some Chinese Internet users call it, "giving knife to foreign forces" (*gei jingwai shili didaozi*). Under this circumstance, Chinese people will be more cautious with accepting interview invitations from foreign news media, especially those media blocked by China's censorship system. Thus, for *China Dialogue* that values Chinese voices in the international environmental communication, it tries its best to keep open to Chinese, as Sam Geall explains:

"Our overall theory of change for our organisation is around trying to build dialogue between China and the rest of the world. [It] still is. And that means it needs to be accessible on the Chinese side, if it is possible. We really need to have Chinese readers. We need to have Chinese writers. It's not really possible for us if we're just completely blocked or shut down in China ... And for us, at least until recently, we wanted to always be in dialogue. We wanted to have two sides of the story. And if we just didn't, if we were blocked in China or if we had to close our office in China⁴, we wouldn't have any opportunity to actually explore that space or

⁴ Unfortunately, *China Dialogue's* office in China was closed in 2022 despite their attempts to maintain it.

to keep it open. So we were keen to, you know, try to publish what we could within the constraints.” (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

Ultimately, to survive under China’s authoritarianism creates more conditions and possibilities for *China Dialogue* to involve China in the international environmental communication, which is important for combating some environmental problems such as climate change and the loss of biodiversity that needs collaboration across the world. Given China’s huge population, geographical size and economic size, there is no solution to global environmental problems if China is excluded. For *China Dialogue*, fostering understandings and consensus through a bridge of communication is one significant part of the solution, and this task is difficult to be accomplished if the media is totally blocked for Chinese people.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter explores *China Dialogue*’s news reports about China’s environmental issues during 2006 and 2021. Through analysis on *China Dialogue*’s news topics about China’s environmental issues over the 16 years, this chapter identifies two changes in the media contents. Firstly, environmental problems including the pollution and food safety problem that have been emphasised by *China Dialogue* before are much less covered in the past few years, despite these environmental problems are still severe on some levels in domestic China. Secondly, through discussions about how *China Dialogue* reports the green public sphere in China, this chapter finds that the media has shifted its radical criticism to conservative criticism on China’s environmental issues in recent years.

All these changes in news contents have indicated that the media seems more prudent when it comes to criticism on environmental issues about China. Based on the contextual analysis and interview with *China Dialogue*’s CEO, this chapter further argues that this is largely resulted from the deterioration of media and non-profit environment under Xi Jinping’s governance. It has involved the self-censorship inside the newsroom, inability to report news stories on the ground, and the large-scaled loss of Chinese journalists that leads to fewer critical and watchdog news reporting in China.

It should be noted the topic modelling analysis adopted in this chapter will not be able to reflect all the dimensions of changes in *China Dialogue*’s news contents. For example, it cannot address the changes of the news sourcing pattern, reporting tone (positive and negative sentimental words), media frames, etc. But the analysis on news topics combined with contextual analysis and interview has successfully revealed the degradation of *China Dialogue*’s news reporting on China as the result of strengthening regulations on news media and non-profit sector.

Even though the non-profit media must publish in China with increasing constraints, which apparently impedes its ability to fully report environmental issues for Chinese people, there are still some benefits to survive under China’s authoritarianism. For *China Dialogue*’s media purpose that pursues to involve China in the international environmental communication, to ensure its publications to be accessible to Chinese makes the media more likely to inform more Chinese people (although with constraints), recruit Chinese writers, deliver Chinese voices, and ultimately facilitate common understandings on environmental issues between China and other nations.

Furthermore, despite the degradation of news topic abundance, there are still some significant news topics that are consistently covered by *China Dialogue* since the media was initiated in 2006. These topics are mostly, but not limited to, international issues that involve both China and the other countries, such as the climate change, China’s overseas financing and investments, which is consistent with the media self-identification as a mediating role. *China Dialogue*’s consistent attention to these topics is possible to fill the gap in Chinese mainstream journalism, or the way it

reports the issues and its discursive construction could be different from mainstream news media. If so, as proposed in Chapter 4, its adaptation to China's strengthening authoritarianism would show the potential to push the boundary of Chinese environmental journalism, which goes beyond the narrative of self-censorship and inability emphasised in this chapter. In the following chapters, comparative analysis on news stories from *China Dialogue*, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* is conducted to examine this dimension. Through quantitative framing analysis and critical discourse analysis, the research will present the valuable and unique voices that *China Dialogue* is able to contribute to Chinese discussions on environmental issues while mainstream news media are severely controlled by the government.

Chapter 7 A Quantitative Perspective: How China Dialogue and Chinese Mainstream Journalism Report Environmental News

7.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to examine *China Dialogue*'s public service role in China through a quantitative perspective. After survival under China's intensifying authoritarianism in the past decade, *China Dialogue* may on some levels be able to push the boundary of Chinese environmental news reporting, which, as argued in Chapter 3&4, demonstrates its public service role as a non-profit news media. To have an overall view on how *China Dialogue* can report environmental news in difference from mainstream journalism, this chapter presents findings from the quantitative analysis on news stories from *China Dialogue*, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. The comparative analysis is conducted on three aspects: news topics, news sourcing pattern, and media frames.

The following texts starts with the analysis on news topics from the three media, and then examines the frequency and abundance of news sources of each news outlets and their tendency to cite different news sources. Subsequently, findings from the framing analysis are shown to suggest how the three media framing environmental news stories. From all these quantitative analyses, this chapter suggests that, while *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*'s news coverages maintain strong characteristics of propaganda information, *China Dialogue* shows significant distinctions when reporting environmental news. And most importantly, a burgeoning journalistic pattern in recent years across the world, constructive journalism, has been found applied to *China Dialogue*'s environmental news reporting in China, which makes the non-profit news media potential to provide media discourses that differs or even challenges the mainstream discourses. The benefits and limitations of *China Dialogue*'s constructive journalism practises will be discussed in terms of how it can help or constrain the media discursive construction under China's authoritarianism. Lastly, a section will sum up the findings in this chapter and discuss the unsolved issues from this quantitative analysis, which will lead to more analysis in next chapter.

7.2. Analysis on news topics: distinct focus of China Dialogue

Table 7.1 presents the issues by region that the three media tend to report. Differences between *China Dialogue* and the other two news outlets is obvious. While 86.0% of news stories from *Xinjingbao* and 81.3% from *Renmin Ribao* mainly focus on China's domestic issues, *China Dialogue* (54.5%) gives most spaces to those international issues which China also involves within. At the same time, *China Dialogue* (24.5%), compared to the other two media (4.8% and 4.4%), is more likely to report environmental issues in other countries, such as how the 2021 German federal election will influence German's climate policy (Wettengel 2021), and the controversy around EU's lithium mining (Davis 2021). The Chi-square test ($=248.476$, $p<0.001$) also suggests a significant relationship between the types of news outlets and their tendency on regional reporting.

Such distinction between *China Dialogue* and the other two media could be explained by the different media positioning. For *Renmin Ribao* and *Xinjingbao*, they both aim at targeting Chinese local readers and thus naturally report more China's domestic issues that could interest Chinese people as more as possible. For *China Dialogue*, as noted in last chapter, it is initiated to facilitate communication between China and the rest of the world. Their readers are spread across the world and for our sampling website Chinadialogue.net, only around half of readers are based in China (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). Therefore, it is not staggering to find the media covers more international issues that concerns both China and other countries, and it is more willing to cover foreign issues that may not interest most of Chinese readers but are important to facilitate understandings among Chinese people on environmental issues in a broader picture.

Table 7.1. Appearance of each issue by region.

* “China’s domestic issues” refer to environmental events that happen in domestic China;

* “International issues” discuss the negotiations about environmental issues in the international community (China also included), and how China can influence other countries’ environmental governance;

* “Foreign issues” only cover environmental news stories happened in other countries and China is not mentioned in the news stories at all.

Issues by region		News Media					
		China Dialogue		Xinjingbao		Renmin Ribao	
		Sum	%	Sum	%	Sum	%
	China’s domestic issues	23	20.9%	572	86.0%	520	81.3%
	International issues	60	54.5%	61	9.2%	92	14.4%
	Foreign issues	27	24.5%	32	4.8%	28	4.4%
Total		110	100.0%	665	100.0%	640	100.0%

Along with the emphasis on news stories that go beyond China’s domestic context, the news sample shows that *China Dialogue* provides opportunities for journalists across the world ranging from East and South Asia, Europe, Africa, North and South America to publish news stories on their website, which contrasts with the fact that *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* only hire Chinese journalists to do news reporting in most cases. The diversifying national and cultural backgrounds of journalists indicate that the media tends to avoid the “parachute journalism” that has been identified before among Chinese mainstream news media when reporting international and foreign issues (Wang et al. 2013). As Wang et al. (2013) note, in addition to the practical difficulties such as the unfamiliarity with local political, economic, and cultural contexts and the lack of news sourcing resources, such type of parachute news reporting can be intertwined with China’s domestic political and economic incentives, which also undermines the news reports to “deepen people’s understanding of the event” (p.897). *China Dialogue*’s manager has fully noticed the problems of parachute journalism and suggests that:

“What’s most important to us really is, as far as possible, we want to have local reporters about local issues. So if we’re reporting from Kenya, we want Kenyan journalists. For reporting from Brazil, we want Brazilian journalists. And the idea is that we’re, you know, bringing local perspectives to global audiences and to Chinese audiences who wouldn’t otherwise read them. And what we don’t want to do is kind of outside analysis.” (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

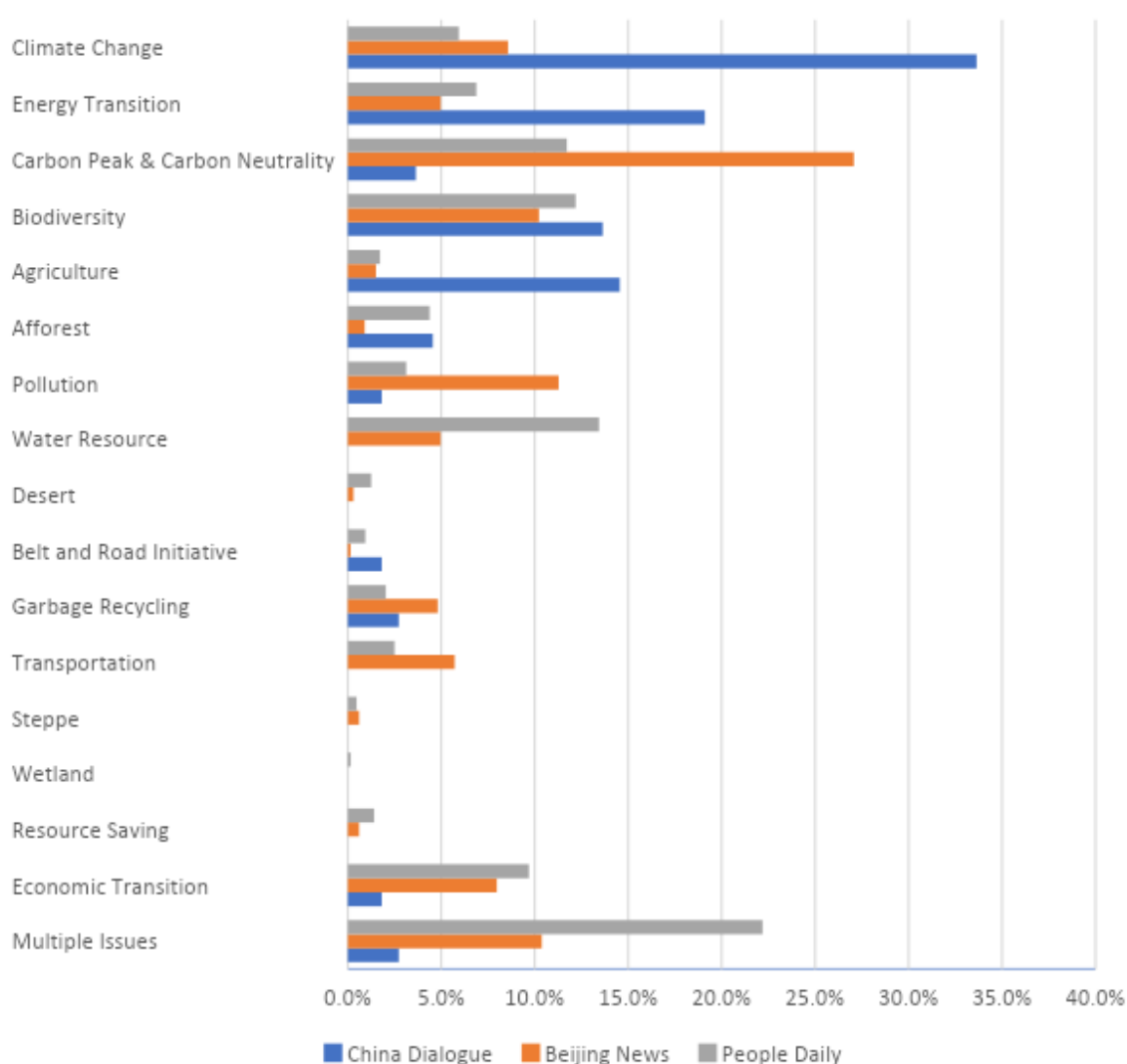
The abundance of *China Dialogue*’s journalists’ background may also indicate that the media could provide distinct perspective from mainstream journalism when doing news reporting outside China, which deserves more analysis (in next chapter).

To explore the specific contents of these domestic, international, and foreign issues, this research creates more sophisticated categories of news topics from the three media. Figure 7.1 shows the percentage of each news topic presented in each news media. The meaning of each topic can be found in appendix B. A news topic here is not definitely equal to an environmental problem and should be seen as an aspect of an environmental issue that an article emphasises. Different topics may indicate one environmental concern. For example, these topics “Climate Change”, “Energy Transition” and “Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality” all point to climate change but emphasise

different aspects. “Climate Change” aims to discuss (1) the negotiation, conflicts and collaboration in the international community; (2) the response of each country to climate crisis; (3) the impact and damage coming with climate change; “Energy Transition” tends to discuss how the traditional energetic system which emits large amounts of greenhouse gas can transfer to be cleaner and sustainable; “Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality” puts the emphasis on the progress, difficulties and solutions in pursuing the goal of carbon peak and carbon neutrality which each country has pledged to meet by its own time. Which specific topic an article is attributed to largely depends on not only the reporting emphasis but also the key words used in the texts. For example, for articles labelled as “Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality”, the word normally appears in the news titles or leading texts and leads the following texts until the end.

Figure 7.1. Appearance of each news topic from comparison analysis.

* The percentage denotes the portion of news articles within the news media that have be attributed to specific news topics. Each article is only labelled with one news topic.



According to the figure, climate change, has been reported mostly in the whole news sample. Adding all the articles labelled as “Climate Change”, “Energy Transition” and “Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality”, we can find 56.4% articles from *China Dialogue*, 40.6% from *Xinjingbao* and 24.5% from *Renmin Ribao* discussing climate change.

This finding is consistent with previous studies that point out, despite the indifference to climate change in early years, nowadays the news topic has become significant for Chinese mainstream journalism (Pan et al. 2021; Yu 2022). While China under Xi Jinping's governance gradually shows more leadership on this issue in the international community and, particularly in 2020, Xi announced China will reach carbon peak by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060 (McGrath 2020), Chinese mainstream news media are now keen to report how China can accomplish this transition process.

As presented in figure 7.1, among the three topics about climate change, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* both discuss mostly about the specific topic "Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality" (or "Double Carbon"). This could indicate that, on the one hand, Chinese mainstream news media are encouraged to promote this agenda during the sampling period to show the state determination on this issue after Xi gave the promise just one year before. Indeed, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* both reported the relevant policies and action plans published by the state government during this period. On the other hand, although the terminology is not easy to be understood for normal Chinese people, the topic could be seen as a hot topic for Chinese businesses. Lots of news coverages from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* have reported the promise on the Double Carbon goal from giant companies in China. In addition, given China's carbon emission trading system was officially initiated in July 2021, discussion about how the system can contribute to the double carbon goal achievement and how it can influence China's economic development has also become a viral topic for *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. From this perspective, the media interest on the topic "Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality" echoes with the domestic concerns about the business sector in Chinese mainstream journalism.

In contrast to *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*, *China Dialogue* puts more focus on the topics "Climate Change" and "Energy Transition". This, firstly, reflects the media consistent attention on climate change since initiated in 2006, as mentioned in last chapter. Compared to the concept of carbon peak and neutrality which starts to become popular in recent years, discussions around climate change and the development of clean energy have lasted for many years. *China Dialogue's* adherence to its own agenda may suggest that it is less influenced by China's political agenda. Secondly, this could be also related to the finding that *China Dialogue* reports more international and foreign issues than *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. When it comes to the topic "Climate Change", it mainly discusses a series of international climate talks happened during the sampling period including the UN General Assembly in September, G20 summit in October and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) held in November 2021. It has been found from the news sample that *China Dialogue* has followed these events and discussed process of climate talks, and specifically for COP26, it published a series of news stories to cover the event from pre-conference until the conference end. These events were undoubtedly full of conflicts between different nations and interest groups, but, at the same time, it can be an important opportunity for *China Dialogue* to deliver the voices from different interest groups and facilitate international communication.

Some other distinctions on the news topics deserve to be noticed. For example, *China Dialogue* pays much attention (14.6%) to the topic of "Agriculture" while the other two media rarely touch this issue (1.5% and 1.7%). The topic discusses the environmental problems brought about by modern agriculture and how the problems can be tackled. The problems can include but not limited to exacerbating climate change due to the large greenhouse gas emission from agricultural production, ecological degradation as the result of arable land expansion, and the resources waste and shortage caused by the excessive cultivation of particular agricultural product. Figure 7.1 suggests that these problems are not emphasised in Chinese mainstream journalism and, conversely, *China Dialogue* has highlighted these issues in their news reports, which may be able to shed light on the marginalised issues in Chinese public discussions.

Furthermore, the topic “Economic Transition” is much more salient in news coverages from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* than *China Dialogue*. This topic discusses how modern economy can be more sustainable, which is a general issue that involves the transition of various industries such as food, fashion, home decoration, architecture, information technology and tourism. Another general issue is “Multiple Issues”, which is also much more salient in *Xinjingbao* (10.4%) and *Renmin Ribao* (22.2%) than in *China Dialogue* (2.7%). From these two issues, we can see that *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* could talk about environmental issues in a general way, but *China Dialogue* has not much interest in this, and the media tends to focus on one specific issue in each article, which will help the news articles provide deep information and be more interpretive and explanatory.

This analysis on the news topics presents some common and distinct focus among the three media. Basically, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* share many commonalities on their news topics. They both tend to report domestic issues in China and stress similar specific issues in the news reports. In contrast, *China Dialogue* presents a different reporting emphasis. It is most likely to report international issues and put more attention to some environmental issues such as the agriculture that are rarely touched by *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*.

And when it comes to news sourcing pattern, *China Dialogue* also significantly differs from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*.

7.3. News sourcing pattern: China Dialogue gives voices to marginalised news sources

With the prevalence of objectivity norm among journalists across the world, journalists usually rely on news sources to provide news information (Carlson 2009). Thus, journalistic sourcing has been generally regarded as an important factor to evaluate the quality of a news story (Lacy and Rosenstiel 2015; Boehmer et al. 2019; Joris et al. 2020). The number of news sources and their backgrounds matter a lot in a news story because they directly influence what information has been given and on what level the information is credible. Under an ideal circumstance, journalists are required to, on the one hand, interview people as more as possible to do fact crosschecking, and on the other hand, invite people from different interest groups to express their opinions and promote a vibrant public sphere (Harcup 2020). Such perception on quality journalism is also influential among Chinese journalists, particularly for journalists working in commercial news media (Meng and Zhang 2022). According to Tong’s interviews with Chinese journalists, while facing the rising of user-generated contents that challenges the traditional news production process, “the three intertwined professional norms – ‘objectivity’, ‘reporting the truth’ and ‘balanced reporting’ – of old-fashioned journalism ... continue to be central to the concept of being professional journalists” (Tong 2015c, p.609). All the three norms, certainly, require journalists to be careful about news sourcing. Excessive reliance on sole news source or news sources from a specific interest group can easily lead to fact loss, unfair and biased reporting.

As Table 7.2 shows, this research adopts two indicators, source number and source diversity, to measure the quality of news stories from each news outlet. The former suggests the average number of news sources appearing in the stories, and the latter indicates the abundance of the news sources’ backgrounds (specific categories are given in Figure 7.2).

The result suggests that *China Dialogue* scores significantly higher than the other two media on both indicators, specifically for the average number of news sources. This means journalists from *China Dialogue*, when writing up their news stories, are more willing or able to interview more people from different fields to make the viewpoints in news stories more diversifying. This is important when it comes to environmental news reporting as environmental issues usually involve different parties. Taking example of climate change, on international negotiation table, different national interest groups may come up with different goals and requirements, and not to mention the

pressure from inter-governmental organisations, environmental NGOs (ENGOS) and activists. Back to national domestic circumstance, climate change also refers to conflicts, collaboration, concession among a variety of interest groups such as state government, local governments, politicians from different parties, business, ENGOS and activists. To restore this complicated picture to the largest extent requires a journalist to reach people from different interest groups as more as possible.

Table 7.2. The frequency and abundance of news sources.

		News Media		
		China Dialogue N=110	Xinjingbao N=665	Renmin Ribao N=640
Source Number	Mean	5.17	1.89	2.61
	Std. Deviation	4.095	2.397	3.081
Source Diversity	Mean	2.58	1.30	1.48
	Std. Deviation	1.517	0.877	1.187

It is also valuable to explore what news sources have tended to be cited in the three news media. As Carlson (2009) notes, “patterns of news sourcing confer authority and legitimacy on certain sources or groups while ignoring others. Over time, sourcing routines reinforce notions of who possesses social power” (p.526). For scholarship on media discourse that sees news media as a field of power struggling and competing for being heard, for being recognised and even for dominance, sourcing pattern in news media can have an important impact on the discursive construction in news texts, which directly influences whose conceptions are delivered into public discourse and whose are not (Stalling 1990). For Chinese environmental journalists, citing news sources from social groups other than government to uncover the information which is not favourable to the authority is an important to do critical news reporting without inviting political punishments, as this is one way to show their “objectivity” and “neutrality” to avoid being regarded as advocacy for opposing opinions (Tong 2015d; Geall 2018).

Figure 7.2 presents the percentage of each news source that has been given voice in each news media. Apparently, *Xinjingbao* (39.2%) and *Renmin Ribao* (43.4%) are most likely to cite words from Chinese government including central and local ones. This is not surprising given the more or less propaganda characteristic of party and commercial journalism in China. Prior studies have found that Chinese mainstream news reports are usually dominated by voices from the government officials when reporting climate change (Comfort et al. 2020; Duan and Miller 2021; Guo et al. 2023), the finding here expands this result to more diverse environmental issues. This is an alarming signal of the politicisation of environmental discussions in today’s China. While the official voices are dominant, environmental issues could be manipulated to prove the legitimacy of Chinese government and the scientific and critical discussions could be omitted due to the political concern, as we can see from the Chinese news coverages about Covid-19 (Abbas 2022).

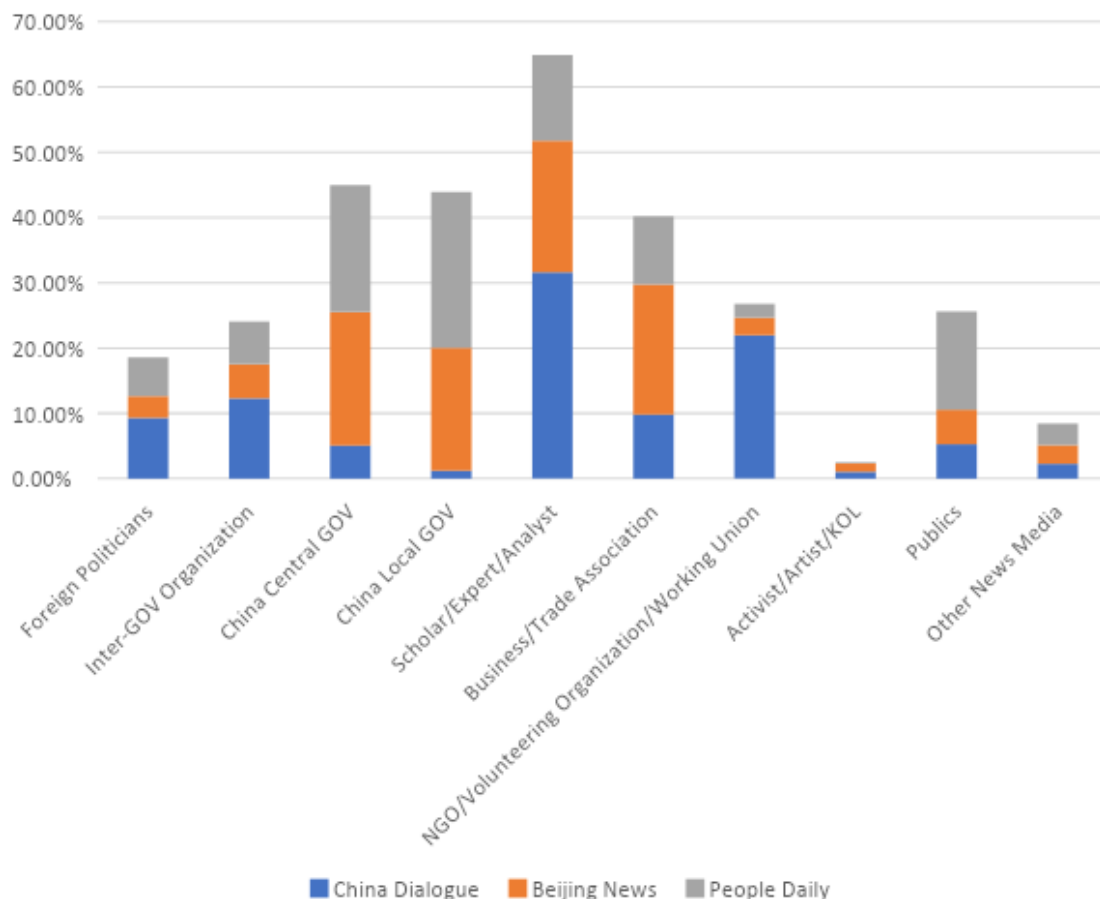
In contrast, *China Dialogue* does not frequently quote words from China’s government (only 6.3%) but gives most spaces (31.6%) to scholars, experts and analysts. This suggests that *China Dialogue* would be more likely to present professional viewpoints and analysis on environmental issues. Certainly, scientific opinions can be also distorted by power and utilised to endorse the authority, but such emphasis on scientific voices rather than political views somehow indicates the possibility for critical and rational discussions. This is important for environmental news reporting. Particularly when it comes to the investigation on causes of environmental problems, scientists and experts are usually cited by news media to provide the evidence of the misbehaviours of powerful institutions and individuals (Tong 2017a). It should be noted that voices from scholars and experts also accounts for a significant proportion in stories from *Xinjingbao* (20.2%), but referring to *Renmin Ribao*, the

ratio becomes low (13.1%). Thus, when it comes to a strong propaganda mode as we can see from *Renmin Ribao*, scientific views can be easily marginalised alongside the domination of political voices.

Another apparent difference between *China Dialogue* and the other two media is that *China Dialogue* is much more willing to give voice to non-profit organisations than the other two news media (22.0% compared to 2.7% and 2.1%). ENGOs are normally prone to environmentalism and in many cases play the watchdog and advocacy role to counter other social institutions that do not put the agenda of environmental protection as primary. Despite our discussions in Chapter 2 that environmental journalist once had a closed alliance with ENGOS, the finding here and the studies in recent years (Duan and Takahashi 2017; Zhang and Skoric 2020; Duan and Miller 2021) all suggest that ENGOS, particularly those grassroots ENGOS without government background, nowadays hardly have a say on Chinese news pages. Yet, *China Dialogue*, as a non-profit news media, makes an important difference here and fills this vacancy of ENGOS' voices in Chinese environmental discussions, which could indicate *China Dialogue's* supports for ENGOS at some points and help amplify the impact of the watchdog and advocacy voices. However, in terms of the news sources of individual activists, artists and key opinion leaders who usually advocate for environmentalism in a more radical way, *China Dialogue* presents low frequency with *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*.

Figure 7.2. Appearance of each news source category.

* The percentage denotes the portion of news source category among all the identified news sources within the media contents.



Overall, the distinction of news sourcing pattern between *China Dialogue* and the other two media points out, firstly, *China Dialogue* is more likely to present diversifying voices in their news reports. Secondly, in contrast to *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* that heavily rely on news sources from Chinese

government officials which could distort environmental news by politicizing the issues, *China Dialogue* tends to present the scientific opinions and at the same time gives large spaces to ENGOS for possible watchdog and advocacy voices. Despite the lots of uncertainties so far, it is fair to conclude here that *China Dialogue* has indeed presented some characteristics of news sourcing that differ from the Chinese typical propaganda mode. This is also true for the results of framing analysis.

7.4. Framing analysis: the commonalities and differences between China Dialogue and mainstream journalism

Seven frames have been identified in the news sample. Table 7.3 suggests the variables for each frame and the average scores each news media obtains on each variable.

Table 7.3. Average appearance of each framing items in news sample.

* "It" means the news article.

* Noticeable differences between among the three media are highlighted with grey background.

* The framing scale: 1 - Absent: The variable doesn't appear in the news articles; 2 - Present: The variable is mentioned in the news articles; 3 - Emphasised: The variable is emphasised in the news articles.

Framing Items	China Dialogue	Xinjingbao	Renmin Ribao
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Attribution of Responsibility (deductive frame from Tong 2014)	1.43	1.13	1.08
Does it suggest some level of government should be responsible for the environmental problems?	2.11	1.18	1.07
Does it suggest any commercial body should be responsible for the environmental problems?	1.50	1.20	1.13
Does it suggest any individual/group should be responsible for the environmental problems?	1.09	1.10	1.10
Does it blame the environmental problems on natural change?	1.01	1.05	1.02
Human Interest Frame (deductive frame from Tong 2014)	1.24	1.01	1.01
Does it provide an example on how individuals/groups being affected?	1.30	1.03	1.04
Does it employ adjectives/personal vignettes that generate feelings?	1.20	1.01	1.00
Does it contain visual information that might generate feelings?	1.22	1.00	1.00
Risk Frame (deductive frame from Tong 2014)	1.67	1.24	1.16
Does it mention financial losses due to the	1.43	1.07	1.05

environmental problems?			
Does it mention social losses due to the environmental problems?	1.54	1.24	1.11
Does it mention natural losses due to the environmental problems?	2.04	1.42	1.31
Conflict Frame (deductive frame from Tong 2014)	2.28	1.29	1.08
Does it reflect disagreements/concerns among individuals/groups/parties/countries?	2.82	1.52	1.15
Does one individual/group/party/country reproach another?	2.41	1.25	1.07
Does it refer to two sides or more of the issue?	2.65	1.26	1.06
Does it refer to winners or losers?	1.25	1.12	1.04
Collaboration Frame (inductive frame)	1.80	1.21	1.40
Does it reflect willingness of collaboration between individuals/groups/parties/countries?	1.87	1.28	1.50
Does it refer to common positions/ goals between individuals/groups/ parties/countries?	1.80	1.21	1.39
Does it emphasise that two or more sides are positively working together on protocols?	1.74	1.15	1.31
Solution Frame (inductive frame)	2.27	1.88	1.97
Does it report solutions to the environmental problems that have been already considered or adopted?	2.36	2.44	2.71
Does it propose solutions to the environmental problems that can be considered and adopted in the future?	2.18	1.31	1.22
Achievement Frame (inductive frame)	2.10	2.11	2.58
Does it refer to any promise of individual/group/party/country to solve the problem?	2.38	2.20	2.59
Does it refer to any activities of individual/group/party/country to solve the problem?	2.12	2.17	2.54
Does it refer to any compliment on individual/group/party/country?	1.79	1.97	2.62

These frames cover several key questions that a journalist normally could explore in an environmental news story:

- Who should be responsible for the problem? (attribution of responsibility frame)
- How serious is the problem? (human interest frame and risk frame)
- How are we currently dealing with the problem? (conflict frame, collaboration frame and achievement frame)
- Is there any solution that has been adopted or could be adopted to alleviate the problem? (solution frame)

Cronbach's alpha is used to measure the internal consistence of items for each frame. $\alpha \geq 0.70$ is considered as satisfying internal consistence (Field 2013), which means different variables for each frame can be seen as consistent to measure the frame. Variables respectively for human interest frame ($\alpha = .745$, 3 items), conflict frame ($\alpha = .802$, 4 items) and collaboration frame ($\alpha = .912$, 3 items) are proved to be consistent.

The internal consistency of attribution of responsibility frame ($\alpha = .299$, 4 items) and risk frame ($\alpha = .655$, 3 items) is not satisfying because of the design of variables. The four variables for attribution of responsibility frame blame environmental problems on different subjects, and the variables for risk frame mention different types of losses. It is normal for a news story to only ask the responsibility of a specific group, and it is not necessary for a news story to touch upon all types of environmental losses. Thus, the low Cronbach's alpha values for the two frames do not indicate the poor design of the variables but just reminds us to notice the differences among the variables,

In terms of achievement frame, $\alpha = .670$ (3 items) suggests that the three variables cannot provide an acceptable consistency. However, when the item "Does it refer to any promise of individual/group/party/country to solve the problem" is removed, the alpha value can be increased to be .745. This indicates that, in the narrative of news stories, promise to action does not definitely bring about real actions and compliment.

7.4.1. Limited discussions about cause and damage: signal of weakening criticism

As noted, the attribution of responsibility frame, human interest frame and risk frame serve to answer two important questions in environmental news stories: who should be responsible for the problem and what damage has been caused? As Table 7.3 shows, in general, the three news outlets obtain a low score of these frames. This means, in the news sample, cause and damage of the environmental problems is not discussed in detail.

For attribution of responsibility frame, the low score could partly be explained by the low internal consistency as each of the variable points to different blaming subjects. However, particularly looking at each variable in this frame, the scores are still low except for one specific question for *China Dialogue*: "Does it suggest some level of government should be responsible for the environmental problems?" In this question, *China Dialogue* obtains 2.11 on average, which is significantly higher than scores of the *Xinjingbao* ($=1.18$) and *Renmin Ribao* ($=1.07$). In other words, *China Dialogue* is more aggressive in criticism of the government bodies than the other two media. This quantitative analysis cannot tell exactly what level of governments have been blamed in stories from *China Dialogue*. It can be local governments in China, China's central government, governments in other countries or the global community which generally points at all the governments. Spaces for criticism of these subjects are different with the censorship system in China. However, given *China Dialogue* mostly reports international issues that involve national interests, it is very possible that the blaming subjects here, in most of cases, refer to a country, a specific group of countries with similar interests, or all the countries as the representative of human being.

Human interest frame indicates how people are affected in environmental problems. On the one hand, the frame is important for critical news reports to uncover the severe consequences of environmental problems. As noted in 2.3.2, news reports about pollutions and the health problems as the result have once successfully alerted Chinese people to the blind GDP-crazed political economy. On the other hand, the frame is potential to result in collective actions. Human interest frame is largely adopted when a news story visualises a broad, abstract and macro problem on a concrete, personal and micro level to make it relatable and perceptible for readers. It tends to arouse people's negative emotions such as sympathy, anxiety, disappointment and even indignation, which is found as an effective strategy appealing to extensive public attentions and mobilise public participation to demonstrations (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). As we can see from a series of campaigns against the project constructions that may cause risks to human health, such as the waste incinerators (Beijing in 2006), Paraxylene (PX) plants (Xiamen in 2007), and coal power plants (Heyuan in 2015), a large number of people can be effectively mobilised to take to the streets out of concerns and fear of the possible negative impacts on themselves (Steinhardt 2019). Thus, the usage of human interest frame could be risky in Chinese context not only because it normally leads to criticism on the status quo but also because the government is vigilant with collective events.

Table 7.3 proves that all the three media rarely use this frame in the news reports, which could weaken the media criticism on today's environmental problems in China and their ability to mobilise the public awareness and actions. Given the strict media control, avoidance on such frame may be necessary for *China Dialogue* to survive in China. In terms of the risk frame, the same as attribution of responsibility frame, the generally low scores should be partly ascribed to the low internal consistency of the three items in this frame. Yet, low scores on specific variables of the three media also suggest this frame is hardly presented. One exception is the question "Does it mention natural losses due to the environmental problems" for *China Dialogue*, the media obtain 2.04 (slightly more than the other two media with 1.42 and 1.31). This indicates *China Dialogue* is more willing to touch on the natural losses such as the degradation of biodiversity. Yet, the media rarely discusses financial and social losses, which, compared to natural loss, is more relevant to social life and more easily to be sensed by normal people. This, along with the low frequency of human interest frame, further limits the media ability to emotionally connect to readers and mobilise the public.

Overall, the exposure of cause and damage of an environmental problem is very limited in the whole news sample. This finding seems contradicted with results from some prior quantitative framing analysis that suggest cause and damage is widely emphasised in Chinese mainstream environmental journalism (for example, see Tong 2014; Han et al. 2017; Fan 2019; Duan and Miller 2021). This contradiction could be probably explained by the sampling difference. Tong (2014) focuses on investigative news reports, which is a type of journalism that naturally exerts criticism on social phenomenon and thus the cause and damage are normally fully discussed in investigative news reports with the purpose of exposing wrong doings. Some other studies focus on single issue such as climate change and haze, which may still make a difference. Moreover, sampling period can possibly influence research results. While most of the prior studies sampling at around mid-2010s and before, this research makes a timely sampling in second half of 2021. As the environmental public sphere in China has been severely shrunk with Xi's intolerance with critical voices (see Chapter 3), the findings here could confirm the constraining press in today's China. After all, the limited discussions about cause and damage can weaken the media criticism on the status quo and their ability to mobilise collective action from bottom.

7.4.2. More balancing opinions and the promotion of crisis awareness from *China Dialogue*

However, this does not mean that *China Dialogue* cannot raise any doubts or concerns about the current environmental governance. Among all the frames, one striking difference between *China Dialogue* and the other two news outlets is the conflict frame, which is found to be an emphasis in

China Dialogue's news coverages (=2.28) but largely neglected in most of stories from *Xinjingbao* (=1.29) and *Renmin Ribao* (=1.08). One common for the three news outlets is they rarely present winners or losers, the fourth variable for conflict frame. If this variable is removed, the gap of scores on conflict frame between *China Dialogue* and the other two can be even wider.

The conflict frame suggests the complicity and uncertainty while facing an environmental problem. Specifically, the variables within conflict frame jointly indicates (1) different views on the issues, which could be different understandings on the attribution of responsibility, divergent solutions to address the problem, various perceptions on the severity of problem, etc.; (2) concerns about how the environmental problems have been faced, such as lack of actions and weak promise; (3) split, instead of solidarity, among various interest groups.

China Dialogue's emphasis on conflict frame, on the one hand, suggests that the non-profit media can provide more plural and balanced opinions in the news reports. Previous finding from section 7.3 claims that *China Dialogue's* news reports usually cite more diversifying news sources than *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. Although source diversity may sometimes accompany the diversity of news contents and opinions, there is not direct causal relationship between the two (Voakes et al. 1996). News sources from different backgrounds may jointly propose the same opinion. The framing analysis here goes beyond the findings about news sources and proves that *China Dialogue* indeed tends to present balanced and even conflicting opinions when reporting environmental news, which is a characteristic rarely identified in news coverages from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. This characteristic features the key journalistic norm of "balanced reporting" as noted above that is generally regarded as key for professional journalism practises in liberal democracy and also in China. Through framing analysis on press and television news about European politics, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) also find that "the more serious the newspaper, the more the conflict frame was in evidence" (p.104). This is because that, for news media that aim to report truth rather than endorsing particular interest party, they are normally more cautious about information from sole news source and tend to present voices from different sides to do fact checking or help readers understand the complicated picture. Such stress on balancing opinions apparently contradicts with the Chinese propaganda mode that asks for news media to be royal to the party and mainly deliver party voices, which indicates the potential of *China Dialogue* to provide viewpoints in distinction with official opinions.

On the other hand, such attentions on conflicts will promote an awareness of crisis. As shown in Table 7.3, in terms of the first variable for the conflict frame "Does it reflect disagreements/concerns among individuals/groups/parties/countries?", *China Dialogue* (=2.82) scores significantly higher than *Xinjingbao* (=1.52) and *Renmin Ribao* (=1.15). *China Dialogue's* highlighting on this issue shows the media pursuit to raise concerns about the current environmental governance, which responds to the "invariant civil concern of risk" that Jackie Harrison calls. "It is centered on the risks we face and reflects how we worry about things and the people who we think may threaten our world" (Harrison 2019, p.113). This is saying that one of the functions of news media to serve the public is to send the warning of what can put our society at risk, which is possible to bring about discussions about how to face the risks and eventually solve the problems. Such awareness of crisis certainly can be prompted by emphasis on the three frames analysed above, the attribution of responsibility, human interest and risk frames, which jointly depict the severity of environmental problems and ask for stronger environmental governance. Unfortunately, the three frames are not frequently utilised by the three media.

Yet, *China Dialogue's* noticeable focus on conflict frame can still advance the crisis consciousness to some degree. This is not done by highlighting the seriousness of environmental problems but through comprehensive discussions about the insufficiency and flaws of current environmental governance. The discussions can include how a specific policy can cause damage to the environment,

challenges of raising public awareness to a specific environmental problem, and pushing relevant environment-friendly policies, the injustice of current environmental governance that may not take into account the interest of some social groups, etc. Such discussions constitute a gentle criticism on the status quo. In contrast to the three frames – attribution of responsibility, human interest and risk frames – that are more likely to vividly depict the consequences of environmental degradations, ignite public sentiment and subsequently lead to collective actions, the prominence of conflict frame puts more emphasis on how we should face the problems instead of how the environmental degradations can disrupt social and natural life.

Such gentle criticism is consistent with *China Dialogue*'s performance on the achievement frame. This frame contains three variables that respectively indicate promise to change, real actions and compliments on someone. The three media all obtain a satisfying score on the first two variables (for the first variable about promise, =2.38 for *China Dialogue*, =2.20 for *Xinjingbao* and 2.59 for *Renmin Ribao*; for the second variable about actions, =2.12 for *China Dialogue*, =2.17 for *Xinjingbao* and =2.54 for *Renmin Ribao*). This means that the news media give lots of spaces to discuss the policies and measures that have been adopted to alleviate the environmental degradations, which may comfort the news readers on some levels.

However, in terms of the third variable that asks whether the news article refers to any compliment on individual/group/party/country, *China Dialogue* (=1.79) scores least among the three cases (=1.97 for *Xinjingbao* and =2.62 for *Renmin Ribao*). *Renmin Ribao*'s emphasis on this variable echoes with its role as the party mouthpiece. Given that most of *Renmin Ribao*'s stories are focused on China's domestic issues (see Table 7.1) and the media mostly cite official news sources (see Table 7.3), the generous compliments are not difficult to be understood as the media needs to advocate state leadership and ease public anxiety on environmental problems. In contrast, *China Dialogue* is prudent with praising any social group in the news stories, which saves some space for criticism on the environmental governance. Although promises and actions aimed for environmental degradation alleviation is noted in *China Dialogue*'s news articles, it does not usually come with compliments, rather, it could accompany discussions about whether the promises have been fulfilled and whether the actions are effective enough. Combined with the findings from the conflict frame that *China Dialogue* tends to raise concerns and arguments around environmental governance, it is safe to claim that it is not unnatural for *China Dialogue* to present questioning on the "achievements", and this is rarely found in the news stories from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*.

7.4.3. Seeking solutions in news coverage from *China Dialogue*

China Dialogue usually goes beyond the gentle criticism and seeks to propose solutions to the environmental problems, which can be told from the analysis on solution frame. According to Table 7.3, there are two variables to measure the solution frame. The first variable asks whether the news articles have reported the solutions that have been considered or adopted to address the problems, which is found emphasised by the three media (=2.36 for *China Dialogue*, =2.44 for *Xinjingbao* and =2.71 for *Renmin Ribao*). This variable is in fact similar to the first two variables for the achievement frame that asks if the news articles touch on promises and actions when facing environmental problems. During the coding, promises to actions or real actions from someone are usually counted as proposing solutions, because action plans are indeed some solutions. Thus, the media performance on this solution variable, as analysed above on the achievement frame, suggests that they all highlight some positive signals on current environmental governance: promises have been given, action plans are designed and implemented, which manifests the characteristics of Chinese propaganda journalism on some levels.

Yet, in terms of the second variable for solution frame that explores whether the news articles propose solutions that have not been adopted by people in power so far but should be considered in

the future, *China Dialogue* (=2.18) explicitly obtains higher score than *Xinjingbao* (=1.31) and *Renmin Ribao* (=1.22). In distinction with the first variable for solution frame that is related to achievement frame, this one is echoed with the conflict frame because, while an article suggests that some solutions are not considered yet, it, at the same time, claims that the current environmental governance is not strong and effective enough. Besides, *China Dialogue*'s emphasis on such variable indicates that the media goes beyond just raising concerns and aims to explore solutions that may help alleviate the problems.

Such constructive role identified in *China Dialogue*'s news coverages is consistent with *China Dialogue*'s perception on their news reporting. When discussing how they approach to environmental issues, *China Dialogue*'s CEO Sam Geall explains:

"It's personally but also I think there's good evidence to say this. You don't really create action on environmental issues if you're just telling these very negative stories constantly because it just creates apathy and alarm and kind of a sense of dread or fear. Like, I want to create stories that are inspiring or show best practices or show ways forward, because I think it's actually useful. I got to think that that's a better way to inspire action and create change, it is to try to point towards positive things that we can do. So there is a ... we try to add that kind of constructive framing, if it's possible. If it's not, obviously, you know, and we're not always force that into a story and we're quite keen to... we defer to local voices and editors as well." (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

Yet, the media itself does not advocate specific "best" solutions, which, at least from the perspective of self-perception, makes it different from some ENGOs that have a clear line on some environmental arguments. As Geall goes on:

"So like Greenpeace or something, if you ask them, you know, what is the right way to get to net zero in China, they would say, well, you need to divert from this, invest in this. You need just transition that looks like this. And if you say no, should we use nuclear power or hydropower or whatever? They would say, no, you can't use this, you can use this. That's not our purpose. Of course we want to reflect those debates. I think there are important debates to have, and I support Greenpeace's right to be involved in that conversation clearly. But we're not, we don't have a particular line or angle. You know, if on those kinds of issues, I'm quite happy to see a debate, to see different perspectives, just to provide the facts so that people can make their own decisions ... as we publish opinion pieces where it's relevant. We don't even publish that much opinions. We mostly do the analysis and information because we just want to try and create a better quality of conversation." (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

Both the interview and framing analysis here indicate that *China Dialogue* tends to provide a platform for inspiring thinking, discussions and even debates for better environmental governance, which manifests its public service role as a non-profit media in China. Such emphasis on creating dialogue and critical thinking makes it different from the mainstream media that in most cases are required to deliver the official opinions on environmental issues and makes it possible to present narratives that cannot be found in mainstream news media.

7.5. Constructive criticism of China Dialogue, and its limitations and potential to challenge mainstream media discourses

Overall, through the comparative quantitative analysis on news topics, news sources and media frames among the three media, it is found that *China Dialogue*'s news reports manifest strong characteristics of the constructive criticism previously identified in Chinese critical journalism

(Repnikova 2017), which is potential to provide narratives that are different or even conflicting with mainstream media discourses. As discussed in section 4.3.2, the constructive criticism primarily exhibits three features: (1) it exerts criticism, shedding light on social problems concerning public goods; while exerting criticism, (2) it tends to transmit hopeful sentiment and (3) propose solutions. These characteristics have been identified in the analysis above on *China Dialogue's* news coverages.

First of all, *China Dialogue* differs from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* that only provide positive information for news readers in most of their news coverages. According to the analysis on the conflict frame, it is usual for the news non-profit to raised serious concerns about the current environmental governance. And the topical analysis suggests that *China Dialogue* has given lots of spaces to some news topics marginalised in Chinese mainstream journalism. These two findings jointly indicate that *China Dialogue* maintains criticism on the current environmental governance, and it is very likely to present some untold narratives that mainstream news media ignore or conceal on purpose, although the latter cannot be confirmed by this quantitative analysis.

Secondly, while delivering the critical voices, *China Dialogue* generally avoids arousing depressing sentiment, rather, it tends to facilitate deliberative discussions around environmental issues, which can be told from its news frames and news sourcing pattern. When reporting environmental problems, frames of risk and human interest are usually adopted to vividly depict the disasters caused by environmental degradations such as the suffering victims and species deaths, and frames of attribution of responsibility serves to sharply interrogate the irresponsible behaviours. These frames are normally effective to ignite anxiety, fear and even anger among the society. Yet, these frames about cause and damage are not frequently adopted by *China Dialogue*, and the media rarely cite voices from activists and victims who would normally deliver emotional message to arouse public attention. *China Dialogue* allocates most spaces for discussions among scholars, experts and analysts, a social group that tends to provide interpretive and complex analysis on environmental issues, which is less likely to be readily absorbed by average readers or mobilise the public sentiment. Besides, while pointing out the problems, *China Dialogue* also underlines some positive information such as the promises and actions already taken to address the problems, as evident in its performance on the achievement frame. The emphasis on achievement frame shows the progress in mitigation efforts and conveys the helpful sentiment.

Lastly, another feature of *China Dialogue's* news reporting that fits constructive criticism is its stress on solutions seeking. The highlighting solution frame, according to the interview, reflects the perception within the newsroom that media should move beyond merely exposing problems and delve into potential solutions to facilitate problem-solving.

Such constructive criticism found in *China Dialogue's* news coverages should be understood in at least two contexts. On the one hand, it is consistent with the ideas of constructive journalism that has been recently gaining popularity in journalistic field across the world, particularly when reporting conflictual issues (Pepermans and Maesele 2017; McIntyre and Sobel 2018; Allam 2019; Atanasova 2022; Parratt-Fernández et al. 2022; Höhle et al. 2023). In contrast to the conventional objective norm that requires professional journalists to remain detached observers, proponents of constructive journalism argue for a more inclusive way to do journalism to facilitate problem solved (Mast et al. 2019). It comes from the reflection inside journalistic field that media prolonged obsession on problems, conflicts and disasters can lead to passive citizenry as the result of “news fatigue”, a phenomenon that readers get tired of endless negative news stories and actively avoid reading news (Aitamurto and Varma 2018), or even “compassion fatigue” that refers to the feeling of hopelessness and the following indifference to disasters (Moeller 2002). In response to these worrying phenomena, seeking solutions in news coverages is emphasised by proponents for constructive journalism. They believe that giving more spaces to solution can deliver positive psychological cues to readers that the problems are not unsolvable, (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2018),

and once the solutions can be reported, people may be inspired and mobilised to take actions. As noted by Hermans and Drok (2018), “being critical ... should go beyond merely reproducing the problem; it should include reducing problems by making clear what can be done, how things can improve and how people might contribute to it” (p.686-687). This perception, as noted above, is also identified in the interview with *China Dialogue*’s CEO. Experimental studies do confirm that constructive contents are likely to trigger more positive and less negative emotions than conventional news reporting (for example see Meier 2018; Hermans and Prins 2022), but it is now less clear that on what levels constructive journalism can mobilise public participation in society (Mäder and Rinsdorf 2022).

On the other hand, echoing with the discussion in section 4.3.2, *China Dialogue*’s constructive criticism should be also interpreted within the context of China’s authoritarianism. For Chinese journalists that report critical news stories, the biggest challenge is not how to avoid the news fatigue or compassion fatigue among news readers but is how to deliver the news stories properly to avoid political punishments. Repnikova (2017) finds that the constructive criticism is widely adopted by Chinese news media to convey critical voices, as she contends that such critical form “fits perfectly into the journalists’ nexus with the central state as, on the one hand, it echoes the party’s vision of constructive critique consistently promoted in official statements, while, on the other, it is conditioned upon self-censorship, as journalists carefully toe the line by infusing a hopeful sentiment into otherwise negative stories” (Repnikova 2018b, p.48). Without the adjustments to be constructive, many critical news stories will not be allowed to be published given the danger of challenging the censorship system.

Based on this previous observation on Chinese journalism, *China Dialogue*’s constructive role could be also the outcome of its subtle interactions with the coercive political power in China. The formation of this reporting style certainly involves an element of autonomous choice. Although *China Dialogue*’s editorial team does not explicitly propose the concept of constructive journalism or criticism, they do tend to be constructive and explore solutions in their news reports if possible (interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). However, we cannot ignore the potential impact of China’s deteriorating media environment on shaping *China Dialogue*’s constructive reporting style. As shown in last chapter, many news reports from *China Dialogue* in early years are more critical than constructive. Many of them give voices to victims in the environmental disasters rather than the experts and scholars. Yet, with the increasing media control, *China Dialogue* cannot report on the ground and the media now tends to do more in-depth analysis on policies. Its news contents shift from radical criticism to conservative in recent years as it is now less likely to report and endorse the social advocacy actions that directly confronts the political power. Some characteristics of the constructive criticism here seem echoing with this point. For instance, if a news piece reports the social advocacy events, it will cite environmental activists and victims to deliver their voices for justice. However, this is apparently not what is found in most of articles from *China Dialogue*. Besides, the case of *China Dialogue*’s conservative criticism practise to further China’s legal reform is majorly done by citing opinions and discussions among ENGOs and experts (see 6.4), which is consistent with the characteristic of *China Dialogue*’s current constructive criticism that tends to be deliberative. In other words, besides the active choice, it is very likely that such outcome of constructive criticism is the reactive change to China’s intensifying authoritarianism.

The constructive pattern has both limitations and power to fulfil *China Dialogue*’s pursuit to facilitate solving environmental problems. Negatively speaking, the constructive criticism practises usually involves self-censorship behaviours concealing some information (Repnikova 2017;2018b), which determines that the news media cannot touch on some problems and thereby makes it difficult to deliver possible solutions that could be important for solving the problems. As shown in Chapter 6, some environmental issues have to be self-censored with the limited press freedom even though discussions about these problems are necessary to evaluate the environmental governance in China.

Even if some issues can be covered, some specific solutions may not be allowed to be discussed. For example, while lots of scholars have appealed to political reform in China on the central level to further environmental governance (Gilley 2012; Eaton and Kostka 2014; Seligsohn et al. 2018; Hu and Li 2020), it is nearly impossible for *China Dialogue* or other news media in China to deliver these opinions to public discourse because this will be easily regraded as questioning the state authority and brings severe political crackdown.

In addition, the deliberative discussions and mild criticism featured in the constructive criticism could sacrifice the emotional power to mobilise the public and push problems solved in China. In such a political system in which judiciary is constrained by political power, policy process is opaque, and social elites collude to constitute an interest group, it is hard for environmental victims and disadvantaged people to achieve justice through official channels. Pursuit for justice in a gentle, calm and rational way is very likely to be ineffective. Victims usually need to expose their miserable experiences to the public, elicit widespread sympathy and attract attention from the society, which may pressure and force the authority to take measures for apology and compensation. As Tong (2015e) argues, “the expression and exploration of emotions provide the potential and means for ordinary people to challenge the hegemonic position of authorities, powerful individuals and institutions” (p.344). Yet, these emotions of disappointment, anxiety and anger from social bottom would not be thoroughly expressed through the constructive reporting that aims to facilitate deliberative discussions.

Nevertheless, positively speaking, in Chinese depressing media environment, social problems in most cases can be only covered in such a constructive way. This is one of the tactics for Chinese journalists to play the guerrilla warfare with the censorship system and expose social problems that could have been hidden in the propaganda information (Repnikova 2017). For journalists who still consider delivering these problems to Chinese public discourse, they need to concern about how to circumvent the censorship and tell the critical stories safely. Constructive reporting seems more likely to be accepted by the propaganda department due to its mild critique and weak ability to trigger furious sentiment. Therefore, it maintains the possibility for journalists working in China to provide news narratives in distinction with the official line. From the analysis above on *China Dialogue*, we have seen lots of clues of the existence of such (mild) criticism space. Particularly from *China Dialogue*’s distinct news framing, we have found the media is potential to raise serious concerns about the current environmental governance, which differs from the mainstream journalism that normally delivers a comforting signal that the environmental problems have been addressed well. It is from these concerns raised in *China Dialogue*’s news coverages that we may be able to identify distinct or even opposing media discourses that is possible to advance China’s reform on environmental governance.

From the perspective of readership, such constructive pattern may not be attractive for normal people because of its deliberative characteristics, but it is possible to reach those people that have political resources to drive environmental changes from above. Although the news coverages centre around experts and scholars can provide a deeper analysis of environmental issues, they often lack the entertainment and sensationalism that appeals to a broader audience. Indeed, according to *China Dialogue*’s previous investigation on readership, most of their readers in China are from well-educated group such as “environmental professionals, environmental policymakers, journalists, people in civil society organisations, postgraduate students” (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). The overly concentrated readership could make it difficult for *China Dialogue*’s news reports to mobilise public participation or spark large-scale grassroots movement. Yet, the ability to reach knowledgeable and even powerful social groups maintains the possibility to advance environmental governance. As Sam Geall puts:

“We sort of understand that, we think our value is in providing sort of greater depth for a readership that we think are influential. We like the fact that we have journalists reading us who then pick up our stories and write their own stories ... or that there are policymakers who find that they're getting greater depth on an issue, and that to us is sort of important. That's an important marker of impact ... so we're making sure that we're read by people who really change, you know, have the ability to change policy or to affect policy and so on, so we can target quite specialized readerships.” (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

Therefore, if the constructive news reporting can raise the problems that have been overlooked or omitted in mainstream journalism, the influential social groups could be better informed and perhaps more environmental actions, reforms could be expected.

7.6. Conclusion

To sum up, this quantitative news analysis on *Renmin Ribao*, *Xinjingbao* and *China Dialogue* presents significant differences between *China Dialogue* and the other two media when reporting environmental news. Firstly, in terms of news topics, *China Dialogue* puts emphasis on international issues while the other two media mainly focus on China's domestic issues. Such emphasis on international issues requires *China Dialogue* to pay much attention to the international negotiations involving China and China's capacity to influence environment in other countries, and *China Dialogue* is much more willing to report foreign news. The differences here manifest *China Dialogue*'s self-perception on its role as a bridge between China and outside China.

Secondly, in terms of how to report the news topics, *China Dialogue* apparently differs from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. The news coverages from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* (particularly the latter) seem strongly characterised with official propaganda information, which can be told from their performance on the news sourcing pattern and framing. The two media mostly give voices to Chinese government officials and when framing the news stories, they tend to present the positive side of the current environmental governance, delivering the signal that strong actions have been taken and the measures are effective to alleviate the environmental degradation. In other words, the two media emphasise the achievements that have been done instead of the risks that should be further concerned. Given the two media mainly report China's domestic issues and exposure on environmental damages in domestic China is not favorable to Chinese government, the findings here about *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* indicate the two media suffer from severe political control.

In difference from mainstream journalism, *China Dialogue* depicts a more complicated picture about the current environmental governance. Although the media also gives lots of spaces to the achievements, it also discusses a lot about the concerns and conflicts we need to address to advance the environmental governance. This makes its news stories manifest some characteristics of critical journalism as both values exposing the current problems.

Yet, compared to critical journalism, this chapter argues that constructive criticism is more appropriate to describe *China Dialogue*'s news reporting. On the one hand, *China Dialogue* in most of cases points out the problems in a deliberative way to avoid triggering public negative emotion, and on the other, *China Dialogue* is not satisfied with just exposing the problems but also seeks possible solutions through giving voices news sources from different backgrounds. As argued above, many characteristics of such constructive criticism are consistent with the conservative criticism identified in section 6.4. This constructive form of critical journalism is not new in China. Due to its feature of mild criticism and relatively weak ability to mobilise public participation, it once played an important role to help Chinese journalists touch on negative news stories and avoid political punishments (Repnikova 2017). It may also help *China Dialogue* to deliver narratives and discourses in difference from mainstream journalism without political punishments.

However, given *China Dialogue* has different focus from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* in terms of the news topics (*China Dialogue* talks a lot about international and foreign issues while *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* largely emphasise China's domestic issues), it is hard for this chapter to claim that *China Dialogue* has indeed provided different discourses from the mainstream news reports. There are at least three simplifying scenarios here. Firstly, *China Dialogue* can play this constructive role when reporting how other countries face the environmental problems, but when it comes to China's domestic issues or China's performance on the international level, its reporting paradigm could be similar to *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* that generally portray a beautiful national image. Secondly, it can be inverse that *China Dialogue* acts constructively when reporting China's environmental performance but not on foreign issues. Thirdly, *China Dialogue* conducts constructive criticism all the time despite which issues by region being covered. In terms of our research question that asks to what extent *China Dialogue* can deliver environmental discourses in distinction with mainstream journalism, these three scenarios will give different answers. Which scenario aligns with the reality will be shown in next chapter based on comparative qualitative news analysis.

Chapter 8 How China Dialogue Delivers Discourses on Climate Change in Difference from Chinese Mainstream Journalism

8.1. Introduction

This chapter, through critical discourse analysis on how *China Dialogue*, *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* cover climate news, explores whether *China Dialogue* can provide distinct discourses on climate discussions in China, and if so, on what issues the mainstream media discourses are challenged.

As justified in section 5.4.1, climate news is chosen for comparison because of the complexity and richness of discourses constructed around climate change issues. Climate discussions and debates are usually not limited to scientific field but intertwined with discourses from political, economic and even cultural fields. Specifically, for China, it is an environmental topic that involves both domestic and international issues. Domestic issues could include the damages caused by climate change, the tension between carbon cutting and China's pursuit for economic growth and energy security (Pan et al. 2021). And for international issues, climate change relates to China's negotiations with other countries and thereby the relevant news reporting could be influenced by China's diplomatic strategies and its pro-government patriotism, nationalism, and xenophobia sentiment in the society (see 3.3.2). These diverse possible perspectives surrounding climate change enable this chapter to explore the subtle differences between *China Dialogue* and the mainstream media discourses across multiple issues. They may differ on domestic issues but display similarities on the international ones, or vice versa. In addition, given prior scholarship find Chinese mainstream journalism mainly follow the official line on climate change (see 2.3.3), it is valuable to examine whether *China Dialogue* can pose challenge to the mainstream discourses around climate news, which is consistent with the overall concerns in this thesis about *China Dialogue's* potential to exert public service journalism under China's authoritarianism.

Four discourses have been identified in the news sample. This chapter introduces them one by one with analysis on their characteristics. Firstly, it starts from the discourse of crisis shared by the three media that recognises climate change as a threat to human society but rarely depicts the climate disasters in China, which makes climate change an unrelated phenomenon for normal Chinese people. Secondly, it is the discourse of green development that, once again, identified in the three media reporting. The discourse is nonradical because it tends to push the environmental changes in domestic China under the current political economy. Lastly, the chapter explains how *China Dialogue* delivers discourse in difference from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* on the international climate talks. While the discourse of responsibility has been generally found in *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao's* news reports that largely serve China's propaganda and diplomacy, *China Dialogue* has delivered the discourse of insufficiency to exert a mild and constructive criticism on China's performance on climate mitigation. These discourse analyses suggest that *China Dialogue's* constructive criticism mode found in Chapter 7 has successfully presented distinct discourses that are potential for advancing environmental governance but rarely identified in Chinese mainstream journalism.

8.2. A common discourse of crisis: climate change as a truism, a national agenda but less as a related disaster for Chinese society

The discourse identified in the news sample, on the one hand, refers to the belief that climate change is an anthropogenic phenomenon that can severely disrupt human life and even results in catastrophic human extinction. It sees climate change as a truism that the environmental crisis as the result of human behaviours has been proved by scientists and needs no further debates. The discourse tends to send the warning that, if climate change has not been tackled seriously with

strong measures and policies by the whole international community, it can lead to disasters for human society. However, on the other hand, such crisis discourse is conservative when reporting China's domestic issues. It avoids stressing the climate disasters in domestic China, which makes it hard to be related by Chinese normal people on climate issues. First of all, all the three media have emphasised that climate change should be taken seriously. For instance, through reporting the heat waves, drought and floods happened in summer 2021, *Renmin Ribao* warns in a news report that more extreme weathers are expected in the future with the climate change and "this will have a more serious impact on human health, food security, the environment and sustainable development" (Sheng et al. 2021). In the article, climate change has been framed as an "global challenge" (*quanqixing de tiaozhan*) that urges the whole world to unite and tackle the problem together. Lexical choice such as "no time left" (*keburonghuan*) also emphasises the emergency of climate change and sends the signal of urgent measures for climate mitigation (Ibid). For *Xinjingbao*, the media conducts exclusive interview with climate scientist James E. Hansen, who is called "father of global warming research", to explain how climate change can threaten human life (Zhu 2021). He claims in the interview that, shortly, climate change can result in more frequent and severe extreme weathers and, for the long term, if global temperature rising cannot be paused, "global temperature may reach a point where ice sheets in the West and East Antarctic inevitably melt and separate, leading to all the coastal cities worldwide disappear as early as the latter half of this century" (Ibid). These description on the climate disasters from *Renmin Ribao* and *Xinjingbao* suggest their recognition on climate change as a serious threat.

In terms of *China Dialogue*, the crisis discourse can be identified in their overall disappointment on the international negotiations on climate change. Several international events such as G7 Summit, G20 Summit, UN General Assembly and 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) were held in the next half year of 2021. Among these events touching on climate talks, COP26 is the most important one. The yearly conference was firstly held in 1995 and continues until today. It serves as the formal meeting for the 197 signatories (including China) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC⁵) to assess the plan and progress in tackling with climate change. COP26 was held in Glasgow in the UK, started on 31 October and ended on 13 November 2021. The conference was attached great importance because it was the first time since the 2015 Paris Agreement that all the attending states need to update their National Determined Contributions (NDCs). The Paris Agreement sets a long-term temperature goal to limit global warming to 2°C and preferably to 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial level, and it requires all the countries to submit NDCs every five years to declare they will actively help achieve the 1.5-2°C goal. After the first submission in 2015, the second NDCs are due to be submitted before COP26. Thus, before the 2021 conference, there were lots of discussions about whether the major emitters had met their first NDCs, whether they would submit stronger NDCs before COP26, and whether the current NDCs promised by the whole world are enough to reach the Paris goal. Unfortunately, according to *China Dialogue's* news reporting on this event, the climate mitigation measures given before and after COP26 were not satisfying. Just before COP26, when the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) published its Emissions Gap Report in October 26, *China Dialogue* references the report warning that global greenhouse gas emission is still increasing in 2020 and the latest climate promises for 2030 from the international community are not enough to meet the 1.5°C target (Crisp 2021). The news title directly presents the emergency, "UN says the world has eight years to halve emissions", and even more urgently in their Chinese edition, "we have only eight years" (*women zhiyou banian Shijian*) (Ibid). This statement from one of their interviewees, "A key

⁵ UNFCCC establishes an international treaty to combat climate change. It was firstly signed by 154 states in 1992. China ratified it one year later in 1993. The treaty officially entered into force on 21 March 1994 and then held the Climate Change Conference every year since 1995. Now UNFCCC has been signed by 197 states (196 countries and the Europe Union) and becomes the most significant framework for international climate negotiations.

measure of COP26's success will be whether major emitters choose to confront the emissions gap head-on", has been also highlighted in the article to stress the significance of COP26 negotiation (Ibid). After COP26 ends on 13 November 2021, *China Dialogue* published an article on November 15 summarises the agreements passed in COP26 and conveys a crisis awareness (Davy 2021). For example, at the very start of the article, it cites the statement of UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres to stress we "still knocking on the door of climate catastrophe". And in the final section with the sub-title "Meeting the emergency", the news report states "Few are satisfied with the agreement reached in Glasgow" and, once again, cites Antonio Guterres's conclusion that "It is time to go into emergency mode or our chance of reaching net zero will itself be zero" (Ibid). In both the start and final section, the two parts of which have been generally believed as the eye-catching parts of an article, the news report emphasises the international climate negotiations are fragile and more promise and actions are demanded.

Overall, all the three media stress the seriousness of climate change and urge for stronger measures for climate mitigation. Climate change is regarded as a truism and no challenges and doubts on climate change as an anthropogenic phenomenon have been identified in the news sample. Climate change is a controversial topic in lots of western industrial countries. There is a group of climate sceptics claiming that climate change is a natural phenomenon irrelevant to human greenhouse gas emission. While some hold this belief out of the pursuit for personal interest, for example, those individuals and organisations backed by fossil fuel companies (Klein 2015), some are a small group of scientists who raise doubts on the mainstream climate opinions in scientific field ranging from the cause of climate change to the appeal to emergent carbon cutting (Weisenthal 2009). Despite their background, it is a challengeable task for news media when facing the climate sceptical voices. It has been found that many western news outlets tend to present the opinions from both sides when reporting climate change due to the adherence to the conventional journalistic norm of objectivity and balancing reporting (Zehr 2000; Brossard et al. 2004; Xie 2015). However, as Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) argue, this way of climate news reporting has "contributed to a significant divergence of popular discourse from scientific discourse" (p.125). It will deliver a false signal to news readers that climate change is still controversial in the scientific field despite only a very minority of scientists hold the sceptical view, which could impede the global endeavour for climate mitigation. Thus, for journalists under liberal democracy who value objectivity and balanced reporting, there exists a serious tension between the journalistic norms and practises (Hiles and Hinnant 2014).

Back to Chinese context, prior studies have indeed found that climate scepticism is largely ignored in Chinese climate news (see Xie 2015; Song 2021), which is consistent with the findings here. One of the important reasons is that, for Chinese mainstream journalism, they are normally required to deliver the party voices on this issue. As Song (2021) notes, "Chinese media adhere closely to the Chinese government's guideline to project one uniform voice in positioning China as the leader in the global battle against climate change" (p.18). The recognition of climate change has become part of the Chinese official ideology since 1990s. China's first official institution on climate change, the National Coordination Group on Climate Change, was established in 1990. And as noted above, Chinese state has ratified the UNFCCC in 1993 and did not miss any yearly conference on climate change since 1995. Particularly in recent years, China led by Xi Jinping's administration has pursued leadership in the international climate talks and given important promises on this issue (Wang 2021). Although some scholars have argued that this emphasis on climate governance is not purely out of environmental concerns but mixed with domestic concerns about economic development, regime legitimacy and its diplomatic strategy to play soft power (for example see Schreurs 2017; Teng and Wang 2021), Chinese state government has consistently declared in the official narrative that combating climate change is one of its national responsibilities. As Qi and Wu note, for Chinese state government, "the essence of the political consensus is that climate change is a real threat that must be taken seriously in the national agenda" (p.303).

In this situation, given mainstream media in China are largely led by Chinese government and any challenge to official ideology may lead to political crackdown, it is not hard to explain why voices of climate scepticism is absent in mainstream news reporting. For *China Dialogue*, its advocacy on climate change issue accords with Chinese official ideology and pose no challenges to mainstream discourse.

However, although the discourse of crisis is clearly delivered by the three media, the way they construct this discourse is not easy to be related by Chinese normal people. According to the advice from Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC⁶) about how to strengthen public climate communication, “tell a human story” is usually more effective to deliver the crisis awareness: “Most people understand the world through anecdotes and stories, rather than statistics and graphs, so aiming for a narrative structure and showing the human face behind the science when presenting information will help ... tell a compelling story” (Corner et al. 2018, p.5). An article from *Xinjingbao*’s sample can provide an example to show how to “tell a human story” when reporting climate news. It is written in the form of special report (*te gao*), or as some Chinese news media call it, nonfictional writing (*fei xu gou xie zuo*), a writing style to tell a news story with detailed description on the scenes, diversifying interviews, and elaborate investigations. The article draws attention to climate victims who must flee their hometown due to extreme weathers (Xie 2021a). People whose hometown destroyed by extreme weather in South Asia, Middle East, Central America and West Europe are depicted as “climate refugees” or “climate victims”. They are given an opportunity to describe their painfulness of leaving home and difficulties of starting new life in a new place. As the news report depicts:

“The raging Meghna River swallowed her home, forcing Rashida Begum to leave her home in Noakhali, on Bangladesh’s south-eastern coast, and move to Chittagong, the country’s second largest city. Begum rented a shack of less than 10 square meters in an illegal slum used to house climate refugees. She lived there with her four children and husband. ‘We had no money and couldn’t afford a better place to live outside of this overcrowded slum’. Begum recently told The Scotsman helplessly.” (Ibid, translation from Chinese)

Such news reporting, with its vivid description on climate victims, is more relatable for normal people and more effective to trigger public sentiment on climate issues. Yet, this media strategy is hardly used by the three media when reporting climate news, specifically when it comes to how Chinese society can be influenced by climate change, this news sample finds no news article to depict China’s climate disasters in detail.

For *Renmin Ribao*, it touches on the extreme weather events as the result of climate change happened in North America, Europe and Middle East (Sheng et al. 2021), but the media, at least in this news sample, has not addressed any climate events in China. In fact, extreme weathers are not rare in domestic China, and climate scientists have suggested that climate change could play a role in the disasters. Perhaps the most famous one in recent years is the Henan floods occurred during the news sampling period. Due to the heavy rainfall, China’s Henan Province experienced devastating flooding between 17 and 31 July 2021. In Zhengzhou, the provincial capital, “on July 20, a local meteorological station recorded 624.1 millimeters of rainfall — almost as much as the city typically receives in a year” (Yuan 2020). The city’s drainage system is not adapted to the severe rainfall, leading to many city dwellers transferred from home to temporary housing. Even worse, water poured into underground spaces such as parking lots and subway stations, resulting in passengers missing, injuries, and deaths. On 2 August 2021, the provincial government reported 302 deaths and

⁶ IPCC is an intergovernmental body of the United Nations. It was established in 1988 to advance scientific knowledge about climate change and facilitate intergovernmental cooperation to tackle with climate change. It now has 195 state members and China is also the member since very start.

50 missing people in the whole province (respectively 292 and 47 in Zhengzhou) (Xinhua 2021a). Later in early 2022, a report from Chinese central government revised the data and announced “the floods killed 398 people in Henan and caused over 120 billion yuan (\$18.9 billion) in direct economic losses” (Yuan 2022). Some climate scientists have suggested that Henan’s flooding is one of the events that shows how climate change intensifies the instability of climate system and causes frequent occurrence of extreme weather (Aravindan and Mackenzie 2021).

Although *Renmin Ribao*’s news reporting on this event has not touched the climate factor, it would be wrong to conclude that Chinese mainstream journalism has totally avoided this climate perspective. Some other party news media such as *Xinhua*, *China News Service* and *Guangming Daily* have discussed this issue soon after the Henan flooding happened (Chen 2021; Li and Chai 2021; Yuan 2021). *Xinjingbao* also alerted in an article that the Henan flooding indicates that climate change has brought about real damage to Chinese society (Luan 2021).

However, it should be noted that this climate perspective, although it has been addressed, is still hardly identified in Chinese mainstream journalism when reporting the Henan event. *China Dialogue* published a commenting article in September 2021 specifically discussing this problem (Yao 2021). The author claims:

“although the climate angle did receive coverage, the flooding did not heat up the climate debate. Data from Baidu shows that searches and instances in news coverage of the term ‘cloudburst’ rocketed after the Zhengzhou flooding and remained high for a week. But there was little change in searches for the term ‘climate change’ – two small peaks, but remaining low.” (Ibid)

In addition, all these news articles report the climate factor in Henan flooding by inviting experts and scientists to share their opinions instead of giving voices to the disaster victims. Such news reporting, of course, can still deliver the discourse of crisis, but as discussed above, it is certainly not the most effective way to facilitate public understanding on this issue. It tends to limit the climate discussions in domestic China to a deliberative and rational way, which is consistent with the previous finding from last chapter that points out the three media are cautious about reporting cause and damage of the environmental problems in detail. Despite the crisis discourse is presented, it is not presented in a mobilizing way. It is presented more as a national agenda and less as an urgent problem that has caused damage to the current Chinese society.

8.3. A common nonradical discourse of green development: compatibility between economic growth and carbon cutting

With the perception that climate change is a serious problem, all the three media deliver the discourse of green development that claims China needs to reduce its carbon emission and this will not slow its national economic growth. The discourse is described as nonradical here because it pursues to promote changes under the current framework of China’s political economy (elaborated later).

The term “green development” (*luse fazhan*) has been frequently mentioned by Chinese authority in recent years and used in various official documents. It broadly refers to an environment-friendly and sustainable development mode in which human activity will not endanger the local environmental conditions and planet. Although it puts emphasis on environmental protection, it does not cast off the pursuit for economic growth. As the government White Paper defines, “green development is a development mode that conforms to nature and promotes harmonious coexistence between man and nature. It achieves maximum economic and social benefits at the minimum cost of resources and environment” (Xinhua 2023).

The media attitude about this issue can be identified from their news reporting on the power shortage that happened in September 2021. The power shortages hit multiple provinces and led to power cuts in some provinces in northeast China. According to *The Guardian's* news reporting:

“As many as 20 provinces are believed to be experiencing the crisis to some degree, with factories temporarily shuttered or working on short hours. Shopkeepers were left to light their stores by candles, and there were reports of mobile networks failing after a three-day outage hit three north-eastern provinces.” (Beaumont 2021)

The large-scale power problem shocked most Chinese people who have been used to a modern China where residents' normal life and economic activities are assured with energy supply. Some have blamed the power cuts on China's national “dual control policy” (*shuangkong zhengce*) which aims at reducing energy intensity and consumption in total, claiming that local governments deliberately cut off the power to meet the annual target from the central. Such suspicion from Chinese society undoubtedly points fingers at the national policy aimed at carbon cutting, spreading the discontents that the policy has been implemented coercively despite demands for public daily life and economic demands. Facing the questioning, both *Xinjingbao* and *China Dialogue* have published timely articles to defend the carbon constraining policy.

After the power shortages emerged in September, *Xinjingbao* published a series of articles, through interviewing experts on energy and resources, to explain why and how this happened. Some of them suggested that the power problem could be partly attributed to the dual control policy, but the general conclusion given in the news articles is that carbon cutting is not the main cause of power shortage. For example, in an article interviewing three energy experts, one from Chinese university and two from European institutions, they highlight the power cuts mainly result from the problem of China's current power market (Xiang 2021). As they analyse, in China, while coal price is free to rise according to the market, the electricity price is curbed by the government to float within a certain range. What happened before the power cuts was that the coal price on the global market has risen to the point where power plants in China cannot afford it, and they are not allowed to rise the electricity price accordingly. Thus, even though there was a high demand for power after China's temporary emergence from the lockdown with factories receiving more foreign orders, the power plants refused to produce electricity due to the concern of losing money. With this analysis, the experts argue in the news article that continuing dependence on fossil fuels is not an option and China needs to put more investments on clean energy to ensure energy security in the future (Ibid).

The experts cited by *China Dialogue* express similar opinions. In November 2021, the media published an article specifically discussing, as the title notes, “Will recent power shortages slow China's progress to carbon neutrality?” (Gao 2021a). Through interviewing experts, several viewpoints have been clearly conveyed in the article. Firstly, “supply and demand issues are the key factor” that leads to power shortage instead of the reduction of coal outputs. Secondly, due to this trouble caused by China's reliance on coal power, the nation should “cut back on the fossil fuel and improve its energy mix” (Ibid). Lastly, although China shows some concerns about power security after the power shortage hit, its commitment to low carbon development will not change in the long term, and China's power security can be still ensured through replacing fossil fuel with renewable power (Ibid).

Furthermore, in an article discussing the energy transition of Inner Mongolia, *China Dialogue* tries to prove that phasing out fossil fuel will benefit China's economic growth (Gao 2021b). The province has long relied on its rich coal reserves to develop economy and its coal exportation to other provinces plays a significant role in the whole national economic development. However, as the author points out in the article, the province “consumes 5.2% of all China's energy, but its economy represents only 1.7% of the national total” (Ibid). Given China's pledge on reaching carbon peaking

by 2030 and the central policy in recent years that requires more renewable energy, Inner Mongolia is under pressure to change its economic mode in a short time. *China Dialogue*'s view on this issue is very clear in this article, as they propose, "quick decision needed", and the reasons can be not only environmental but also economic: "...experts told China Dialogue that the later Inner Mongolia moves, the more likely it is to lock in emissions and leave assets stranded" (Ibid). An example from an expert is given to explain why the urgent energy transition is not contradicted with economic development but the converse:

"Yang points out that there have been huge investments in the coal-chemical industry, but those plants are mostly operating at a loss. If that goes on for three to four years, the company has no chance of recovering its losses: 'So what's to be done? Shut it down, sooner rather than later'." (Ibid)

Although this news sample does not include any *Renmin Ribao*'s news article that specifically reports the power cuts⁷, some sampled articles have suggested *Renmin Ribao* steadily stands for the dual control policy and clearly delivers the information that constraining carbon emission will not influence the economic growth, which is also a direct interface to know the official understanding on this issue. For example, since Chinese 14th five-year-plan regulates that China will "cut energy consumption and CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP respectively by 13.5% and 18%" (Xinhua 2021b), *Renmin Ribao* published an article discussing the challenges and how to reach the goal, suggesting that "there is no doubt that we should focus on controlling fossil energy consumption and accelerating the development of non-fossil energy sources" (Ding 2021). In the final section with the sub-title "Will controlling energy consumption and intensity affect economic development?", a Chinese scholar was cited to give a clear answer to no. As he puts:

"By accelerating the elimination of outdated production capacity with high energy consumption and high emissions, the original total energy consumption can support a larger economic scale, and the quality and efficiency of economic development can also be improved." (Ibid)

All the articles cited here suggest that, although the power shortage emerged and brought about public controversy on China's low carbon policies, all the three media firmly advocated for China's official narrative of green development. They clearly signal that there will not be contradiction between China's economic development and its long-term objective for carbon cutting. Although Chinese government had asked local authority to expedite coal supply to ensure energy security after the power shortage (Beaumont 2021), the media cases here did not question China's determination for green development in the long term. For instance, a news report from *China Dialogue* has touched on this point, noting that "the (power) shortage has put power supply stability further up on China's list of priorities" (Gao 2021b). But in the following texts, the article lists a series of announcements from the central government and claim that China will insist on its promise to carbon peak and carbon neutrality (Ibid).

Such discourse of green development tends to promote the social changes under the current order of political economy in China. On the one hand, politically, no discussions identified in the news sample have asked whether or how some institutional structures or governance arrangements

⁷ This does not mean that *Renmin Ribao* did not report the event. In fact, through searching the Internet, there is a widely cited commenting article from *Renmin Ribao* touching on this issue (news link: <https://caijing.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/26/WS61511e6aa3107be4979efe09.html>). In consistence with our argument here, the article suggests that *Renmin Ribao* stands for the dual control policy. But it gives a different reason about the power cuts. The media tends to blame local governments that implement the policy in the wrong way.

should be reformed to advance the environmental governance or just carbon cutting. Relevant discussions about this point are not rare in scholarship on Chinese climate governance. For instance, firstly, on the state level, some scholars have argued that although the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) takes the lead in designing climate-related policies, it has no power to control over coal plant approvals because the power for energy policy design owns to National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) (Lewis 2020; Teng and Wang 2021). MEE also lacks the capacity and resources that NDRC maintains when setting policies, which makes the ambitious climate targets more challengeable to be met.

Secondly, on the local governance level, climate policies from the central government are found difficult to be fully enforced on the local. This may be because that the local authorities do not have enough policy instruments to issue powerful policies (Teng and Wang 2021), or local officials tend to prioritise economic growth and permit polluting industries due to the “intricate ties and collaboration between the local government and local industry management” (He et al. 2014, p.166).

Thirdly, on the civic level, NGOs and individuals have limited access to climate policy making process, environmental movements have been cracked down to maintain “social stability”, and the watchdog function of news media has been severely weakened in the past decade under Xi’s media policy. Despite the ambitious policy design at the central, it remains a question whether the actual environmental governance could be improved for the long term without bottom-up public engagement and interrogation from social institutions (Geall and Hilton 2014; Johnson 2017; Kostka and Nahm 2017; Seligsohn et al. 2018).

And lastly, on the most macro level, doubts on the sustainability of China’s authoritarian environmental governance remain strong in current scholarship. Some have argued that, although Xi’s government has given greater promises on combating climate change, the drivers of the low-carbon championship are mainly out of the domestic strategic goals for economic growth, energy security and, most importantly, political stability (Lo 2015; Schreurs 2017; Engel 2018; Teng and Wang 2021). In the absence of political opposition and civil oversight, China’s climate governance could easily give in once other agendas take on a stronger priority.

These fruitful discussions about how China should push political reform to advance its climate governance have been hardly found in the news sample. This is consistent with the prior findings in scholarship that apolitical discourse is vital for environmentalism to survive in China (see 2.3.1). Even for *China Dialogue* as a non-profit media, its news reporting seems to avoid such political topics that are sensitive and unfavourable to Chinese state government. Particularly when the superiority of Chinese political system over the western liberal democracy is key for the official ideology of Xi’s government (Zhao 2016; Lin 2020), directly questioning politics in China has now become risky and nearly impossible for Chinese news media.

On the other hand, economically, the discourse of green development does not sway China’s capitalist economy. It believes that the environmental protection and economic prosperity can be both accomplished through energy transition from fossil fuel to renewable energy such as water, wind, solar power and even hydrogen fuel in China. Although Chinese government has invested significant resources to the renewable energy capacity in recent years, China’s energy consumption remains weighted toward fossil fuel, with the coal accounting for over 60% of electricity generation (International Energy Agency 2021). 48% CO₂ emissions from China are now from the energy sector (Ibid). Given Chinese government has given the promise of carbon peak by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060, the green development discourse recognises the great challenge for China to finish the energy transition in the short time, and, meanwhile, it argues that the transition process must take place gradually and steadily to ensure a stable economic production. Particularly for

Xinjingbao and *Renmin Ribao*, they have emphasised drastic energy transition does not apply to China.

In news reports from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*, “emission reduction campaigning” (*yundongshi jiantan*) has been used to describe actions or policies that roughly overlook current development demands to reach low-carbon goal. More specifically, the development demands can be divided into two aspects: economic development and energy security. And such criticism on “emission reduction campaigning” is mostly presented as criticism on local governments. For example, *Xinjingbao* cited speech from Liu Shijin, an expert with Chinese official background, demonstrating that “the key to carbon peaking and carbon neutrality is to replace traditional technologies with green technologies, but carbon reduction does not mean reducing production capacity, or slowing economic growing...” (Hou and Huang 2021). This is to say that economic development should be still ensured instead of being sacrificed during the green transition. He also mentioned that some local governments deliberately shut off the electric power to reach emission goal, which reflects a tendency of “emission reduction campaigning” and should not be allowed (Ibid). A commenting piece from *Renmin Ribao* delivers similar opinions. The article suggests that carbon reduction needs not only intensity but also order (*you li you xu*). China’s process to carbon peak and carbon neutrality “should not be slow or urgent” (*manbude ye jibude*). A metaphorical term “hard war” is used to describe such process and since this is a “hard war”, it will not end quickly (Liu 2021b).

Such emphasis on order and hardness from the official ideology reflects a relatively conservative attitude about China’s energy transition. It claims that, although climate change is regarded as a crisis, climate mitigation should not be the only priority for China. In Chinese official ideology, economic development will not be sacrificed not matter in the short term or long run. In the near future, economy will be still boosted at the expense of global temperature rising. Perhaps it is driven by this narrative that we have seen China is still permitting and building more coal plants today. A recent report has found that China’s coal power plants permitted in 2022 reach the highest level since 2015 and “the coal power capacity starting construction in China was six times as large as that in all of the rest of the world combined” (Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air 2023). Despite whether China’s long-term promise to climate mitigation is strong or not, its energy policies will not prioritise environmental protection but will be balanced with domestic pursuit for economic growth, energy security and even diplomatic considerations, which will be elaborated below. This nonradical stance on energy transition is clearly delivered by the news reports from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*.

There is no article from *China Dialogue* obviously refuting the “emission reduction campaigning” in this news sample, but the media’s news report also notes the importance of avoiding rigid implementation of the dual control policy. In a 1-on-1 interview with *China Dialogue*, Wang Yi, member of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress and vice president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ Institutes of Science and Development, suggested that China should “avoid taking a one-size-fits-all approach to ensure a just transition” (China Dialogue 2021). As he argued, those regions where economic growth have been long relied on energy producing and heavy industry should be allowed different resources and time to finish the energy transition. This argument is consistent with the official narrative. However, meanwhile, *China Dialogue* also expresses some concerns about the conservative energy transition process. As noted above, in the news article discussing energy transition of Inner Mongolia, *China Dialogue* points out the province investments on coal projects are not in the interest of either its economy or the national aim for carbon cutting (Gao 2021b). Such appeal to the local authority to stop further investments on dirty energy has not been identified in the news reports from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. Thus, it is fair to conclude that *China Dialogue* has urged Chinese government to complete the energy transition as soon as possible without challenging the official discourse that claims the energy transition should not impede the economic growth.

In addition to the emphasis on the renewable technologies, the green development discourse also introduces some market mechanisms to help reducing the carbon emission. One of them, which is also the most important one during the sampling period, is the emission trading system (ETS) that Chinese government launched on 16 July 2021. The ETS allows carbon credits to be sold and bought and enables companies that successfully meet the carbon cutting requirement to make profits from selling carbon credits to other entities. All the three media have given lots of space to discuss how ETS can promote the carbon reduction in China, and the challenges and advices to improve the efficiency of the system and makes it cover more enterprises.

Despite some economic reforms have been touched in the discourse, it does not dismiss the capitalistic order. Economic prosperity is promised and even prioritised at least in the short term. In this regard, the discourse of green development bears a resemblance to the discourse of ecological modernisation discussed by John S. Dryzek (2022). It is a nonradical discourse that, while admitting the necessity of developing an environmental-friendly society, promotes a narrative that “environmental protection and economic prosperity go together” (Ibid, p.178). The discourse of ecological modernisation is originated in wealthy developed nations and now becomes popular in lots of developing countries, including China (Sonnenfeld and Rock 2009), largely due to the compatibility between its nonradical proposals and the global hegemony of capitalistic political economy. It is also because of the nonradical features that the discourse remains doubtful for some proponents for more radical discourse. For instance, as Dryzek (2022) notes, a “degrowth” movement “gathered momentum in the 2010s” (p.36). Degrowth advocates argue that the capitalistic obsession with economic growth is essentially contradicted with environmental protection and thus human society needs to pursue lower production, consumption and population. They also refute the fantasy of “green growth” that puts hope on renewable technologies, which is exactly underlined in the discourse of green development (and discourse of ecological modernisation), asserting that renewable energy cannot solve all the environmental problems as long as human’s demands for energy continues to increase (Ibid).

Indeed, to ask China to stop economic growth from now on or in the near future is nearly impossible. Although lots of reforms for environmental advance have been pushed in the past decade under Xi Jinping’s government, China’s growth-first economic model remains strong, particularly when facing slowing economy and pressure to stimulate growth in recent years (Lewis 2020). A variety of reasons can be given and at least two can be concerned here. Firstly, despite its miraculous development in past decades, poverty is still a significant problem for China as a significant percentage of Chinese people are still living under the poverty line drawn for an upper middle-income country by the World Bank (Westcott 2020). China still needs to alleviate the poverty through boosting its economy. Secondly, economic development, to bring prosperity to Chinese society, has long been one of the important reasons for legitimacy of CCP since its reform in 1980s (Holbig and Gilley 2010), and keeping social stabilisation and regime consolidation is always the priority for China’s public policy. For this reason, as discussed above, some scholars are concerned that China’s leadership on climate change, such a global issue about the international community, may give way to domestic economic growing if needed (for example see Gilley 2012; Engels 2018).

Perhaps due to these reasons, the discourse of green development constructed around China’s domestic climate mitigation issues tends to be nonradical and promote environmental changes under the current framework of political economy. However, it should be noted that, while the discourse maintains the same, *China Dialogue* has still pushed a little stronger than the other two media when urging China to complete the energy transition. More importantly, in terms of the discussions about China’s climate performance on the international stage, *China Dialogue* has delivered a discourse that significantly differs from the mainstream journalism.

8.4. Discursive construction on China's international image: how China Dialogue differ from the mainstream journalism

Combating climate change demands collaboration across the world. For each country involved in the global trade system, discussions about climate change are usually intertwined with national interests. In the international climate negotiation, as introduced by one of the *China Dialogue's* news report (Gupta 2021), different countries may pursue different goals based on the stages of national development and the levels of being affected by climate change. For those countries that release the least GHG but suffer mostly from the climate change, they will urge big emitters to compensate for the climate damages, offer financial supports for climate adaptation and give stronger pledge on climate mitigation. For the major GHG emitters in the history and on contemporary such as the US and EU, they may not deny the responsibilities on climate change but still try to push back out of domestic interests.

Since the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (CBDR-RC) was firstly enshrined in the 1992 UNFCCC treaty, it has become the most important guideline for climate negotiation. The convention originally reads:

"... the global nature of climate change calls for the widest possible cooperation by all countries and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities and their social and economic conditions." (Unfccc.net 1992)

The convention divides participating parties into "Annex I" and "non-Annex I", and this division has been changed to developed and developing countries in the 2015 Paris Agreement (Unfccc.net 2015). The developed countries shoulder more responsibility for the climate change because they are the countries across the world that firstly adopted capitalism, developed such an economic mode leading to high carbon emission and spread it to other countries. They are also regarded as more capable of mitigating the climate change. Developing countries, although taking responsibility for climate change (less than developed countries), still demand carbon space for domestic economic development.

China has been so far categorised as a developing country, although, at the same time, it is also the largest GHG-emitting economy followed by the US and EU (Song et al. 2022). While facing the urgency of climate mitigation and the international pressure, Chinese government has emphasised the principle of CBDR-RC in the international climate negotiations, insisting that its performance on this issue already shows responsibility. This can be clearly identified in Chinese mainstream journalism when reporting the climate talks.

8.4.1. A discourse of responsibility from mainstream journalism: China as a responsible nation and victim of western hegemony

This discourse of responsibility identified in the sample from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* mainly contains two dimensions. On the one hand, it suggests that China, as a developing country with a lesser developed industrial base, already plays a responsible role in the international stage. Its current pledges and actions on climate change are irreproachable and coherent with its national development phase. On the other hand, it proposes a narrative that the climate talks have been weaponised by western developed nations, particularly the US, to suppress China's economic growth.

In news stories from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*, while reporting on the responsibility issue, China's stance as a developing country is clearly advocated. For example, after COP26 ended, *Renmin Ribao* published a summarizing article on 16 November 2021 which apparently stands for

developing countries and justifies China's performance on climate issue (Xu 2021). It criticised that some of the core concerns of developing countries have not been well addressed by the developed group. As noted in the article, "in terms of climate adaptation, developed countries remain passive and opposed to the establishment of a formal negotiating agenda for this". On the contrary, China "has played an important role in promoting global climate governance and contributed China's wisdom and proposals to this conference" (Ibid).

Such disappointment with developed countries and praise on China is also presented in news stories from *Xinjingbao*. During COP26, the media published two 1-on-1 interviews (*zhuan fang*) respectively for Chai Qimin (Xie 2021c) and Wu hongbo (Xie 2021d). Chai is the director of International Department in National Center for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation. Wu is the foreign ministry's special envoy for European affairs. The two people both have strong Chinese official background, representing China's interest in the COP26 talks and, unsurprisingly, steadily standing for China's developing stance. The news title for Chai's interview is explicit: "Developed countries cannot pass on the responsibility for cutting emission" (Xie 2021c). In the interview, Chai clearly suggests that some developed countries requiring to strictly pursue the 1.5°C target are out of political consideration rather than human interests. In his viewpoint, the 1.5°C requirement is aimed to "suppress" the development of large emerging economies such as China and India. At the same time, Chai praises China's performance on low carbon endeavours in recent years, which is not limited to domestic low carbon experiments but also includes supporting other developing countries to reduce greenhouse gas emission (Ibid). Wu's stance is also explicit. Although he did not include such political framework to criticise the developed camp, he makes a contrast between China and "some countries" to build China's responsibility (Xie 2021d). Wu firstly notes that the 1.5°C requirement from developed countries remains controversial, and then suggests that it is depressing that "some countries" come up with ambitious target but fail to take appropriate actions, and by contrary, "China do what they say and set the example for the world in this respect" (Ibid). Although Wu did not clearly point out which countries he means by "some countries", given he also mentions that developed countries fail to fulfil their pledge of offering US\$100 billions of climate finance per year to other countries by 2020, he apparently points at the developed group.

It should be noted that the journalists writing these two reports did not deliver their own opinions about the climate negotiations. However, this news style of 1-on-1 interview gives voice to specific person that the newsroom believes her/his opinions are important and deserved to be heard. In other words, through giving speech space to China's representative, *Xinjingbao* delivered China's official stance in the international climate negotiations.

This emphasis on China's responsible image certainly accords with China's pursuit for national economic interests. As analysed above, the national insistence on perpetual economic growth has not changed even though Xi's government has pushed lots of reforms for environmental advance. China's economic performance has been tightly bonded to CCP's regime legitimacy, and thus the government will not give up its stance on economic growth at the moment.

In addition, a perspective of international political struggle is presented in this discourse of responsibility. It accuses the developed countries of impure consideration in this climate negotiation and believes that the climate issue has been utilised by developed countries to drag China's economy. Through this narrative, China is depicted as a victim of western global hegemony. For example, when the US presidential envoy John Kerry visited to China in September 2021 and virtually met the Chinese high-ranking diplomat Yang Jiechi, both *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* published news stories about this video conference (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021 from *Xinjingbao*; Xinhua 2021c from *Renmin Ribao*). The two articles are exactly the same one, which may indicate that publishing such news report is a political task for the two media. In the report, Yang has been

given much more voices than Kerry. In the total five paragraphs, except for the first introduction paragraph, Yang's speeches take up three and there is only one at the end left to Kerry's reply. Yang suggests that it is the US's "seriously wrong actions" to interfere in China's internal affairs that exacerbate China-US relations, which hamper climate talks between the two. Conversely, in his view, China has attached great importance to addressing climate change and taken strong measures to address the problem, "demonstrating an active and firm attitude" (Ibid). However, facing such criticism, Kerry's reply is not presented in the report. Rather, he simply expressed US willing to collaborate with China on climate issue. Yet, according to Reuters's news reporting about this video conference, Kerry criticised China's construction of new coal plants. He also noted that the climate cooperation should be separated from political disputes between China and US, but this was turned down by Yang (Stanway 2021). This information is clearly not beneficial for China's image of responsibility for some readers as to correlate climate issue to political collides seems a kidnapping of the whole international community, and both *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* have deliberately concealed Kerry's speeches.

Such distortion in Chinese mainstream news reporting on international issue is consistent with China's assertive foreign policy since Xi became president in 2013 (Miura 2023), which is also well known as "wolf-warrior" diplomacy in recent years (Duan and Liu 2023). The term "wolf-warrior" originally comes from a 2015 war film with the same name, which tells a story about Chinese soldiers combating foreign forces and defending the motherland. It becomes one of the most successful movies in Chinese film history with its action sequences, military tactics, and strong patriotic themes. One of the most famous lines in the movie is "any invaders to China will be annihilated, despite distance (*fan wo zhong hua zhe, sui yuan bi zhu*)", which showcases China's tough position when facing foreign forces. After the movie, "wolf-warrior diplomacy" is broadly used to refer to China's assertive diplomatic strategy.

The "wolf-warrior" diplomacy is featured with several characteristics. Firstly, it is embodied as an offensive and hostile tone against the countries in conflicts with China. For example, back to early 2020, in the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, while Donald Trump repeatedly criticised China hidden the truth of virus spreading in January and named the virus as "Chinese virus", an inappropriate racism word (Reja 2021), the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian hit back on Twitter, promoting a conspiracy theory that it was the US military bringing the virus to Wuhan (Westcott and Jiang 2020). Later on in the pandemic, Chinese state media and diplomats' twitter repeatedly casted doubt on the efficiency and safety of western-made vaccines without strong evidence (Allen-Ebrahimian 2023) and in November 2022, another diplomat Hua Chunying twitted: "The price of 'freedom' in the US: 1 million Covid deaths + 40,000 gun deaths per year + 107,622 Fentanyl deaths in 2021 alone. The American people deserve something far better than that" (Hua 2022).

Secondly, the hostility is presented not only in speeches but also in actions. China has shown a tougher position in the Indo-Pacific conflicts. To demonstrate its territorial sovereignty on the conflictual areas, China's warplane incursions into Taiwan air defence zone drastically increased in recent years (Xie 2021b), and the country has gradually expanded its presence in the Indian Ocean through military exercises (Grare and Reuter 2023).

Thirdly, besides showing hostile stance when facing international conflicts, "the 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy is part of the Chinese government's endeavour to 'tell the China story'" (Zhu 2020, p.1). It is the propaganda strategy proposed by Xi's administration to portray China's image in the international community, or more specifically, China's image of responsibility and leadership. It is based on the perception that China has been long misrepresented or reported in bias in western news stories so that China needs to actively tell its own stories in a positive way, and this is manifested in the diplomatic speeches that defend China's stance.

The discourse of responsibility identified in news coverages from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* is deeply intertwined with China's diplomacy. On the one hand, it steadily stands for China's stance in the international climate talks and builds up a responsible image of China, which accords with Xi's order to "tell the China story". On the other hand, it reproaches the western developed nations for their inaction on climate change and their "interference in China's domestic affairs" which impedes the collaboration between the first two largest GHG emitters. This shows the hostile and aggressive attitude when facing the rival states in the "wolf-warrior" diplomacy. The finding here confirms the previous argument that Chinese mainstream news reporting on climate news is normally constrained by national interests and severely politicised (see 2.3.3). As argued by Guo et al. (2023), "the politicization of climate change has manifested ... in China, where policymakers use the issue to legitimise authoritarian rule and assume global leadership in environmental protection" (p.12). The discourse of responsibility serves China's national interest in the international climate talks and remains limited space for journalism to play the watchdog role. Even worse, Chinese mainstream journalism is required to promote propaganda information coordinated with the "wolf-warrior" diplomacy.

8.4.2. A constructive discourse of insufficiency from *China Dialogue*: China's as the beneficiary of international fossil fuel financing

In contrast, in news stories from *China Dialogue*, although the media also notes the western developed group should take up more responsibility in the climate negotiations and the deteriorated relationship between China and US, one cannot find explicit stance on each side in their reports. A news report talking about how China-US relationship will impact climate cooperation is analytical and explanatory (Liu 2021c). It tends to explain the current challenges and future opportunities for China-US climate collaboration, and what the article advocates is not accusing any side of the issue but reminding that "the climate crisis has created a global community of all nations, in which nobody can stand apart" (Ibid). It does not support binding climate negotiations with political conflicts between the two nations, rather, it appeals to unification and solidarity on this issue. Moreover, given that *China Dialogue* runs a series of news stories about China's oversea energy investment, a discourse of insufficiency has been found to urge China to play a more responsible role when facing the climate crisis.

The discourse of insufficiency, firstly, overlaps with discourse of responsibility delivered by *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*, suggesting that developed countries should take more responsibility and actions to tackle with the climate change. For example, based on data from Global Coal Exit List, a database compiled by German non-profit environmental organisation Urgewald, *China Dialogue* published an article criticizing the large-scaled investments on China's coal companies from international financiers (Sausmikat and Ganswindt 2021a). The article directly points at developed countries such as the US, UK, Switzerland, France and Japan. Tones are acerb and sarcastic: "China is sanctioned, China is financed: the US and Europe stand out in both cases. The historically largest CO2 emitters are thus financing the largest current climate polluter" (Ibid). Furthermore, through a special interview with Sonam P. Wangdi, chair of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) which contribute least to climate change but suffer most from the problem, the news media urges the developed group to provide more money to support climate mitigation and adaption in these countries (Gyeltshen 2021).

In fact, in various of stories about climate talks, *China Dialogue* repeatedly mentions that the developed group failing to commit the US\$100 billions promise has hampered the climate collaboration, which is the information that seems beneficial for China's stance as a developing nation, as we can see from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*. However, *China Dialogue* does not stand for China in the climate negotiations. When reporting COP26, the media touches on the information that China did not sign some widely supported agreements that aim to promote global energy

transition, for example, the Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement that sets end dates for the construction of new unabated coal-fired power generation projects⁸ (Jiang 2021). Such information is absent in the news sample from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* accidentally or deliberately. Although *China Dialogue* just mention this issue and attaches no comments on it, one can say at least *China Dialogue* shows no explicit stance on this issue instead of being supportive of China, as the latter will require justifying China's decision through citing someone's opinions.

Another point that makes the discourse of insufficiency different from the discourse of responsibility from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* lies on *China Dialogue*'s focus on China's role in other countries, or more specifically, China's oversea energy investments. China's outward foreign direct investment has grown fast since 2005 and one of the significant portions is energy and resources (Tan 2013). According to data from International Energy Agency (2022), coal plants have majorly attracted funding from China's financiers, especially the China Development Bank and the Export Import Bank of China, both of which are public financing institutions with Chinese official background. This is partly driven by profit seeking but one of the intentions that should not be ignored is China's pursuit for international influences. The top ten recipients of Chinese investments in coal-fired power are members of China's Belt and Road Initiative except for India (Gallagher et al. 2021). However, this dirty financing is obviously incompatible with the Paris goal of 1.5°C. For years, climate activists and experts have called on China to stop overseas investments on fossil fuel (Watts 2020). The good news is president Xi Jinping, under such international pressure, had announced to stop building new coal projects overseas in the UN General Assembly in September 2021, and he also pledged to support other developing countries to pursue green and low-carbon transition.

China Dialogue focuses on this issue not because of Xi's statement, rather, the environmental problems caused by China's international business have been an important news topic for the media before Xi made this promise on 21 September 2021. In September 8, the media published an article written by a researcher to talk about China's "substantial" overseas energy footprint (Ma 2021b). According to her data, the author suggests that "China is the largest public financier of overseas coal plants". Although she recognised some positive changes such as China's increasing investments and finance on overseas hydropower projects during 2015 and 2019, the conclusion is conveyed explicitly: "this has not been enough to slow the acceleration in global temperature rise – so far" (Ibid). The discussions on China's international role is not limited to fossil fuel but extended to the environmental problems caused by China's renewable energetic products. Another article published in July 2021 covers "the high cost of Zimbabwe's cheap solar gear" (Mwareya and Chiketo 2021). The story mainly indicates that the substandard cheap solar equipment produced by some Chinese companies have harmed the rights of local consumers and led to waste and health problem. Although the private Chinese companies criticised by this news piece do not have official background, the story still pose a challenge to the responsible image built in Chinese mainstream journalism.

After Xi made the declaration, *China Dialogue* published a timely article just one day afterwards to discuss this decision (Shi 2021). While praising the new pledge, the article suggests the scope of pledge still needs clarification and it is unclear whether the coal projects that are already planned or under construction will continue. Another article published by *China Dialogue* in December is from Urgewald, the environmental non-profit organisation mentioned above, pointing out two worrying aspects (Sausmikant and Ganswindt 2021b). Firstly, almost half of companies on the Global Coal Exit List still have plans for new assets on coal projects despite the global demand for phasing out coal

⁸ According to UN, "unabated coal power generation is defined by the G7 and the International Energy Agency as referring to the use of coal power that is not mitigated with technologies to reduce carbon dioxide emissions" (Link: [https://ukcop26.org/global-coal-to-clean-power-transition-statement/#:~:text=Unabated%20coal%20power%20generation%20is,Utilisation%20and%20Storage%20\(CCU S\).](https://ukcop26.org/global-coal-to-clean-power-transition-statement/#:~:text=Unabated%20coal%20power%20generation%20is,Utilisation%20and%20Storage%20(CCU S).)).

power. Among these companies, 131 are from China. Secondly, although some companies pledge to exit from coal power, they tend to replace this fossil fuel with another one, gas power. The authors' criticism on this tendency is very clear: "This is extremely worrying, as fossil gas is mostly composed of methane, which has 86 times the warming power of CO₂ over the first 20 years after it is released" (Ibid). At the same time, they express strong opposition to coal gasification and liquefaction. The technology is not climate-friendly as the conversion process still leads to big carbon footprint. The two companies mentioned in the article that have plan for coal gasification projects in Pakistan are both backed by capitals from China. These two articles are examples showing that *China Dialogue's* persistent attention to China's international role in the energy green transition did not stop at Xi's pledge. They tend to provide oversight on whether and how the commitment will be delivered.

These news stories from *China Dialogue* provide a discourse of insufficiency urging the CO₂ emitters from different negotiating groups in this climate talks to take more active attitude and emergent actions to face the crisis, and China is not excluded. In contrast to China's image built in stories from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* as a responsible nation, *China Dialogue*, although praising some of China's endeavours such as Xi's pledge, suggests that some overseas investments and financing from Chinese companies, not matter with official background or not, are incompatible with the global urgency for climate mitigation.

Following such scrutiny on China's international role, the discourse of responsibility from the other two media has been challenged. China is not depicted by the media as a victim of western hegemony - this is built up from the perspective of political struggle - but a beneficiary of its overseas investments and financing on fossil fuel projects. The discourse of insufficiency points out, while these investments enhance China's international influence and bring huge economic benefits to Chinese companies, they also result in environmental costs suffered by the residents living in those countries receiving Chinese capitals. Further investments on overseas coal-fired plants are contradicted with China's leadership image on climate mitigation and could lead to more pollutions in local areas. Even though it is financing on renewable energy, the discourse reminds that China needs to pay attention to the risk of low-quality products and the electronic waste problem.

It should be noted that *China Dialogue* has noticed these problems are not completely China's fault. As an expert cited by *China Dialogue* puts, "China's overseas electricity investment strategy tends to follow the demand of host countries" (Pham 2021). According to Gallagher et al. (2021), the recipient countries of China's capitals indeed embrace a growth of coal-fired power in their economies and issue few energy policies preferring clean energy. Even so, *China Dialogue* tries to push China to be more responsible for its overseas financing and investments given the emergency of environmental problems.

Such scrutiny on China's international affairs is hardly found in Chinese mainstream journalism. On the one hand, prior studies on Chinese environmental journalism that emphasises the scrutiny function are mainly focused on their stories about Chinese domestic context (for example see Tong 2015a; Geall 2018; Li 2019). The environmental problems touched by Chinese mainstream journalism such as the haze, acid rain, desertification, deforestation, cancer village and soil erosion are problems inside China. The environmental problems caused by China's international financial behaviours in other countries are rarely covered. Some aspects may deserve to be considered to explain this phenomenon. For example, to report China's role in other countries is closely related to China's national image in the global community. Given China's diplomatic strategy to build its positive image as noted above, it is hard for mainstream journalism in China to convey any stories that undermines this official line. Furthermore, Chinese mainstream news media, not matter party or commercial ones, are essentially controlled by the state, particularly after Xi came to power in 2013 (Tong 2019). Thus, the mainstream media are required to follow the official guideline to report

China's role in other countries, to build a positive and responsible image of China, to "tell China's story well" (Xu and Tang 2021).

While the mainstream news media in China have limited spaces to cover such critical news stories about China's role in other countries and hold the country accountable, the discourse of insufficiency found in stories from *China Dialogue* has proved that the media fill this gap in today's Chinese public environmental discussions. It also echoes *China Dialogue's* mediating role that pursues to facilitate environmental communication between China and outside as discussed in Chapter 7. *China Dialogue's* oversight on China's international behaviours could interest not only Chinese readers who want to be better informed about their government's environmental performance but also readers in other countries who may lack of understandings on China's environmental role in their countries. This is apparently different from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* whose news contents are mainly designed to target domestic Chinese, which further help explain why the insufficiency discourse is hardly identified in Chinese mainstream media discourses.

In fact, serving the audiences in "Global South countries that have a lot of Chinese investments, need to work with Chinese counterparts, and need better ways to understand the challenges they face" is regarded as a vital mission inside *China Dialogue's* newsroom (interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023). As Sam Geall puts:

"I think we have content that's really vital for, you know, civil society stakeholders, policymakers for public and particularly in those Global South countries. So I think we have an important mission that we need to get the tone right and the angle right, and not alienating news audiences, including Chinese audiences if possible, because I still want to bring Chinese readers in and make sure they actually see this as part of a constructive dialogue, as part of a conversation that they're included." (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

On the other hand, such criticism on China is not limited to local level but touches on Chinese state government. Prior studies on Chinese critical journalism draw a general conclusion that while news media may be able to publish critical stories on local governments (Chen 2017), it is very unlikely to touch central government since this will be regarded as a challenge to legitimacy of Chinese regime (see 2.3.1).

Yet, the subjects criticised in *China Dialogue's* stories, China's overseas financing, are mostly led by state-owned enterprises. They are backed by central government and, on some levels, represent China's image on the international stage, not to mention that some financiers are related to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For instance, the China Development Bank and the Export Import Bank of China, two of the institutions mentioned in *China Dialogue's* news story, are leading vehicles of this project (Tritto 2021). The BRI is a massive development and infrastructure project launched by Xi Jinping's government in 2013. According to the official narrative, "the initiative aims to promote orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets by enhancing connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas" (China State Council 2015). It is one of Xi's ambitious national policies to enhance China's international influence. By the means such as direct investment, loan and grant assistance, China has provided 150 countries with funding on the construction of their own infrastructures such as roads, railways, ports, pipelines, power plants, and industrial parks (Green Finance & Development Center 2024). While the BRI seems to be potential to boost the economy in less economically developed areas (although this is also controversial in recent years with some doubts on the debt sustainability), the initiative raises general concerns about its environmental costs in the involving countries. Besides the concern about GHG emission as discussed in *China Dialogue's* news stories, there are worries about loss of biodiversity, deforestation, accelerate

extraction of natural resources, etc. (Coenen et al. 2021). Despite substantial criticism on this project from environmental activists on the international level, any doubts on the BRI has become a sensitive topic for mainstream journalism inside China. One of the important reasons may be the central government attaches great importance to the project and any doubts on it could be seen as an intimidation to the regime legitimacy. Under this circumstance, the discourse of responsibility may easily lead to political punishment on *China Dialogue* as it challenges the official narrative on the state level.

Some features of the distinct discourse may help the media deliver it without being censored – at least until the time of writing. Firstly, the discursive construction is completed through the constructive criticism surveyed in section 7.5. It is rare for *China Dialogue* to depict the victims' experiences when noting the environmental costs of China's overseas activities. Most of the sampled articles discuss the problems through citing voices from experts and research reports instead of victims (one exception in the sample is the news story reporting the low-quality solar gears from Chinese companies). In addition, *China Dialogue* has repeatedly mentioned China's endeavours and improvements on the climate mitigation. For instance, in the article discussing Xi's pledge to stop building new coal power projects overseas, the author writes:

"Chinese-supported development of coal-fired power overseas has already slowed down in the past five years... A report ... shows that close to half of planned and permitted coal power projects with Chinese involvement have been either cancelled or suspended. In 2021 so far, China has not made any new coal investment overseas, except for three supply and engineering contracts that may or may not materialise ... China is the first developing country to take such a position, said Kevin Gallagher, Director of the Boston University Global Development Policy Centre. He now urges the private sector to follow suit. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the announcement made by President Xi. 'Accelerating the global phase out of coal is the single most important step to keep the 1.5-degree goal of the Paris Agreement within reach,' he said in a statement." (Shi 2021)

Such attention on the progress we have made so far, combined with the limited exposure of damage, constitutes a reporting style that is not provocative but deliberative, which is consistent with the characteristic of constructive journalism that tends to avoid arousing negative emotion.

Besides pointing out the problems, *China Dialogue* also gives lots of spaces to discuss how China can address the environmental concerns through better investments. This can be told directly from the news titles such as "How can China help South Africa achieve a just transition?" (Deng 2021) and "With coal off the menu, can China export its renewables model?" (Gao 2021c). Taking example of the former, the article starts with discussions about the "tension between 'justice' and 'transition'". The first implies that decarbonisation should not worsen social inequality; the second suggests an urgent coal phase-out" (Deng 2021). Urgent coal phase-out may bring about problems of justice such as the mass unemployment of workers in coal industry and, as the domestic union concerned, privatised model of renewable energy development may not be able to protect workers' benefits. As mentioned in the story, companies from China are important financiers on coal power in South Africa, including those with official background such as China Development Bank and Bank of China. In addition to mentioning all these, the focal point of last section of the article is to discuss how China can promote "just transition" in South Africa after Xi pledged to stop China's financing on overseas coal power. As noted, "China's halt to overseas coal power construction could result in a new era for China–Africa cooperation on renewables" (Ibid). Cited in the article, campaigners and experts suggest some possibilities of China's new investment. They call on China's capitals to flow to more renewable energy projects. Some even advice Chinese companies to support the clean energy development in South Africa by "taking a less market-based route, using renewables projects to promote the development of communities and local industries". As an interviewee suggests in the

news report, Chinese enterprises can sustain long-term partnership with the local community and facilitate the local abilities to develop renewable energy, which would “help the firms win more renewable projects” (Ibid).

Secondly, the discourse of insufficiency does not hinder China’s pursuit for economic growth and energy security, which, as discussed in 8.3, are the most important concerns for Chinese government because they directly associate with the social stability and regime consolidation. The discourse does not oppose China’s overseas investments per se but just calls for more environment-friendly investing behaviours. In this regard, the call to address China’s investments in overseas fossil fuel projects doesn’t advocate for China to relinquish its economic gains from other countries, because it also encourages the country to invest in renewable energy projects to pursue sustainable economic returns. Moreover, this appeal, unlike certain proposals urging China to halt domestic coal mining, is not in conflict with China’s ongoing efforts to ensure energy security (Xue 2023).

Lastly, the discourse does not raise concerns about the geopolitical and geo-economic impacts as the result of China’s overseas financing, which is now a regular and important perspective for scholarship and many western news media when discussing the issue (Coenen et al. 2021). The perspective is based on the simmering tensions between western liberal democracies on one side and the other side represented by China and Russia. In the past decade, with the strengthening authoritarianism of China and Russia and the rising populism in Europe and US, the tensions between the two sides have become increasingly irreconcilable. The ideological and political friction gradually evolved into economic contradictions as the conflict escalated. Particularly after the pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war, which reminds the western group that their intertwined economic relations with China and Russia could lead to the loss of autonomy during the global crisis, decoupling of both sides – particularly US-China decoupling – has now become a heated topic in international relations (Murray and Al-Rikabi 2023). In this situation, China’s overseas investments could raise concerns not only about environmental damages but also about China’s expanding world influences.

In fact, *China Dialogue*’s editorial team is well aware of the geopolitical conflicts around China’s overseas investing and financing behaviours. And the media has deliberately avoided relevant discussions. According to the interview with *China Dialogue*, Sam Geall illustrates:

“It’s the fact that we’re focused on environment rather than on geopolitics. And we try to be geopolitically evenhanded but we’re quite careful about, you know, we’re not captured by any particular sort of geopolitical framing ... we try to really be genuinely quite neutral when it comes to geopolitics, and so that we can just keep the focus very strictly on international cooperation around environment, around environmental emissions on that.” (Interview with Sam Geall on 11 August 2023)

The geopolitical and geo-economic discussions, indeed, are not identified in the discourse of insufficiency from *China Dialogue*. This strategy certainly helps the discourse survive under the rigorous censorship system as the discourse does not dispute Xi Jinping’s diplomatic emphasis on China’s global influence. After all, in the context of increasingly heated international conflicts and China’s “wolf-warrior” diplomatic policy, it is nearly impossible to criticise China’s aspirations for geopolitical influences.

Nevertheless, despite the mild or conservative criticism, it is still risky to deliver the discourse in today’s Chinese media environment. What happened to *China Dialogue* in the middle 2021 suggests that the threats to such constructive discourse may not necessarily come from the political institutions but from the society.

In June 2021, with the World Oceans Day on June 8th, some social media accounts posted messages online, urging people to pay attention to issues related to marine biodiversity, global overfishing, and advocating for responsible consumption. These seemingly humdrum messages, however, sparked significant controversy on Chinese Internet. Many Chinese netizens accused these messages of unfairly blaming Chinese consumers for the problem of overfishing worldwide while remaining silent about the fishing consumption of western countries. They believed these messages constitute part of a malicious western propaganda campaign to hinder Chinese people from obtaining enough protein in diets. On 18 June 2021, a blogger with millions of followers, Sai Lei (2021), published a video and contended that these messages about ocean protection are actually funded by foreign NGOs. He claimed that he received an email inviting him to participate in a marine conservation project jointly initiated by three NGOs, *China Dialogue*, *World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF)* and *Greenovation Hub*, but he rejected the invitation with the belief that these NGOs have ulterior motive to denigrate China's environmental protection. In the video, he accused *China Dialogue* as an "anti-China" (*fanhua*) NGO, alleging it to be one of the numerous institutions established by western countries to defame and suppress China's development. He went on to assert that "99% of foreign NGOs are not doing anything good in China" (Ibid). The video received millions of views and hundreds of thousands of likes. It also became a hot-searching topic on Sina Weibo, the most popular Chinese social media platform. After the video released, a large group of Chinese netizens left insulting comments under *China Dialogue's* Weibo account, asking the organisation to exit China. Chinese journalists working for *China Dialogue* were denounced as race traitors (*han jian*), which forced Ma Tianjie, the manager of *China Dialogue's* Beijing office at that time, to deactivate his Weibo account to avoid harassing and threatening comments. Even on Twitter, Isabel Hilton, *China Dialogue's* founder, received many hatred speeches from Chinese netizens.

This Internet troll against *China Dialogue* seems initiated by a blogger without official background. In an interview with *The Economist*, Sai Lei declared that his campaigns against foreign NGOs "are not co-ordinated with officials in advance. 'We are a private company, we're not connected to the government'" (Chaguan 2022). Despite this is true or not, the popularity of his video indicates that he caters to a certain sentiment popular among Chinese people. As mentioned in 3.2.2, under the promotion of Xi Jinping's propaganda apparatus, an ideology mixed with pro-government patriotism, nationalism, and xenophobia is escalating in today's Chinese society. Under this ideology, any criticism of China may be seen as treasonous behaviour, and any organisation or individual with western background could be viewed as spies seeking to undermine China. Even some domestic Chinese companies, merely because they receive financing from overseas, are suspected of having ulterior motives (Cai 2022). In this context, a patriotic industry with Chinese characteristic has emerged. Those influential nationalist figures on Weibo like Sai Lei are generally known as "Patriotic Big-Vs" (*aiguo da V*) or "Positive-Energy Big-Vs" (*zhengnengliang da V*). They primarily disseminate positive narratives about China, ridicule negative news about foreign countries (particularly those in conflicts with China such as the US, UK, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan), and lead their followers in online attacks against people and organisations suspected of being traitors or spies. Regardless of the fake news and conspiracy theories in their narratives, these figures still manage to attract a large number of followers, which translates into advertisement revenue and business opportunities.

The anti-foreign nationalistic sentiment in China is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it has been widely presented in contemporary Chinese society and occasionally manifests into acts of violence. Just in September 2012, in Xi An, a peaceful anti-Japan demonstration in just one month gradually escalated into violent riots targeting Japanese businesses and products. A Chinese middle-aged man was attacked and paralysed simply because he was driving a Toyota Corolla, a Japanese brand car (Jiang 2022). After the violence, there was a short period of reflection among Chinese people regarding the blind patriotism sentiment, but it has resurfaced again in recent years. With Xi Jinping continuously emphasising national security and suppressing civil society in China, this societal trend has merged with state power resulting in the persecution of dissidents and critics.

In this grim moment, NGOs, particularly NGOs with foreign background such as *China Dialogue*, suffer pressure from both government and society. And in some cases, the pressure from the society seems more intense. In the controversy about Chinese consumption and the environmental costs, the nationalists have shown more hostility towards NGOs than the government. While *China Dialogue* was still allowed to operate in China with official recognition, the nationalists had viewed it as an “anti-China” organisation and demanded it to “get out of China”. While the criticism on Chinese society was still tolerated by the authority, the nationalists had condemned the critical voices as “anti-China” speeches and asked the authority for censorship. Under such circumstance, although the constructive discourse of sufficiency identified in *China Dialogue*’s news coverages seems temporarily accepted by the Chinese government, it is fragile when facing the surging sentiment of patriotic nationalism with zero tolerance with criticism of China.

8.5. Conclusion

Through critical discourse analysis, this chapter shows both the commonality and distinction between *China Dialogue* and Chinese mainstream journalism when reporting climate change. On the one hand, it has been found that the three media are cautious about discussing the damage of climate change in domestic China. Although they all recognise that China, as a one part of the global community, will be also impacted by climate change, they present no detailed description of climate disasters in China. Experts are invited to discuss the possible climate consequences, but no news report gives voices to victims in domestic China. This is not surprising given Chinese news media are always constrained by the political power when reporting disasters (Tong 2017b). To depict disasters in a too critical way may lead to widespread discontents among Chinese people and more pressure on the authority, which is not favourable to the “social stability” that Chinese government emphasises.

Furthermore, when reporting how China can advance its climate governance, all the media tend to push the nonradical changes in the current political economic order. The fruitful discussions in scholarship about why and how China should initiate political reform to strengthen climate governance are found absent in the discourse. And when addressing the conflict between China’s economic growth and the carbon cutting for climate goods, all the media deliver the discourse of green development that stresses China can continue its economic growth while reducing its carbon emission with green technologies. Particularly for *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*, both go further to argue that China’s path for carbon peak and neutrality should not affect the country’s pursuit for economic growth and energy security. In this regard, carbon cutting is not prioritised but put equal (if not subordinated) to economic growth, which offers a conservative or nonradical attitude when facing the urgency of climate mitigation. However, it should be noted that *China Dialogue* still pushes China a little harder on this issue. While recognizing the legitimacy of economic growth, the media has asked China to facilitate the energy transition as soon as possible, which is the appeal that has not been found in news reports from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*.

On the other hand, when it comes to reporting the international climate negotiations, *China Dialogue* shows significantly different emphasis from the other two media. For *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao*, they firmly stand for China’s stance as a developing country, justifying China’s pursuit for economic development. At the same time, their strategy to cover the climate talks is intertwined with China’s “wolf-warrior” diplomacy in recent years, which aims at not only polishing China as a positive and responsible nation but also accusing western developed countries of irresponsibility and politicizing the climate talks. This discourse of responsibility, as shown, can be delivered with biased news reporting. This indicates that, in consistence with findings from prior scholarship, Chinese mainstream news reporting on climate change is constrained by national interest consideration. It also echoes our concern about politicizing environmental news in the quantitative news analysis. While news media are asked to deliver the official line, scientific discussions can be severely

sacrificed (Guo et al. 2023), and the agenda of climate mitigation must give concession to the conflicts between different nations.

In contrast, although *China Dialogue* also asks developed countries to move urgently and stop their irresponsible investments on coal plants, China is also criticised by the media as a beneficiary of its overseas financing on projects powered by fossil fuel. In other words, in such international negotiations, *China Dialogue* does not stand for China but keep neutral, or, one can say that they stand for the climate victims, urging a really emergent attitude to address the problem. Such difference between *China Dialogue* and the other two media further proves that in the stringent media environment in today's China, *China Dialogue*, as a non-profit newsroom, still have some spaces to be independent and create valuable journalism works for Chinese environmental communication. *China Dialogue's* constructive criticism practises may help the media successfully deliver the discourse of insufficiency without political punishments. As shown, the discourse is constructed in a deliberative – instead of emotional and mobilizing – form, and while pointing out China's problem, the media also pursues to explore suggestions for China's improvement on the issue, which shows its collaborative and friendly gesture to Chinese government.

However, in today's Chinese media environment, the biggest challenge for the discourse may not come from the Chinese authority but from the patriotic nationalism in Chinese society. Even though the criticism presented in the discourse seems mild, constructive and temporarily accepted by the authority, it has been regarded as "anti-China" by the pro-government nationalists. This is partly because of *China Dialogue's* foreign background, but more importantly it is because of *China Dialogue's* criticism on China's issue. The prevalence of this nationalistic sentiment has now conspired with the coercive media policy from Xi Jinping's government against the critical voices to China. Under this circumstance, *China Dialogue's* public service journalism featured by the constructive discursive construction is fragile.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Today to push China to take stronger measures on environmental governance is more urgent than ever before. In the context of globalisation, China's perception and governance on environmental problems concerns not only Chinese people but also the global community. Led by the discourse of economic modernisation, China's decades' drastic economic growth at the cost of environmental protection has caused widespread pollution, health problems at home and contributed to climate change, biodiversity loss across the world. Chinese mainstream environmental journalism once exerted great power to point out the risk of the modernisation discourse (Tong 2015a). Through critical news reporting on environmental issues, they functioned to foster the consciousness of environmentalism in Chinese society, reveal the of environmental damages caused by powerful institutions, safeguard the rights of environmental victims, and pressure Chinese government to be more responsible for environmental problems. Yet, with the crackdown on press freedom in the past decade under Xi Jinping's governance, it is now hard for Chinese mainstream journalism to play the watchdog role on China's environmental governance. News media are strictly required to follow the official line and manipulated to serve the political agenda.

Under such circumstance, this study sheds light on a media phenomenon, non-profit journalism, that has not been fully discussed in prior Chinese journalism studies, examining to what extent its public service role can survive under China's strengthening authoritarianism and pose challenge to the mainstream media discourse on environmental issues. In particular, it focuses on *China Dialogue*, a non-profit news media with foreign background, as a case, and explores its adaptation to China mainly from the perspective of news analysis. This research finds that *China Dialogue's* 16 years' publications (between 2006 and 2021) about China's environmental issues manifest the characteristics of both reactive and proactive adaptation. Although the boundary of news reporting by *China Dialogue* has indeed narrowed compared to before, which is largely resulted from the civil society shrinking in China, the media still manages to report the uncovered environmental topics, give voices to marginalised groups, maintain spaces for watchdog journalism, and even counter the official discourses that have been dominated in the mainstream journalism. This constitutes a significant public service that is potential to facilitate China's environmental governance. It shows the resilience of *China Dialogue* as a non-profit news outlet to maintain its public service role when facing the authoritarian political system, but such public service is fragile in today's China with the increasing political control and the rising nationalistic sentiment in Chinese society.

9.1. Main findings

9.1.1. Adaptation to the strengthening authoritarianism: the weakening of criticism and risk discourse over the years

Over the 16 years of operation in China, *China Dialogue* has indeed mitigated its criticism on China's environmental problems with the gradually constraining space for press freedom and non-profit advocacy. More and stronger self-censorship has been held inside the newsroom to avoid political punishments. More strict political regulation on news media and NGOs makes the media unable to report news on the ground. In addition, the comprehensive collapse of China's news industry has led to a mass exodus of journalists capable of doing investigating journalism, which has also dealt a blow to *China Dialogue* that publishes lots of news reports from freelancer journalists.

All these factors help explain the two changes identified in *China Dialogue's* news contents over the years. Firstly, some environmental problems such as the pollution and food safety problem reported frequently by *China Dialogue* in early years have now dwindled despite the evidence that the environmental problems are still existent and severe on some levels in today's China. News

reporting on these issues is once important for Chinese critical journalism to construct the risk discourse to warn Chinese society about the severe consequence of environmental degradations. Some previous events also demonstrate that news coverages on these environmental problems are likely to cause general discontents among Chinese public and promote activism from bottom (Bao 2010; Matsuzawa 2012; Fedorenko and Sun 2016), because these problems are closely related to public health concerns and hence more possible to facilitate collective civil actions. In this situation, construction of such risk discourse on environmental issues has the potential to undermine China's economic modernisation discourse and even subvert the illusion of political stability. *China Dialogue's* recent avoidance on these topics could be the symptom of self-censorship and inability to report on the ground. The interview with *China Dialogue* suggests that sending out journalists to do pollution investigation on the ground used to be normal for the media, but it now becomes impossible because the strict political regulations has made it too risky for *China Dialogue* registered as an NGO rather than a news media.

Secondly, how *China Dialogue* reports the topic "Green Public Sphere" shows the media shift from radical criticism to conservative criticism when reporting some sensitive issues. The topic provides discussions including the social advocacy that directly confronts the authority such as the media scrutiny, non-profit advocacy, civil activism, and also the political advocacy that aims to push changes inside the political system such as the legal reforms to facilitate social participation on environmental governance. These discussions can be sensitive because they touch on a range of issues relevant to China's authoritarian environmental governance that remains vigilant with civil participations from the society and legal power that could restrain the political power (Kostka and Zhang 2018; Shen and Jiang 2021). And between the two categories of advocacy, news reporting on social advocacy constitutes a more radical criticism on China's authoritarianism than the other as it pursues changes from outside the ruling party. In early years, *China Dialogue* maintains the space to report lots of social advocacy events, follow environmental protests and even question the government decision to arrest environmental activists. News reports on social advocacy are scarcely identified in their recent publications with the civil society shrinking, despite the ongoing social advocacy events in recent years. Yet, *China Dialogue* remains to discuss the political advocacy about how Chinese government can facilitate public and non-profit participation through legal construction and more information disclosure, which maintains a conservative criticism on China's authoritarian governance.

These changes in *China Dialogue's* news contents over the years suggest that the media must be more prudent about what can be published and what cannot during adaptation to China's strengthening authoritarianism in the past decade. While Xi repeatedly emphasises state security (Cabestan 2021), and Chinese propaganda departments are now very cautious about those news topics that may cause "social unrest", many news topics that can be covered before are now prohibited by the authority. In order to ensure the survival, *China Dialogue* must conduct stronger self-censorship on their news coverages, which is a normal phenomenon that we have identified in journalistic institutions under intensifying authoritarianism across the world, in Crimea after the 2014 crisis (Zeveleva 2020), in Venezuela after years of anti-press violence (Pain and Korin 2021), and in Hongkong after the National Security Law issued in 2020 (Lee 2023). When state power strengthens its authoritarian rule, news organisations could initially bear the brunt due to their influence in the field of speech. Media outlets with divergent backgrounds may face varying degrees of political crackdown, but all must be more careful than ever in their news reporting to avoid more severe political punishments. From the perspective of classic liberalism, this refers to forced submission and compromise to the unjust power structure (see 4.3.1).

9.1.2. Adaptation as an opportunity to push the boundary of environmental journalism and challenge mainstream media discourse

Nevertheless, from the pragmatic perspective, *China Dialogue's* adaptation to the increasingly authoritarian society is also a proactive choice. As noted in Chapter 6, *China Dialogue* is well aware of the shifting dynamics. Following the formal implementation of the Foreign NGO Law in 2017, unlike many other overseas NGOs that chose to leave China (ChinaFile 2022), *China Dialogue* chose to register and continue operations in China under stricter policies and regulations. The key lies in maintaining the normal functioning of their Beijing office and staying accessible to Chinese readers, which makes the media more possible to recruit Chinese writers, deliver voices from China to the world and the outside voices to China, and ultimately involve China in the challenging international environmental communication midst the escalating geopolitical conflicts.

Adaptation also creates opportunities for *China Dialogue* to push the boundary of Chinese environmental journalism. Despite the concession in its critical news reporting, *China Dialogue* keeps consistent attention to some issues that are hardly covered in mainstream journalism. With the media mission of facilitating communication between China and the rest of the world, *China Dialogue* indeed has a different focus from mainstream news media in China. As the analysis in Chapter 7 shows, while *Renmin Ribao* and *Xinjingbao* mainly report China's domestic issues, *China Dialogue* pays more attention to those international issues, such as how China gets involved in the global talks about climate change and biodiversity loss, how China's foreign financing and investments on energy projects impact local environment, and how China's export or import of specific products matters for environmental problems in other countries.

More importantly, it is possible for *China Dialogue* to create discourses around these issues that pose challenge to the narratives in mainstream journalism. Critical discussion about these international issues is normally difficult for Chinese mainstream journalism because the topic is related to China's international image and benefits, and thus news reporting can be easily constrained and manipulated by China's diplomatic strategy. This is clear in prior studies on how Chinese mainstream media report climate news (see 2.3.3). It is also confirmed in Chapter 8 which claims that the mainstream media discourses from *Xinjingbao* and *Renmin Ribao* mainly follow the official narrative on climate issues. Domestically, both media advocate the compatibility between economic growth and climate governance through so called "green development", and largely promotes the official endeavour and achievements to alleviate the climate crisis. When it comes to reporting on international negotiations, the mainstream media discourse firmly stands for China's responsible image and denounces western developed nations using climate governance as an excuse to impede China's economic growth. Such discursive construction on both domestic and international climate issues is apparently consistent with China's pursuit for regime legitimacy, economic growth, and intertwined with China's "wolf-warrior" diplomacy and the rampant sentiment of patriotic nationalism among Chinese people.

This research finds that *China Dialogue* does not neatly follow the mainstream discourse on climate change issue. There are some commonalities between *China Dialogue* and mainstream journalism on many specific issues. For example, *China Dialogue* also promotes the compatibility between climate governance and China's economic growth and confirms that Chinese government has made great efforts when facing climate crisis. When reporting international negotiation, the media repeatedly points out the irresponsibility of western developed nations that fail to keep commitments to the global mitigation of climate change. However, *China Dialogue* does not endorse the official stance when evaluating China's climate governance. While the mainstream media emphasise the positive and responsible contribution of China, the news non-profit has pointed out the fact that the authority does not sign some agreements that are significant for stronger commitments on climate mitigation. Furthermore, through covering the environmental costs

resulted from China's large-scaled overseas investments on fossil fuel, the media points out China's responsibility on climate change and urges the government to take more measures on the problem. Such discursive construction does not cater to the official diplomacy that requires blind loyalty to the ruling party, nor does it align with the patriotic sentiments among the general public. In contrast to mainstream media promoting a binary narrative that sees the western as bullies and China as the victim, *China Dialogue* points out the fact that China also benefits from the global capitalistic system and the nation has more to do to accomplish the responsible image built up in its propaganda apparatus.

This study argues that *China Dialogue's* news contents in recent years can be characterised as constructive criticism, which could help explain why *China Dialogue's* opposing discourses did not lead to immediate political punishment (at least until the writing time). This constructive pattern maintains some features when reporting the environmental problems. It tends to report the news in a deliberative tone and avoid triggering drastic negative emotions, which in *China Dialogue's* news contents is manifested with giving voices to more experts and analysts instead of environmental victims, limited description on cause and damage, and holding a balanced presentation between positive and negative views. In addition to pointing out the problems, *China Dialogue* also tries to explore solutions for alleviation. Some characteristics here are also presented in *China Dialogue's* conservative criticism on China's authoritarian governance when reporting the topic "Green Public Sphere".

These characteristics of constructive criticism, firstly, could make *China Dialogue's* news coverages less attractive for normal Chinese people and hinder the news from reaching mass audiences. Indeed, *China Dialogue's* concentrated and elite readership among environmental professionals, environmental policymakers, journalists, NGOs and postgraduate students suggests this point (see section 7.5). This may help dispel the authority concern about media influence among the mass which could lead to large-scaled protests. Secondly, the deliberative style further weakens the media ability to mobilise collective actions. Previous protests and demonstrations in China were usually ignited by negative emotions such as grievance, worry, fear, anger among the public (Geall and Hilton 2014; Tong 2015e; Steinhardt 2019). *China Dialogue* does not deliberately incite emotions; instead, it employs a calm and deliberative approach to news reporting. In many of cases, while acknowledging areas China needs to improve for better environmental governance, *China Dialogue* also emphasises the considerable achievements that China has made. Thirdly, the solution seeking tendency in *China Dialogue's* news reports could also deliver a friendly signal to the authority that they are here to help solve the problems. This is also a strategy employed widely by Chinese critical journalists before to deal with the censorship system (Repnikova 2018b).

As argued in Chapter 7, the constructive criticism found in *China Dialogue's* news contents is jointly shaped by both the authoritarian environment and the media pursuit for advancing environmental governance, as more critical and radical criticism can be generally identified in *China Dialogue's* news reporting in early years when the press enjoyed more freedom. In this regard, the constructive pattern is one part of the media adaptation to China's political system, but it manifests the characteristic of proactive adaptation. It does create some spaces for *China Dialogue* to touch on those news topics overlooked in mainstream journalism. It does give voices to social groups marginalised in mainstream news reports. It does deliver discourses challenging the official line dominated in today's Chinese public space. Although it has the limitations, as the "constructive criticism" discussed here should be described more accurately as "self-censored constructive criticism", it so far proves to be successful to push the boundary of Chinese environmental journalism.

9.2. Non-profit journalism as a fragile public service for Chinese environmental communication

The central argument of this thesis is that, through adaptation to China's authoritarianism, *China Dialogue*, as a non-profit news media, can provide a fragile but significant public service for Chinese environmental communication. Such public service role is hard to be fulfilled by today's mainstream journalism in China, which has not been fully addressed in prior scholarship on Chinese environmental journalism.

The public service role in distinction to mainstream journalism can be presented in several aspects. Firstly, *China Dialogue* has shown persistent attention to some news topics even though they are not of political nor economic value at the time. As shown in Chapter 6, climate change has been always an important topic for *China Dialogue* since the media was initiated in 2006. But back to 2000s, neither Chinese party nor commercial journalism provided sufficient coverage of climate change (Geall 2011). At that time, climate change was not an important political agenda for Chinese central government (Wang 2021) so that party journalism did not strongly promote the issue, and it was not regarded as an attractive topic for Chinese readers so that market-oriented media did not pay lots of attention to climate change (Tong 2015a). *China Dialogue's* persistent emphasis on the topic from the very beginning indicates that the media has a different logic of news production compared to the mainstream news industry in China. It does not aim to be the mouthpiece of the ruling party, nor it is concerned about the commercial interests of news stories. The news production is guided by the objective of serving public goods and advocating for enhanced environmental governance, and thus it is capable of providing persistent and deep analysis on environmental agendas that do not serve either political or economic interests in China. Indeed, *China Dialogue's* emphasis on international issues in many cases does not even serve the interests of Chinese people. While discussing how China's overseas behaviours could have an environmental impact, the media pays attention to the benefits of local residents in other nations instead of China, which is rare for both Chinese party and commercial journalism.

Secondly, *China Dialogue* not only sheds light on overlooked agendas but also delivers the challenging discourses around the issues, which is largely attributed to its alternative position in Chinese media landscape. For Chinese mainstream journalism, both party and commercial media are initiated and backed by the authority, which makes them face stronger pressure from the political power. Even though some newspapers once enjoyed the space to be critical of the authority, the object of criticism is usually limited to the wrongdoings on the local level (Tong 2015a; Brady 2017; Li 2019), which could serve the central benefit to maintain the authoritarian order from some scholars' viewpoints (Zhao 2000; Pan and Chan 2003; Chen 2017). Even worse, with the increasing political control and digital disruption, today's Chinese mainstream journalism has generally lost the space to do critical and watchdog journalism (Tong 2019). In this situation, critical reporting on many issues may likely only come from alternative journalism outlets such as *China Dialogue*. Due to the distance from political power, it is better equipped to maintain independent and critical spaces within the oppressive political climate, which enables agenda and discursive construction that should be prohibited under the direct political regulation.

Lastly, *China Dialogue's* concentrated readership and specific environmental focus may not be good for a business model because of the small-scaled influence, but it maintains the possibility to impact China's policy decision-making process. The news media may not be well known for the majority of Chinese people, but many influential figures for Chinese environmental protection, including senior government officials, experts, and scholars, have published articles on this platform before. They may be able to, taking example of the climate governance, play important roles during the expert consultation phase of China's climate policy formulation processes (Teng and Wang 2021). Although

it is hard to measure the impact at this point (and it is not the focus of this thesis), adaptation to China, keeping the news information open and delivering constructive voices to Chinese people all manifest the media endeavour to facilitate understanding on more diversifying environmental issues in China and push stronger environmental governance.

Nevertheless, such public service role is fragile under today's China's authoritarianism. *China Dialogue's* constructive criticism seems to provisionally survive with the ubiquitous censorship, but it could be easily banned anytime with the increasing political control, or it has to further weaken its public service role through self-censoring more topics. Since the time of data analysis of this research, some signals of increasing control have emerged. As noted, *China Dialogue's* Beijing office was closed in 2022, although its website is still accessible for Chinese people. This could make it more difficult for *China Dialogue* to support its journalists and editors to do news reporting on the ground and create interpretive news pieces. The escalating patriotic nationalism in Chinese society constitutes another pressure threatening the public service. Boosted by Xi Jinping's propaganda apparatus, the rampant sentiment has drastically intensified in recent years, becoming an effective tool for the authority to stigmatise civil society institutions and suppress dissenting opinions. Against the backdrop of increasingly intense international geopolitical conflicts, not only foreign organisations such as *China Dialogue* are subjected to suspicion of espionage but also local criticism of the government can be viewed as treasonous and colluding with foreign forces. Based on the Internet, crackdown on journalism does not necessarily require formal intervention from the government but can be achieved through online abuse, harassments, and threats in the name of "justice", which causes psychological stress among critical journalists and pressures them into silence (Binns 2017). This has been a recurring narrative in China's public discourse in recent years, with *China Dialogue's* experience in 2021 being just one example. Many journalists, media professionals, scholars, and dissidents have faced similar violence and chosen to be silent in the fear of bully (Lao and Lin 2021).

Furthermore, to what extent that *China Dialogue's* news reporting can impact China's environmental governance remains to be observed. As China's political power becomes gradually centralised under Xi's leadership and policy decisions are made in an increasingly authoritarian manner (Kostka and Nahm 2017), it could be more and more difficult for the news non-profit to intervene China's governance even if *China Dialogue* manages to influence some experts in China. In addition, China's environmental politics are fragile when facing other agendas. In a model dominated by official leadership and lacking scrutiny from bottom, the agenda of environmental protection can be easily overshadowed by political and economic considerations. Although Xi's government has issued more powerful measures on environmental governance and given solemn promises on various international issues, there are still general concerns about whether the strong governance is sustainable (for example see Engels 2018; Geall and Ely 2018; Teng and Wang 2021). Once other agendas become more emergent for the authority, environmental considerations could be possibly suspended. For instance, in August 2022, after Nancy Pelosi – at the time serving as the speaker of the US House of Representatives – visiting Taiwan, which was seen by China as disrespect for its sovereignty on Taiwan and ignited general resentment among Chinese people, Chinese government announced to halt its climate negotiations with the US as a sanction (Lau 2022). More recently, in order to revive China's weakened economy after the pandemic and ensure energy security, some local governments have accelerated the restart of coal-fired power projects, disregarding the increase in carbon emissions and the future costs of energy transition (Zhang 2023). In this situation, even though *China Dialogue's* discourses could be delivered to Chinese public space, it is hard to see a corresponding return on policy change.

In spite of the frangibility, the public service role identified in *China Dialogue's* news contents showcases the space to play watchdog journalism, to counter the official line, to better inform Chinese readers on environmental issues, despite the overall collapse of critical journalism in today's

China (Tong 2019). While current narratives about Chinese (environmental) journalism are dominated by pessimism and incapability, it indicates the autonomy and resilience of the journalistic field amid increasing political pressure and media control. The public service space that *China Dialogue* strives to maintain through active adaptation mechanisms – the changing tones in news reports, the constructive criticism practises – serves as a tangible representation of this point. And most importantly, the adaptation so far seems successful to save the space for resistance and criticism. This resonates with Zeng and George’s recent emphasis on the resilience of Chinese journalism (Zeng and George 2022). Their investigation on Chinese mainstream journalism suggests that public interest journalism does not vanish under crackdown but just go into “abeyance”: “although it may not be publicly visible in this phase, it continues to maintain and nurture its support base, preparing for the next resurgence when the environment becomes more favorable” (Ibid, p.2063). Even in challenging times, journalists endeavour to preserve the foundations and rooms for independent journalism, which could be easily overlooked under the depressing environment. This further proves the significance of shifting perspective or research cases when examining today’s Chinese (environmental) journalism, as while certain spaces and cases may appear to be overrun by the authoritarian forces, spaces for resistance may be reserved in some measures in some other places.

9.3. Limitations and future research

For this research, some improvements can be firstly made in terms of the methodology. Through LDA topic modelling combined with interview, this research shows how the deterioration of media environment could be reflected in the change of *China Dialogue*’s news topics. Yet, dimensions to evaluate news content are not limited to news topic but could also include such as the news sourcing and media frames (Ihlebaek et al. 2022). This research does not address the changes of these dimensions due to the time limitation. One more pity is the lack of perspectives from front-line journalists and news editors. Although one interview with *China Dialogue*’s CEO has been conducted to see what happened inside the newsroom, the perspective of media manager could be different from the journalists and editors. As noted in 5.5, *China Dialogue*’s frontline staffs in China refused to be involved in this research. If the interviews or even field work inside the newsroom can be done, it may shed light on more phenomenon and details beyond the changes of news outputs during the adaptation process, for example, how journalists (editors) write (edit) news stories with the changing political climate, and how data collection methods change when news reporting on the ground becomes more dangerous. Future studies can also expand research cases to other non-profit news organisations in China and examine their role in Chinese environmental communication. This will provide a more complete picture of Chinese non-profit journalism and capture common or divergent characteristics of such journalistic form in China, and also facilitate our understanding on how non-profit journalism could contribute to the diversification of environmental discourses in China.

Secondly, although this study argues that *China Dialogue* can construct environmental discourses distinct from mainstream journalism, we hardly know how such discourses can be involved with the environmental governance in China. In other words, how possible such environmental discourse constructed by *China Dialogue* can be transformed to actions, lead to changes in policies and laws, or invoke social movements? One of the approaches to this problem could be further investigating *China Dialogue*’s readership to see why they choose to read the news coverage, how they understand the news information, and what actions could be (have been) made.

Thirdly, more broadly, future studies could go beyond China and pay more attention to potential critical discourses from civil society institution – journalism, NGOs, etc. – during their adaptation to other (intensifying) authoritarian systems. As Linz (2000) suggests, one common characteristic of authoritarian societies is the “limited political pluralism”, which means that, although the spaces for

political pluralism are limited, but they will always exist in some manners. The discourse contestation around these potential spaces demonstrates not only the control from authoritarian forces but also the autonomy from bottom, which indicates adaptation not only as obedience but also as resistance. Based on this characteristic of authoritarianism, it should come as no surprise that discursive practises similar to the ones identified in *China Dialogue* can be found from the suppressed civil society in other authoritarian societies. This shall be important for anyone concerning about the social changes under authoritarianism and the roles of civil society plays within the process. The critical and opposing discourses may not directly point to the injustice of political system, but their adaptation to the political system would on some levels force the society to face the criticism, which could at some points emerges as a crucial factor for policy changes and even societal transformations.

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Appendix A.

Meaning of each news topic in section 6.2.

Topics	Meanings
Climate Change	This topic discusses (1) the dangers of climate change; (2) the negotiations, conflicts and collaborations in the international community to face climate change; (3) measures and performances of each country when facing climate change such as clean energy development.
Ecological Conservation	This topic refers to (1) ecological damage such as desertisation, water and soil erosion with the consequent loss of biodiversity; (2) China's measures and performances when facing the problems.
China's Overseas Investments and Import/Export Market	This topic focuses on (1) China's overseas investments on resource development such as energy and mining; (2) the environmental costs in other countries caused by China's huge import and export consuming market.
Animal Protection	This topic covers crimes against wildlife and rare animals such as illegal hunting, fishing, smuggling and other activities that are potential to harm animals.
Garbage Disposal	This topic refers to how China deal with garbage.
Natural Disaster and Environmental Impacts	This topic touches the environmental costs resulted from natural disasters such as earthquake, drought, and mudslides.
Urbanisation and Environmental Impacts	This topic talks about how environmental protection and China's expanding urbanisation can be compatible, such as how to develop a green transportation system, and how tourism development avoids environmental damage.
Agricultural Production and Environmental Impacts	This topic covers the environmental costs resulted from China's urban agriculture such as the overuse of pesticides.
Food Safety	This topic concerns about food safety problems in China.
Pollution	This topic focuses on various categories of contaminations in China such as air, soil, water, chemical pollutions and discusses how China faces the problem.
China's Green Public Sphere	This topic refers to (1) environmental participations or activism of different social actors including public, activists, artists, NGOs and news media; (2) and the legislative and judicial system construction on environmental protection.

Appendix B.

Meaning of each news topic in section 7.2.

Topics	Meanings
Climate Change	This topic aims to discuss (1) the negotiation, conflicts and collaboration in the international community; (2) the response of each country to climate crisis; (3) the impact and damage coming with climate change
Energy Transition	This topic reports how the traditional energetic system which emits large amounts of greenhouse gas can transfer to be cleaner and sustainable.
Carbon Peak and Carbon Neutrality	This topic discusses the progress, difficulties and solutions in pursuing the goal of carbon peak and carbon neutrality which each country has pledged to meet by its own time.
Biodiversity	This topic talks about discussions on biodiversity among countries, the importance of biodiversity, and how biodiversity can be promoted or threatened.
Agriculture	This topic discusses the environmental problems brought about by modern agriculture and how the problems can be tackled.
Forest	This topic refers to the importance of forest and how forest can be protected or threatened.
Pollution	This topic refers to different kinds of pollutions such as air pollution, plastic pollution and nuclear pollution. Water pollution is excluded as it is included in the topic “Water Resource” below.
Water Resource	This topic reports any criminal action that pollute water resource and how this can be resolved.
Desert	This topic refers to how desertification has been resolved in China.
Belt and Road Initiative	This topic evaluates China’s Belt and Road Initiative and discusses how this project can be environmentally friendly.
Garbage Recycling	This topic discusses the garbage problem in modern life and how this can be tackled.
Transportation	This topic refers to how modern transportation, which has been seen as responsible for climate change and air pollution, can be more sustainable.
Steppe	This topic reports how steppe ecology has been protected or threatened.
Wetland	This topic reports how wetland has been protected or threatened.
Resource Saving	This topic refers to how different categories of resources such as electricity, water, food and paper cannot be wasted.
Economic Transformation	This topic discusses how modern economy can be more sustainable.
Multiple Issues	This topic is created to label those articles generally discussing various topics and hard to be named as a specific issue. One typical example is news media publishing some politicians’ words to discuss how we can address different environmental problems.